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## *International Perspectives*

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### **Do European Border Towns Hold the Key to Cultural Integration, Incubation?**

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There are 1,060 European border towns (i.e., towns within 25 kilometres of country geographic borders), accounting for 10% of the total European population. Border towns therefore may be "breeding grounds" for sociological insight into both the problems and the complex environmental factors that would be invaluable for gauging their potential contribution to Europe's co-operative future.\*

Not all border towns by virtue of their proximity to borders have developed a system of cross-border cooperation or cultural openness toward their coterminous social systems. This may be because they are projected more towards the center of their own state system than toward the exterior, or because they are projected into a larger international dimension than that represented by what is immediately over the border.

I include in my analysis of border towns those that are in the vicinity of long-established borders, and not those resulting from newly created borders following the disappearance of states related to the collapse of Communism. This leaves out towns now on the new borders between Slovakia and the Czech Republic, those between the new states of the former Yugoslavia, and those between the new European states of the former Soviet Union and the present Russian Federation. Island states are also excluded where their maritime borders are in international waters or where they are so small that their entire territory is virtually a border area.

**Table 1 – Basic Information on European Border Towns**

Small/Medium-size European States	% of Border Towns with >10K Inhabitants	Average Population of Border Towns	States' Rankings by Inhabitants in Border Towns	Resident Border Towns' Populations	Total State Population	State Population Residing in Border Areas as % of Pop.	States' Ranking by % Population in Border Areas	% of Border Area Towns Not Consider Themselves as Such
Great Britain	100.0	54,333	6	163,000	55,487,500	0.3	28	33.3
Slovakia	94.7	58,747	4	1,116,200	5,268,935	21.2	5.5	0
Holland	93.9	51,603	7	2,528,527	15,129,200	16.7	8	20.4
Poland	90.7	54,394	5	2,937,282	38,309,200	7.7	17	14.8
Romania	90.3	74,122	2	2,297,800	23,206,720	9.9	15	3.2
Czech Rep.	83.3	43,617	10	1,570,217	10,298,731	15.2	9	5.6
Belgium	81.0	42,665	11	3,327,855	9,947,782	33.5	2	12.7
Germany	77.1	76,656	1	8,738,760	79,753,227	11.0	13	13.6
Ireland	76.9	33,875	16	440,375	3,523,401	12.5	10	0
Former Yugoslavia	74.2	30,894	17	957,700	21,501,048	4.5	22	0
Hungary	70.2	44,663	9	2,188,467	10,335,000	21.2	5.5	2.1
Albania	70.0	38,850	12	285,800	3,255,891	8.8	16	10.0
Turkey	60.0	38,000	14	190,000	6,021,600	3.2	24	0
Bulgaria	59.3	38,224	13	1,032,044	8,992,316	11.5	12	0
Portugal	57.1	13,356	26	560,940	9,853,100	5.7	20	14.3
Sweden	56.3	37,408	15	598,524	8,644,119	6.9	18	6.3
Finland	52.2	51,000	8	1,173,000	5,029,002	23.3	4	0
France	51.5	25,997	18	3,379,594	56,614,493	6.0	19	13.8
Denmark	50.0	391,600	0	1,607,200	5,146,469	31.2	3	40.0
Switzerland	50.0	20,972	21	1,216,400	6,871,500	17.7	7	39.7
Greece	50.0	13,986	25	195,802	10,264,156	1.9	25.5	0
Former USSR	45.3	62,995	3	4,031,695	74,622,371	1.9	25.5	0
Luxembourg	42.9	16,325	23	228,550	385,317	59.3	1	35.7
Norway	41.2	12,357	27	210,068	4,274,000	4.9	21	5.9
Austria	38.5	20,622	22	804,266	7,812,100	10.3	14	17.9
Italy	37.8	21,978	20	791,200	56,778,031	1.4	27	13.5
Slovenia	33.3	15,492	24	232,384	1,974,839	11.8	11	0
Spain	28.8	23,681	19	1,397,166	38,425,679	3.6	23	6.8
<b>Totals and Means</b>		<b>42,587</b>		<b>44,200,816</b>	<b>577,725,727</b>	<b>7.7</b>		<b>11.7</b>

## Populations in Border Towns

Border towns in Europe (see Table 1) range in population from villages of 2,000 to 5,000 inhabitants to Copenhagen, which has a population of 1.54 million. Including towns with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants—in any assessment of border town function in cultural dynamics—is justified. In a border area, even a village may exhibit marked urban characteristics, at least in terms of the superior connecting function (between states) that it performs and in terms of the complexity of the social composition of its population.

Of the total border towns, 37.1% have less than 5,000 inhabitants, and the remaining 62.9% have more than 10,000. In and around these urban centers live 44.2 million people. In my study, surveys of representative population samples indicate that residents in 11.7% of the 1,060 towns do not consider theirs to be border towns. The table shows that this is more prevalent in small states with many land borders. The group comprises border towns in Switzerland (39.7%) and Luxembourg (35.7%) as well as Holland (20.4%) and Austria (17.9%). The same applies to Danish border towns, but the high percentage here (40%) is due to the fact that it includes Copenhagen. In larger states, the percentage of border towns with residents who do not consider theirs to be border towns are lower and markedly homogeneous (i.e., 14.8% in Poland, 13.6% in Germany, 13.8% in France and 13.5% in Italy).

There is no lack of states in which border town inhabitants are intensely conscious of their town's borders. A remarkable case is Belgium, where though small and surrounded by borders, only 12.7% of its surveyed responders did not consider theirs to be a border town. This may be due to the fact that national divisions (between the Walloons and the Flemish) drive individual towns to outside cooperation.

These figures on border towns whose residents do not consider themselves as border towns already give us an idea of how complex the European border situation is. This may be understood in part by analysing some of the structural determinants of the numbers of towns and inhabitants of border areas.

Border towns are more numerous in large states with long land borders, most of which run across flat land. The greatest numbers of border towns are thus found in countries such as France (130), Germany (118), the former Soviet Union (64), Spain (59), and Poland (54), but also in smaller countries such as Switzerland (58), Hungary (47), Portugal (42), Austria (39), and the Czech Republic (36). Some large countries have few border towns (e.g., Italy has 37), and some small countries have high totals precisely because of their size and also

because they are very flat (e.g., Belgium has 79 and Holland 49). The table shows also that the presence of a large number of border towns does not necessarily imply that such towns are populous.

## New Perspective on Europe

Viewing Europe from the perspective of border populations (in towns) provides a unique profile quite different from traditional individual country profiles. For example, 59.3% of Luxembourg's population lives in border towns, while the corresponding figure in Belgium is 33.5%, Denmark 31.2%, Finland 23.3%, Slovakia and Hungary 21.2%, Switzerland 17.7%, Holland 16.7%, the Czech Republic 15.2%, Slovenia 11.8%, and Bulgaria 11.5%. In highly populated Germany the figure is 11% and in Romania 9.9%. The countries with the lowest percentage of their total populations living in border towns are highly populated ones such as France (6%) and Spain (3.6%), and above all Italy (1.4%) and the former Soviet countries bordering Europe (1.9%). Here too, the reasons are varied. In Italy, alpine barriers opened where there are large towns such as Trieste, Gorizia, and Monfalcone. In addition to the natural barriers in France and Spain, a significant role may also have been played by the highly centralist history of the two nation-states.

From the above data it is clear that life in border areas (particularly their towns) constitutes a substantial part of Europeans' experience. These areas contain a great many towns of varying sizes and arrangements, forming urban systems such as those between Benelux and Germany; between the former Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and Romania; between the countries of northern and central Europe; and among the countries of eastern Europe (the former Soviet Union).

As a global demographic phenomenon, a great many people live in an environment of trade, of openness between different state systems, and of everyday cosmopolitanism. This total, more than 44 million, is concentrated more densely in particular countries and particular inter-nation and inter-state contexts. For sociologists, the benefit of these border towns is that a co-operative Europe may thus find a kind of laboratory in border towns. Above all, twin towns and towns lying alongside each other divided "only" by the political lines between two or more states are worthy of some specific considerations.

*\* The area of Europe comprised in the 50 km-wide swath of land on either side of the borders separating the 28 states included in this research accounts for no less than 7.7% of the more than 577 million inhabitants of Europe and the ex-Soviet countries bordering central Europe. If we add to this urban population the people living in the sparsely populated areas with no urban centers—rural areas, mountain areas or areas gravitating around centers more than 25 kilometres from state borders—this comes to 10% of Europe's inhabitants.*