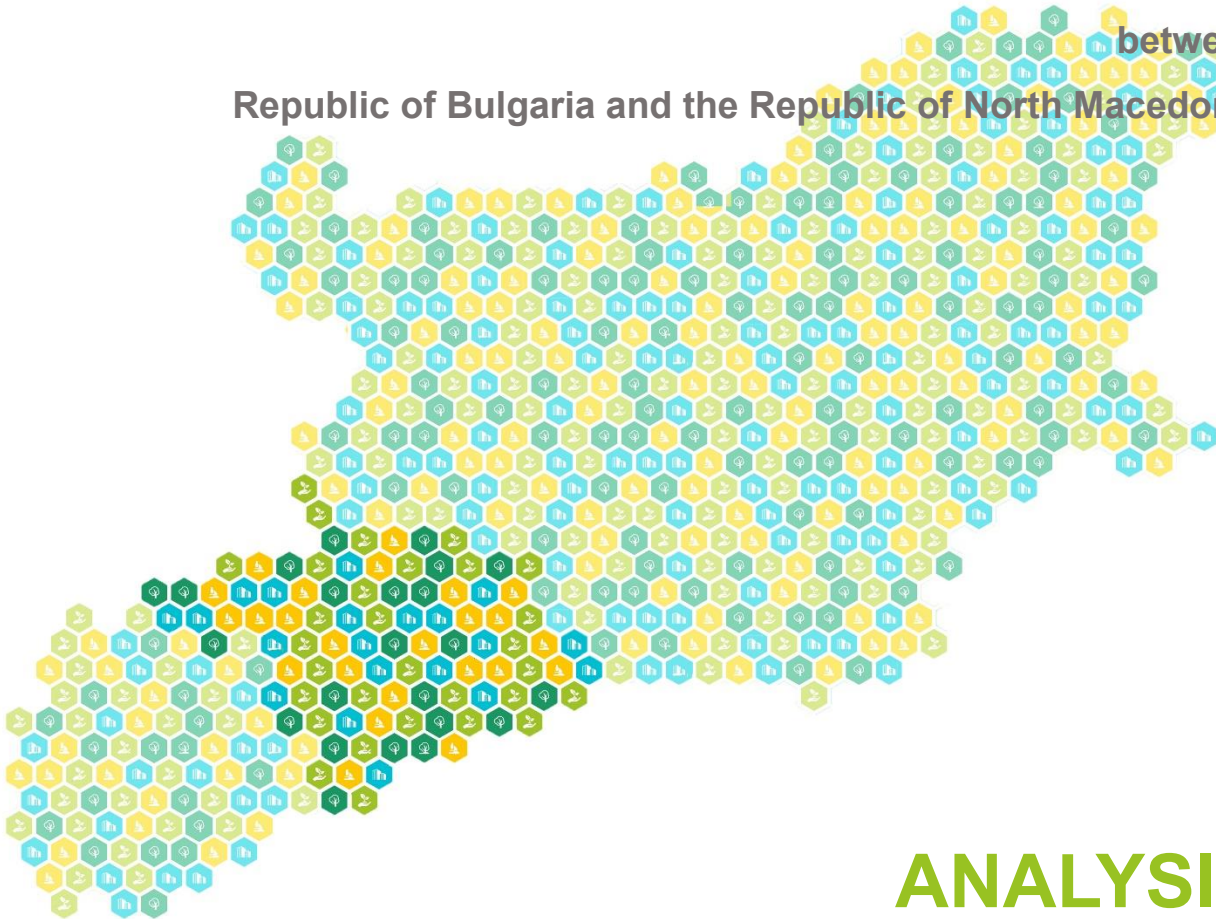




TERRITORIAL STRATEGY

for integrated measures to be financed under
the INTERREG - IPA CBC programmes 2021 -2027

between
Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia



ANALYSIS



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INTRODUCTION

This analysis lays the foundation for the development of the Interreg IPA Cross-Border Cooperation Programme between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia 2021-2027. It is part of the regulatory framework for the programming process set out in the EU legislative package for the 2021-2027 programming period.

The analysis is not systematic but selective in order to focus on the possibilities for cross-border functional interaction leading to economic and social cohesion.

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the current situation and, on this basis, explore the opportunities for improving, strengthening, and developing cross-border links through economic and social cohesion. The key areas of intervention will be identified in close cooperation with the Task Force group.

The specific objectives of the Analysis are related to the study of the possibilities for improving the territorial, economic, and social cohesion in the programme area through interventions with cross-border orientation.

The information included in the analysis contains updated data from the relevant national statistical institutions of the two partner countries, from strategic documents at EU, national, and regional levels as well as from already developed territorial and situational analyses at sectoral level.

This analysis of the situation covers the following main aspects:

- territorial (infrastructure, density, and capacity of border checkpoints, settlements, environment and landscapes, energies, etc.);
- economic (GDP, economic sectors, SMEs, tourism, etc.);
- social (demographic conditions, health and education systems, social activities, etc.).

The territorial scope of the Analysis includes the identified, in close cooperation with the Task Force group, geographical area

covered by the strategy. The region is characterized by opportunities for interaction and connection between the different sectors of socio-economic life on both sides of the border.

The time scope of the analysis covers the period from 2014 to 2020 and depends on the available information on certain indicators.

The thematic scope of the analysis is oriented to the main goal of the task and covers main areas as economic development, tourism, social development, labour market, culture and cultural heritage, infrastructure, environment, etc.

The summarized results form the basis of the synthesized analyses, in which the strengths and weaknesses will be derived, as well as the opportunities and threats for the development during the programming period of each of the main directions separately.

The focus will be on the needs and common priorities of the border areas and, as a result, the potential for the development and selection of an appropriate cooperation strategy will be identified.

The methodological framework for the development of the task is determined by the system of approaches, principles, and methods applied in the process of development, consultation, and implementation of strategies for integrated territorial development.



The integrated approach unites the participants in the strategic planning and programming process, the participants in the development and implementation of the development policies, stakeholders, representatives of local authorities, business, and communities. The integrated approach combines the analysis of the sectoral policies, their spatial dimensions and links. The aim is to identify the potential for positive synergies between the sectoral policies and the ways to reduce conflicts between them.

The cross-border approach brings together the efforts of the partner countries to strengthen the socio-economic development of the border regions. The approach increases the possibilities for solving common problems.

The ecosystem-based approach is at the heart of modern planning and programming. The analysis shall take into account the needs for management of human activities so as not to jeopardize the ability of ecosystems to cope with change and ensure the sustainable use of natural products and services by present and future generations.

During the development of the analysis, a system of principles, rules, and procedures and modern general and specific methods and tools for processing and analysing information and documents for comparative analysis and evaluation have been applied:

- Documentary analysis of programmes and strategic documents, systematization and processing of secondary information from conducted research, incl. content analysis;
- Multifactor, geospatial analyses, comparative analyses and assessments;
- Traditional statistical methods for collecting information, etc.

The statistical information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-economic development of the region is not yet ready, and the period under review is related to the very high dynamics of the parameters studied. The developed strategy will take effect in early 2022 at the earliest, and by then the national government's plan to control the pandemic thanks to the intensive process of vaccination of the population and the intensive implementation of their plans to restore the socio-economic life. All this leads to the conclusion that the analysis must pay attention not so much to the negative effects of the pandemic, but to the opportunities provided, the needs and potentials for development on the basis of which cross-border cooperation can contribute to recover from the crisis.

This analysis is based mainly on the socio-economic analysis of the Republic of Bulgaria - the cross-border region of the Republic of North Macedonia (North-East, East, and South-East planning regions of the Republic of North Macedonia), December 2019. It is the first step in developing a strategy for development of cross-border cooperation in line with the EU policy for the period 2021-2027 included in the proposal for a Regulation of the EP and of the Council laying down general provisions governing the operation of the funds during the period. The overall strategic objectives of the policy (PO) are:

PO 1. A smarter Europe - innovative and smart economic transformation;

PO 2. A greener, low-carbon Europe;

PO 3. A more connected Europe (mobility and ICT connectivity);

PO 4. A more social Europe (the European Pillar of Social Rights);



PO 5. A Europe closer to citizens (sustainable development of urban, rural, and coastal areas and local initiatives).

The specific objectives of the document are aimed at increasing the capacity for research and innovation and introduction of modern technologies, digitalization, promoting sustainable resource management, adaptation to climate change, risk prevention, and disaster resilience promoting the transition to a circular economy. Development of a climate-resistant, intelligent, secure, and intermodal TEN-T. Increasing the efficiency of labour markets and access to quality employment through the development of social innovations and infrastructure; improving the quality of and access to education, training, and lifelong learning; increasing the socio-economic integration; ensuring equal access to health care. Promoting integrated social, economic, and environmental development, cultural heritage, and security in the regions.

The European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) programmes, including the Interreg-IPA Republic of Bulgaria - Republic of North Macedonia programme, must contribute to the achievement of the above-mentioned policy objectives.

Taking into account the specific characteristics of the Interreg programmes, two specific objectives (ISO) have been derived to achieve the general objectives:

ISO 1 Better governance of Interreg for strengthening the institutional capacity as well as the legal and administrative cooperation, in particular where it relates to the implementation of communication on border areas, and strengthening the cooperation between citizens and institutions.

ISO 2 A safer and more secure Europe - addressing specific issues of external cooperation such as security, safety, border checkpoint management, and migration.

1. GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ENVIRONMENT

1.1. Geographical Characteristics

The Republic of Bulgaria - Republic of North Macedonia region of cross-border cooperation is located in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula and covers an area of 18,087 km². The length of the border between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia is 165 km, with three active border checkpoints (Zlatarevo – Novo Selo, Logodazh – Delchevo and Gyueshevo – Deve Bair).

On the Bulgarian side, tangent to the border line are the districts¹ of Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil. The region subject to this analysis covers 8.6% of the country's area and includes 23 municipalities:

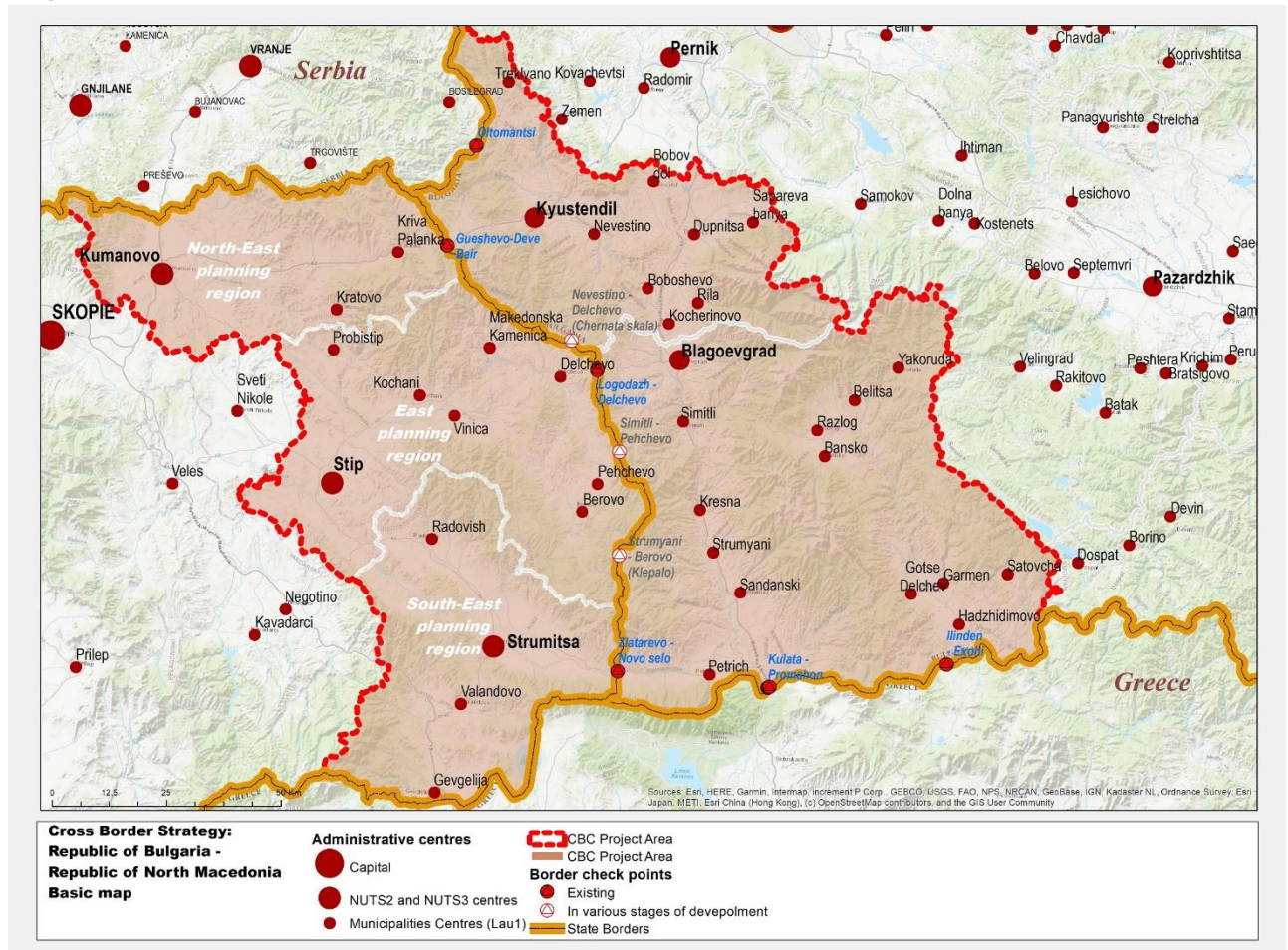
1.1.1. Blagoevgrad District: Bansko, Belitsa, Blagoevgrad, Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Kresna, Petrich, Razlog, Sandanski, Satovcha, Simitli, Strumyani, Hadzhidimovo, and Yakoruda municipalities;

1.1.2. Kyustendil District: Bobovdol, Boboshevo, Dupnitsa, Kocherinovo, Kyustendil, Nevestino, Rila, Sapareva Banya, and Treklyano municipalities.

The total number of settlements is 462.

¹ Administrative units of level BG NUTS 3

Map 1: Administrative units in the CBC region



Source: NCRD

The territory of the Republic of North Macedonia consists of three programme regions: North-East, East and South-East planning regions, which represent a total of 33.8% of the country's area. They consist of 27 municipalities:

- North-East planning region: Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, Kumanovo, Lipkovo, and Staro Nagorichane;
- East planning region: Berovo, Pehchevo, Vinica, Kochani, Cheshinovo – Obleshevo, Zrnovci, Probistip, Stip, Karbinci, Delchevo, and Makedonska Kamenica.
- South-East planning region: Valandovo, Gevgelija, Bogdanci, Dojran, Radoviš, Konče, Strumica, Bosilovo, Vasilevo, and Novo Selo.

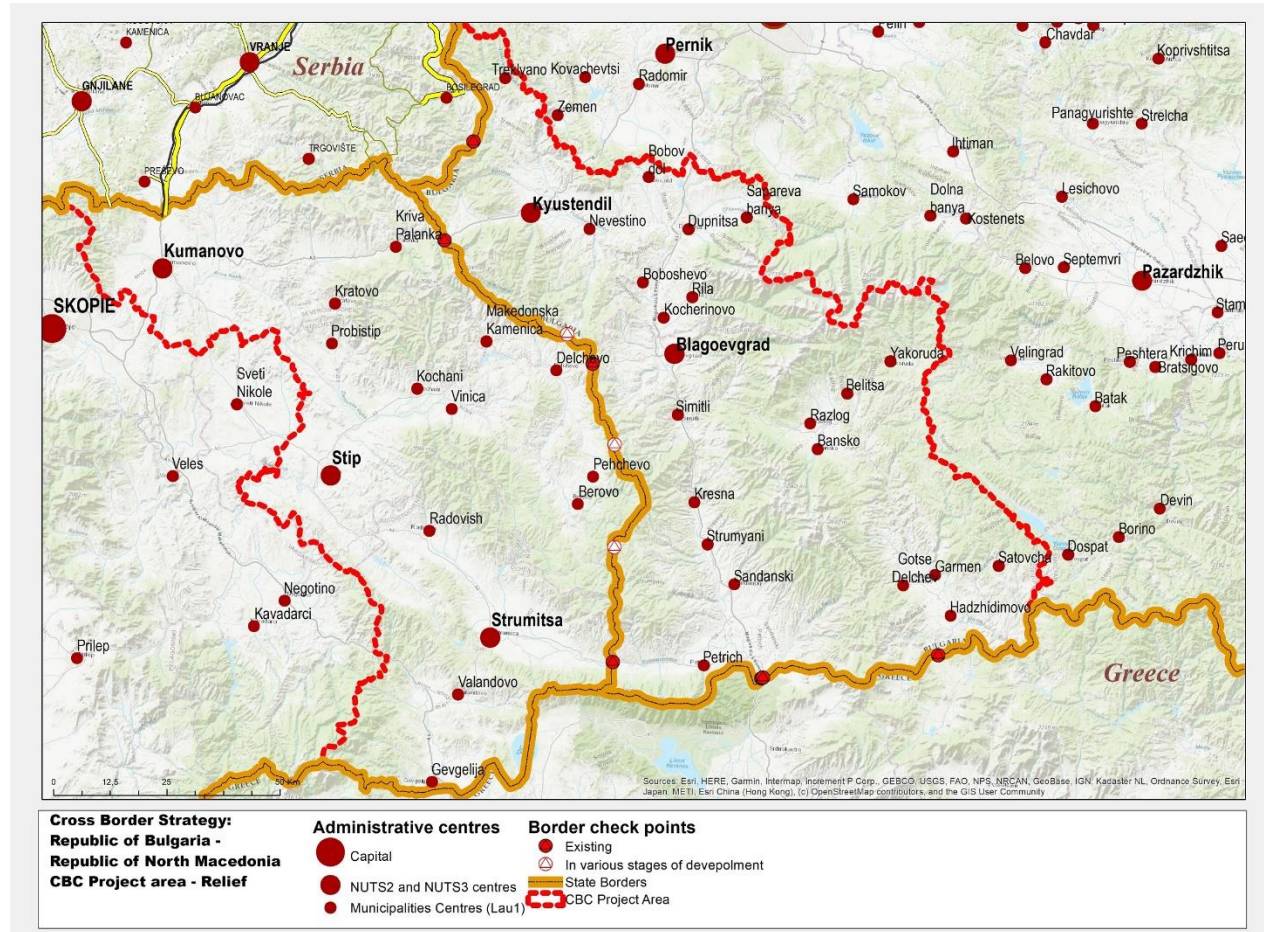
The total number of settlements is 597.

The CBC region is characterized by a strong centralized urban structure, with concentration of the population and economic and social activities in the urban centres. For the Republic of Bulgaria, these are the towns of Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Sandanski, Gotse Delchev, and Petrich. For the Republic of North Macedonia, these are the towns of Kumanovo, Stip, and Strumica.

More than half of the area is mountainous, with the forests occupying over 40% of the territory. It

includes the entire Rila and Pirin Mountains, part of the Western Rhodopes, the mountains Verila, Konyavska, Zemenska, Slavyanka, Plačkovica, Belasica, Osogovo, Maleshevska, Ograzhden, and Vlahina. It also includes valleys and agricultural lands (the Kochani plain, Struma and Mesta valleys, Kyustendil valley, Dupnitsa valley, etc.).

Map 2: Geography of the CBC Region



Source: NCRD

The programme region is rich in water resources: rivers, the largest of which are Struma, Vardar, Mesta, Bregalnitsa, Strumitsa (Strumeshnitsa); lakes (part of Lake Dojran, Vodoča, Mantovo; numerous lakes in the Rila and Pirin Mountains), groundwater (both spring and thermal) available throughout the cooperation region. The most significant thermal springs with potential for development of spa tourism are those in the towns of Sandanski, Marikostino, Ognyanovo, Kyustendil, Sapareva Banya, the villages of Nevestino and Chetirts (on the border side of the Republic of Bulgaria, representing over 40% of all thermal springs in the country), and those in Kochani, Vinica, Strumica and Gevgelija (in the Republic of North Macedonia).

The climate is diverse, from temperate continental, transitional continental, and mountainous to Mediterranean in the river valleys. The soil profile also varies: from forest soil in the mountainous areas to alluvial soils in the river valleys, which provides favourable conditions for agriculture (both fruit and vegetable crops).



1.2. Environment

• Ambient Air

No significant air pollution has been registered in the region. The main potential air pollutant is FPM. Increased content of fine particulate matter is registered mainly during the winter heating season and this is due to the widespread use of solid fuels for heating in the domestic sector and transport traffic, as well as to the windlessness, fog, and temperature inversions that are characteristic of the season and create conditions for retention and accumulation of atmospheric pollutants in the ground layer.

In the CBC region, there are only 2 fixed stations for measuring air quality (Table 1). In Kyustendil District, only periodic control is carried out following the schedule of the mobile automatic station (MAC) of the EEA. In the last 2 years, no exceedances of the observed pollutants have been found in the town of Blagoevgrad. In the last measurements performed in 2017, single exceedances were found in the indicators of PM and hydrogen sulphide in the towns of Kyustendil and Bobov dol. The excess hydrogen sulphide is due to natural causes in Kyustendil, i.e. the presence of a thermal zone, while in Bobov dol the probable cause is the putrefactive processions in the Razmetanitsa river due to discharge of untreated domestic wastewater.

Table 1: Registered average levels of major air pollutants

Administrative unit/ monitoring point	NO ₂ µg/m ³	SO ₂ µg/m ³	PM ₁₀ µg/m ³
Blagoevgrad station	17,82	15,65	29,96
Kyustendil	-	-	-
North-East planning region /Kumanovo station	-	2,70	48,21
East planning region / Kochani station	-	3,06	40,11
South-East planning region /Strumica station	-	-	-
MAXIMUM LIMIT	40	125	40

Source: MOEW, 2019 and <https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/dashboards/air-quality-statistics> 2019

• Waters

The region covers the water basins of the rivers Struma, Mesta, Strumica, Bregalnica and, partly, Vardar. The inflow of untreated industrial and domestic wastewater and the change in water outflow are the main reasons for the deterioration of the water quality. At the same time, the tendency of improving the quality of surface waters continues due to the partial technological renewal and the closure of inefficient polluting plants and construction of treatment plants.

• Soils and Mineral Resources

The soil cover varies from forest soil in the mountainous areas to alluvial soils in the river valleys and is most favourable for the traditionally developed cultivation of tobacco, fruits, and vegetables. The mineral resources in the region include granite, marble, clay, dolomite, brown and lignite coal, and ores. While the crude mineral resources are diverse, only the coal and marble are of economic importance.

Higher pesticide levels have been found in some border areas. The content of heavy metals does



not reveal particularly high values. An important issue to be addressed is the reclamation of the land around the mines. There are strong erosion processes on the slopes of the mountains Vlahina, Maleshevska, South-western Rila and, partly, on the slopes of Western Pirin. All arable land with a slope of more than 6 degrees is subject to water erosion. Wind erosion is found mainly in the plains and deforested areas.

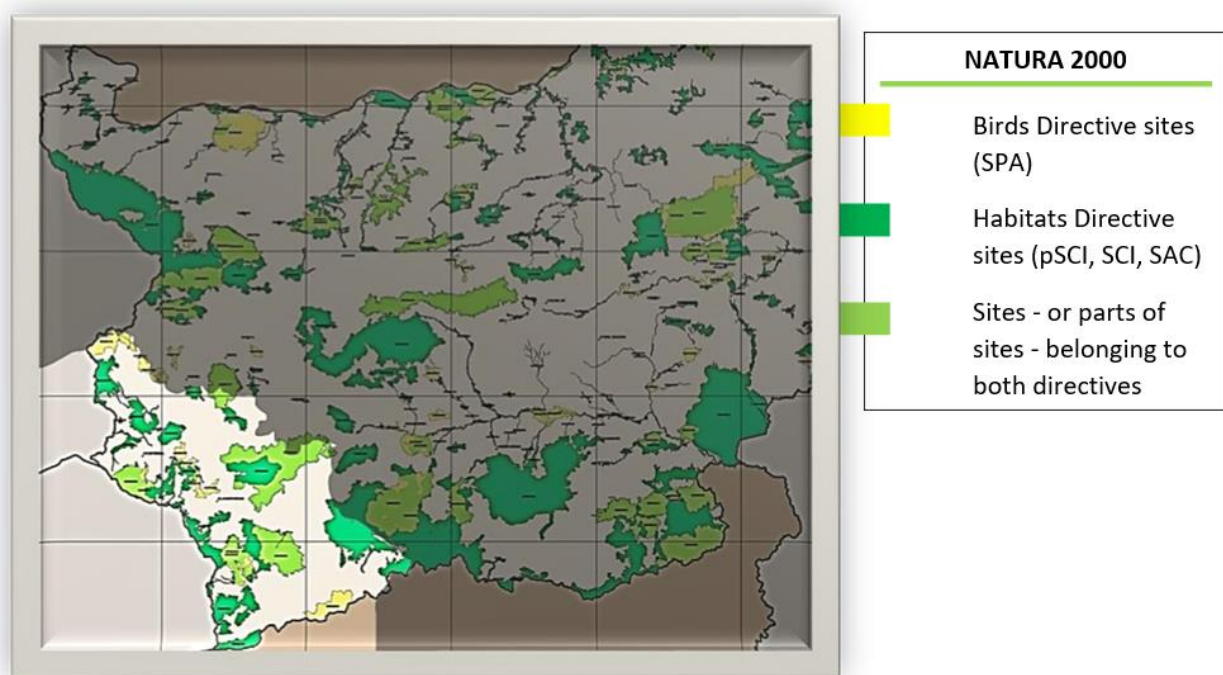
- **Biodiversity, Protected Areas and Sites**

The border area is characterized by a variety of flora, fauna, and natural habitats. Its environment is clean and preserved. The numerous plains and valleys form a strong natural potential for the development of agriculture, forestry, and tourism. The region is rich in nature parks, protected areas, and nature reserves due to its location in the centre of the Balkan Peninsula. Additional merit for the natural wealth of the region is borne by its healthy thermal springs which form a factor with significant added value for potential tourism development in the region. Numerous geomorphological phenomena (caves, natural bridges, gorges, and canyons), hydrological phenomena (springs), dendrological monuments, and smaller nature reserves are also protected by official instruments.

The border area is rich in protected territories and areas. On the Bulgarian side of the border are the Rila and Pirin National Parks (included in the UNESCO list of World Natural and Cultural Heritage Sites), the seven Rila Lakes, the Stob Pyramids, Parangalitsa (the oldest nature reserve in the country), as well as the largest (2,873 ha) nature reserve of Bayuvi Dupki (Dzhindzhiritsa).

The European ecological network NATURA 2000 is of utmost importance for the protection of natural habitats. The conservation measures in these directives presuppose the creation of a multifunctional unified network of key areas – special protection areas (SPAs) and sites of Community importance (SCI) interconnected by ecological corridors.

Map 3: Natura 2000 sites in the Republic of Bulgaria





Source: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/db_qjs/pdf/BGn2k_0802.pdf <https://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/#>

Within the border area, 40 protected sites have been identified. National parks, mountains, well-preserved river valleys, natural landmarks, and locations of preserved habitats or valuable for Europe flora and fauna species are some of the sites proposed for inclusion in the network.

Table 2: Natura 2000 sites in the Republic of Bulgaria

	BLAGOEVGRAD		KYUSTENDIL		
Birds Directive sites (SPA)		BG0002107	Boboshevo		
		BG0002129	Rila Bufer		
		BG0001013	Skrino		
	BG0002072	Melnik pyramids	BG0002100	Lower Koznitsa	
	BG0002076	Mesta	BG0002079	Osogovo	
	BG0002063	Western Rodopes			
	BG0002099	Kocherinovo			
	BG0002126	Pirin buffer			
	BG0002098	Rupite			
	BG0002078	Slavyanka			
	BG0000167	Belasitsa	BG0000308	Verila	
Habitats Directive sites (pSCI, SCI, SAC)		BG0000220	Lower Mesta	BG0000295	Lower Koriten
		BG0002003	Kresna	BG0001012	Zemen
		BG0000366	Kresna-Ilinden	BG0000298	Konyavska mountain
		BG0000626	Krushe	BG0001017	Bloody stone
		BG0000636	Low Rila	BG0000294	Karshalevo
		BG0000224	Ograzden- Maleshevo ²	BG0000636	Lower Rila
		BG0001022	Oranovki gorge - Leshko	BG0001011	Osogovo mountain
		BG0000167	Belasitza	BG0001013	Skrino
		BG0000220	Lower Mesta	BG0000134	Choklyovo swamp
		BG0000625	Izvorovo		
		BG0001021	Mesta river		
		BG0001030	Rodopi- West		
		BG0001023	Rupite- Strumeshnitsa		
		BG0001028	Middle Pirin - Alibotush		
	Sites belonging to both directives		BG0000495	Rila	
		BG0000496	Rila Monastery		

² <https://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/Natura2000/SDF.aspx?site=BG0000224>

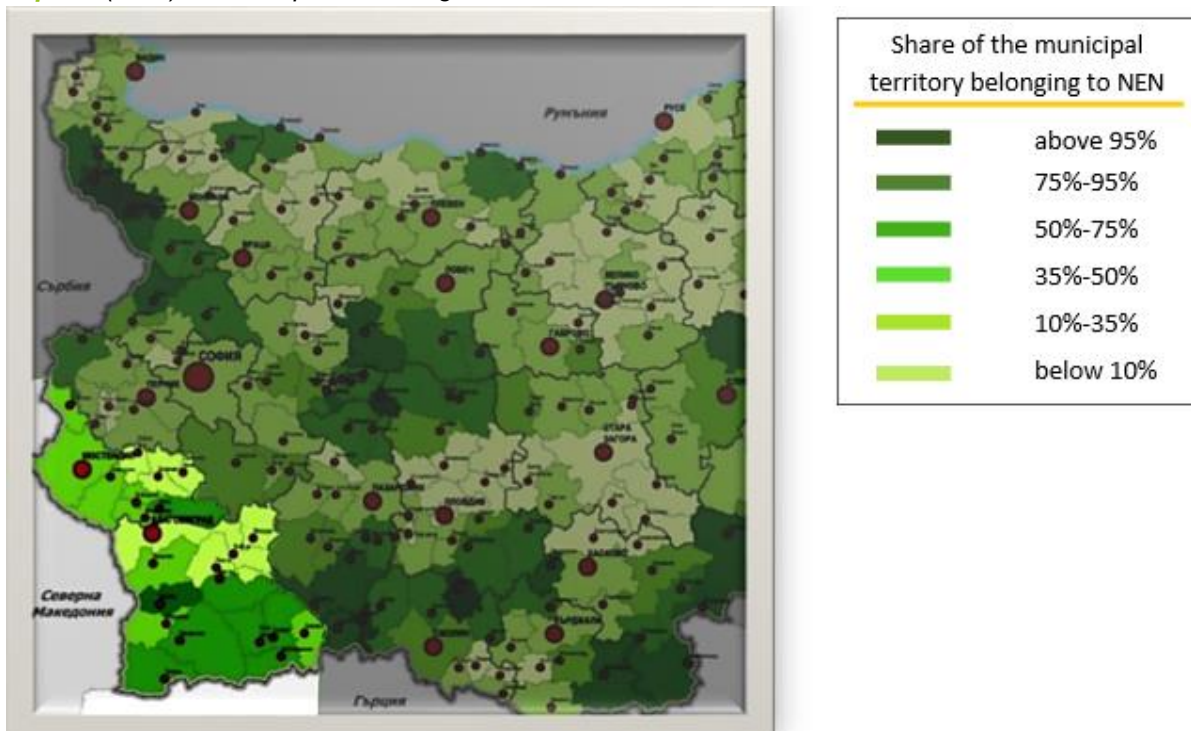
BLAGOEVGRAD		KYUSTENDIL
BG0000209	Pirin	

Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

The significant share of the sites of the National Ecological Network (NEN) is a proof of the biological significance of the different areas and of the protection measures taken. This is a prerequisite for the development of educational tourism and ecotourism, but, at the same time, significantly limits human activities in such areas. Spatial development and economic life issues arise when the restrictive regimes of the protected areas overlap with those of the protected areas and natural habitats and when the social and economic aspects of development are underestimated due to environmental aspects. This problem is most visible at the lowest level, the one of the municipalities, especially where almost the entire territory of a municipality is covered by protected areas and territories.

Blagoevgrad District is among the districts that have a very high percentage of protected areas.

Map 4: (NEN) in the Republic of Bulgaria



Source: NCRD

On the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, there are other natural protected territories that are important for the environment ecological corridors such as Kumanovo Kozjak, proposed as a Nature Park, with rocky areas important for the nesting of several species of birds of prey.

The EMERALD network covers areas of special conservation interest developed on the territories of the countries parties to the Berne Convention, and is an extension of the principles and criteria of the Natura 2000 network in non-EU countries, and, therefore, a key tool for preparing the countries for their future work on Natura 2000 and for implementing the Birds and Habitats Directives. Currently, the EMERALD network in the Republic of North Macedonia includes 16 sites,



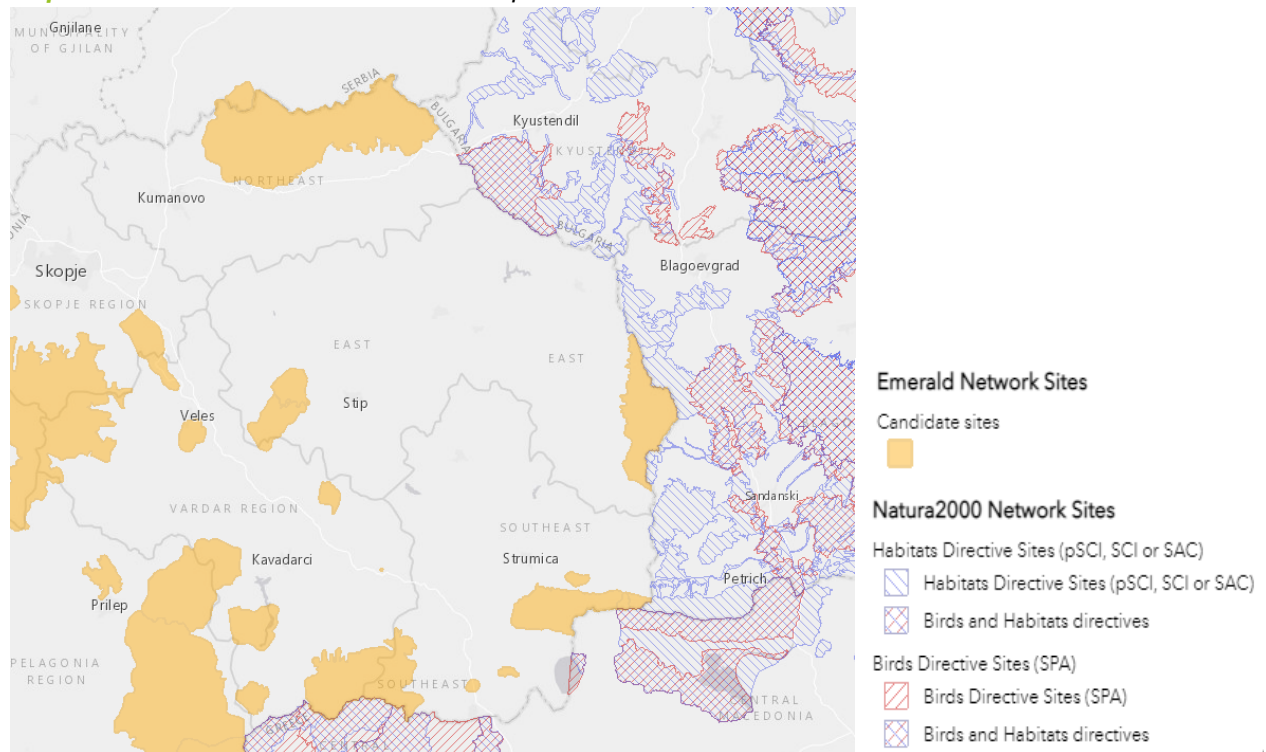
which represent about 80% of the entire network. Within the border area, the following places with valuable European habitats and species have been identified: Bogoslovec, Monospitovo Marsh (The Blato, as it's affectionately known, is a marsh, purported to be one of the last and biggest in North Macedonia), the natural monuments Smolare Waterfall and Dojran Lake.

The Potrošnica River is of great ornithological and botanical importance. The Bislim Gorge is a short gorge with a pronounced sub-Mediterranean climatic impact, rich in underground and surface karst formations; the gorge of the Kiselica River and others. The Osogovo Mountain has a number of internationally and nationally significant species of flora and fauna. This is an important corridor for the movement of wild plant and animal species within the Pan-European Ecological Network for South East Europe (PEEN SEE) and the Izumrud region.

The Belasica Mountain contains two geomorphological phenomena declared natural monuments - the Smolare and Kolesino waterfalls. The Monospitovo Marsh near Strumica has also been declared a natural monument due to the presence of glacial relics of ferns (*Osmunda regalis*). The Osogovo, Belasica, and Maleshevska Mountains and parts of the catchments of the Struma and Vardar rivers are also recognized in the Strategy of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as areas with high potential for CBC activities. There are other natural protected territories that are a solid basis for potential tourist attractions.

The Osogovo, Belasica, and Maleshevska Mountains and parts of the catchments of the Struma and Vardar rivers are also recognized in the Strategy of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as areas with high potential for CBC activities. There are other natural protected territories that are a solid basis for potential tourist attractions.

Map 5: EMERALD Network sites in the Republic of North Macedonia



Source: <https://emerald.eea.europa.eu/>

Table 3: Candidate sites for Protected Species under EMERALD Network



Candidate sites for Protected Sites under EMERALD Network	№	Area: (km²)	Region of Republic of North Macedonia
1. German - Pchinja	MK0000029	635.73	North-East planning region
2. Maleshevska Mountain	MK0000033	191.64	East planning region
3. Bogoslovec	MK0000010	45.06	East planning region
4. Belasica	MK0000021	167.34	South-East planning region
5. Monospitovo Marsh	MK0000013	10.83	South-East planning region
6. Churchulum (Bogdanci)	MK0000027	6.53	South-East planning region
7. Negorski banji	MK0000022	6.26	South-East planning region
8. Kozuf	MK0000019,	282.82	South-East planning region

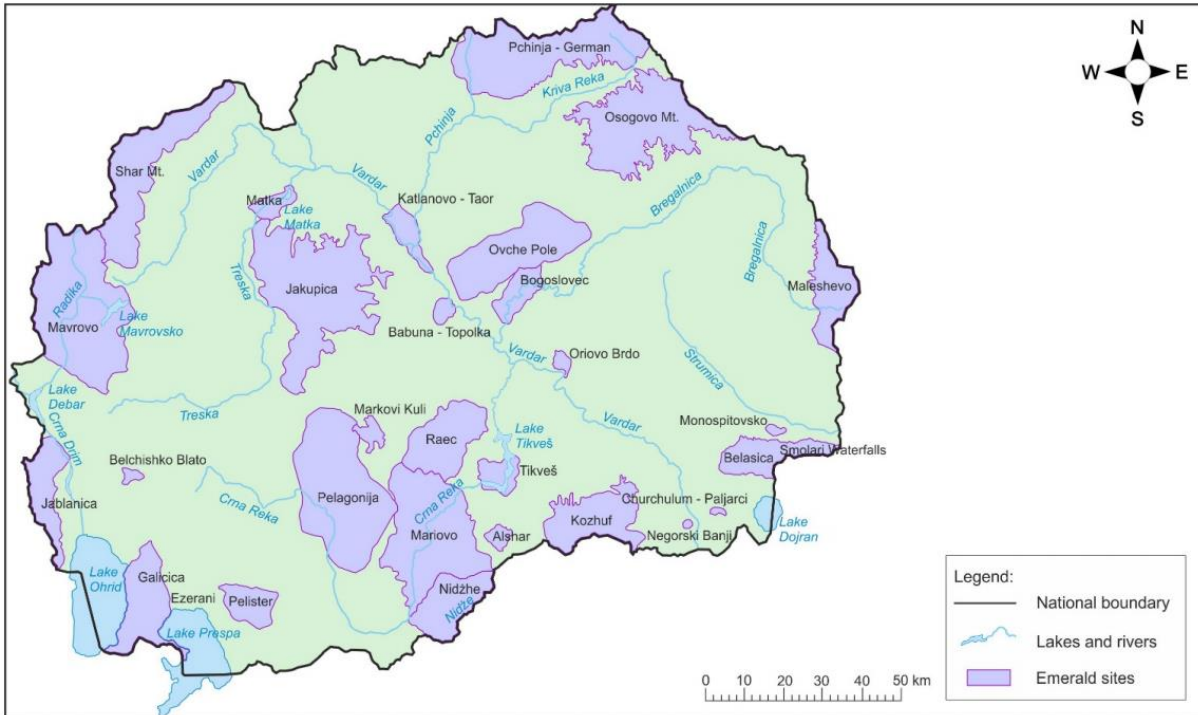
Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

Protected natural areas in the Republic of North Macedonia and ecological corridors for connecting the protected territories are the:

- North-East planning region: Kumanovo Kozjak, proposed for a nature park; the Kokino archaeological site; the stone town of Kuklica (protected area as a natural rarity); the Potrošnica River (ornithological and botanical significance); the Bislim Gorge (sub-Mediterranean impact on the climate, rich in underground and surface karst formations); the gorge of the river Kiselica; the Osogovo Mountain (an important corridor for the movement of wild plant and animal species within the pan-European ecological network);
- South-East planning region: The forest ecosystems in Strumica cover the territory of the Belasica and Ograzhden mountains and are dominated by deciduous forests and evergreen forests - rare and most common in the higher parts of the mountains; the natural resource-rich areas of Radoviš and Konče are popular for their supply of mineral, non-metallic raw materials.

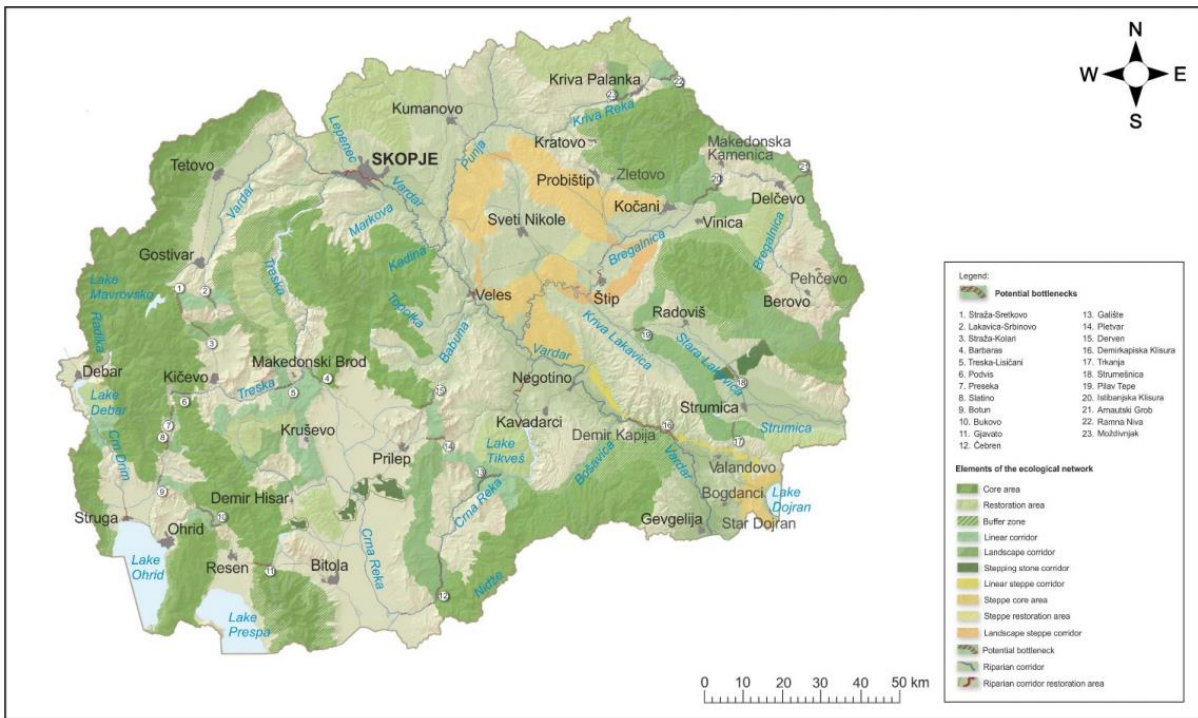


Map 11.3: National Emerald Network



Source: UNECE – Environmental Performance Reviews - North Macedonia - Third Review, 2019
https://unece.org/DAM/env/epr/epr_studies/ECE.CEP.186.Eng.pdf

Map 11.2. Proposed scope of the National Ecological Network



Source: UNECE – Environmental Performance Reviews - North Macedonia - Third Review, 2019
https://unece.org/DAM/env/epr/epr_studies/ECE.CEP.186.Eng.pdf





In addition to the natural diversity of the region, there are forests that cover about 46.5% of the total area of the border region and provide raw materials for the woodworking industry as well as opportunities for recreation and hunting activities.

The Balkan Green Belt is part of the Green Belt Europe initiative and passes through the Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Republic of Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Turkey) to end in the Black Sea. The Iron Curtain that divided Europe for almost 40 years created an area between Western and Eastern Europe where human activity was limited and natural habitats remained undisturbed. The purpose of the Green Belt is to become part of an ecological network and preserve the biological diversity and, for this reason, is preserved as an option in the National Concept for Spatial Development for the period 2013-2025 and its 2019 Update.

- **Climate Change**

Various analyses, assessments, and scenarios by national and international institutions and experts place the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia among the countries with a higher risk of climate change. The factors expected to adversely affect human health, environment, biodiversity, and economic growth include extreme temperatures, higher frequency and intensity of rainfall, torrential rains, and related processes and natural disasters.

Taking into account the environmental situation, the whole CBC region is assessed as a region with deficits for adaptation to climate change.

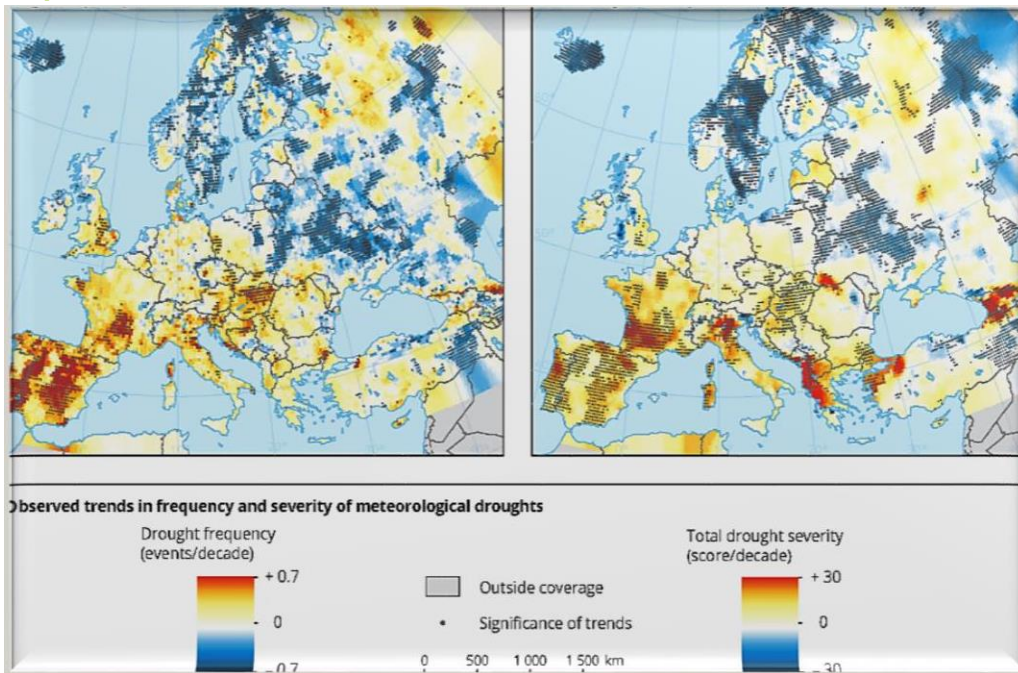
The frequency of natural disasters has increased in recent years. A series of disasters have been observed, mainly related to the development of powerful convective storms, which have caused serious material damage and casualties. The effects of these processes are also the frequent floods.

Droughts

One of the main results of climate change is represented by long periods of meteorological and hydrological droughts and reduction of soil moisture. According to the data available, the analysed region is characterized by a slightly higher frequency of drought. The frequency of dry years registered is increasing, while rainy years are no longer significantly present.

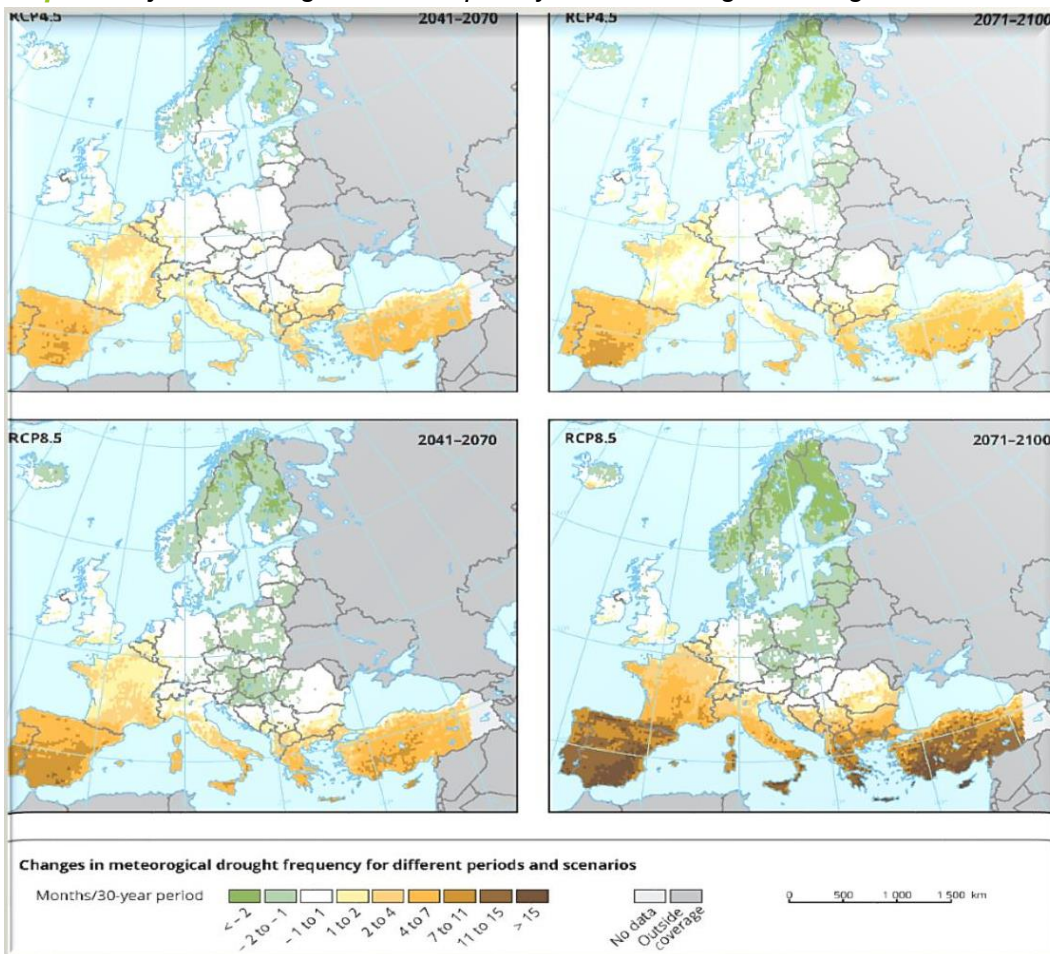
According to the scenarios developed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the cross-border area between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia will not be surrounded by meteorological droughts in the future. In this context, it is up to the policy makers and the governments to develop and implement strategies to reduce the negative effects of climate change.

Map 6: Drought frequency and severity in Europe



Source: European Environmental agency, Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

Map 7: Projected change in the frequency of meteorological droughts





Source: Environmental European Agency, Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

Floods

The natural and anthropogenic causes of floods relate to the existence of topographic diversity and concentration of surfaces with a high risk of floods, the insufficient strengthening of the torrential slopes around the areas (especially in the hilly areas), the lack of afforestation works.

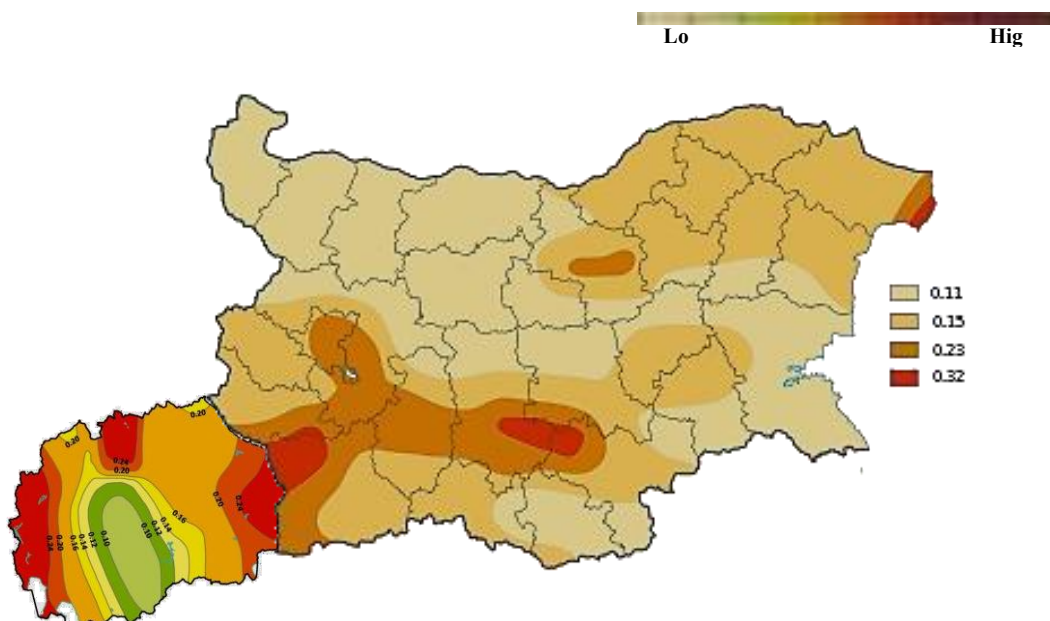
Climate change is expected to lead to higher rainfall, with projections showing an increase in torrential rains in most parts of Europe in autumn and winter of up to 35% by the end of the 21st century in a high-emission scenario.

Geological risk and seismic Hazard

The main threat of geological risk in the CBC region are the landslides. These negative phenomena are directly related to the settlements and the technical and engineering infrastructure. The efforts in this direction must be associated with specific technical interventions and large financial resources.

The Balkan Peninsula countries are located in the Aegean Sea seismic zone, which is part of the Mediterranean earthquake. The cross-border area is exposed to a relatively high seismic hazard. Two Districts of the Republic of Bulgaria belong to the most earthquake-vulnerable regions of the country.

Map 10: Map of seismic hazard



Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area



GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ENVIRONMENT

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favourable geographical location with opportunities for key transport links; • Favourable climatic and geomorphological conditions; • Diverse natural environment; • High river network density with relatively good ecological condition; • Significant and diverse set of natural resources: forests, waters, geothermal springs, etc.; • Well-developed national ecological network in the CBC region; • Availability of protected territories with well-preserved and unique ecosystems and biodiversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peripheral location of the border areas in the territories of the two neighbouring countries; • Mountainous terrain of the CBC region limiting the development of transport connections; • High degree of vulnerability to the negative effects of climate change; • High risk of earthquakes; • Relatively high level of flood risk; • Relatively high levels of air pollution in urban areas; • Low level of awareness of the population about nature and environmental protection.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prerequisites for overall CBC development given the favourable geographical location and natural resources; • Increasing the adaptive capacity and support for preventive actions; • Joint risk management and emergency preparedness; • Raising the population awareness and readiness for action; • Cross-border cooperation for sustainable use and management of resources of mutual interest; • Direct support to SMEs in the field of green economy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation of smaller municipalities; • Negative impacts of natural disasters: floods, fires, earthquakes; • Negative impacts of human activity: depletion of resources, environmental pollution, floods, fires; • Reduction of biological diversity due to soil, air, and water pollution; • Inefficient management and consumption of natural resources.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND LABOUR MARKET

2.1. Demographic Characteristics

As at 31 December 2019, the total population in the cooperation region is 942,210 people, 44.5% of the population lives in the Bulgarian part and 55.5% lives in the part of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The demographic potential of the cooperation region is similar for both countries, except for Kyustendil District where there is definitely a higher negative population growth rate compared to other regions.

On the Bulgarian side, the natural increase in the CBC region is negative: in Blagoevgrad District, it is -4.1 ‰, and in Kyustendil District it is -13.2 ‰. The region is characterized by a continuing decline and aging of the population, declining birth rates and a high overall mortality rate, negative



natural and mechanical growth. Due to the negative natural growth (mainly in rural areas) and dominant migration processes, there is serious depopulation, especially in rural areas.

On the side of the Republic of North Macedonia, there is also a decreasing rate of population growth, but not with such dimensions as on the Bulgarian side. At the end of 2019, only the North-East planning region had a positive growth, while the other two regions showed a slight decrease, more significant in the East planning region.

Table 5. Population in the CBC region as of 31.12. 2011-2019

Administrative unit	2011	2019	Growth	
	number	number	number	%
Blagoevgrad District	322 025	302 694	-19 331	-6,0
Kyustendil District	134 990	116 915	-18 075	-13,4
CBC region of Republic of Bulgaria	457 015	419 609	-37 406	-8,2
Republic of Bulgaria	7 327 224	6 951 482	-375 742	-5,1
North-East planning region	175 323	175 973	650	0,4
East planning region	179 080	173 804	-5 276	-2,9
South-East planning region	173 083	172 824	-259	-0,1
CBC region of Republic of North Macedonia	527 486	522 601	-4 885	-0,9
Republic of North Macedonia	2 059 794	2 076 255	16 461	0,8

Source: NSI, SSO, MAKSTAT³

The most significant demographic characteristic is the aging of the population, which is typical for most EU countries. The population of the Bulgarian country in the cooperation region has been aging in recent years, following the national trend. The large-scale emigration processes, mainly among the young age groups, have significantly contributed to the age structure in the Republic of Bulgaria. As a result, the human potential for economic development, especially in the rural areas, on the Bulgarian side, is declining, with the working age population being less than two thirds.

The population aging is a process with profound consequences for the economy, the labour market, and the social systems. It affects all aspects of the economic and social life of the country.

The border region of the Republic of North Macedonia has also had problems with population aging in recent years, although not to the same extent as on the Bulgarian side. The share of the working age population (15-64 years) is more than two thirds of the total population. The population in 2019 by main age groups was close to the national average.

Table 6. Population as of 31.12. 2019 by age

Administrative unit	Total	0-14	15-64	65+	0-14	15-64	65+
	number				relative share - %		
Blagoevgrad District	302 694	44 557	198 298	59 839	14,7	65,5	19,8
Kyustendil District	116 915	14 185	70 391	32 339	12,1	60,2	27,7
CBC region of Republic of Bulgaria	419 609	58 742	268 689	92 178	14,0	64,0	22,0
Republic of Bulgaria	6 951 482	1 002 258	4 445 136	1 504 088	14,4	63,9	21,6
North-East planning region	175 973	28 739	123 383	23 810	16,3	70,1	13,5

³ <https://www.stat.gov.mk/>



Administrative unit	Total	0-14	15-64	65+	0-14	15-64	65+
	number				relative share - %		
East planning region	173 884	23 491	120 629	29 683	13,5	69,4	17,1
South-East planning region	172 824	27 422	119 356	26 023	15,9	69,1	15,1
CBC region of Republic of North Macedonia	522 681	79 652	363 368	79 516	15,2	69,5	15,2
Republic of North Macedonia	2 076 255	336 630	1 438 810	300 647	16,2	69,3	14,5

Source: NSI & SSO

The territory on the side of the Republic of North Macedonia consists of the North-East, East, and South-East territorial units, equivalent to a NUTS 3 level statistical region and consisting of 27 municipalities and 597 settlements. It covers 47.7% of the programme region and occupies 33.8% of the country's area.

The territorial programme on the side of the Republic of Bulgaria includes two NUTS 3 level territorial units (Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil) consisting of 23 municipalities and 462 settlements. It covers 52.3% of the programme region and occupies 8.6% of the country's area.

Table 7. Population by municipalities, 2019

Municipalities	Population		Municipalities	Population	
	number	%		number	%
CBC region of Republic of Bulgaria	419 609	100	CBC region of Republic of North Macedonia	522 601	100
Blagoevgrad			North-East planning region		
Bansko	12 890	3,1	Kratovo	8 981	1,7
Belitsa	9 199	2,2	Kriva Palanka	19 633	3,8
Blagoevgrad	74 825	17,8	Kumanovo	109 521	21,0
Gotse Delchev	29 657	7,1	Lipkovo	30 439	5,8
Garmen	14 650	3,5	Rankovce	3 612	0,7
Kresna	5 423	1,3	Staro Nagorichane	3 787	0,7
Petrich	48 992	11,7	East planning region		0,0
Raslog	19 086	4,5	Berovo	12 493	2,4
Sandanski	37 074	8,8	Cheshinovo- Obleshevo	6 651	1,3
Satovcha	14 204	3,4	Delchevo	15 722	3,0
Simitli	13 026	3,1	Karbinci	3 904	0,7
Strumyani	4 880	1,2	Kochani	37 389	7,2
Hadzhidimovo	9 040	2,2	Makedonska Kamenica	7 335	1,4
Yakoruda	9 748	2,3	Pehchevo	4 722	0,9
Kyustendil			Probistip	14 771	2,8
Bobov dol	7 262	1,7	Stip	48 690	9,3
Boboshevo	2 579	0,6	Vinica	19 207	3,7
Dupnitsa	38 653	9,2	Zrnovci	2 920	0,6
Kocherinovo	4 196	1,0	South-East planning region		0,0
Kyustendil	52 460	12,5	Bogdanci	8 032	1,5





Municipalities	Population		Municipalities	Population	
	number	%		number	%
Nevestino	1 951	0,5	Bosilovo	13 885	2,7
Rila	2 391	0,6	Dojran	3 272	0,6
Sapareva banya	6 608	1,6	Gevgelija	22 556	4,3
Treklyano	815	0,2	Konche	3 548	0,7
			Novo Selo	10 486	2,0
			Radovich	29 061	5,6
			Strumica	57 381	11,0
			Valandovo	11 621	2,2
			Vasilevo	12 982	2,5

Source: NSI & SSO

The territorial disparities are identified by the population density indicator, which for the entire Republic of Bulgaria-Republic of North Macedonia CBC region was 52.1 people/km² at the end of 2018. It is influenced by the mechanical and natural movement of the population as well as by the process of urbanization.

The average population density in the cooperation region of the Republic of Bulgaria is lower than the national one (63.0 people/km²) and varies significantly between urban and rural areas. Kyustendil District has the lowest population density in the entire CBC region.

The population density in the cooperation region of the Republic of North Macedonia shows that it remains below the national average (80.8 people/km²). The North-East statistical region has the highest population density in the entire CBC region (76.3 people/km²), which is close to the national average.

The average population density in the whole REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA-Republic of North Macedonia CBC region is far from the EU-28 average, which is 117.7 people / km².

Table 8. Population density, 2019

Administrative unit	Territory	Population	Density
	km ²	number	d/km ²
Blagoevgrad District	6 449	302 694	46,9
Kyustendil District	3 084	116 915	37,9
CBC region of Bulgaria	9 533	419 609	44,0
Republic of Bulgaria	110 372	6 951 482	63,0
North- East planning region	2 306	175 973	76,3
East planning region	3 539	173 804	49,1
South-East planning region	2 835	172 824	61,0
CBC region of Republic of North Macedonia	8 680	522 601	60,2
Republic of North Macedonia	25 710	2 076 255	80,8
CBC region	136 082	9 027 737	66,3

Source: NSI & SSO



2.2. Labour Market

The employment rate is a leading indicator showing what part of the working age population works. On the side of the Republic of Bulgaria, both border districts – Blagoevgrad (71.0%) and Kyustendil (65.5%) – show a high employment rate. For Blagoevgrad District, it is above the average employment rate for the Republic of Bulgaria (67.7%). According to the Eurostat and the NSI forecasts for the population in the EU member states, the number of people of working age in the Republic of Bulgaria will continue to decrease in the future. This is the main factor that will reduce the workforce in the region.

Comparing the levels of employment in the border region of the Republic of North Macedonia, it is obvious that the South-East planning region has the highest employment rate (60.2%) even above the national average, while the North- East planning region has the lowest rate (33.7%), far below the average employment rate for the Republic of North Macedonia.

In both regions of the cross-border cooperation, there is a large disparity in the employment rate between the regional centre and the larger cities and smaller municipalities. The insufficient employment opportunities in the rural areas and smaller settlements lead to a concentration of business activities and employment opportunities mainly in the municipal and regional centres.

There is a clear difference in the unemployment rate between the two countries. The districts of the Republic of Bulgaria show a low level of unemployment, below the national average. The data for the regions of the Republic of North Macedonia are quite diverse: for example, the unemployment rate in the North- East planning region is more than 3 times less favourable than that in the South-East planning region, while the East planning region is 2 times below the national average. In some of the small municipalities in the two border areas of the CBC region, there is a high level of unemployment that leads to constant migration of young people.

Table 9. Employment, economic activity, and unemployment rates in the region, 2018, (%)

Administrative unit	Employment rates	Economic activity	Unemployment rates
REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA	67,7	71,5	5,2
Blagoevgrad District	71,0	74,6	4,7
Kyustendil District	65,5	70,0	3,6
Republic of North Macedonia	45,9	56,9	21,5
North- East planning region	33,7	52,5	35,9
East planning region	53,4	60,4	11,5
South-East planning region	60,2	67,5	10,9

Source: NSI & SSO



DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND LABOUR MARKET

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Positive trend in the level of employment;</i> • <i>Tendency to decrease the unemployment rate among the working age population.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Unfavourable demographic trend: population aging, negative net migration;</i> • <i>Depopulation of rural areas;</i> • <i>Emigration of skilled labour, young people, and highly-educated professionals and intellectuals;</i> • <i>Concentration of employment opportunities mainly in the provincial and municipal centres;</i> • <i>Discrepancy between the level of professional qualification and the needs of the labour market.</i>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Creating opportunities for professional development and attracting young people;</i> • <i>Creating conditions for cooperation between educational and training institutions and the business;</i> • <i>Development of labour skills and improvement of labour mobility in the CBC region.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reduction of the production in some industrial sectors leading to rising unemployment;</i> • <i>Intensification of emigration processes;</i> • <i>Deterioration of employment opportunities in rural areas;</i> • <i>Difficulties in the development and improvement of the education and vocational training system;</i> • <i>Increasing the share of the elderly population due to negative growth and migration processes.</i>

3. ASPECTS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

3.1. Economic Development

Economic development is a multifaceted process affecting economic growth, output of innovations and business sectors, productivity growth, improvement of the living standards of the population of countries with sustainable growth from a low-income economy to a modern, highly profitable economy. Economic development and disparities between and within the regions are assessed using several key indicators.

- **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)**

In recent years, Bulgaria has achieved high economic growth and GDP growth. This is mainly due to improvements in the overall factor productivity, while the labour capital contributions are modest. The regional differences are growing and hampering the country's competitiveness. The region is characterized by a large number of industrial sites and intensive agriculture. The cross-border region accounts for 3.7% of the country's total GDP.

The cross-border region in the Republic of North Macedonia is characterized by a diverse economic structure as well as various development processes depending on the specifics of each



region, the traditions, and the natural resources. The North-East planning region is the least economically developed planning region in the Republic of North Macedonia, with a share of 5%. The East planning region, due to favourable climatic conditions, contributes to the development of agriculture and agricultural production, while the economy in the South-East planning region is much more competitive than the other two, as it registered a GDP share of 9.8% in 2018. Services and agriculture predominate in this region (covered mainly with arable land and gardens (82%) and vineyards (10.6%).

The gross domestic product per capita in the Republic of Bulgaria is constantly increasing and according to Eurostat data in 2019 reached 53% of the average for the European Union⁴, compared to about 50% in 2017. In terms of this indicator, there is a difference between Kyustendil District and Blagoevgrad District, as well as a difference between the country and the CBC region. These differences are due to less investment, which affects the GDP per capita, and staff shortages both in terms of quantity and quality (education and training).

According to the data of the State Statistical Office, the Skopje Region had the biggest share (43.2%) in the gross domestic product of the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019, while the Northeast Region had the smallest share (4.8%). Southeast Region with an index of 107.5. All other regions had gross domestic product per capita below the average of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The other two border regions have a gross domestic product per capita below the average for the Republic of North Macedonia, while the lowest gross domestic product per capita compared to the national average is in the North- East planning region. It is the least economically developed planning region in the Republic of North Macedonia, with a share of GDP of 5%, much smaller than the share of the region in the total territory and the total population of the country. The economic development of the South-East planning region has achieved significant results compared to the other two regions. It has a GDP rate of almost 10% compared to the national level.

Table 10. Gross domestic product, 2018, (in million EUR)

<i>Administrative unit</i>	<i>Gross domestic product in million EUR</i>	<i>Share%</i>	<i>Gross domestic product per capita in EUR</i>
Republic of Bulgaria	51 663	100	7,984
Blagoevgrad District	1 390	2.69	4,495
Kyustendil District	500	0.97	4,085
Republic of North Macedonia	10 066	100	5,153
North- East planning region	500	4.97	2,746
East planning region	831	8.26	4,341
South-East planning region	988	9.82	7,702

Source: NSI & SSO

- **Gross Value Added (GVA)**

Gross value added (GVA) is the measure of value of goods and services produced in an area, industry or sector of an economy. The values of the GVA indicator in the Republic of Bulgaria (at national level) repeat the characteristics of the GDP indicator. The changes in the economic structure of the CBC region on the Bulgarian side follow the trends of the more developed

⁴ https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=nama_10_gdp&lang=en



economies. The high share of services continues to grow at the expense of the shrinking sectors of industry and agriculture. A higher GVA compared to the economic sectors in the CBC region of the Republic of North Macedonia has been registered in the South-East planning region, with lowest values in the North- East planning region.

Industry, ranking second in the CBC region of the Republic of Bulgaria and third in the economy of the CBC region of the Republic of North Macedonia, is represented mainly by mining as a leading sector in the past and still the most important part of the regional industrial production. The most famous mining centres in the Republic of North Macedonia are Konče (South-East planning region) with extraction of limestone, marble, and copper, an iron mine in Radoviš (South-East planning region), the zinc mines in Makedonska Kamenica (East planning region).

The agricultural sector has a significant share in the Republic of North Macedonia and ranks third in the border region of the Republic of Bulgaria. Nearly 95% of the total rice production in the Republic of North Macedonia is produced in the East planning region (Kochani). The East planning region is the largest producer of potatoes and accounts for 40% of the pork production in the country. In terms of viticulture, the South-East planning region has arable area of 60.699 ha. About 82% are gardens and 18% are vineyards (MAK STAT 2019). On the Bulgarian side, there are 3,000 ha planted in Blagoevgrad District. In Kyustendil District, there is an annual production of 6 thousand tons of cherries, and the district is one of the largest producers and exporters of cherries in the Republic of Bulgaria. The supporting axis of agriculture is the valley of the Struma River, in the southern part of which the Sandanski-Petrich Intensive Agricultural Region is located. The earliest vegetables of Republic of Bulgaria, fruits, and grapes are produced here. Intensive agriculture and production of early vegetables is typical for the Struma field in the Republic of North Macedonia, where sesame, peanuts, peaches, grapes, and other intensive crops are also grown. The whole border region is characterized by tobacco production.

The services sector is at the forefront in the Republic of Bulgaria and ranks second in the border region of the Republic of North Macedonia. The geographical location of the region and the rich natural resources form an excellent basis for the development of the services sector, in particular international trade, transport, and related services and tourism. In this way, they become an important engine for stimulating the socio-economic development of the border region. The South-East planning region (Republic of North Macedonia) and the districts of Kyustendil and Blagoevgrad (Republic of Bulgaria) are rich in thermo-mineral potential, which is one of the main prerequisites for the development of spa tourism in the CBC region.

Table 11 GVA by economic sectors, 2018, (in million EUR)

Administrative unit	GVA by economic sectors in million EUR			GVA total in million EUR
	Agriculture	Industry	Services	
Republic of Bulgaria	2,104	12,744	29,961	44,809
Blagoevgrad District	122	346	737	1,205
Kyustendil District	52	136	246	433
Republic of North Macedonia	7,446	2,317	5,177	14,940
North- East planning region	370	99	281	750
East planning region	613	255	334	1,202
South-East planning region	587	211	376	1,174



Source: NSI and MAKSTAT

- **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)**

The size of investment and its structure determine the speed and nature of economic growth. Insufficient investment reduces economic growth and employment, the reverse process stimulates economic activity such as production and employment. Investment is very important for regional development and its distribution must be based on many demographic, social, and economic factors.

The foreign direct investment (FDI) in the non-financial sector in Blagoevgrad District as at 31 December 2018 amounted to EUR 499.3 million, which is 5.3% more than in 2017. Its share in the total amount of foreign investment made in the country is 2.0%. In terms of foreign investment, Blagoevgrad District ranks 8th in the country.

The foreign direct investment (FDI) in the non-financial sector in Kyustendil District as at 31 December 2018 amounted to EUR 42.9 million, which is 0.4% more than in 2017. Its share in the total amount of foreign investment in the country is 0.2% and 0.3% of the FDI in the South-Western region. In terms of foreign investment, Kyustendil ranks 21st in the country.

There are significant differences in the ability of the individual districts in the CBC region on the side of Republic of Bulgaria to attract foreign direct investment, which further increases the gap between the districts. Table 12 illustrates the difference between the districts in terms of foreign direct investment by the difference between Blagoevgrad District (1.94%) and the district with the lowest score in the region (and one of the last in the country) at the end of 2018 – Kyustendil District (0.17%).

Of the studied regions in the Republic of North Macedonia, the largest percentage of investment is distributed in the North- East planning region – 16.28%. A lower percentage is distributed in the South-East planning region – 10.32%.

The foreign direct investment in the Republic of North Macedonia (FDI) increased by USD 6.5 million in September 2019 compared to an increase of USD 43.4 million in the previous month.

The foreign direct investment in the Republic of Bulgaria is also constantly growing, especially in real estate, financial intermediation, as well as electricity generation and trade sectors. All these trends show a rapidly developing economic situation in the Republic of Bulgaria, with a positive outlook for the coming years.

Table 12. Foreign direct investment in non-financial corporations

Administrative unit	Total FDI in thousand EUR	Share - %
Republic of Bulgaria	24,475,196.0	100
Blagoevgrad District	474,197.0	1.94
Kyustendil District	42,782.0	0.17
Republic of North Macedonia	1,124,616.2	100
North- East planning region	183,087.4	16.28
East planning region	142,350.9	12.66
South-East planning region	116,042.5	10.32

Source: NSI (2018) and MAKSTAT (2017)



- **Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)**

The SMEs are the backbone of the national economy and generate over 60% of the GDP of the Republic of Bulgaria. The number of SME sectors on the Bulgarian side of the border has a share of 98% in the industry and 99% in the services. The number of micro-firms with staff between 0 - 9 people prevails, reaching 317,834 in 2018 (91.83% of the total number of enterprises). The group of enterprises with 10 to 49 employees numbered 14,289 enterprises in 2018, with a share of 6.72%.

The development of the small and medium enterprises in the country is observed annually in the analyses performed on certain indicators since 2011. The report for the Republic of Bulgaria from 2018, according to Eurostat data for the previous year, shows that the added value of the SMEs increased from 59.2% in 2012 (according to data from 2008-2009) to 65.2% and was above the EU average, which fell from 58.4% to 56.8% in the same period.

The analyses emphasize both the advantages and the problems faced by the SMEs in the Republic of Bulgaria. They represent 75% of the employment (compared to 68% in the EU for the same period) and 62% of the value added (compared to 58% in the EU for this period). From 2002 to 2011, the SMEs quadrupled their contribution to the value added. The high number of graduates and people with language and computer skills and high relative share of women in the SMEs are highly appreciated. Among the disadvantages are the high concentration of most SMEs in the capital and the provincial centres.

According to NSI data, in Blagoevgrad District in 2018 there were a total of 21,907 non-financial enterprises, or 1.7% more than in 2017. The District was dominated by micro-enterprises (up to 9 employees) – 93.6% of the total number. The small enterprises (10 to 49 employees) were 5.5%, the medium enterprises (50 to 249 employees) – 0.8%, and the large enterprises (over 250 employees) – 0.1% of all non-financial enterprises in the district.

According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), in Kyustendil District in 2018 there were a total of 5,935 non-financial enterprises, or 3.6% more than in 2017. The largest was the number of the micro-enterprises with up to 9 employees – 93.6%, the small enterprises (10 to 49 employees) were 5.4%, and the medium enterprises with 50 to 249 employees – 0.9%.

In the Republic of Bulgaria, directly related to the regional development policy, measures have been proposed to support SMEs in lagging regions with low employment. In addition to the measures for technological modernization and improvement of professional qualification, development of low-tech sectors, various forms of joint activities, and cluster initiatives are proposed for such regions. Emphasis is also placed on the need to implement specific targeted programmes to reduce regional disparities. Municipalities with potential for development of the clothing industry – Blagoevgrad – and the leather and footwear industry – Kyustendil, Blagoevgrad⁵ – are indicated for regional specialization.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the micro-, small and medium enterprises represent 99.7% of the total business population. Among them, the largest group includes micro-enterprises (up to 10 employees), which represent about 90% of the total number of active business entities, while the smallest share in the business community in the Republic of North Macedonia – only 0.3% – is



owned by large enterprises with over 250 employees.

The development of the private sector in the cross-border region of the Republic of North Macedonia is considered to be at a satisfactory level. In 2018, there were 15,695 active business entities in the region, of which 89.45% were micro-enterprises (up to 10 employees), 8.0% were small enterprises (10 to 49 employees), and 2.3% were medium-sized enterprises (50 to 249 employees). The current cooperation between enterprises is oriented towards internal economic, social, and cultural urban centres, e.g., Kumanovo (North- East planning region), Stip (East planning region), Strumica (South-East planning region), mainly due to the fact that the important transport corridors provide easy access to these centres and, therefore, to the capital of the Republic of North Macedonia. This allows for easy communication and cooperation between the enterprises. There are some cluster initiatives, and the application of innovations and technologies can help companies become competitive nationally and internationally.

Table 13 Number of active enterprises by number of employees, 2018

Administrative unit	Total number	Enterprises by number of employees			
		Up to 9	10-49	50-249	250 +
Republic of Bulgaria	413,535	383,134	24,982	4,549	827
CBC region	27,842	26,060	1,525	228	28
Blagoevgrad District	21,907	20,505	1,205	175	22
Kyustendil District	5,935	5,555	320	53	6
Republic of North Macedonia	72,315	65,405	5,271	1,399	249
CBC region	15,695	14,039	1,255	363	38
North- East planning region	4,078	3,688	305	79	6
East planning region	5,632	4,980	459	173	10
South-East planning region	5,985	5,371	491	111	12

Source: NSI (2018) and MAKSTAT (2017)

The analyses show similarities in the economies of the two countries on both sides of the border:

- small and medium-sized enterprises predominate;
- the structures of industrial production are basically the same;
- the industries need fresh capital in order to innovate technologically and increase competitiveness.

Table 13a: GDP by sectors of activity in the East Planning Region (EPR), in millions of denars and share of sectors, at regional and national level, 2018 - 2019⁶

	2018			2019		
	Total EPR	RNM	Share(%)	Total EPR	RNM	Share(%)
Total	47.330	573.922	8,2%	48.564	598.204	8,1%
Agriculture, forestry; fishing	4.642	55.979	8,3%	4.674	55.477	8,4%
Mining; manufacturing industry; utilities	18.555	123.187	15,1%	19.130	123.854	15,4%
Construction Industry	3.057	35.757	8,5%	2.887	38.161	7,6%

⁶ DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR THE EAST PLANNING REGION 2020—2024



Wholesale and retail; Repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; Transport and storage; Conditions for accommodation and food service	7.237	131.737	5,5%	7.783	139.773	5,6%
Information and communication	532	22.612	2,4%	555	25.520	2,2%
Financial and insurance activities	584	19.276	3,0%	300	19.221	1,6%
Real estate activities	5.867	66.152	8,9%	6.289	68.399	9,2%
Professional, scientific and technical activities; Administrative and support service activities	811	23.822	3,4%	872	25.953	3,4%
Public administration and defense; compulsory social security; Education; Health and social activities	5.332	76.943	6,9%	5.277	82.027	6,4%
Arts, entertainment and recreation, other services	713	18.458	3,9%	798	19.819	4,0%

Table 13b. GDP by sectors of activity in the South-East Planning Region (SEPR), in millions of denars and share of sectors, at regional and national level, 2018 - 2019⁷

	2018			2019		
	Total SEPR	RNM	Share(%)	Total SEPR	RNM	Share(%)
Total	53.759	573.922	9,4%	53.577	598.204	9,0%
Agriculture, forestry; fishing	14.665	55.979	26,2%	14.404	55.477	26,0%
Mining; manufacturing industry; utilities	10.645	123.187	8,6%	8.981	123.854	7,3%
Construction Industry	2.756	35.757	7,7%	3.858	38.161	10,1%
Wholesale and retail; Repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; Transport and storage; Conditions for accommodation and food service	11.092	131.737	8,4%	11.994	139.773	8,6%
Information and communication	604	22.612	2,7%	680	25.520	2,7%
Financial and insurance activities	564	19.276	2,9%	316	19.221	1,6%
Real estate activities	5.049	66.152	7,6%	5.726	68.399	8,4%
Professional, scientific and technical activities; Administrative and support service activities	747	23.822	3,1%	812	25.953	3,1%
Public administration and defense; compulsory social security; Education; Health and social activities	4.383	76.943	5,7%	4.258	82.027	5,2%
Arts, entertainment and recreation, other services	3.255	18.458	17,6%	2.549	19.819	12,9%

Table 13c. GDP by sectors of activity in the North-East planning region in millions of denars and share of sectors, at regional and national level, 2019⁸

	Republic of North Macedonia	North-East planning region
Agriculture, forestry; fishing	4.067	160
Mining; manufacturing industry; utilities	33.175	309
Construction Industry	53.702	3.535
Wholesale and retail; Repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; Transport and storage; Conditions for accommodation and food service	25.727	2.275
Information and communication	8.069	102
Financial and insurance activities	1.739	3
Other	19.600	298

⁷ DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR THE SOUTH-EAST PLANNING REGION 2020—2024

⁸ DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR THE NORTH-EAST PLANNING REGION 2020—2024



Total	146.078	6.681
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3.2. Social Development

- Education

By 2019, the existing educational base of the cross-border region included 3 universities, one college, and 650 schools (including primary, lower secondary, and high schools). The structure of the educational institutions in the border region on both sides was relatively good, but with visible territorial differences in the secondary and upper educational institutions, which were mostly located in the administrative centres in the CBC region.

In the CBC region of the Republic of Bulgaria, there are three universities located in Blagoevgrad: Neofit Rilski South-West University, the American University, and College of Tourism.

Neofit Rilski Southwestern University of Blagoevgrad is the only state university in the border region. The university consists of 7 faculties and 1 college, which offer 76 bachelor's and over 70 master's programmes. The university has established active scientific relations with England, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey, Spain, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, etc. They provide opportunities for scientific specializations and teaching practice of the academic staff and students, for exchange of teachers as well as academic and scientific literature. Many students from the Republic of North Macedonia study and graduate each year at the SWU.

The American University in the Republic of Bulgaria was one of the first private universities in the country. The AUBG was a leader in education for the ninth consecutive year according to the 2019 national university ranking. The university is number one in the country in the professional fields of Administration and Management, Political Science and Public Communications and Information Sciences. AUBG graduates find 100% realisation in three of the disciplines (political science, informatics and computer science, and public communications and information science) and the highest average salaries in four of the disciplines (administration and management, economics, political science and public communications, and information science). All main activities of the university are certified, as well as its programmes for training students in bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in 19 programmes, qualification, research, and international relations. In 2019, 924 students enrolled at the university, of which 897 in bachelor's and 27 in master's programmes. computer labs and offices; Panitsa Library is the largest English language library in Southeast Europe and a unique student centre.

The College of Tourism in Blagoevgrad offers courses and programmes leading to officially recognized higher education degrees, e.g. a bachelor's degree, in several fields of study. The college provides specialized training in the professional fields of Tourism and Administration and Management. It provides competence and competitiveness for the local, national, and international labour market.

There is only one university in the border region of the Republic of North Macedonia - Gotse Delchev University of Stip, a state university ranked second on the list of state universities in the Republic of North Macedonia. Founded in 2007, the university started with seven faculties and one higher-level vocational school as follows: Law, Economics, Faculty of Education, Mining and Geology and Polytechnics, Agriculture, Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology; Faculty of Music, and Higher Medical School. In the academic year 2008-2009, the university included six new faculties: Medicine, Philology, Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical



Engineering, Faculty of Technology, and Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics. Today, the University consists of 13 faculties and three academies and offers over 100 curricula in three cycles of study: bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. In the 2018-19 academic year, a total of 8,237 students were enrolled at the university.

In total, more than 17,000 students study at the 4 higher-education institutions. A significant part of the highly-educated population is located in the larger municipal centres, the cities of Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Sandanski, Gotse Delchev, and Petrich on the side of the Republic of Bulgaria and Stip, Kumanovo, and Strumica on the side of the Republic of North Macedonia.

- **Healthcare**

In 2019, the infrastructure of hospital care in the CBC region included 18 hospitals, of which 12 were in the Bulgarian CBC region (11 in Blagoevgrad District and 5 in Kyustendil District), 6 were in the CBC region of the Republic of North Macedonia (3 in the South-East planning region, 2 in the East planning region, and 1 in the North- East planning region). The main part of the hospitals was concentrated in the big municipal centres: Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Sandanski, Kumanovo, Stip, and Strumica.

One of the main problems in the border region is the uneven distribution of hospitals and the lack of guaranteed equal access to health services, including for those living in small settlements, far from urban centres.

One of the challenges facing the healthcare system of the CBC region is the internal and external "drain of brains" or health professionals who leave certain districts for professional or subjective reasons in search of better working conditions. This lack of human resources continues to undermine the system. Among the many problems that need to be addressed by the relevant authorities and agencies are the mismatch between the available funds and the expected quality of service, the inefficient use of facilities, the old equipment and apparatus, the lack of certain health services, and the lack of transparency in human resource management.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Economic growth in recent years;</i> • <i>Good resources for economic diversification;</i> • <i>Increased economic activity of SMEs;</i> • <i>Availability of active border checkpoints and potential for daily travel;</i> • <i>Relatively good coverage in territorial terms of primary and secondary education infrastructure;</i> • <i>Proximity to university centres;</i> • <i>Provided access of the population to all educational levels;</i> • <i>Relatively good territorial coverage of infrastructure for social and primary health services.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lower level of investment in areas with demographic problems;</i> • <i>Low level of product and technological competitiveness;</i> • <i>Low entrepreneurial activity;</i> • <i>Low capacity of SMEs to access funds for innovative development;</i> • <i>Presence of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion;</i> • <i>Tendency to decrease in existing educational infrastructure;</i> • <i>Discrepancy between the knowledge and skills acquired in the educational system and the needs of the labour market;</i> • <i>Insufficient development of the social assistance system.</i>



Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth of the services sector and conditions for job creation; • Stimulating the start-up and development of SMEs in key areas with potential for creating alternative employment; • Creating conditions for the development of activities in the conditions of individual employment; • Development of dual education; • Transition to a circular economy related to reducing resource dependence and waste recovery; • Promotion of social entrepreneurship; • Development of models for social innovation and cross-border cooperation in social, cultural, and health services and disadvantaged people; • Cross-border cooperation between educational and training institutions and the business; • Development of innovative approaches for professional, distance, and specialized training; • Existing know-how and positive local practices for social inclusion; • Establishing synchrony between business, science, and education through modern centres for start-up export-oriented innovation companies; • Orientation towards high-tech production activities with high added value; • Application of innovative approaches in the manufacturing sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of the overall socio-economic development of rural areas due to their peripheral location and isolation; • Further deepening processes of population growth at risk, isolation and exclusion; • Vulnerability of health and social systems to the negative consequences of epidemic and pandemic situations; • Increasing level of demand for health and social services due to the aging population; • Insufficient provision of health and social services; • Deepening economic and social disparities between urban and rural areas; • Vulnerability to the negative effects of a global and national financial and economic crisis; • Vulnerability of the SMEs to the negative consequences of pandemic and epidemic situations; • Low technological level of the economy; • Insufficient number of highly-qualified staff given the new challenges in the economy; • Further lagging behind in competitiveness of the least developed areas.

4. TRANSPORT AND ENGINEERING INFRASTRUCTURE

4.1. Transport Infrastructure

- **Road Network**

TEN-T network

The Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) policy concerns the implementation and development of a pan-European network of railways, roads, inland waterways, sea routes, ports, airports, and railway terminals. The ultimate goal is to fill the gaps, remove the bottlenecks and technical barriers, and strengthen the social, economic, and territorial cohesion in the EU. The current TEN-T policy is based on Regulation (EU) No. 1315/2013.

In addition to building new infrastructure, the TEN-T's policy supports the application of innovation,



modern technology, and digital solutions for all modes of transport. The aim is to improve the use of infrastructure, reduce the environmental impact of transport, and increase energy efficiency and safety.

The TEN-T consists of two network "layers":

- The core network includes the most important connections and should be completed by 2030.
- The network connecting all European regions should be completed by 2050.

The backbone of the core network is represented by nine corridors that were identified for the purpose of its coordinated development on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.

One of the main corridors of the TEN-T network, with extensions to third countries, passes through the cross-border region, namely the Orient / Eastern Mediterranean corridor, which connects Northern Germany (Hamburg – Berlin) with Eastern Europe (Prague – Bratislava, Budapest – Timisoara – Craiova – Sofia), and Southeast Europe (Sofia – Thessaloniki – Athens / Piraeus).



Map 13: TEN-T network with extensions to third countries

Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

The main road directions of the TEN-T network are formed by the roads of international and national importance: highways and first-class roads that ensure the integration of the road network of the country with that of the neighbouring countries and are important for the integration of the territory both nationally and at European level.

The Bulgarian CBC region crosses the Struma motorway from Sofia to the Kulata / Promahon border checkpoint and provides a direct connection from the capital of the Republic of Bulgaria to the border with the Republic of Greece.

The cross-border region is also served by the following first-class roads:

- First-class road I-1;
- First-class road I-6.

The Bulgarian side of the cross-border region is served by the following second-class roads:



- Second-class road II-19 Simitli – Gradevo – Razlog – Bansko – Dobrinishte – Gotse Delchev – Greek border is an important road connection that connects the region and the country with the Republic of Greece through the Ilinden / Exochi border checkpoint.
- Second-class road II-62 Kyustendil – Dupnitsa – Klisura – Samokov provides convenient access from the regional centre of Kyustendil to Struma Motorway and the capital Sofia.
- Second-class road II-84 (Belovo – Pazardzhik – Zvanichevo – Vetren – Velingrad – Yundola – Yakoruda – Razlog is an interregional connection of the South-Western and South Central NUTS 2 regions in the Republic of Bulgaria, via Velingrad.

Table 14: National road network - length and structure, 2019 (km)

Administrative unit	Total	Motorways	I class	II class	III class
Republic of Bulgaria	19 879	790	2 900	4 019	12 170
Blagoevgrad	716	49	75	152	440
Kyustendil	629	44	85	54	446

Source: National Statistical Institute

The density of the road network determines the degree of its construction and, for a better idea, is detailed by breaking down the density of the roads of national and international importance and the density of regional and intra-regional roads, given their different functions in serving the region.

Table 15: Density of the road network, 2019 (km / 1000 km²)

Administrative unit	Total	Motorways	I class	II and III class
Republic of Bulgaria	179.1	7.1	26.1	145.9
Blagoevgrad	111.0	7.6	11.6	91.8
Kyustendil	205.6	14.4	27.8	163.4

Source: National Statistical Institute (Calculated on Road Length Database 2019)

All indicators for Kyustendil District are above the national average, and the density of the highways is 2 times higher, but its peripheral location in relation to the regional centre does not favour transport links with other important centres in the CBC region. At the same time, the density of the highways in Blagoevgrad District is slightly above the national average, but the rest of the road network has a lower density.

The structure of the road network determines the quality of transport services in the respective territory and shows that the share of the highways in both districts of the Republic of Bulgaria is more than twice the national average.

Table 16: Share of the road network by classes of total length, 2019 (%)

Administrative unit	Motorways	I class	II class	III class
Republic of Bulgaria	4.0	14.6	20.2	61.2
Blagoevgrad	6.8	10.5	21.2	61.5
Kyustendil	7.0	13.5	8,6	70,9

Source: National Statistical Institute

Given the role of the highways and first-class roads in conducting transit flows and ensuring the integration of the country's road network with that of the neighbouring countries, the current



situation on the territory of the CBC region suggests a more favourable position for integration at both national and European level.

The condition of the road network is a determining factor for the service of the settlements and the opportunities for development in the region.

The improvement of the road network in Blagoevgrad District is impressive, where more than two thirds are in good condition, increasing by 20 percentage points over the last two years; Kyustendil District is also in a good position, where more than half of the road network is maintained in good condition, with an average value of 40% for the country.

The actual transport services of the municipalities are provided by the municipal road network, which provides the connections of the settlements in the municipality with the municipal centre, the connections with the settlements in the neighbouring municipalities or the access to higher-class transport infrastructure facilities.

The difficult transport access in the less-developed peripheral regions leads to a lack of effective economic activity, high levels of unemployment, depopulation of the settlements, and insufficient provision of public services.

The territorial analysis of the service of the municipalities of the CBC region by the national road network provides a basis for determining their potential for development. The higher-class roads situate the municipality at a higher territorial level and determine the possibilities for spatial organization of the economic, social, and administrative communications on a larger scale, resp. with more other higher-rank municipalities and centres. Conversely, the service by a lower-class road network "shrinks" the communications on the territory to a smaller perimeter and limits the opportunities for development.

Within the CBC region, in most favourable position are eight municipalities served by roads of international and / or national importance: Blagoevgrad, Petrich, Sandanski /Blagoevgrad District/; Dupnitsa, Bobov Dol, Boboshevo, Kocherinovo, Rila /Kyustendil District/.

The group of roads of regional importance is formed by the second- and third-class roads the functions of which are to provide connections between the major administrative and economic centres in the CBC region, thus facilitating its integration. The connections of most of the municipal centres with the provincial cities are also part of the functions of the second- and third-class roads. In some cases, they serve the border checkpoints with neighbouring countries and play an important role in the development of the cross-border cooperation.

This group includes 11 municipalities from the CBC region: Bansko, Belitsa, G. Delchev, Razlog, Hadzhidimovo, Yakoruda, Garmen, and Satovcha (Blagoevgrad District), and Nevestino, Sapareva Banya, and Treklyano (Kyustendil District).

The A4 motorway, passing through the Republic of North Macedonia, connects Kosovo with Skopje and continues southeast to Stip, Radoviš, and Strumica, reaching the border with the Republic of Bulgaria near Novo Selo.

The road infrastructure in the North-East planning region of the Republic of North Macedonia consists of 888 km local roads, 370 km regional and 99 A roads (Skopje – Kumanovo Serbian border) and A2 roads (Kumanovo – Kriva Palanka – REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA border). Two of the pan-European transport corridors (VIII and X) pass through the CBC region of the Republic of North Macedonia, which puts it in a strategically favourable situation.



The East planning region has a good road infrastructure: an A4 highway from Miladinovtsi - Sveti Nikole Stip with a total length of 47.1 km. Other important roads are those that connect the towns of Veles – Stip – Kochani – Kamenica – Delchevo – Pehchevo – Berovo. Recently, the road sections Kochani – Ponikva, Vinica – Berovo, Delchevo – border checkpoints (Logodazh) and Berovo – border checkpoint (Klepalo) have been partially reconstructed, but additional investment is needed to complete the rehabilitation activities.

The South-East planning region has a good road infrastructure. Out of a total of 14,395 km of road network on the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, 1,557 km, or 10.82% of the road network, are located in this region. The road infrastructure connects the country with the European road network (international corridors - E roads), while the state road network includes A state roads, regional, and local roads.

- **Railway Network**

On the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, there are 4,030 km of railway lines (2019), of which 282 km are in the cross-border region. The TEN-T network includes the following main lines of the national railway infrastructure passing through the CBC region:

- Railway line 5 Sofia – Vladaya – Radomir – Dupnitsa – Kulata (Greek border). The line forms part of the Orient / East-Mediterranean corridor of the main TEN-T network.
- Railway line 6 Voluyak – Razmenna – Batanovtsi and Radomir – Gyueshevo (Republic of North Macedonia border). The Sofia –Republic of North Macedonia border direction is currently defined as a section of cross-border nature and after the adoption of the new Regulation on the Connecting Europe Facility will be included in the Orient / Eastern Mediterranean corridor from 2021.

The railway connections with neighbouring countries in the Bulgarian part of the CBC region are limited only to the one with Greece (the Kulata / Promahon border checkpoint); there is no railway connection with the Republic of North Macedonia.

The built railway network in the country, incl. the CBC region, is able to meet the declining demand for transport services (especially passenger ones), but its operational condition is unsatisfactory due to overdue repairs. The parameters of some of the main railways allow a design speed for passenger transport of 130 km/h and 100 km/h for freight, but in reality, the operating speed is significantly lower due to the lack of reliable rolling stock and lack of funds for maintenance and repair work. The deteriorated condition affects the permissible maximum speeds, the travel times, and the quality of the services offered, which in turn reduces the interest in this type of transport, and hence the opportunities for development of the municipalities in the CBC region.

Table 17: Length of railway lines in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2019

Region/NUTSIII/ District	Total length km	Electrified lines km	Density km / 1000 km ²	Railway stations/stops
Total REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA	4,030	2,870	36.3	
Total CBC REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA	282	168		68
Blagoevgrad	161	104	24.9	37



Kyustendil	121	64	39.5	31
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Source: NSI, National Railway Infrastructure Company, own calculations

The specificity of the terrain of Blagoevgrad District predetermines the lower density of the built railway network, but the larger number of railway stations / stops is an indicator for better railway transport service. In Kyustendil District, the density is higher than the national average, but the smaller number of stations / stops implies more limited access to the railway network.

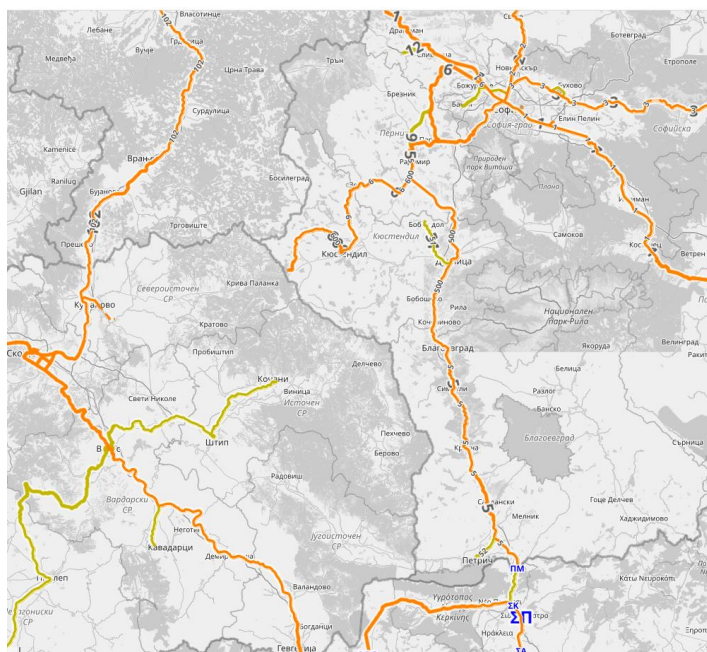
The railway transport service in the CBC region is complemented by several railway branch lines. The General Todorov – Petrich branch line serves the municipality of Petrich, and Dobrinishte, Bansko, Razlog, Belitsa, and Yakoruda are served by Septemvri – Dobrinishte, the only functioning narrow-gauge line in the country. The narrow-gauge line from the Kocherinovo railway station to the Rila Monastery was closed and dismantled. The Dupnitsa – Bobov Dol railway branch line is connected with the operation of the Bobov Dol mine.

The access to the built railway network in the CBC region determines the opportunities for development of the individual municipalities depending on the type of the serving railway line and serving railway stations and / or stops, and they can be divided into three groups:

- The main railways as part of the infrastructure of the TEN-T network ensure the integration of the country's railway network with that of the neighbouring countries. Spatially, they are important for the integration of the territory, both nationally and at European level. They provide access to the ports and airports of international importance, as well as connections between major urban centres, incl. the capital. The municipalities served by these railways have opportunities for communication at a higher territorial level, respectively better opportunities for development. This group includes the municipalities of Blagoevgrad, Kresna, Sandanski, Simitli, Strumyani (Blagoevgrad District) and Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Kocherinovo, Boboshevo (Kyustendil District).
- The railway branch lines also improve the development opportunities of the municipalities served, adding the advantages of rail transport to those of road transport. Due to the most often dead-end nature of such lines, these opportunities are more limited compared to the main railway line service, the economic and transport activity as well. This group includes the municipalities of Petrich, Bansko, Razlog, Belitsa, Yakoruda (Blagoevgrad District), and Bobov Dol (Kyustendil District).
- The Septemvri – Dobrinishte narrow-gauge railway or line No. 16 of the National Railway Network of the Republic of Bulgaria is a single, non-electrified, and the only operating narrow-gauge railway in the Republic of Bulgaria. The route leads from the Septemvri station (on the Kalotina – Svilengrad main road) to the Dobrinishte station through 12 stations (Septemvri, Varvara, Dolene, Kostandovo, Velingrad, Tsvetino, Avramovo, Yakoruda, Belitsa, Razlog, Bansko, and Dobrinishte) and 13 stops. Due to the characteristics of the route through the mountains, the Septemvri – Dobrinishte narrow-gauge line is also known as the alpine railway on the Balkans. The Avramovo Station, located 1,267 meters above sea level, is the highest station in the Balkans. As the only narrow-gauge railway in the Republic of Bulgaria, it is a major tourist attraction for Bulgarian and foreign tourists.



Map 14: Railways in the CBC region



Source: public data

The construction of a Sofia – Gyueshevo high-speed railway line will contribute to facilitating the connection between the capitals of the two countries. The designed Kumanovo Gyueshevo railway connection has a total length of 96.8 km, with a speed of 100 km/h – 130 km / h, providing combined traffic (both passengers and freight). Now, expropriation procedures are underway under this project and construction is expected to begin in 2026.

The construction of the railway line is an important priority both for connecting the railway networks of the two neighbouring countries and ensuring the proper functioning of the EU's TEN-T corridor.

- **EuroVelo – the European Network of Cycle Routes**

In addition to the TEN-T network, one of the European cycling routes, namely the EuroVelo 13 Trail Iron Curtain Trail runs in the CBC region. It provides an opportunity to visit 20 countries, starting in Northern Finland, passing near the Baltic Sea, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia – Bratislava, Romania, and ending in the Republic of Bulgaria in the small Black Sea town of Rezovo.

The EuroVelo routes have a tourist purpose, so they do not connect large cities, but aim at places with important natural or cultural heritage. Unfortunately, none of the segments of the EuroVelo corridor passing through the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria is developed or at least marked.

Map 15: EUROVELO 13 Iron Curtain - EUROPEAN NETWORK OF CYCLE ROUTES



Source: <https://en.EuroVelo.com/ev13>

4.2. Border Checkpoints

There are 3 border checkpoints on the border between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia:

- Gyueshevo – Deve Bair, near Kyustendil
- Logodzh, near Blagoevgrad
- Zlatarevo – Novo Selo, near Petrich

The capacity, the technical condition of the Gyueshevo – Deve Bair border checkpoint, together with the whole connected infrastructure, meets the modern requirements. The route is suitable for all types of transport: vehicles, minivans, buses, trucks and lorries, especially on the Bulgarian territory, where the highway has optimal parameters for traffic. In the part of the Republic of North Macedonia, rehabilitation is planned to improve the parameters of the road.

For the other two points, measures for reconstruction and modernization are necessary.

These sites are included in the short-term investment programme of the RIA (Road Infrastructure Agency) for rehabilitation of the roadway and reconstruction of the border at Zlatarevo after the fire in 2019. All three border checkpoints ensure the movement of goods and people, as their geographical location allows the construction of high-class roads for all types of motor vehicles. However, they are not sufficient for direct and effective connections, as the settlements on both sides of the border are at relatively short distances by air, but through the existing roads and border checkpoints the crossing time is significantly increased.

This need for efficient connections for road transport – cars, light commercial vehicles, and minibuses – leads to the conclusion of an intergovernmental agreement for the construction of two new points, with priority given to Klepalo (Strumyani – Berovo). The infrastructure on the side of the Republic of North Macedonia has been built, and the 30-km section of the Republic of Bulgaria



must be completed.

There are intergovernmental agreements between the two countries to open three new border checkpoints, namely: Strumyani – Berovo (Klepalo), Simitli – Pehchevo, and Nevestino – Delchevo (Chernata Skala). The agreement between the governments of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria for the opening of the new international road border checkpoints Strumyani – Berovo and Simitli – Pehchevo was signed on 14 June 1999 in Skopje.

The missing road section on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria should connect Blagoevgrad District with the Strumyani – Berovo border checkpoint, respectively with the adjacent municipalities in the border region in the Republic of North Macedonia, namely Berovo, Kochani, Radoviš, Vinica, Zarnovci, and Blatec. The accessible road on the territory of North Macedonia is the connection of the existing Klepalo border checkpoint with the Berovo – Skopje first-class road. The last section of the road from the border to the town of Berovo has been completed, but needs rehabilitation.

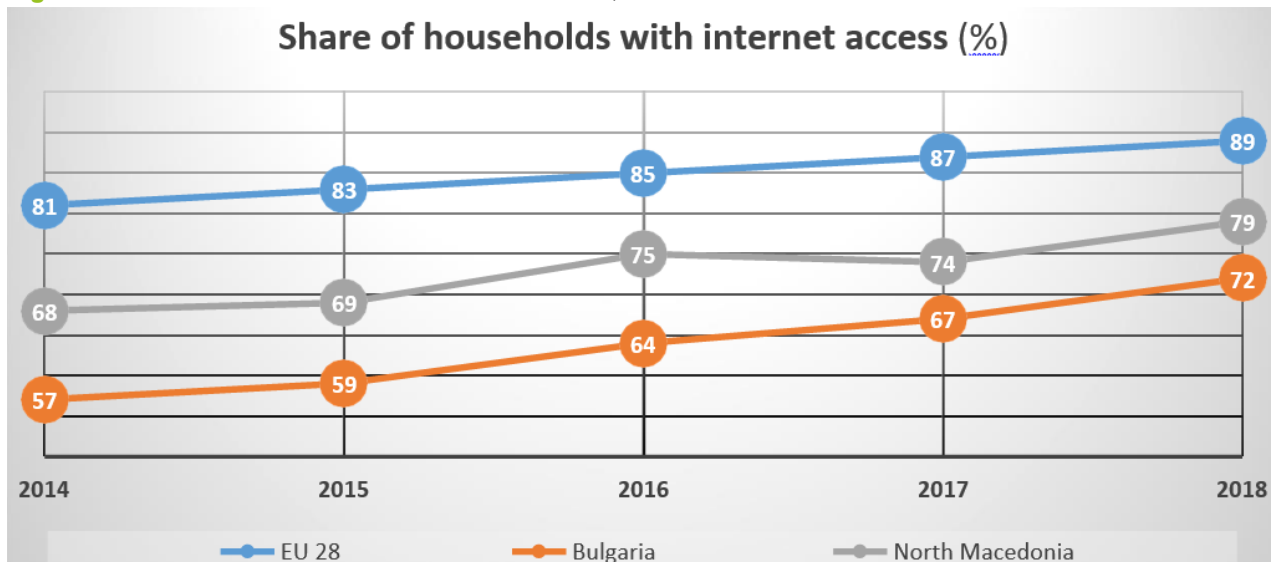


Table 18: Internet access and household usability 2019 (%)

Administrative unit	Households with internet access	People who use the Internet regularly	Individuals with basic or above basic digital skills
REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA average	75.1	66.8	29.4
Blagoevgrad	71.1	65.2	33.1
Kyustendil	62.5	46.7	15.3
Republic of North Macedonia average	81.9	83.4	
North- East planning region	90	93	
East planning region	77	85	
South-East planning region	77	84	
EU 28	89	82	

Source: NSI-2019 and MAKSTAT-2019

Figure 1: Share of households with internet access, 2014 - 2018



Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the use of broadband internet and mobile broadband is highest in the North- East planning region with a share of 90%, while the share of the persons (aged 15 to 74) who used the Internet in the region in 2018 was 93%. The East planning region shows that the share of the households that had access to the Internet in 2018 was 77%, while the share of the persons (aged 15 to 74) who used the Internet in 2018 reached 85%. The situation is similar in the South-East planning region, where the figures are very close to those of the East planning region, respectively 77% of the households with access to the Internet and 84% of the persons (aged 15 to 74) who used the Internet in 2018.

4.4. Waste Management

Waste represents a huge loss of resources in the form of both materials and energy. The amount of waste generated can be seen as an indicator of how efficient we are as a society, especially in relation to the use of natural resources and waste treatment. Poor governance is seen as an



environmental risk.

Table 20: Municipal waste (in thousand tons)

Administrative unit	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Total Republic of Bulgaria	3572	3249	3135	3193	3011	2881	3080
Total Republic of Bulgaria CBC	163	149	159	162	178	153	162
Share%	4.6%	4.6%	5.1%	5.1%	5.9%	5.3%	5.3%
Blagoevgrad	101	91	101	104	126	101	107
Kyustendil	62	58	58	58	52	52	55

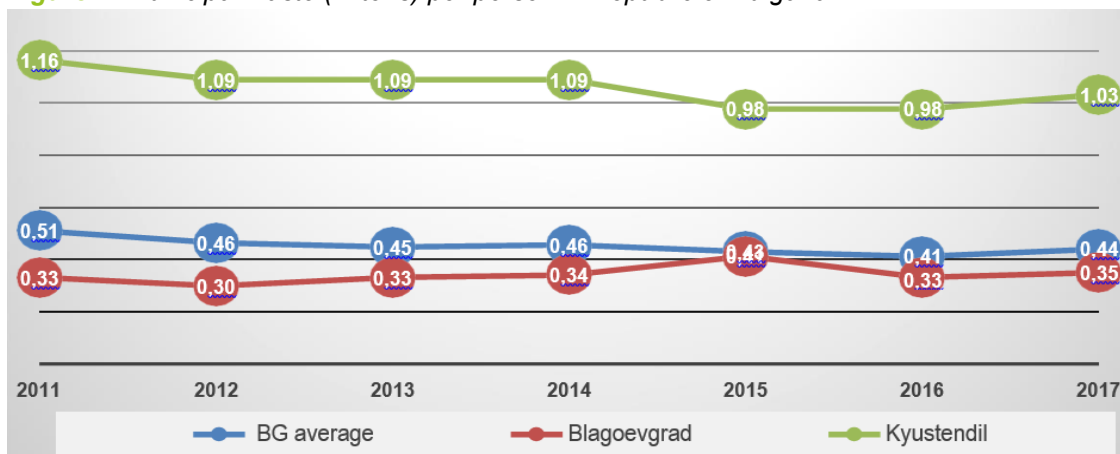
Source: NSI

Table 21: Municipal waste per person (in tons)

Administrative unit	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Republic of Bulgaria average	0.51	0.46	0.45	0.46	0.43	0.41	0.44
Blagoevgrad	0.33	0.30	0.33	0.34	0.41	0.33	0.35
Kyustendil	1.16	1.09	1.09	1.09	0.98	0.98	1.03

Source: NSI

Figure 2: Municipal waste (in tons) per person in Republic of Bulgaria



Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

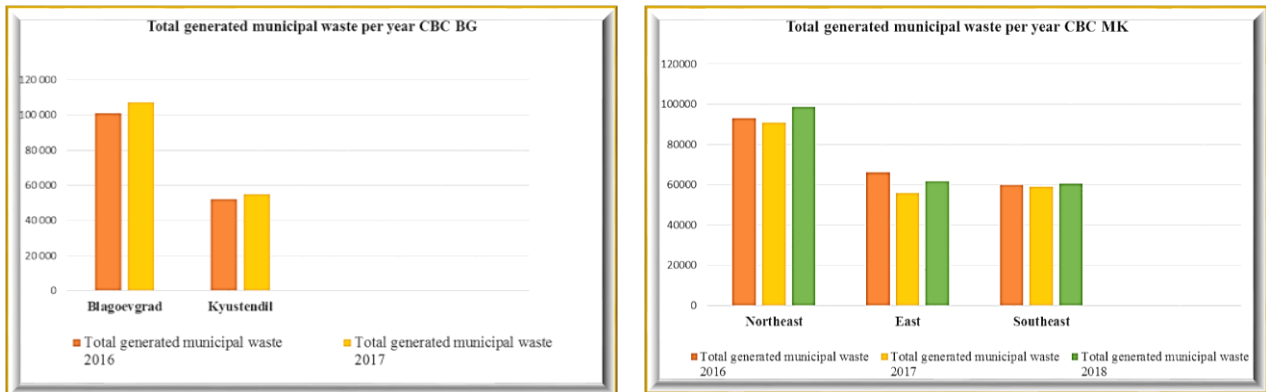
The comparison between the years 2016 and 2017 shows a slight increase in the waste generated in the Republic of Bulgaria part of the CBC region, while in the CBC region of the Republic of North Macedonia in 2017 smaller amounts of generated waste were generated compared to 2018. The collected waste increased in the East and South-East planning regions in 2018 and decreased in the North-East planning region in the same year.

Almost the entire amount of collected household waste in the Republic of North Macedonia in 2018 (625 thousand tons) was disposed of (99.5%). In 2018, there were 45 active landfills in the Republic of North Macedonia.



Figure 3, Figure 4: Total general municipal waste per year in the CBC region

Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area



4.5. Renewable Energy Sources

In line with the commitments made to implement Energy 2020 European Strategy, the Republic of Bulgaria has already exceeded the national targets set for increasing the usability of renewable energy sources (RES). The construction of various types of power plants from renewable sources had its "peak" in the middle of the 2007-2013 period, when the built capacity increased by almost 50%, and in the 2013-2018 period – by a little more than 2% due to the later-changed state policy in this regard.

Table 22: Built capacities (in MW) by type and by District in Republic of Bulgaria, 2019

Municipality/ District	Hydro power plants	Photovoltaic power plants	Wind Power Plants	Bio Power Plants	Total number	Total power	Density MW/1000km ²
Bansko	7.9	0,13			8	8.0	16.76
Belitsa	5.52	0,03			5	5.55	18.90
Belitsa	9.32	0,31		0,50	25	10,2	16.24
Gotse Delchev	4.9	0.20			18	5.1	15.28
Garmen		0,54			5	0,54	1.33
Kresna	10.2	0,50	0.95		12	11.7	30.20
Petrich	1.3	8.20			26	9.5	14.58
Razlog	4.43	5.77			20	10,2	23.76
Sandanski	120.7	6.70			39	127.4	127.70
Simitly	2.15	0,45			14	2.6	4.69
Strumyani	1.5	2.00			13	3.5	9,87
Hadgidimovo		10.30			8	10.3	31.41
Yakoruda	1.6	0,005			4	1.6	4.75
Blagoevgrad District	169.5	35.1	0.95	0,5	197	206,1	31.95
Bobov Dol	0,30	0,10			3	0,40	1.98
Dupnitsa	10,0	0,15			13	10.15	30,73
Kocherinovo	0,28	0.16			6	0,44	2.44
Kyustendil	1.50	0,04			6	1.54	1.62
Nevestino		0,13			1	0,13	0,30
Rila	23.40	0,38			5	23.80	65,51
Sapareva Banya	2.90	5.00			5	7.90	43,73
Treklyano		0,40			2	0,40	1.52
Kyustendil District	38.4	6.3	-	-	41	44.8	14.52



CBC Republic of Bulgaria	207.9	41.4	0.95	0.5	238	250.9	26.32
Republic of Bulgaria	2370.00	1067.55	704,35	65.0	2687	4206.9	37.9

Source: Sustainable Energy Development Agency⁹, data processing NCRD

Water, wind, and solar energy are used in the country to produce alternative electricity depending on the specific natural conditions of each region. The use of renewable energy has a number of potential benefits, including reduced greenhouse gas emissions, diversified energy supplies, and reduced dependence on fossil fuel markets (especially oil and gas). Increasing the share of renewable energy sources also has the potential to boost employment in the EU by creating jobs in new green technologies.

In fulfilment of the national goals set for increasing the usability of RES, solar energy facilities have been built in recent years, but on the territory of the CBC region there are no particularly good conditions for them.

On the other hand, according to studies of the regional potential of renewable energy sources – biomass, wind, and solar energy, there is a potential for additional absorption of solar energy in the CBC region.

Table 23: Installed electricity-generation capacity in the Republic of North Macedonia

	<i>North – East planning region /MW</i>	<i>East planning region /MW</i>	<i>South-East planning region /MW</i>
2016	6	25	42
2017	6	27	43
2018	6	27	43

Source: Territorial analysis of Republic of Bulgaria – The Republic of North Macedonia cross border area

INFRASTRUCTURE	
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the main corridors of the TEN-T network (Orient - Eastern Mediterranean) passes through the CBC region, including its branches to third countries; • Significant presence of highways and first-class roads in the CBC region; • Presence of three functioning border checkpoints; • Relatively short distances from the CBC region to the international airports in Sofia and Skopje; • A growing number of households with Internet access; 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of railway connections between the two countries; • Insufficient connection of small towns and villages with the main routes; • Poor condition of the transport infrastructure in the CBC region on the side of the Republic of Bulgaria;
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further development and maintenance of the CBC region infrastructure; 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depreciation and destruction of the existing infrastructure due to climate

⁹ <https://www.seea.government.bg/en/>





- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Reconstruction of the existing and opening of new border checkpoints;</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>impact and natural disasters;</i>• <i>Increasing people's isolation in the CBC region due to the deteriorating state of the infrastructure;</i> |
|--|---|

5. CULTURAL-HISTORICAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

5.1. Cultural-Historical Heritage

"Culture is one of the most important factors in the cross-border cooperation framework, as it gives a clear idea of the common features and provides a common identity for the region." The cultural-historical heritage of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia is a living testimony to the shared history of the two countries and their common path for centuries, and a serious prerequisite for the development of an attractive tourist product that would be especially significant if developed jointly. Tangible and intangible, movable and immovable monuments of cultural and historical heritage testify to the historical memory from most ancient times in the lands of today's two countries and represent one of the greatest potentials providing almost unlimited opportunities for tourism, science, education, and regional, but also national, economic and social growth. At the same time, their preservation, restoration, and use are particularly important to be subordinated to the idea of **sustainable development**.

The **World Heritage Convention of 1974**¹⁰ (Articles 4 and 5) states that the states parties to the Convention have a duty to "ensure the identification, protection, preservation, presentation, and transmission of the cultural and natural heritage to future generations" and to "adopt a general policy that aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programs". In addition, the scope of the Convention goes beyond the sites included in its *World Heritage List* to cover national heritage policies and broader development strategies.

The 2012-2022 Strategic Action Plan for the Implementation of the Convention¹¹ emphasizes sustainable development, in particular in its **Goal 3**, which states: "Heritage protection and conservation considers present and future environmental, societal, and economic needs". Its priority is sustainable development, and the outcome is "Increased consideration of sustainable development through connecting conservation to communities".

However, the process is two-way. In addition to its inherent value for present and future generations, cultural-historical and natural heritage can also be an important instrumental contribution to the sustainable development in its various dimensions. Through a variety of goods and services and as a repository of knowledge, being well protected, it can contribute directly to alleviating poverty and inequality. It is an important asset for economic development by attracting investment and providing stable and decent jobs, and only some of them can be related to tourism. Cultural and natural heritage management activities are in fact local by definition (i.e. cannot be delocalised) and green "by design", as they embody an internally more sustainable use of their resource developed for millennia of slow adaptation between communities and their environment.

Recognition and protection of the diversity of cultural and natural heritage in the CBC region, fair access to it, and fair sharing of the benefits arising from its use strengthen the sense of place and

¹⁰ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

¹¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2011/whc11-18ga-11-en.pdf>



belonging and mutual respect as well as the sense of purpose and ability to maintain the common good that contributes to social cohesion.

The European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage¹² views cultural heritage as a resource for the future and emphasizes the need for an integrated approach in the various EU policies. In addition, the document emphasizes the importance of cooperation between many stakeholders in the development and implementation of cultural heritage policies and programmes. The framework for action is based on five "pillars":

Pillar 1: *Cultural heritage for an inclusive Europe: participation and access for all* – the actions are focused on improving accessibility and engaging the wider public, school children and young people, including via digital means.

Pillar 2: *Cultural heritage for a sustainable Europe: smart solutions for a cohesive and sustainable future* – developing integrated solutions to urban and regional challenges, encouraging the restoration of heritage buildings, and improving policies on sustainable cultural tourism. Promoting natural heritage, too.

Pillar 3: *Cultural heritage for a resilient Europe: safeguarding endangered heritage* - actions aiming at fighting against illicit trafficking of cultural goods; raising the quality of physical interventions on cultural heritage, and protecting cultural heritage against natural disasters and climate change.

Pillar 4: *Cultural heritage for an innovative Europe: mobilising knowledge and research* – implementation and use of technological tools and innovations in the field of cultural heritage; fostering social innovation; and strengthening skills in the field of cultural heritage.

Pillar 5: *Cultural heritage for stronger global partnerships: reinforcing international cooperation* - strengthening international cooperation on heritage.

While the European Commission has a leading role in drawing up a framework for action, the implementation of the measures and the successful achievement of results depend on the involvement of other EU institutions, EU Member States, local and regional authorities, non-governmental organizations, and citizens. The Framework for Action can also serve as an inspiration for Europe's regions and cities when developing their own actions on cultural heritage.

In the Bulgarian part of the cross-border territory, there are 2,922 registered immovable cultural values (ICVs) of tangible immovable cultural heritage (1,159 in Kyustendil District and 1,763 in Blagoevgrad District) dating from different historical periods such as prehistoric, ancient, medieval, and renaissance to modern times. The cultural values of national importance in the Bulgarian part of the CBC region include 99 sites – 43 in Kyustendil District and 56 in Blagoevgrad District, among which:

- the town of Melnik – a cultural and historical reserve and a town museum, and the Rozhen Monastery –the only one restored during the first centuries of the Turkish rule, which has survived to this day. It was built in the 12th or 13th century by Despot Slav, the ruler of Melnik;
- the ancient and medieval city of Pautalia located in the centre of Kyustendil – one of the largest ancient Roman cities in the district of Thrace (in Mediterranean Dacia, there were five cities, the main of which was Serdica). It was the main stop on the way from Serdica (Sofia) to Stobi in the Republic of North Macedonia, with a detour to Thessalonike

¹² <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5a9c3144-80f1-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1>



(Thessaloniki). In the Middle Ages, it was called Velbazhd, and after the baptism, even under Knyaz Boris I, it became an important episcopal centre and remained so throughout the existence of the First Bulgarian State. Thus, nowadays, to the ancient thermae the Pirkova Tower medieval defence tower rises, supposed to have been built in the 14th – 15th century and giving an accurate idea of the architectural and construction techniques of the fortification system of the medieval Velbazhd;

- the village of Kovachevitsa, Blagoevgrad District, with finds from the late Iron Age, and a Thracian sanctuary from the 1st millennium BC. Near it, an ancient road passes connecting Nicopolis ad Nestum and Philippopolis;
- the village of Dolen, Blagoevgrad District – heir to old Thracian neighbourhoods, the remains of which can still be seen today along with Thracian necropolises as well as Thracian vineyards used until the end of the Bulgarian Revival. The village is located on an old Roman-Thracian road that connected Drama with Trimontium and the remains of which are at the eastern end of the village along with the Roman bridge in the area of Banyan; Nevestino, Kyustendil District, with Kadin Bridge;
- the ancient and late antique town of Nikopolis ad Nestum, village of Garmen – one of the few preserved ancient cities and the only one in the Rhodopes from the period of the Roman Empire declared an archaeological and architectural monument from antiquity and the Middle Ages;
- Kulata medieval fortress, dating from the 5th – 4th century BC;
- the ancient city of Heraclea Sintica near Rupite, with an annual attendance of between 60 and 65 thousand people in recent years without any infrastructure;
- Vladimir Dimitrov – Maystora (The Master) Art Gallery in Kyustendil, having rich collections of Bulgarian Revival and foreign art.

The UNESCO list of world material and cultural heritage includes the Rila Monastery, one of the seven cultural and three natural sites in the Republic of Bulgaria on the list. The monastery was founded in the tenth century by St. John of Rila. His ascetic home and his tomb became a sacred place and were transformed into a monastery complex, which later played an important role in the spiritual and social life of medieval Bulgaria. Destroyed by fire in the early nineteenth century, the complex was rebuilt between 1834 and 1862. The monument is a typical example of the Bulgarian Revival (18th -19th century) and symbolizes the consciousness of Slavic cultural identity after centuries of occupation. The Rila Monastery is one of the most important cultural, historical, and architectural monuments of the Republic of Bulgaria and is a key tourist attraction both locally and at European level.

The town of Melnik and the Rozhen Monastery are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia share a common position with Romania and Moldova, namely the traditional wearing of martenitsas in early March. The name of the holiday Baba Marta is associated with the greeting of the coming spring.

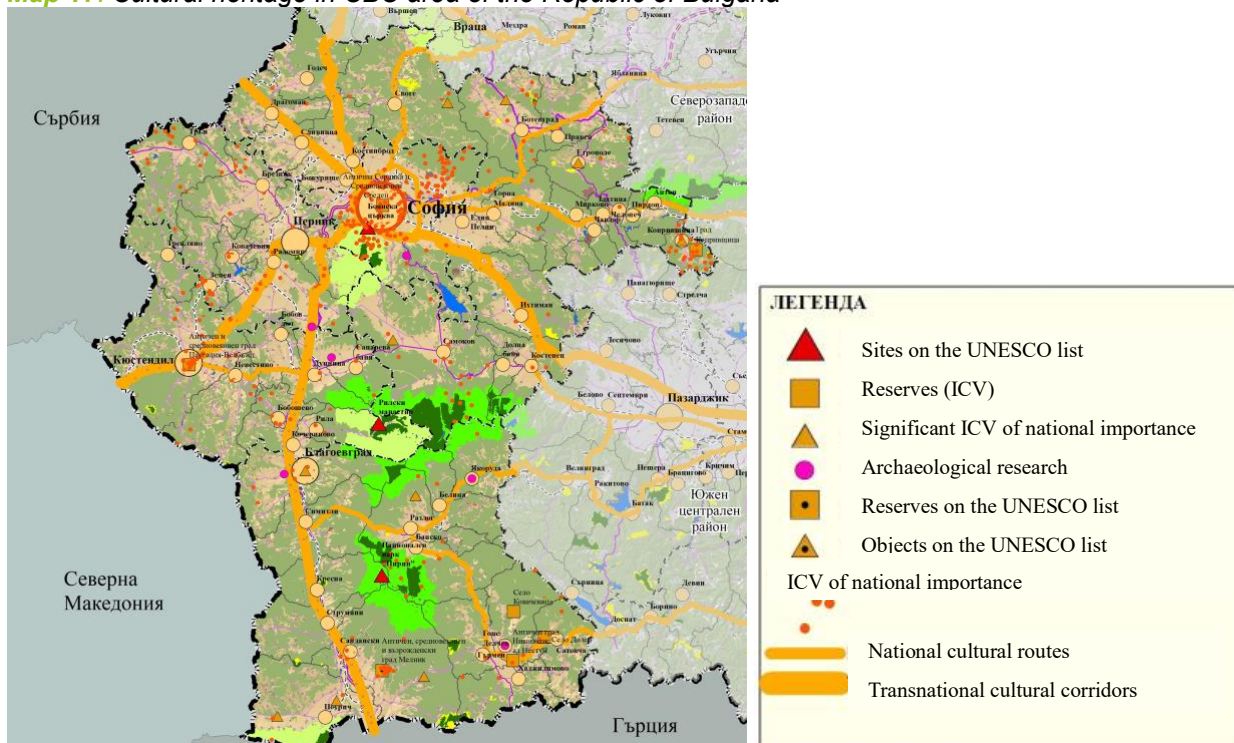
Traditional cultural organizations such as libraries, cinemas, museums, theatres, galleries, public and cultural centres, etc. have a lasting presence, but need to be updated and keep up with the modern way of life. Cinemas and theatres are particularly affected by the pandemic.

The museum network was well developed at the end of the 19th century and in the years after, but there are also many problems such as the lack of a quality programme to take care of the preservation of the monuments and their restoration, shortage of staff responsible for collection management, absence of rules to regulate the way the individual objects are collected and their organization in exhibitions and others.

Another traditional public institution, a centre of cultural, cognitive, and social exchange in the Republic of Bulgaria are community centres. With more than 150 years of tradition, they perform educational functions, provide space for local talent groups, and enjoy a reputation as a strong cultural institution with the specific mission to preserve and develop traditional national values. In the modern era, having kept their social legitimacy and flexibility and thanks to their geographical scope covering the entire territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, community centres continue to meet the modern needs of the Bulgarian society as centres for cultural, informational, and social activities. In the period 2012-2017, their number increased by 241 (7.8%). In the CBC region, the number of community centres is as follows: 118 in Blagoevgrad District and 97 in Kyustendil District.

Various festival events are organized in the CBC region, including Valandovo folk festival, Kostenijada, Smokvijada, Prazijada, Rakijada and the famous Strumica carnival, Pirin Sings, Pirin Folk (Sandanski), the Jazz Festival in Bansko, Francofolies de Bulgarie in which every year world-class stars take part, the Kukeri carnivals, etc. The main consumer of this tourism is the foreign market and, above all, tourists from countries such as England, France, Germany, the Benelux countries, but also neighbouring countries.

Map 17: Cultural heritage in CBC area of the Republic of Bulgaria



Source: NCRD

On the other side of the border, in the Republic of North Macedonia there is also a wealth of historical and cultural sites: St. Joachim Osogovski monastery complex in Kriva Palanka, sanctuary



of the hermit St Joacim Osogovski in Gradec, archaeological site on Gradec Monastery of the Most Holy Mother of God monastery near the village of Matejče (14th century), The Most Holy Mother of God monastery - the Karpin Monastery near the village of Orah, St. Nicholas church (1851) and St. Trinity Church in Kumanovo, St. Georgi church in the village of Staro Nagorichino (14th century), Monastery Holy Mother of God Eleusa church, Veljusa, 11th Century – Strumica, Saint Leontius – Vodocha Monastery near Strumica, 12-13 Century, Czar's Towers – Strumica 11th Century, etc.

- St Joacim Osogovski in Gradec
- Tatihev Kamen Rock Sanctuary (Kokino) - a megalithic observatory in the Republic of North Macedonia declared a cultural monument of exceptional importance;
- the town of Kratovo built in the crater of an extinct volcano, which created conditions for the development of a separate architectural and construction approach and typical Kratovo architecture. The town is famous for its wealth of towers and bridges, and the Kratovo Towers have been declared a cultural heritage site with a special sign;
- Stipsko Kale (Isar Fortress);

Part of the cultural corridors of Southeast Europe pass through the territory of the CBC region:

The Diagonal Road (Via Diagonalis), connecting Southeast Europe with Asia, is one of the most ancient arteries in the direction of transcontinental and even global significance. Entering Slovenia from Central Europe, it takes over Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria and Turkey to continue to the Far East. From the time of the Roman Empire until today, it is the most important communication axis between the West and the East. The corridor is the strongest direction in Southeast Europe and plays the role of a kind of "catchment", a collective vector of all other cultural axes in the region.

The Sofia – Ohrid Cultural Corridor runs through Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, connecting the monastery agglomerations around the two historic cities and the religious cultural area of Metohija in Serbia and Montenegro.

The Sofia – Ohrid road was a kind of religious axis along which cultural influences flowed to the great pilgrimage road Via Egnatia. In the direction connecting the monasteries and churches of the Sofia Holy Mountain, the district of Metohija, and those around Lake Ohrid, the faith and the arts related to religious construction – architectural techniques and methods, murals, woodcarving – spread for centuries. One of the most prominent woodcarving schools in Debar (Republic of North Macedonia) started here to bequeath its craftsmanship throughout Southeast Europe along this cultural corridor.

Today, on the Sofia – Ohrid road one can see real masterpieces, many of which recognized as World Heritage: the Boyana Church (Bulgaria), the Stari Ras and Sopočani Monasteries, the Dečani Monastery (Serbia and Montenegro), the Ohrid Churches (Republic of North Macedonia).

The Western Trans-Balkan road crosses Southeast Europe in a north-south direction. For centuries, the corridor has united the territories on both sides of the Balkans: Stara Planina, passing through Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. Thus, the Western Trans-Balkan Road connects Western and Central Europe with the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean, crossing successively the Danube Road, the Diagonal Road, the Sofia – Ohrid Road, and Via Egnatia. The Western Trans-Balkan Road is a kind of axis of spread of ancient Greek culture in the north as the basis of modern



European civilization.

The historical heritage of the cross-border region goes back to the traces left by the Thracians, Romans, and Byzantines, to the roots of the European civilization. The historical landmarks from the Middle Ages are the most numerous and preserved (such as the architectural and historical reserves in Melnik, Bansko, Kovachevitsa, Dolen). Valuable archaeological remains from antiquity can be found in almost all municipalities: ruins of castles and sanctuaries in the district of Bansko, Belitsa, Razlog, Satovcha, the ancient town of Nikopolis ad Nestrum, etc. on the Bulgarian side of the border, the ancient towns of Tiveriopolis (today Strumica), Astibo (today Stip), Bargala (near the Kozjackska river), the archaeological sites Vardarski rid near Gevgelija and Isar near Valandovo, etc. in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Regarding the monuments of Christian culture, the cross-border region is characterized by a relatively high number of churches and monasteries (the Rozhen Monastery, the churches in Rupite and Brestovo, etc. on the Bulgarian side of the border, as well as the Church of the Holy Fifteen Saints, the Veljusa Monastery and others in the Republic of North Macedonia. The Rila Monastery (included in the UNESCO list of protected sites) and St. Joachim Osogovski Monastery (near Kriva Palanka) are among the most famous.

The region is rich in diverse culinary traditions and crafts. These traditions could play an important role in the promotion and tourist offer of the region, but for the time being are largely underestimated.

5.2. *Natural Heritage*

The strong link between natural and cultural values and the need for their integrated management is increasingly recognized, especially in the context of Natura 2000. The conferences in Greece and Italy in 2014 identified a number of opportunities to strengthen these links, which in turn can stimulate cultural and entertainment activities and ecotourism and provide green jobs and additional income to local communities. A study on the scope of the links between Natura 2000 and cultural sites and application was carried out to examine the contribution of Natura 2000 to the protection and restoration of the cultural capital, to identify the main relevant initiatives at EU political level, and to examine how the different policies can better support each other in terms of EU funding opportunities and suggest ways to track the integration of the two assets.

The conservation of natural resources, including exceptional sites containing some of the richest combinations of landscape and biodiversity, clearly makes a major contribution to the environmental sustainability. Most of these places, on the other hand, have evolved over time through mutual adaptation between people and the environment, thus demonstrating how, instead of existing in separate and parallel spheres, biological and cultural resources interact and influence each other in a complex way in something like a co-evolutionary process.

Pirin National Park is one of the three natural sites in the Republic of Bulgaria included in the UNESCO World Heritage List: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

The park includes territories located in seven municipalities in Blagoevgrad District: Bansko, Gotse Delchev, Razlog, Sandanski, Strumyani, Kresna, and Simitli. Spread over 27,000 ha, at an altitude of between 1,008 and 2,914 m, the site contains a variety of limestone mountain landscapes with numerous glacial lakes, waterfalls, caves, and mostly coniferous forests. It was added to the World Heritage List in 1983.



Vihren Park is the park area of Pirin National Park, with the most developed tourist network. This is due to the proximity of the park area to the town of Bansko. Among the treasures in the area of Vihren Park are the Demyanitsa and Banderitsa rivers and the Vasilashki lakes, Dalgoto, Ribno, and other lakes, as well as various rock gates. The area is home to one of the largest natural landmarks of the national park – Baikusheva mura, which, with its age of over 1,300 years, is one of the oldest trees in the Republic of Bulgaria. Within the boundaries of Vihren Park is Vihren Peak, which is the highest peak in the Pirin Mountain – 2,914 meters. The peak attracts many tourists and climbers.

The UNESCO list of reserves as part of the Man and the Biosphere Programme includes 10 biosphere reserves located in the Republic of Bulgaria, three of which are located in the CBC region, namely: Bayuvi Dupki - Dzhindzhiritsa, Ali botoush, and Parangalitsa.

Bayuvi Dupki - Dzhindzhiritsa is one of the oldest reserves in the Republic of Bulgaria (1934), protecting the endangered black and white fir (*Pinus peuce*) and the habitats of many other plants and animals. It covers an area of 2,858.5 hectares between 1,300 m and 2,884 m above sea level. Together with Yulen Reserve, they are part of Pirin National Park. The reserves are rich in water resources and a large number of glacial lakes. The most typical mammals are the brown bear, the grey wolf, and the chamois.

Ali botoush Biosphere Reserve is located in the Slavyanka Mountain, near the border with Greece. The reserve was established in 1951 to protect the largest Heldreich pine forests (*Pinus heldreichii*) in the Balkans and was declared a biosphere reserve in 1977.

Rila National Park is the largest national park in Bulgaria and one of the largest European parks. It includes the treeless parts along the ridge of Rila Mountain and part of the coniferous forest complexes below it in the four main parts of the mountain with a total area of 81,046 ha. Rila National Park includes 4 reserves: Parangalitsa, Central Rila Reserve, Ibar, and Skakavitsa – all of them samples of natural ecosystems with characteristic and remarkable wild plant and animal species and habitats. Skakavitsa Reserve (70.8 ha) was declared in March 1968 on the land of the town of Sapareva Banya. This is a typical forest reserve, located at an altitude of between 1,850 and 2,050 m. It protects a centuries-old pristine, mostly white-fir, forest. In June 2000, a part of Rila National Park was re-categorized into Rila Monastery Nature Park, which covers the central part of Rila Mountain. With its steep, impassable slopes overgrown with mixed deciduous and coniferous forests, bog-pine formations and alpine pastures, beautiful valleys passed by foamy rivers, various relief, majestic rock peaks, wonderfully beautiful glacial lakes, and diverse vegetation and wildlife, it is an attractive centre for recreation and ecotourism.

In 1986, with an area of 3,676.5 ha, Rilomanastirska Gora Reserve was declared. It was created to preserve primary forest ecosystems of coniferous and mixed fir-beech forests, as well as the natural environment of the architectural and historical reserve Rila Monastery declared by UNESCO in 1983 a world cultural monument.

The Stob pyramids, located in the last shoots of the south-western part of Rila near the village of Stob, are on both sides of the watershed (mostly on its southern side) dividing the dry lands Grchkovets (from the north) and Busovets (from the south). They are divided into separate groups called by the locals with different names: Kulite, Chukite, Samodivski komini, etc. Most of the earth pyramids have crowns of stone hats.

Tsarna Reka Nature Reserve is located in the Osogovo Mountain, which was declared a reserve



in 1980, and covers a representative ecosystem of primary beech communities in a climax phase, presenting the most characteristic biocenoses of the mountain. On the territory of the mountain, the following are also located: the natural landmark Yuch Bunar – a group of redwood trees aged 110 years – and the natural landmark Vekovna Bukova Gora (Century Beech Forest), near St. Luke medieval monastery.

Belasitsa Nature Park is located in the south-western part of the country and covers most of the Bulgarian part of Belasitsa Mountain. The park also includes Kongura Reserve.

Via Aristotelis is the main biocorridor for the migration of birds from Europe to Africa, passing through the Western Republic of Bulgaria, described in ancient times by Aristotle. According to him, the pelicans move south along the Struma River, while the cranes fly through Via Pontica. The road connects the Danube River with the White Sea from Vidin through the Vratsa Balkan, Iskar Gorge, Sofia Field, along the valley of the Struma River (a branch of the Mesta River) to the White Sea.

The territory of the CBC region on the side of the Republic of North Macedonia is characterized by many protected natural areas and ecological corridors to connect other protected areas and ecologically important areas such as Kumanovo Kozjak, proposed as a nature park, characterized by rocky areas important for the nesting of several species of birds of prey.

Apart from its great cultural significance, the Kokino archaeological site has a great geomorphological value, representing a geological phenomenon. It contains pyroxene andesite and antensites aged 32-33 million years, about which more can be learned at the Kokino Megalithic Observatory.

The stone town of Kuklica, located 8 km northwest of Kratovo, with an altitude of 415-420 m, covering an area of 0.3 sq. km, is a natural monument with a rare geomorphological shape. It consists of over 120 naturally shaped stone pillars located on the right bank of the valley of the Kriva river. This area is protected by law as a natural rarity in the country.

The Potrošnica River is of great ornithological and botanical importance. The Bislim Gorge is a short gorge with a pronounced sub-Mediterranean climatic impact, rich in underground and surface karst formations, the gorge of the Kiselica River, and others.

The Osogovo Mountain is the habitat of a number of internationally and nationally significant species of flora and fauna. It is an important corridor for the movement of wild plant and animal species within the Pan-European Ecological Network for South East Europe (PEEN SEE).

Southeast of the town of Strumica, below the Belasiča mountain, is the village of Bansko, where are the thermal mineral springs of Bansko Spa – a total of five thermo-mineral springs with a water temperature between 56° C and 71° C.

The Negorci spa (Negorski banji) is located 3 km from the town of Gevgelija at an altitude of 50 m. It is located at the foot of Kožuf Mountain in a dense ash-tree forest which is a natural park. There are two springs: Vrela Banja and Ladna Banja, as the water in the first has a temperature of 40 degrees Celsius, and in the second – 38° C. Its chemical composition is rich in calcium, magnesium, caesium, radon, and other minerals.

In its hydrographic structure, the region has different types of water springs, artificial lakes such as Mantovo in the municipality of Konče, Turija, and Vodoča in the municipality of Strumica, Paljurci in the municipality of Bogdanci. The natural Dojran lake in the municipality of Dojran is one of the most beautiful natural resources in the country.



Climate change and environmental degradation are among the greatest challenges of our time threatening Europe and the world. The European Union's efforts are aimed at making Europe the first climate-neutral continent. This applies to cultural heritage, too.

The European strategy papers view cultural and natural heritage as *a resource for the future* and emphasize the need for ***an integrated approach*** in the various EU policies. The importance of cooperation between many stakeholders in the development and implementation of policies and programmes for conservation and sustainable use is emphasized.

A well-maintained heritage is also very important in dealing with the risks associated with natural and man-made disasters. Experience has shown how the degradation of natural resources, neglected rural areas, urban sprawl, and poorly designed new structures increase the vulnerability of communities to disaster risks, especially in poorer countries. On the other hand, a well-preserved natural and historical environment, based on traditional knowledge and skills, significantly reduces the main risk factors for disasters, strengthens the resilience of communities, and saves lives.

In addition, **during a crisis**, access to and care for heritage can help vulnerable people regain a sense of continuity, dignity, and empowerment.

Recognition and protection of heritage, based on shared values and interests, can promote mutual recognition, tolerance, and respect between different communities, which is a prerequisite for the peaceful development of the society.

6. TOURISM

The territorial analysis of the cross-border region reveals opportunities for cooperation and joint development in the fields of economy, transport infrastructure, tourism, ecology, human capital, and management. The cross-border region is a combination of two bordering peripheries bearing the characteristics of backwardness: low GDP, persistently unfavourable demographic trends, large depopulated areas, shortage of skilled labour, low level of entrepreneurship, underdeveloped tourist infrastructure (except for that for ski and spa tourism), and high vulnerability to natural disasters (earthquakes, landslides, and forest fires). The centre-periphery syndrome is also strongly expressed in the model of the settlement network in the region. The symbolic employment and the strongly deformed demographic structures in the rural areas have led to a pronounced concentration of the population, economy, and services in the regional centres and larger cities of the cross-border region. Apart from the emphasized seasonality of the tourist offer, there is still no developed interaction of the tourist function across the border. Thus, to the untapped time potential (tourism in 4 seasons) untapped spatial potential is added: the tourist products of two countries and a functionally united cross-border region. Here is the place for a methodological note: when applying the concept of a 'functional region, the territorial scope of such cross-border tourist products can go beyond the formally established borders of the cross-border region. The same applies to business cooperation in other areas. Tourism is just one of them.

At the same time, tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the current almost complete blockage of the sector in the context of an emerging economic crisis and a drastic decline in income, it can be predicted that in the short term (1-2 years) and even medium term (3-4 years), the quantitative parameters of tourism worldwide will not reach the levels of the pre-crisis 2019 year.



A similar forecast could be addressed to the tourism of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. A major contingent for both countries has been issued from European markets in recent years. By interpolating the forecast for strong stagnation in them, a pronounced negative forecast for both countries' tourism can be motivated. The indicative quantitative dimensions of decline vary from 60% to over 80% only for the past 2020 year. The season in the current 2021 year will be focused on restarting and adapting to the new restrictive sanitation conditions for all traditional services in the tourism sector. And top tourist destinations such as Spain are announcing "closed doors" in advance for the upcoming season.

The attractiveness of European tourism, incl. that of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, is formed by cultural and historical heritage, natural values, diverse landscapes, quality services, and good connectivity / accessibility.

For Bulgaria, the total contribution of tourism in 2019 covered about 11% of the GDP and over 10% of the employment. In the same year, the number of visits by foreign tourists for leisure and travel was over 5.9 million (compared to 5.5 million in 2017). The revenues from inbound tourism reached over EUR 3.7 billion, and the total number of visits by foreign tourists was over 9.3 million in 2019. All these indicators tend to increase in value. In the latest edition of the World Economic Forum from 2019, Bulgaria also recorded an increase in the ranking by travel and tourism competitiveness index (Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 edition). Ranked 49th in 2015, our country ranked 45th in 2019 among 140 countries. It should be mentioned that according to some of the indicators of this composite index, Bulgaria occupies prestigious places. For example, according to the hygiene and health indicator, our country is on the fifth position; according to tourist infrastructure and services – on the 12th, and according to environmental sustainability – on the 19th.

The pandemic consequences of the first crisis year and the expected changes in the tourism sector can be summarized as follows:

- Tourism is among the three most affected economic sectors: for the first 10 months of 2020, the overall decline was 49% and the collapse of foreign tourists was 70%. Analyses of the BNB reported that revenues from inbound tourism with overnight stays and one-day stays fell by over BGN 4.1 billion in the first 9 months of 2020;
- The pandemic has catalysed the trends towards sustainable tourism and the reorientation from mass to specialized tourism. Transformations have already begun that may prove to be lasting. Increasingly, short holidays of various kinds will be combined, with preferences changing dynamically and with a focus on individual travel;
- The pandemic has changed the sector in the direction of increasing interest in health and recreation tourism, i.e. services and products related to body-strengthening procedures, active recreation and outdoor sports, strengthening immunity and improving the health status through balneal and spa treatments, climatotherapy, and mud therapy;
- Preferences are shifting to smaller accommodation (which remains outside the scope of the statistics): small family hotels and guest houses. There is a growing interest in destinations where there is no traditional gathering of a large number of tourists;
- Cultural and historical tourism is among the leading highlights of the marketing and advertising policy of Bulgaria aimed at establishing the country as an attractive and recognizable



year-round destination as well as at influx of more visitors. In combination with balneal, culinary, and wine tourism, there is an attractive "menu" to choose according to personal preferences.

The pre-crisis upward development of the national tourism is a pleasing fact, but, at the same time, there are serious negative factors representing threats to the sustainable development of both the established and new destinations. These are the aging of the population, high unemployment on the periphery, poverty, crime, climate change, increased pressure on natural resources, and political instability in the region. This context is politically aware and institutionalized in the leading strategic document of the sector, i.e. the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2014-2030 (2017 updated version). In 2019, the EU countries continued to be the most important generating market for international tourism in Bulgaria.

The regionalization of the tourist offer in Bulgaria began with the conceptual differentiation of nine tourist regions. The programme scope includes two of them: the Sofia Region (specialized in business and cultural tourism) and the Rila - Pirin Region (specialized in mountain and religious tourism). The extended specialization of the Sofia region includes: 1. Business tourism (MICE), 2. Cultural tourism (all types), 3. Mountain tourism (all types), 4. Health tourism (all types), 5. Religious and pilgrimage tourism, 6. Adventure tourism and ecotourism. The Rila-Pirin region has a similar palette of specialized offer: 1. Mountain tourism (all types, e.g. skiing, hiking, recreational), 2. Religious and pilgrimage tourism, 3. Adventure tourism and ecotourism, 4. Balneotourism, SPA & Wellness, 5. Cultural-historical and festival tourism, 6. Wine tourism.

The differentiation of the tourist regions aims at the formation of regional tourist products and implementation of regional marketing and advertising. It can be expected that with an active and consistent policy, tourism zoning will begin to play the role of a spatial basis for the effective organization of tourism resources in competitive regional tourism products. Their expansion across the border and their connection with a similar offer in the Republic of North Macedonia is a prerequisite for a synergy effect and increased marketability, which is of mutual interest.

The diverse climatic, geological, and hydrological conditions, unique flora and fauna, rich diversity of species, communities and natural habitats, as well as the fact that the territory includes national parks and national parks of great importance, represent invaluable potential for tourism development and conservation of rich biodiversity of pan-European importance.

The diversity of historical periods and respective cultural values is a prerequisite and a realized potential for socialization and valorisation through tourist products uniting not only the cultural and historical heritage, but also the natural resources in the region. Against the background of rich complexes of natural and cultural heritage, the unique resource of mineral waters stands out, the potential of which has not yet been fully exploited. At the same time, there is also untapped significant potential for the development of alternative forms of tourism.

Despite the established traditions, reported development, and favourable factors, tourism in the region "recognizes" insurmountable weaknesses: underdeveloped tourism product as a whole, underdeveloped network of companies for services and offers in tourism, insufficiently qualified staff in the field of tourism services, poor condition and limited access to natural and cultural-historical heritage sites, poor accommodation.

The most developed and renovated are the resorts of Bansko and Sandanski. They offer year-round accommodation and there is infrastructure for ski tourism which is in the process of renovation and development. Outside the resorts, the accommodation is represented by many



family hotels and houses and guest rooms, while the mountain huts and shelters are in poor technical condition. In the national and nature parks, a visitor infrastructure has been built along the ecotourism routes. With few exceptions, there is practically no developed tourist infrastructure in the other mountains.

The spatial, historical, and cultural proximity of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia suggest a similar diversity of natural and cultural values. This fact implies the potential for a diverse tourist offer for both countries. In the Republic of North Macedonia, in addition to the rich tourist resources, previous analyses noted the absence of complete tourist products both at national and regional and local levels. The tourist offer is formed spontaneously by primary tourist services (sleeping, eating, traveling, attractions). The support of the state institutions and policies is weak. There is a need to form and implement a national policy for the development of the sector with clear national and foreign tourism priorities.

Like in Bulgaria, the tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia was developing upwards in the years before the pandemic crisis – by an average of 15%, and in April 2018 the growth, compared to the same month of the previous year, reached 21.4%.

According to current national statistics, the Covid-19 crisis has caused a serious contraction in the sector:

The number of tourists in November 2020 decreased by 66.6% compared to the same month of 2019, and that of overnight stays – by 64.5%;

For the same months in comparison, the number of local tourists decreased by 25.9% and that of foreigners – by 87.3%;

In the period from January to November 2020, compared to the same period of the previous year, the tourists decreased by 61.2%, with the decrease in domestic tourism being about 20%, and that of international tourism being more than 80%;

A professional marketing analysis of tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia was made in a report under the auspices of the Republic of North Macedonia Competitive Industries and Innovation Support Programme¹³. The analysis of key strategic documents related to tourism shows that while supply is grouped into a number of destinations defined as "strategic", the "demand" aspect has received almost no attention. And this is a key factor in creating and marketing successful tourism products. Almost all documents contain a detailed description of the tourist resources and potentials for tourist products: cultural, wine, sports, ecotourism. At the same time, there is a lack of precise spatial orientation for the product as well as its connection with other products and services. In general, there is a lack of a clear strategic framework for the development of the tourist destinations identified.

In order to concentrate the efforts and resources, the cited report presents the results of a study of the ten priority tourist destinations in the Republic of North Macedonia, with those in the CBC region being as follows:

- Maleshevska Mountain;
- Gevgelija and Dojran;

¹³ Tourism Development Plans for Ten Destinations across FYR Macedonia, Volume 1 – Methodology, Background and Market Analysis

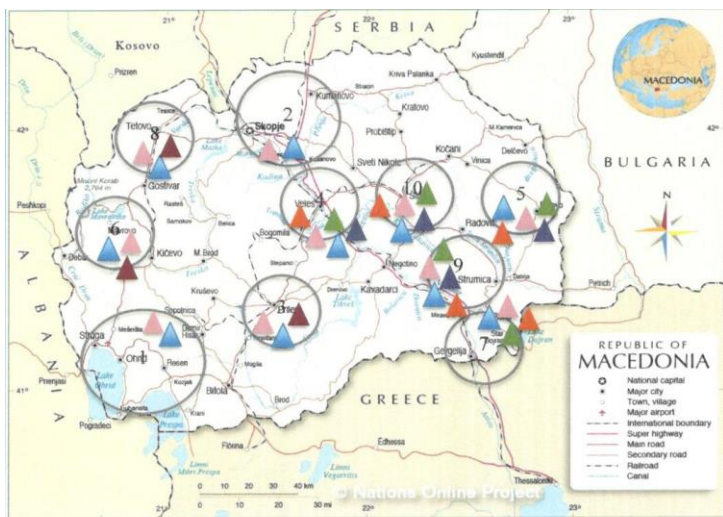


- Strumica and its surroundings;
- Stip, Radovich and their surroundings.







By applying the principle of "functional region", the Programme may also include:

- Skopje, Kumanovo and their surroundings;
- the Tikvesh region.

Map 18: Map of the Republic of North Macedonia with its priority tourist destinations



Note: The delineation of each destination on the map is approximate.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Organized active tourists  Independent active tourists  Hard adventure tourists  Domestic short break tourists  Regional short break tourists  Organized large group explorers 	<p>Destination 1 encompasses Ohrid, Struga, Prespa and their surroundings</p> <p>Destination 2 encompasses Skopje, Kumanovo and their surroundings</p> <p>Destination 3 encompasses Pelagonija</p> <p>Destination 4 encompasses the Tikvesh region</p> <p>Destination 5 encompasses Maleshevo</p> <p>Destination 6 encompasses the Reka region</p> <p>Destination 7 encompasses Gevgelija and Dojran</p> <p>Destination 8 encompasses the Polog region</p> <p>Destination 9 encompasses the Strumica and its surroundings</p> <p>Destination 10 encompasses Stip, Radovich and their surroundings</p>
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The tourist destinations of the Republic of North Macedonia, falling into or with a possibility of joining the cross-border region with Bulgaria, also have attractive tourist resources based on natural and cultural heritage enriched with diverse relief and climate. In comparison, the analytical assessments and statistics show that most attractive and with largest contribution is the South-East planning region followed by the Central and North-East planning regions.

CULTURAL-HISTORICAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM

Strengths

- Presence of rich cultural-historical heritage;
- Wide variety of cultural and historical monuments and sites;

Weaknesses

- Low level of information security and awareness;
- Insufficiently developed and maintained infrastructure for access to cultural and





<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rich natural heritage with unique flora and fauna;</i> • <i>the impact of the passing near the territory of CBC Via Diagonalis Cultural Corridor, connecting Southeast Europe with Asia;</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>historical sites and natural landmarks;</i> • <i>Insufficient joint actions in the field of cultural heritage exchange;</i> • <i>Low attendance at cultural and historical institutions and events;</i> • <i>Differences in the administrative systems and approaches to the protection of natural and cultural heritage;</i> • <i>Low level of development of ecological tourism;</i> • <i>Strong seasonal nature of the tourist services in the CBC region;</i>
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Threats</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Increased cultural exchange between the two countries;</i> • <i>Valorisation of natural and cultural resources;</i> • <i>Development of innovative technologies for preservation and maintenance of cultural and historical heritage sites and natural landmarks;</i> • <i>Joint actions for protection and popularization of the cultural-historical sites and natural resources;</i> • <i>Diversification of the forms of tourist services with emphasis on the development of ecotourism;</i> • <i>Increasing the demand for eco-friendly tourism and bioproducts;</i> • <i>Promotion of alternative tourist services like cultural tourism, wine tourism, etc.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Vulnerability of services in the tourism sector due to pandemic and epidemic situations;</i> • <i>Insufficient environmental protection due to underdeveloped ecological infrastructure;</i> • <i>Insufficient financial support for cultural activities and exchange of cultural heritage;</i> • <i>Low degree of integration of cultural-historical heritage and natural resources in the offer and development of tourist products.</i> •

CONCLUSION

Based on the analytical studies and systematized results, several priority fields can be identified to serve as a basis for developing a CBC strategy between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.

In the field of economic development, cooperation will be aimed at achieving common economic benefits. The strategy should include measures to achieve joint economic development of the region on the basis of the final commodity product instead of competition between the businesses on both sides of the border.

The main challenges for the strategic planning are related to:

- strengthening the economic base of the region;
- opening prospects for competitiveness growth;
- direct and indirect business support;



- expanding markets.

In the field of education, professional qualification, and staff development, cooperation between educational and training institutions and business communities on both sides of the border can be made a priority.

In the field of healthcare, cooperation can be aimed at:

- interaction of health teams in serious epidemic situations in the border areas on both sides;
- interaction of health teams in emergency situations in border areas.

In the field of infrastructure, transport infrastructure is the most important priority for CBC. Both for the highways and railway lines in the CBC region, included in the TEN-T network, it is necessary to complete the unfinished sections and accelerate the adjustment of their parameters in accordance with the TEN-T network requirements. This, in turn, would give a strong impetus to the development of the region and especially the municipalities served by the improved transport infrastructure.

The potential for creating cross-border functional regions is determined mainly by the presence of neighbouring territories on both sides of the border with a concentration of similar types of resources: urban areas, protected areas, areas with tourist potential (historical, cultural, wine, culinary, etc.). The modernization of the existing and opening of new border checkpoints would lead to accelerated development of cross-border functional regions with different functions, e.g. education, healthcare, social services, tourism and recreation, sports, labour and employment, etc.

The field of tourism is one of the most complex possible strategic directions for CBC, with clear territorial dimensions. The areas in the CBC region are characterized by attractive natural-geographical characteristics having a great impact on the components of the environment. Attractive natural and cultural values will be valorised through tourism. The socio-economic dimensions and impacts of tourism for stimulating the economy and creating various jobs have also been proven.

The main efforts / actions in the tourism offer aspect should be focused on:

- Development of attractive sites of natural and cultural heritage: restoration, protection, exhibition, equipment, animation;
- Development of four season tourism;
- Improving access and adjacent tourist infrastructure;
- Formation and marketing of regional tourism products (including cross-border ones);
- Promotion of natural and cultural heritage;
- Study of areas for Republic of Bulgaria –Republic of North Macedonia cooperative tourist offer;
- Digitalization.

In conclusion to the short selective analysis presented, on the both countries side there are objective prerequisites for joint, regional cross-border tourist products based on similar natural and anthropogenic values. Next is the manifesting of mutual will and proposing specific measures.

After the unexpected pandemic shock of the first half of 2020, a new policy on restarting travel and



tourism is being carefully developed step by step. The strategy in this area should be in line with the Package of Guidelines and Recommendations published by the EC to help the Member States gradually remove travel restrictions and allow tourism businesses to work again after the long break and in compliance with the necessary sanitary measures.