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This article develops a theoretical reconceptualisation of European borderlands by positioning them as productive sites of adaptive resilience rather than structurally vulnerable peripheries. It argues that dominant securitisation frameworks, centred on threat construction and exceptionalism, insufficiently capture the relational, epistemic, and democratic capacities that emerge in borderland settings. Building on the concept of adaptive continuity, the article advances a five-pillar model of borderland resilience that explains how political cohesion, institutional endurance, economic adaptability, social solidarity, and psychological robustness together sustain governance under conditions of chronic uncertainty. Chosen empirical cases demonstrate how proximity to geopolitical volatility fosters anticipatory intelligence, civic agency, and cross-scalar coordination that can surpass centralised state responses. These dynamics reveal forms of situated expertise that challenge centre-periphery hierarchies and complicate technocratic interpretations of resilience. The article contends that recognising borderland agency requires a shift from security understood as control to security understood as cooperative adaptation, thereby reframing borderlands as laboratories of democratic resilience. Their practices illuminate how political communities learn, innovate, and maintain continuity amid the dynamics of permacrisis, offering conceptual and empirical insights into the evolving architecture of European security.

Keywords:

Adaptive continuity, borderland resilience, democratic governance, hybrid threats, securitisation.

COOPERATION ACROSS CONTESTED SPACES: RETHINKING BORDERLANDS AS SITES OF RESILIENCE

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Introduction

Borders have long functioned as both symbolic and material demarcations of difference. They organize political space, define citizenship, and embody the enduring tension between openness and closure. As instruments of order, they structure relationships among territory, identity, and authority – projecting the state's spatial imagination while reflecting centuries of geopolitical negotiation, conflict, and cooperation. This ordering function has assumed increased salience and political valence over the past decade. A wave of overlapping crises, ranging from unexpected refugee movements and the COVID-19 pandemic to energy insecurity, digital vulnerabilities, and the resurgence of authoritarian power that has in some cases erupted into open war, has pushed borders back to the centre of political debate and public consciousness. Once perceived as mundane lines of administration,

they have re-emerged as potent symbols of sovereignty, security, and social anxiety.

Within this context, a pervasive security narrative has gained hegemonic traction (Laine, 2025a, 2020). It frames borders as protective barriers against diffuse, encroaching threats, translating complex transnational phenomena into binary logics of safety and danger. Drawing upon the rhetoric of emergency, this narrative legitimizes intensified surveillance, restricted mobility, and unilateral state action as both necessary and inevitable. The securitized logic of bordering (Huysmans, 2006; Balzacq et al., 2016; Balzacq, 2019) extends beyond policy to a broader cultural politics of fear. Through the continual invocation of crisis, it sustains a ban-opticon of control (Bigo, 2006) in which exceptional measures become normalized and border management assumes a performative role of reassurance. Borders thus cease to be passive territorial markers; they become dynamic instruments of governmentality – sites where sovereignty is enacted and the boundary between security and insecurity is continuously reproduced.

The thickening of borders in the name of security reflects far more than administrative adjustment or technological enhancement. It reveals a deeper psychological investment in borders as sources of ontological security, symbolic anchors that help steady societies unsettled by globalisation and uncertainty. In a world shaped by fluid capital, transnational migration, and the perceived erosion of state sovereignty, borders come to signify stability and control, offering a sense of reassurance amid accelerating change. Yet borders are socially produced institutions, continually contested and reconstituted through enforcement, resistance, and everyday crossing (Paasi, 1999). They are as much processes as they are objects, dynamic arenas in which power, identity, and belonging are negotiated among states, migrants, border communities, and civil society actors. Contemporary securitisation tends to obscure this complexity. When borders are reduced to instruments of defence, the social and political vitality that animates borderlands is pushed out of view, even though it continues to shape how these spaces function and how people inhabit them.

In February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine dramatically unsettled the re-

ductive framing. The ensuing reconfiguration of Europe's security order shattered the assumption that security radiates outward from metropolitan centres to passive peripheries. Regions that had long been marginal in security planning, often economically peripheral and politically overlooked, suddenly became strategic frontlines (Laine, 2025a; Laine & Petersson, 2025) in a multidimensional struggle that unfolded across military, societal, informational, and psychological domains. Borderlands adjacent to Russia and Belarus, long cast as fragile buffers, emerged instead as critical nodes of resilience and cooperation. Their communities, accustomed to uncertainty and structural instability, displayed remarkable adaptive capacity (Stokłosa & Laine, 2024). Those very spaces dismissed by securitization frameworks as zones of vulnerability revealed themselves as sites of sophisticated mechanisms for maintaining continuity amid disruption – precisely through the dynamic practices such frameworks ignore.

This article argues that borderlands should be understood not as vulnerable margins but as laboratories of resilience, places where cooperation and adaptive capacity take shape through the lived experience of contestation. This reconceptualization extends debates in resilience theory, securitization studies, and critical border scholarship. Traditional ecological models of resilience (Holling, 1973) defined it as the capacity to return to equilibrium after disturbance. Such "bouncing back" paradigms inadequately capture the temporal and relational complexity of social systems, where equilibrium is rarely attainable or desirable (Laine, 2025b). Joseph (2013), Chandler (2014), and Pugh (2014) reconceptualise resilience as adaptive, anticipatory, and transformative, a way of sustaining functionality through ongoing change rather than restoring a previous equilibrium. In this view, resilience becomes an epistemology of governance, one that foregrounds distributed agency, continuous learning, and the capacity to operate effectively under conditions of uncertainty.

Borderlands epitomize this adaptive orientation. Far from static peripheries, they are dynamic ecologies of interaction shaped by asymmetrical dependencies, cross-border flows, and overlapping sovereignties. Their inhabitants cultivate pragmatic knowledge and

cooperation to navigate shifting alignments and risk landscapes. Borderland resilience therefore encompasses not only material and institutional resources but also cultural and cognitive dispositions, a cultivated way of living with uncertainty (Andersen & Prokkola, 2021; Laine, 2021). This article introduces a conceptual framework defining borderland resilience through five interdependent pillars: *Political cohesion* sustains legitimacy and direction; *institutional endurance* ensures functionality under strain; *economic adaptability* enables diversification; *social solidarity* reinforces community cohesion; and *psychological robustness* underwrites collective confidence. Each dimension contributes to adaptive capacity, yet their effectiveness arises from their interrelation.

Together, these elements constitute adaptive continuity (Laine, 2025b), a distinctive mode of resilience that preserves essential functions and identities while adjusting to evolving conditions. Unlike conventional frameworks that equate resilience with recovery, borderlands seldom encounter equilibrium. They inhabit a state of continual flux, where stability is provisional and adaptation is an ongoing practice. Their resilience lies not in returning to normality but in absorbing disruption without disintegration. They persist by anticipating rather than reacting, cultivating flexibility over stability, and transforming contestation into cooperation. Borderlands with strong and interconnected resilience pillars function as force multipliers within national and European security architectures, strengthening early warning capacities, fostering innovation, and reinforcing democratic legitimacy through lived practices of endurance. Where these pillars are weak, by contrast, societies remain vulnerable to hybrid threats and external manipulation.

In a security environment defined by hybrid warfare, cyber coercion, and information manipulation, the production of security increasingly relies on distributed, bottom-up capacities rather than centralized command. Borderlands, positioned at the intersection of geopolitical, economic, and informational systems, are thus pivotal. They are not simply spaces to be defended but frontlines of resilience, places where democratic societies learn to navigate complexity, live with uncertainty, and preserve openness even under pressure. Recognizing borderlands as strategic assets requires a fun-

damental shift from the securitization of space to the cultivation of social and institutional resilience within it. This shift entails moving beyond fortification to engage with the capabilities border communities already possess – networks of trust, adaptive governance, and the ability to uphold democratic values amid geopolitical strain.

Reframing security through borderland agency

The contemporary thickening of borders under the rubric of security entails more than administrative recalibration or technological upgrading of state apparatuses. It represents a profound psychosocial transformation that exposes the extent to which borders have acquired existential meaning in late-modern societies. Ontological security, understood as confidence in the continuity of self-identity and in the predictability of one's social and material environment, becomes increasingly fragile under the conditions of reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1991, 1990). Here, borders operate as "thick signifiers" (Huysmans, 2006): symbolic repositories through which collective anxieties about globalization, migration, cultural transformation, and systemic uncertainty are projected and temporarily contained. The border thus assumes an affective and psychological function, promising stability, coherence, and control in the condition of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000); an era characterized by fluid identities, perpetual flux, and the erosion of traditional certainties.

The notion of permacrisis captures this pervasive sense of instability. The contemporary moment is shaped less by isolated emergencies than by a sustained perception of crisis, a continuous turbulence driven by interlinked challenges such as climate disasters, economic volatility, political fragmentation, and technological disruption (Karyotis et al., 2025). It encapsulates the growing difficulty of distinguishing between temporary shocks and systemic conditions of insecurity. In the absence of a clear interpretive framework for consistently understanding processes of securitization and desecuritization, political actors compete to define which threats matter most, which require urgent intervention, and whose security counts. The permacrisis is therefore not simply a world

of multiplying material dangers but a field of competing narratives and claims about danger itself, a global politics of anxiety in which the language of security has become both pervasive and contested.

Within this environment, borders assume heightened significance as sites where these competing security imaginaries are materialised and enacted. Essentialist conceptions that treat borders as fixed, naturalized dividing lines misapprehend their ontological character. As critical border studies have shown, borders are not pre-given geographical facts but socially constructed institutions, continuously produced and reconstituted through practices, discourses, and performances (Paasi, 1996; Newman, 2006; Salter, 2012, 2008; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012). Borders' simultaneous thickening and thinning, multiplication and displacement – the vacillation of borders (Balibar, 2009, 2002) – captures the inherently dynamic and contradictory nature of contemporary bordering processes.

In conditions of permacrisis, borders function as key sites where competing claims about security are enacted, negotiated, and resisted. They are simultaneously instruments of control and symbolic markers of collective anxiety. No longer confined to territorial peripheries, borders have become polysemic and ubiquitous (Rumford, 2008), extending across multiple scales and modalities. Bordering has become multiscalar (Laine, 2016), occurring across global, regional, and local arenas, while also proliferating into digital and virtual domains (Vukov & Sheller, 2013; Dijstelbloem & Meijer, 2021). The border, rather than a line fixed at the state's outer edge, now appears everywhere, expressed through data infrastructures, biometric systems, and algorithmic logics of inclusion and exclusion that regulate mobility, identity, and access, yet in another sense it is nowhere in particular.

Dominant security discourses tend to occlude this complexity. Framing borders primarily through the triad of risk, threat, and control reduces borderlands to spaces of exception (Agamben, 2005), zones of intensified surveillance, suspicion, and state violence where ordinary juridical protections are weakened or suspended. This reductionist framing, amplified by the logics of permacrisis, legitimizes the normalization of exceptional measures, en-

trenching a politics of permanent emergency. In doing so, it obscures the reality that borderlands are not only sites of vulnerability but also vibrant spaces of interaction, cultural hybridity, and resilience. Borderlands generate distinctive border cultures (Konrad & Amilhat Szary, 2023), social formations and hybrid identities that emerge from sustained cross-border encounters and exchanges (Anzaldúa, 1987; Alvarez, 1995; Vila, 2000).

Borderland communities often inhabit ambiguous, liminal positions that challenge nationalist binaries and reveal the artificiality of territorial demarcations (Wilson & Donnan, 1998; Scott & Wilson, 2025). These spaces are defined by code-switching, bicultural competence, kinship networks that traverse international divides, and economic practices reliant on mobility and reciprocity (Heyman, 1994; Vila, 2003; Laine, 2025c). They also host forms of political creativity and resistance, as marginalized populations contest state sovereignty and articulate alternative imaginaries of belonging and citizenship (Cunningham & Heyman, 2004; Paasi, 2009; Shapira, 2013). These practices illuminate the agency of borderlands: their capacity to transform constraint into opportunity and precarity into adaptive strength.

To view borderlands only through the prism of threat or control is therefore to misrecognize their analytical and empirical significance. Borders repeatedly attract global attention not only because of crises occurring at their margins but because they crystallize broader social anxieties about order, identity, and belonging (Scott & Wilson, 2025; Laine, 2026). Borderlands are both material and metaphorical frontiers, zones where the global meets the local and where the contradictions of contemporary governance become visible. They are at once sites of everyday negotiation and spaces of strategic significance, where geopolitical contestation intersects with the mundane practices of living, trading, and relating across difference.

Recognizing borderlands as analytic categories as well as lived realities opens new perspectives on global security politics. It invites inquiry into how resilience, cooperation, and adaptive agency emerge precisely in those spaces most frequently represented as fragile or dangerous. Acts of solidarity, humanitarian engagement, creative expression, and everyday

forms of crossing all challenge the logic of securitization and reveal borders as contested arenas of meaning (Squire, 2015; Stierl, 2016). In these interactions, sovereignty, citizenship, and belonging are not imposed from above but renegotiated through practice (Johnson et al., 2011; Jones, 2012; Laine & Casaglia, 2017; Casaglia & Laine, 2017).

In the context of permacrisis, where competing security claims continually collide and reconfigure, borderlands serve as vital laboratories for observing how political communities adapt, resist, and reimagine the meaning of security itself. Rather than passive recipients of state policy, borderland actors such as municipal leaders, NGOs, activists, and ordinary residents exercise a form of situated agency that turns bordering from a top-down imposition into a field of negotiation. Understanding this agency demands a reframing of security: from an obsession with control and exclusion toward an appreciation of interdependence, relationality, and the co-production of resilience across contested spaces.

From security as control to security as adaptive cooperation

The reconceptualization of borderland resilience as adaptive continuity (Laine, 2025b) demands a fundamental theoretical shift: from security understood as control to security understood as cooperation under uncertainty. This move expands the analytical scope of borderland studies beyond the familiar politics of exclusion, deterrence, and emergency, toward a more relational understanding of how governance adapts through plural, distributed, and experiential processes. Resilience, it acknowledges, is not merely a defensive property but an emergent capacity rooted in social relations, collective learning, and institutional flexibility. Borderlands, precisely because of their exposure to volatility and their embeddedness within overlapping systems of governance, offer an especially vivid vantage point for observing this transformation.

In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the epistemic landscape of European security shifted in profound ways. Regions long treated as peripheral, often portrayed as zones of transit, neglect, or ambiguity, have moved to the centre of attention.

They now appear as key sites where new forms of experimentation and adaptation take shape, revealing dynamics that were previously overlooked. Along the borders of Russia and Belarus on one hand, and Ukraine on the other, local authorities, civic networks, and community actors have demonstrated an ability to anticipate, absorb, and respond to evolving threats, often ahead of national administrations. These developments show that borderlands are not simply on the receiving end of security policy. They increasingly operate as generators of stability and resilience in their own right. What happens at the margins is not peripheral to governance but constitutive of it. In these settings, innovation, improvisation, and cooperation are not optional add-ons; they become the everyday techniques through which communities navigate uncertainty and sustain collective survival.

The predominance of securitization as an analytical framework has profoundly shaped contemporary scholarship on borders and resilience. The Copenhagen School's canonical formulation (Buzan et al., 1998) illuminated the processes through which political actors discursively construct existential threats, thereby legitimating exceptional measures under the rubric of national survival. While invaluable for analysing the performative power of crisis narratives, this paradigm remains circumscribed by an elite-centric epistemology of security. It privileges state speech acts and formal authority over the material, affective, and social practices through which security is enacted in everyday life. Consequently, it tends to obscure how ordinary actors at the margins of state power negotiate, reinterpret, and contest the conditions of insecurity.

Borderland dynamics underscore these limitations. Security, as experienced and practiced in these spaces, is not reducible to elite declarations or centralized interventions; it is continuously enacted through quotidian strategies of adaptation. Borderlands thus operate as laboratories of everyday securitization, where communities develop protective and adaptive responses without invoking states of emergency. These practices blur conventional distinctions between security and normality, between exceptional and routine governance. They mark a conceptual shift from a politics of exception toward a politics of endurance that is less con-

cerned with suspending order in the face of crisis than with sustaining cooperation amid chronic instability.

The diffusion of resilience across governance domains has brought analytical clarity but also considerable political friction. As the concept has travelled through institutional arenas, especially those of NATO, the European Union, and national defence establishments, it has often been recast in managerial terms that foreground preparedness, risk mitigation, and rapid recovery. This technocratic interpretation aligns closely with neoliberal modes of governance, which tend to shift responsibility for managing crises away from state institutions and toward individuals and communities. In practice, resilience becomes less a collective capacity embedded in public infrastructures and more a behavioural expectation placed on populations.

Critics, including Neocleous (2013) and Chandler (2014), caution that resilience, when mobilized as a policy orthodoxy, risks becoming a normative injunction compelling populations to adapt to structural insecurity rather than contest its origins. Pugh (2014) situates resilience within a post-liberal genealogy of governance, arguing that it emerged as a response to the erosion of liberal internationalism in the 1990s and has since evolved into an epistemic paradigm oriented toward complexity, contingency, and adaptation. Rather than simply reproducing modernist assumptions of control, resilience gestures toward a relational ontology of governance under uncertainty. The concept's proliferation across academic, political, and activist circles reflects both its analytical potential and its risks: resilience has become a trendy buzzword applied to a highly diverse set of issues and "wicked problems" that dominate contemporary life. While resilience thinking holds promise when conceptualized as an ability to adapt, acquire new capabilities, and emerge stronger from struggle rather than merely bouncing back, it is not a universal magic bullet offering ready solutions to societal challenges. The transformative potential of resilience-oriented approaches can paradoxically function as a depoliticizing effort, substituting demands for responsiveness, adaptability, and flexibility within catastrophic horizons for more fundamental contestation of the conditions producing precarity itself.

The experience of European borderlands since 2022 complicates and enriches these theoretical debates. Here, resilience is not reducible to a depoliticized, managerial process; it is inherently political and relational. Borderland actors do not merely adjust to crises imposed from above but reinterpret, contest, and transform them through collective agency. Practices of mutual aid, civic cooperation, and local diplomacy exemplify adaptive governance: a mode of resilience grounded in participation, trust, and distributed authority. Adaptive governance recognizes that uncertainty is not an aberration to be eliminated but a condition to be navigated. It thrives on pluralism, flexibility, and iterative learning. Borderlands can be seen to function as laboratories of governance innovation: spaces where mechanisms of coordination, inclusion, and improvisation emerge organically in response to volatility, often preceding or exceeding national policy frameworks.

Borderland communities cultivate forms of experiential knowledge that resist codification within bureaucratic or technocratic systems. This knowledge is situated, embodied, and historically sedimented, formed through long-term exposure to uncertainty. Borderlanders acquire distinctive interpretive skills that allow them to sense subtle shifts in political, informational, or environmental conditions; to distinguish signal from noise; and to calibrate responses in real time. Their proximity to hybrid threat environments and their embedded experience of overlapping sovereignties generate a cognitive resilience often absent in more insulated interior regions. In epistemological terms, borderland resilience entails a pluralization of expertise. It challenges the hierarchical epistemology of conventional security governance, which privileges technical rationality over lived experience. Integrating experiential and community-based knowledge into formal decision-making enhances not only situational awareness but also the democratic legitimacy of security governance. Authority, in this view, derives not solely from institutional mandate but from participatory recognition: the acknowledgment that those who live with insecurity possess critical insight into its management. Adaptive governance thus represents both a political and epistemic reorientation: a shift from governing for borderlands to governing with them.

Reconceptualizing borderlands as producers of security invites a broader reflection on resilience as a democratic practice. Drawing on Keane (2020) and Schmidt (2021), democracy endures not through rigidity or insulation from crisis but through its capacity for adaptation, deliberation, and renewal under pressure. Borderlands epitomize this ethos: their governance depends on plural actors, overlapping jurisdictions, and continuous negotiation across difference. The vitality of democratic systems rests not only at their centres but also, and often more visibly, at their edges. It is in these peripheral zones that instability is felt most directly and cooperation becomes a daily necessity. When understood as democratic laboratories, borderlands show that resilience is not the opposite of fragility but a way of working with it. Continuity is sustained through practices of inclusion, reflexivity, and collective learning that allow communities to adapt without losing their sense of purpose. These regions endure not because they are insulated from crises but because they have learned how to live with them, turning exposure into a source of political and social capacity.

Borderlands as laboratories of democratic resilience

Resilience manifests unevenly across European borderlands. Empirical evidence reveals that these regions respond to crisis not only through defensive adaptation but by reconfiguring institutional linkages, mobilizing social solidarity, and cultivating psychological robustness. Yet these capacities are distributed asymmetrically: while some borderlands convert uncertainty into adaptive continuity, others remain constrained by institutional fragility, political fragmentation, or weakened social cohesion. Such heterogeneity underscores both the enabling conditions under which adaptive resilience flourishes and the structural limits that inhibit it when foundational pillars of governance and trust erode.

The selected borderland cases highlight this variation through trajectories that differ in important ways yet speak to one another. All experienced heightened pressure after 2022, but their responses were shaped by distinct historical memories, governance arrangements, social fabrics, and geopolitical orientations (cf. Kon-

rad et al., 2025). Taken together, they show that borderland resilience is not an abstract ideal but a grounded practice – a lived process of adaptation, negotiation, and learning under conditions of strain. The invasion of Ukraine marked a decisive rupture in European security, and in its wake, borderlands once regarded as peripheral have become central arenas for humanitarian, political, and economic experimentation.

In the Baltic states, communities along the Russian and Belarusian borders acted as early sentinels of geopolitical change. Through linguistic familiarity, generational memory, and an intimate understanding of local dynamics, borderlanders produced situated intelligence that complemented formal state systems. Institutional foresight further reinforced this local intelligence. Estonia's post-2007 cybersecurity strategy institutionalized digital resilience through the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. Lithuania's diversification from Russian and Chinese dependencies reframed economic autonomy as security, while Poland's investments in LNG terminals and energy interconnectors transformed national assets into regional public goods during the weaponization of gas supplies. The coordinated withdrawal of the Baltic states from the BRELL grid in 2025 symbolized not only infrastructural decoupling from Russia but also the material embodiment of adaptive continuity – resilience as strategic transformation rather than mere recovery.

The Slovak-Ukrainian borderland also exemplified resilience under acute stress. Confronted with unprecedented refugee flows and logistical disruption, local institutions, municipalities, and civil society actors mobilized emergency shelters, aid distribution networks, and coordination hubs with remarkable speed. These adaptive practices drew on decades of EU-funded cross-border cooperation programs that had cultivated both administrative know-how and intercommunal trust. Social solidarity and pragmatic problem-solving outweighed ideological polarization, while local actors countered disinformation by privileging direct communication and community presence. This case demonstrates that resilience emerges not from centralized command but from networked cooperation sustained through shared purpose and civic agency.

Notably, borderland resilience persisted despite increasingly strained national-level political relations between Slovakia and Ukraine, particularly following the 2023 election of Prime Minister Robert Fico, whose government has opposed military aid to Ukraine and adopted a more sceptical stance toward EU sanctions on Russia. The divergence between local cross-border solidarity and national political discourse underscores how borderland communities can maintain cooperative practices and humanitarian commitments even when official state positions shift, revealing the relative autonomy of local resilience mechanisms from central government politics.

The Finnish-Russian borderland extends the argument from local adaptation to national transformation. Stretching over 1,300 kilometres, this border has long been both a line of vigilance and a zone of pragmatic coexistence. Borderlanders developed an ethos of alert pragmatism, rooted in their everyday familiarity with Russian administrative patterns, economic cycles, and social rhythms. When Russia instrumentalized irregular migration along the Finnish border in 2023–2024, the government responded with decisive securitization measures, including the much debated complete closure of all border crossing points with Russia, alongside the implementation of emergency legislation authorizing immediate border closures and border control measures of dubious legality, including pushbacks (Laine, 2025d).

Yet in borderland itself, local actors maintained a less alarmist posture, drawing on their embedded knowledge and established networks to manage humanitarian challenges with institutional composure. This divergence between state-led securitization and borderland pragmatism reveals tensions between centralized threat assessment and localized coping mechanisms. Nonetheless, local knowledge, derived from decades of cross-border cooperation, fed into national recalibration, including the redesign of civil preparedness and border infrastructure policies. This borderland experience occurred alongside Finland's historic NATO accession in April 2023, representing a fundamental shift in national security orientation after decades of military non-alignment.

The Norwegian-Russian Arctic frontier represents a variant of cooperative resilience

increasingly complicated by contestation over historical memory. Communities in Sør-Varanger (Norway) and Pechenga (Russia) maintained cross-border relations anchored in shared environmental and economic interests, with pragmatic cooperation in fisheries management, environmental monitoring, and search-and-rescue persisting longer than elsewhere despite escalating geopolitical tension after 2022. Yet this cooperative infrastructure coexisted uneasily with an emerging battle over historical narrative: Norwegian memory diplomacy had initially fostered goodwill through shared World War II commemorations, but from 2014 Russia systematically appropriated these memorials to advance nationalist narratives, transforming shared memory into a geopolitical weapon (Fors, 2025). The 2022 invasion ended joint commemorations entirely, exposing memory as a contested security domain.

Accustomed to both geopolitical volatility and environmental extremity, borderlanders nevertheless displayed psychological resilience in treating turbulence as normal rather than exceptional. Local actors took the lead in resisting Russian memory offensives through creative interventions by reclaiming commemorative spaces, advancing inclusive narratives of human resilience, and publicly exposing historical manipulation, which proved effective in asserting Norwegian sovereignty over collective memory (Fors, 2025). Norway's national policy complemented this local sensibility through Arctic infrastructure investments and civil preparedness that strengthened stability without overt militarization. However, the absence of coordinated national strategy left local actors facing significant asymmetries against state-backed Russian memory campaigns, resulting in a delicate equilibrium of resilience sustained through pragmatic cooperation in functional domains while simultaneously demanding mnemopolitical vigilance to defend historical narratives against external appropriation.

In contrast, the Western Balkans highlight the vulnerabilities of resilience. Chronic institutional weakness, political fragmentation, and persistent ethnic mistrust undermined collective adaptation (Morača et al., 2023). Disinformation campaigns deepened social cynicism, and the core pillars of resilience, namely poli-

tical cohesion, institutional endurance, and social solidarity, struggled to align. Even so, this fragmented landscape was not devoid of possibility. Small pockets of civic cooperation and cross-border initiative showed that resilience can take root in fragile conditions, often in tentative, informal, or embryonic forms. Local NGOs, youth groups, and cross-ethnic professional networks kept channels of dialogue and collaboration open despite the absence of supportive state structures. In moments when institutional resilience faltered, social resilience sometimes persisted, revealing how adaptive capacity can survive in the interstices of weakened governance.

Across these diverse cases, several comparative insights emerge. First, resilience is relational rather than unilateral: it materializes where local agency intersects with institutional flexibility. Second, resilience is not binary – present or absent – but scalar, cumulative, and contingent upon historical legacies of trust and legitimacy. Third, experiential knowledge, the lived understanding of uncertainty, proves as vital as formal capability. Fourth, social solidarity consistently underpins successful adaptation, while its erosion undermines every other pillar. Fifth, economic adaptability reveals that diversification and preparedness yield enduring strategic advantage. Finally, psychological robustness, cultivated through historical exposure to instability, functions as a cognitive safeguard against manipulation and fear.

Resilience in borderlands is thus neither incidental nor automatic. It is cultivated through the interplay of structure, agency, and experience. Each pillar reinforces the others through what the theoretical framework earlier defined as adaptive continuity: the capacity to preserve coherence and shared purpose while flexibly recalibrating to shifting pressures. Borderlands that embody this balance demonstrate that stability does not preclude transformation. Rather, transformation itself can become a stabilizing process – anchored in institutional learning, civic engagement, and the activation of situated knowledge.

Resilience in borderlands is best understood as a systemic property rather than a set of discrete attributes. Where political cohesion, institutional endurance, social solidarity, economic adaptability, and psychological robustness converge, resilience acquires a generative qual-

ity that radiates outward from local contexts to shape regional security. Borderlands configured in this way do not merely withstand disruption; they reshape the trajectories of national and continental stability. Their capacity to absorb hybrid pressures, recalibrate governance, and sustain democratic legitimacy demonstrates that resilience is both political and relational. As laboratories of adaptive governance, borderlands translate uncertainty into innovation, producing models of cooperation that are increasingly indispensable to the future of European security.

Implications for security architecture

European security architecture has long reflected an implicit spatial hierarchy in which central institutions and metropolitan regions have been regarded as the producers of order, while peripheral zones were treated as passive recipients of protection. This inherited cartography of power has sustained the notion that security emanates from the centre and radiates outward to the margins. Yet the experience of recent years, particularly since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has inverted this logic. Borderlands, once imagined as fragile fault lines, now function as strategic nodes of resilience: early-warning systems, logistical corridors, and normative exemplars of democratic adaptability. They generate security not by virtue of proximity to threat but through their experiential knowledge, adaptive governance, and cross-scalar coordination. Their familiarity with neighbouring societies and their sensitivity to subtle behavioural, informational, and infrastructural shifts render them critical sources of situational awareness. Their dense local networks, linking municipal authorities, civic organizations, private firms, and volunteer actors, enable rapid mobilization that frequently outpaces centralized bureaucratic processes. Their embeddedness within both national and transnational frameworks allows them to mediate between the local and the global, translating lived experience into actionable intelligence.

Recognizing borderlands as central assets in Europe's security ecosystem requires a reconfiguration of institutional hierarchies. Their roles must be institutionalized within national decision-making architectures: borderlands

should not merely execute strategies designed in distant capitals but participate in formulating those strategies. Incorporating local perspectives into policy design expands the epistemic base of decision-making and enhances the legitimacy of national security agendas. Investment must extend beyond traditional military or surveillance infrastructure to encompass the full spectrum of resilience: digital systems, civic institutions, transportation networks, public health, education, and local media. These dimensions constitute the connective tissue of social endurance. National resilience strategies should adopt a distributed architecture that diffuses adaptive capacity across territory rather than concentrating it within singular command centres. Decentralization reduces systemic fragility, turning crises into coordinated responses across multiple nodes. Security is thus redefined: borderlands shift from defensive zones to platforms of anticipation and innovation, where early disruptions are detected, interpreted, and transformed into adaptive action.

Conventional security discourse draws a sharp distinction between security and cooperation: the former associated with deterrence, defence, and sovereignty; the latter with diplomacy, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. The lived experience of borderlands dissolves this binary. Cooperation is not a luxury of peace but a mode of security practice indispensable to sustaining resilience under pressure. This reconceptualization carries direct policy consequences. Cooperation frameworks, including cross-border councils, municipal partnerships, transnational NGOs, and professional networks, must be recognized as critical security infrastructure. They should be protected from politicization and designed to remain operational under stress, not merely in times of stability.

Sustaining communication across borders during crises prevents isolation and polarization, allowing pragmatic contact to function as a stabilizing mechanism even amid geopolitical tension. Cooperation embodies preventive resilience, weaving the connective tissue that enables societies to absorb shocks collectively instead of fragmenting apart. Recognizing this requires a cultural shift in strategic thinking from zero-sum deterrence toward shared adaptation as the foundation of durable security.

The contrast between the context briefly outlined above reveals that resilience cannot be engineered through technical management or centralized control. It arises where local agency is empowered and where institutions learn through practice. Top-down strategies often prioritize control, emphasizing standardized procedures, surveillance, or infrastructure protection. Yet borderlands that adapted most effectively were those characterized by participatory governance, trust-based networks, and locally embedded knowledge. Empowerment, not mere protection, distinguishes communities that merely endure crises from those that transform through them.

Borderlands generate forms of intelligence often overlooked by conventional security systems. Proximity to geopolitical adversaries cultivates sensitivity to micro-level social rhythms, including shifts in discourse, local behaviour, or bureaucratic practice that remote analysis rarely captures. Experiential knowledge enriches surveillance and modelling with qualitative depth, adding dimensions that numbers alone cannot provide. To harness this asset, national and supranational institutions must establish structured mechanisms for integration. Formal consultations between borderland authorities and national security agencies, inclusion of local experts in EU and NATO resilience committees, and hybrid early-warning systems that combine satellite or cyber data with community-based observation can bridge the gap between lived experience and strategic foresight.

Incorporating borderlands into Europe's security architecture signals a normative shift toward a distributed and democratic order. Participation replaces hierarchy, learning supersedes control, and interdependence outweighs insulation. The sustainability of security rests not only on deterrence or military alignment but on the vitality of democratic networks that transform uncertainty into collective adaptation. By transforming the margins into sites of innovation and resilience, Europe can move beyond the illusion of fortress stability toward a genuinely adaptive security architecture: one that views uncertainty not as a pathology to eliminate but as a condition to be governed through pluralism, cooperation, and shared learning. Borderlands thus become both the testing ground and the model for

a European security paradigm that is as democratic as it is strategic.

Toward an integrated and democratic security architecture

The reconceptualization of borderlands as strategic assets rather than vulnerabilities marks a broader epistemic transformation in European security thinking. Contemporary threats, whether cyberattacks, disinformation, energy coercion, migratory pressure, or climate disruption, are inherently transboundary, hybrid and multidimensional. They cut across the conventional boundaries separating domestic from foreign, civilian from military, and security from development. These challenges cannot be addressed through militarized, state-centric models alone. Instead, they demand a comprehensive security architecture that integrates military, political, economic, social, informational, and psychological dimensions within a coherent, adaptive framework.

In this integrated paradigm, societal resilience is not secondary to defence capability but co-constitutive of it. Borderlands exemplify this principle. Their stability is sustained not merely through deterrence or protection but through democratic participation, institutional trust, and collective memory. These elements form the social infrastructure that enables societies to absorb disruption without losing their normative coherence or political legitimacy. Security, therefore, must be reconceived not simply as the defence of territory but as the preservation of societal functionality and democratic vitality. Building such an architecture requires transcending long-standing binaries – centre versus periphery, civilian versus military, and national versus local. Borderlands reveal that resilience operates between these categories: in spaces of overlap, hybridity, and negotiation. Their embeddedness in multiple jurisdictions and cultural worlds demonstrates that effective governance under uncertainty depends on connectivity rather than command.

This insight challenges the traditional spatial hierarchy of European security, which has privileged metropolitan centres as sources of order and relegated peripheral zones to reactive roles. The experience of the Baltic, Finnish, Slovak, and Arctic borderlands shows instead that security is produced through interaction;

through the ability of local institutions to coordinate across levels of governance, and to mobilize collective intelligence that fuses technical expertise with lived experience. These “marginal” regions embody the distributed logic that a resilient Europe increasingly requires. A democratic and integrated security architecture must therefore adopt a systemic rather than sectoral orientation. It should treat the military, economic, informational, environmental, and civic domains not as discrete arenas but as interdependent circuits of stability.

The borders of Europe are not only defensive lines; they also function as connective tissues that link diverse systems of governance. Their strength rests in redundancy, cooperation, and decentralization, principles that distribute risk, support rapid adaptation, and help prevent systemic collapse. Read in this way, borders become less about fortification and more about sustaining the flexibility and interdependence on which contemporary security increasingly relies. A future-oriented security architecture must institutionalize these principles, ensuring that crisis response mechanisms, intelligence networks, and policy platforms integrate both top-down coordination and bottom-up participation. If the 20th century’s security order was built on deterrence, the 21st must be built on deliberation. The democratic character of resilience lies in its inclusiveness, in its ability to bring a wide range of actors into the work of defining, interpreting, and managing threats. Borderlands make this especially clear. They show that democratic resilience does not dilute security but grounds it in social legitimacy. When citizens trust their institutions, when local authorities have the capacity to act, and when information circulates openly, societies are far better equipped to withstand disruption without sliding into polarization or authoritarian reflexes.

This democratization of security governance implies a reorientation of institutional design. Borderland municipalities, regional authorities, and cross-border partnerships should have formalized roles in national and EU-level security planning. Mechanisms for horizontal coordination, across sectors and borders, must complement vertical command structures. Furthermore, information-sharing must expand beyond classified or technical domains to include civic intelligence: the experiential, narra-

tive, and interpretive knowledge that shapes public understanding of crisis. Such integration demands not only policy reform but a cultural transformation within security institutions: from the protection of societies to the co-production with them. It entails acknowledging uncertainty not as failure but as a condition of political life, one best governed through flexibility, participation, and trust.

The lessons of Europe's borderlands suggest that resilience is best understood as a civic compact, a mutually reinforcing relationship between state capacity and societal engagement. The five pillars of adaptive continuity are sustained only when citizens perceive themselves as co-owners of security, not as its passive beneficiaries. This perspective challenges technocratic approaches that reduce resilience to infrastructure protection or risk management. It asserts instead that democratic culture is itself a form of critical infrastructure: the social capital, pluralism, and deliberative norms that allow societies to recover from shock without sacrificing their values. In this sense, Europe's security future will be determined less by the hardware of defence than by the software of democracy.

Security through vitality

Security in borderlands emerges not from their closure but from their vitality. Moving beyond securitization does not imply the rejection of security but the transformation of its epistemic and moral foundations. The concept of adaptive continuity situates resilience within a broader understanding of governance as relational, polycentric, and democratic. It reframes borderlands from passive peripheries into active nodes of security production, whose strength lies in their capacity for adaptation without disintegration.

Recognizing the strategic value of borderland experiential knowledge challenges centralized and technocratic models of security that treat resilience as a matter of engineering. Instead, resilience appears as a collective capability rooted in social solidarity, political legitimacy, and shared meaning. Borderlands, long cast as zones of vulnerability, increasingly appear as the connective tissue of Europe's security architecture. They are the places where uncertainty is handled rather than feared, where

difference becomes a source of insight rather than a liability, and where the practices that underpin democratic resilience are already being quietly rehearsed. In these settings, the future of security is not imagined in abstract terms but lived through everyday forms of cooperation and adaptation. In an era of permacrisis, where the question of whose security matters remains fundamentally contested, borderlands offer empirical evidence that security can be constituted not through exclusion and control but through inclusion, cooperation, and the recognition of multiple, negotiable security claims.

At its core, this study challenges the dominant securitization narrative that has long framed borderlands as margins of instability requiring intensified control. The events following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 rendered such assumptions untenable. Across Europe, borderlands demonstrated not fragility but adaptive strength: they provided early warning of aggression, organized humanitarian logistics, sustained local governance, countered disinformation, and contributed substantively to national and regional decision-making. The traditional understanding of security as radiating from the centre toward the periphery must therefore give way to a model in which security is co-produced across space, with borderlands serving as vital anchors of adaptive continuity.

Borderlands are not merely geographic margins; they are democratic infrastructures where cooperation, pluralism, and adaptability are continuously practiced and refined. Their resilience stems from long-standing experience in negotiating interdependence rather than erecting isolation. The ability of borderlands to maintain continuity under stress, by balancing local initiative with cross-border coordination, is illustrative of how democratic values can function as security assets rather than vulnerabilities. In this sense, borderlands embody the resilience of democratic governance itself. They translate the abstract principles of inclusion, trust, and participation into concrete practices of crisis management and social solidarity. This insight calls for a reorientation of both scholarly and policy approaches: democracy and security should not be seen as competing priorities but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of systemic resilience.

Traditional models of resilience emphasize recovery or equilibrium, the ability to “bounce back” after disruption. Yet borderlands rarely experience stable conditions to which they can return. Their resilience lies instead in continuous recalibration: maintaining essential functions such as governance, communication, mobility, and trust amid permanent flux. Adaptive continuity reframes resilience as a dynamic process rather than a fixed outcome. It is sustained through flexibility, learning, and agency, not insulation or rigidity. Across cases, borderlands exemplify this living form of stability. They do not merely endure crises; they navigate them, transforming exposure into insight through the accumulation of local intelligence and cross-scalar coordination.

Pillars of systemic resilience

The five identified pillars of borderland resilience each fulfil a distinct function, yet their strength ultimately derives from their mutual reinforcement:

- *Political cohesion* sustains democratic legitimacy by preserving public trust during periods of uncertainty.
- *Institutional endurance* ensures the continuity of governance and administrative competence even under severe stress.
- *Economic adaptability* mitigates dependency and enables diversification in the face of geopolitical or energy shocks.
- *Social solidarity* underpins collective mobilization, civic engagement, and humanitarian coordination.
- *Psychological robustness*, rooted in historical experience and cultural memory, protects societies from fatigue, manipulation, and disinformation.

Together, these pillars form an ecosystem of resilience. Coherence under pressure is sustained in borderlands where all are present, while fragility appears when one or more are absent. Resilience is therefore not a collection of discrete interventions but a systemic property arising from the interplay of institutional, social, and cognitive dimensions.

Borderlands function as security multipliers within national and regional systems. Their experiential knowledge enhances intelligence and early-warning capacities. Their logistical and humanitarian infrastructures strengthen

national crisis response. Their economic diversification supports regional autonomy. Their civic solidarity and psychological endurance counter hybrid threats that seek to erode democratic confidence. These functions reduce the vulnerability of centralized systems by distributing resilience across the territorial and institutional fabric of the state. Borderlands thus operate as redundant nodes in the European security network – providing buffering, flexibility, and innovation when centralized systems are under strain.

The recognition of borderlands as resilient, generative spaces compels a broader rethinking of what security means in a democratic context. Contemporary threats cannot be mitigated by military power or central control alone. A comprehensive democratic security framework must weave together political legitimacy, social cohesion, and economic adaptability with conventional defence capability. This approach demands long-term investment rather than short-term reaction, empowerment rather than control, and distributed agency rather than central command. Borderland communities reveal everyday practices of resilience that include mutual assistance, adaptive governance, and pragmatic cooperation. Together these practices offer a living illustration of how democratic societies can protect themselves against multidimensional threats. They show that resilience flourishes in environments where citizens are trusted, well informed, and empowered to act collectively.

As hybrid threats and systemic volatility become global constants, borderlands offer empirical and conceptual guidance for reimagining security architectures worldwide, underscoring the need to integrate societal and strategic dimensions, bridge local and global scales, and design institutions capable of learning under stress. The transformations since 2022 reveal that deterrence and defence, though essential, are insufficient without cultivating societal resilience, and borderlands illustrate how democratic systems can convert exposure into preparedness and proximity into insight. Their adaptive continuity, grounded in cohesion, endurance, adaptability, solidarity, and robustness, shows that resilience is not a matter of simply enduring pressure. It is a form of strategic creativity that turns uncertainty into a source of collective strength. Far from pe-

ripheral, borderlands are indispensable to democratic security in the twenty-first century, embodying a distributed, participatory, and socially embedded order that converts uncertainty into innovation and coexistence into strength. Recognizing and institutionalizing their agency is not only a matter of justice but a strategic imperative for building a resilient, democratic, and secure Europe amid volatility and interdependence.

Conclusion

This study has argued that resilience in the twenty-first century must be understood not as a defensive posture but as a generative capacity, one that transforms exposure into adaptation and uncertainty into agency. Borderlands show that democratic vitality rests as much on social and institutional elasticity as on material strength. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Baltic states, the Finnish-Russian border, the Slovak-Ukrainian borderland, and the Norwegian-Russian Arctic have each demonstrated distinct forms of adaptive continuity. Through anticipatory intelligence, participatory governance, cross-border coordination, and psychological endurance, these regions converted proximity to threat into reservoirs of resilience. Their experiences underscore that security is not imposed from the centre but co-produced across space, emerging from overlapping networks of trust, knowledge, and cooperation.

Borderlands are not merely the outer edges of state sovereignty but relational nodes in a wider European security ecosystem. Their embeddedness in multiple scales of governance allows them to mediate between communities and institutions, translating lived experience into strategic insight. Their micro-observations, civic mobilizations, and pragmatic problem-solving provide an epistemic depth that complements technical intelligence and centralized command. Security, in this sense, becomes a multidimensional process sustained by human relationships as much as by infrastructure and deterrence.

The theoretical contribution of adaptive continuity lies in shifting the analytical focus from resilience as recovery to resilience as ongoing navigation. Borderlands rarely experience equilibrium; they exist in conditions of

perpetual uncertainty, where continuity depends on learning, improvisation, and mutual trust. Adaptive continuity captures a form of stability that remains dynamic rather than fixed, anchored in flexibility rather than rigidity. It resonates with the conditions of a world shaped by hybrid threats, polycentric governance, and persistent volatility. In this environment, stability is not a return to equilibrium but an ongoing capacity to adjust, absorb, and reconfigure in response to shifting pressures.

Rather than treating democratic openness as a liability, borderland experience reveals it as a source of adaptive strength. The capacity to deliberate, coordinate, and recalibrate collectively under stress is precisely what enables democratic societies to withstand multidimensional crises. Participation, transparency, and inclusion are not secondary to resilience; they form its very substance. In borderland settings, democracy operates as a kind of infrastructure, a living system of cooperation that stabilizes uncertainty through shared meaning and shared agency. It is through these everyday democratic practices that resilience becomes both credible and durable.

A resilient Europe cannot be built solely through military deterrence or centralized command. It requires an integrated and democratic security architecture that distributes capacity, values local knowledge, and institutionalizes cooperation as a mode of security practice. Investment must extend beyond defence to include civic education, media literacy, cross-border institutions, and participatory governance. The everyday resilience of borderland communities, expressed through trust networks, volunteerism, and adaptive coordination, offers a living blueprint for how societies can remain secure without hardening into rigidity or retreating into fear.

At the same time, the heterogeneity observed across Europe underscores that resilience is not automatic. Where political cohesion, institutional endurance, and social solidarity are weak, crises can erode rather than strengthen governance. The contrast between the Baltic and Balkan cases illustrates that resilience flourishes only when democratic legitimacy and societal trust are sustained. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to replicate successful models but to cultivate the conditions under which adaptive continuity can take root: long-

term investment, inclusivity, and iterative learning.

Ultimately, the findings presented here suggest that security and democracy are not opposing imperatives but mutually constitutive dimensions of the same systemic resilience. Borderlands make this relationship visible because they operate where uncertainty is greatest and where governance must remain most flexible. Their experience affirms that in an age of hybrid disruption and geopolitical flux, the sustainability of Europe's security will depend less on defending boundaries and more on strengthening the connective tissues that link them – solidarity, knowledge exchange, and participatory trust.

Borderlands are not the margins of Europe but its mirrors. They reveal both the vulnerabilities and the creative capacities of democratic systems under pressure. Their experiences point toward a new strategic horizon in which security is measured not by control or exclusion but by the ability of societies to adapt together, to preserve continuity without closing themselves off, and to turn uncertainty into a shared resource for collective endurance. As this study concludes, the future of European stability will depend less on fortified edges and more on the vibrant, adaptive, and democratic resilience that continues to emerge within its borderlands.

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