

Crossing Borders, Building Trust

The Prespa Lakes as a Living Laboratory for Integrated Transboundary Governance

DOI: 10.37199/o41010101

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Abstract - *The Prespa Lakes basin, spanning Greece, Albania, and North Macedonia, offers a strong example of evolving transboundary governance. What began as civil society-led cooperation has gradually moved toward more formal structures, most notably with the creation of the Prespa Park Management Committee following the 2010 trilateral agreement. Despite the area's rich ecological and cultural assets, balancing conservation with development remains a persistent challenge amid shifting political contexts.*

In response, local authorities have proposed forming a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) for the region. Backed by EU legislation, this model could provide the legal and operational framework needed to manage joint efforts across borders. By aligning ecological preservation with regional strategies, like ecotourism and enhanced public services, the EGTC offers a pathway to integrated, long-term governance.

Comparative examples, such as the Lake Constance region, show the value of lasting institutions, inclusive governance, and multi-level coordination. A Prespa EGTC could follow this path, offering a legally grounded platform for collaboration among municipalities, communities, and NGOs to manage both environmental and socio-economic priorities.

This study adds to policy and academic conversations by showing how EGTCs can help close governance gaps in complex ecological regions. However, success will depend on addressing legal inconsistencies between countries and securing political and financial commitment. As a real-world testbed, Prespa illustrates the promise of integrated territorial governance for fostering stewardship, cohesion, and sustainable progress in shared landscapes.

Keywords - Transboundary Governance, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), Integrated Territorial Development, Multi-level Collaboration, Cross-border Conservation

Introduction

The governance and planning of transboundary landscapes like the Prespa Lakes region offer a valuable lens through which to explore the intersections of environmental conservation, local development, and cross-border collaboration. Increasingly, such areas are seen not only as ecological frontiers but also as testing grounds for multi-level governance, socio-spatial integration, and landscape-focused planning. The key challenge lies in translating these intersections into meaningful institutional, territorial, and design frameworks that are particularly relevant in Southeast Europe's evolving governance context. The creation and management of transboundary protected areas (TBPAs) are central to advancing global conservation goals, fostering regional cooperation, and promoting sustainable development. Scholars have identified these areas as critical zones for ecological protection, economic integration, and political engagement (Ali, 2007; Sandwith et al., 2001). Still, research reveals significant gaps,

particularly in governance models, community participation, integrated development planning, and long-term sustainability, especially in regions like Southeast Europe, where ecological sensitivity and political complexity intersect (Vasilijevic et al., 2015; Lockwood et al., 2010). The shift from informal cooperation to formal governance remains underexplored.

The Prespa Lakes basin, shared by Greece, Albania, and North Macedonia, illustrates both the promise and the fragility of cross-border collaboration. It reflects the difficulty of balancing environmental goals with the socio-economic realities of peripheral rural areas rich in cultural and ecological value. Established in 2000 as an informal, civil society-led initiative for environmental protection and sustainable territorial development, Prespa Park showcases both the opportunities and the constraints of managing a shared ecological resource (Christopoulou & Roumeliotou, 2006; Katsaros, 2008). Yet, ongoing political shifts,

divergent national agendas, and governance challenges have tested its durability (Dimopoulos et al., 2010).

This paper addresses these gaps by tracing the trajectory of Prespa's transboundary governance, from early informal efforts to more structured institutional frameworks, and toward the proposed creation of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). The recent proposal by the four mayors of the Prespa municipalities to establish a Prespa Basin EGTC marks a potentially transformative development. This initiative, under the EU's EGTC framework, would grant the cross-border municipal alliance legal standing and operational authority thus offering a vehicle to institutionalize co-operation, implement joint initiatives, and ensure consistency in conservation and development efforts. Critically, it would empower municipalities to co-manage environmental and socio-economic issues with greater autonomy and continuity than is typical in intergovernmental or externally driven models. Realizing this potential, however, hinges on ensuring legal alignment, particularly in Albania and North Macedonia, where enabling legislation remains underdeveloped, and crafting a mandate that balances environmental, social, and economic priorities (European Committee of the Regions, 2018; Gualini, 2018).

The paper's central aim is to evaluate how formal governance tools like the EGTC can enhance cross-border cooperation, promote regional sustainability, and reinforce ecological resilience. It further explores the relevance of integrated territorial approaches aligned with EU cross-border cooperation strategies. The urgency of this inquiry lies in the need to understand how institutional evolution in TBPA's can support more coherent, inclusive, and adaptive governance systems across similar ecologically significant, politically nuanced regions. By offering empirical insight into how structured governance mechanisms function in a TBPA context, the study contributes to ongoing academic and policy debates. It also highlights how integrated strategies and inclusive participation can improve both conservation outcomes and regional development.

The structure of this paper follows a clear and

coherent progression, moving from conceptual framing to empirical analysis and forward-looking reflection. The **Introduction** outlines the research rationale and objectives, positioning the Prespa Lakes region as a valuable case study in the evolution of transboundary governance. **Section 1** examines broader European experiences with transboundary protected areas (TBPAs), presenting key governance typologies and foundational principles that shape cooperative management frameworks. **Section 2** traces the historical trajectory of the Prespa Park initiative, with particular attention to the transition from informal civil society efforts to treaty-based institutionalization, culminating in the establishment of the Prespa Park Management Committee. **Section 3** introduces the methodological approach, which employs comparative qualitative analysis. It details the primary tools used, including document analysis and benchmarking against established cases. **Section 4** offers comparative insights by exploring governance models from other European transboundary lake regions, particularly Lake Constance, drawing out lessons relevant to the Prespa context. **Section 5** focuses on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) as a novel governance mechanism. It evaluates cases such as Alpi Marittime–Mercantour and Duero-Douro to assess the potential contribution of the proposed Prespa Basin EGTC. **Section 6** addresses cross-cutting themes, including stakeholder engagement, regional economic integration, and institutional innovation, identifying key conditions that support long-term cross-border collaboration.

The **Conclusion** synthesizes these findings and outlines the main policy implications, arguing that EGTCs hold strategic value in embedding inclusive, multi-level governance in ecologically and administratively complex transboundary regions.

Governance Structures of Transboundary Protected Areas in Europe

Governance of European TBPA's spans a broad spectrum: from informal networks to formalized treaties. A longstanding tradition of cross-border conservation exists, notably the early 20th-century

collaboration between Italy and Switzerland in the Alps. The EU's Natura 2000 network further accelerated cross-border cooperation, prompting countries to align conservation goals and link national parks across borders. Today, most European nations are involved in multiple TBPA, typically by connecting adjacent protected areas. Formal governance often takes the shape of bilateral or multilateral bodies. The Wadden Sea, shared by Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, operates under a Trilateral Cooperation structure supported by national park designations and a shared Secretariat (Wadden Sea Secretariat, 2014; Tatenhove & Leroy, 2003). River basins like the Danube and Rhine are managed through international commissions under EU water directives (ICPDR, 2021; Bernauer & Moser, 1996). These frameworks offer stable platforms for planning and decision-making, fostering clarity and political backing. However, intergovernmental mechanisms may struggle when they lack strong enforcement tools or mutual trust (Voogd et al., 2022).

Effective TBPA governance requires institutional clarity paired with adaptability. Prespa Park illustrates this evolution. Founded in 2000 by a joint declaration from the Prime Ministers of Greece, Albania, and North Macedonia, it became the Balkans' first transboundary protected area. Early cooperation, guided by the Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC), brought together government, local, and NGO actors alongside international observers. This informal arrangement, driven by goodwill and project-based collaboration, laid the groundwork for deeper institutionalization. In 2010, a formal agreement, also including the EU, was signed, entering into force in 2019. It established the Prespa Park Management Committee (PPMC), a multilateral body with a wide membership, including central governments, local communities, NGOs, and observers like MedWet. Initial evaluations suggest that such inclusive, multi-level governance enhances coordination on key priorities like water regulation and habitat conservation. Yet, the nearly decade-long delay between signing and ratification highlights the vulnerability of high-level commitments without consistent political engagement (de Koning & Avramoski, 2021; Catsadorakis & Roumeliotou, 2021).

Other regions have taken similar paths. Lake Constance, shared by Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, demonstrates enduring trilateral cooperation. Since 1959, the International Commission for the Protection of Lake Constance (IGKB) has led integrated lake management. Thanks to coordinated investment in sewage treatment, phosphorus levels dropped from 87 mg/m³ in 1979 to about 12–13 mg/m³ by the early 2000s, making it a widely cited example of successful lake restoration (Eder & Koch, 2018). Additionally, the International Lake Constance Conference (IBK) offers a platform for dialogue on development, infrastructure, and environmental concerns among bordering states and cantons. These arrangements exemplify how long-term, legally supported, and multi-level coordination fosters effective TBPA governance, even when not bound by formal protected-area treaties (International Lake Constance Conference, 2019).

Tools and Methodology

This paper adopts a context-sensitive and practice-informed approach, grounded in the authors' close involvement with transboundary governance processes in the Prespa Lakes region. Drawing on institutional experience and access to current policy developments, including the ongoing establishment of the Prespa Basin EGTC, the analysis reflects both insider knowledge and the broader policy environment shaping regional cooperation.

The study is primarily based on the synthesis of secondary sources, including official cooperation agreements, strategic plans, legal instruments, and practitioner literature produced by local and international stakeholders. Special attention is given to documents emerging from the Prespa Park Coordination Committee, the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP), PrespaNet, and the broader Ramsar and MedWet networks.

In addition, the paper integrates comparative reflections from other European transboundary lake regions, notably Lake Constance, Alpi Marittime–Mercantour, and Duero–Douro, selected for their relevance to the institutional challenges and opportunities present in the Prespa context. These examples are used illustratively rather than evaluatively, to draw attention to governance design elements and collaborative mechanisms that may offer useful analogies or lessons.

Rather than following a fixed theoretical model, the methodology emphasizes interpretive synthesis, grounded comparison, and applied policy learning. It reflects the paper's dual aim: to contribute to the broader discourse on transboundary protected area governance in Europe, and to offer practical insights for policy and institutional development in the Prespa Basin.

Comparative examples

Transboundary Lakes in Europe: Prespa Park and Lake Constance as Comparative Examples

The Prespa Lakes region is frequently cited as a real-world laboratory for transboundary governance that connects environmental protection with socio-economic development. Ecologically, it functions as a single watershed encompassing Macro and Micro Prespa Lakes, surrounding wetlands, and mountainous habitats that support numerous endemic species and internationally important bird populations, most notably the Dalmatian pelican (Catsadorakis & Malakou, 1997). Yet administratively, the area is split among Greece, Albania, and North Macedonia, making unilateral conservation efforts inadequate.

Prespa's governance story began with local civil society. Organizations like the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP) and WWF-Greece played a central role in advocating for a tri-national park, culminating in the 2000 Prime Ministers' Declaration. The interim Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC), created shortly thereafter, achieved meaningful progress during the 2000s, including the development of a Strategic Action Plan and securing a UNDP-GEF project for integrated ecosystem management. What made the PPCC especially unique was its participatory structure: government agencies, NGOs, and local community representatives worked as equals. This inclusive

model fostered trust among previously isolated actors and helped cultivate a shared sense of purpose around Prespa's natural and cultural values. Over time, stakeholders began to see that ecological preservation and traditional livelihoods, such as fishing and agriculture, were inherently linked, and that collaboration served their mutual long-term interests (Christopoulou & Roumeliotou, 2006). The 2010 trilateral Agreement, which came into legal effect in 2019, provided a more formal institutional base for this cooperation. It led to the formation of the Prespa Park Management Committee (PPMC), which by 2022 had become operational alongside a specialized Working Group on Water Management. This marked the first instance in which official joint bodies met to coordinate policy—on water levels, for example, across the full Prespa basin. One early success was the implementation of synchronized monitoring, such as coordinated bird counts among the three countries, which had never occurred at this scale before. While the formal governance process was slow to launch, Prespa's case underscores how effectiveness can evolve: from informal collaboration to a treaty-based framework, with civil society still playing a central role, SPP continues to serve in the PPMC's secretariat (Catsadorakis & Roumeliotou, 2021).

Looking ahead, the planned Prespa EGTC is expected to complement existing structures. The EGTC would institutionalize municipal-level cooperation around cross-border development projects, such as tourism, infrastructure, and service delivery, ensuring they align with environmental management efforts led by the PPMC.

Lake Constance (Bodensee) Region: In contrast, Lake Constance offers a long-established model of cross-border integration that goes beyond conservation. Though not designated as a single protected area, the lake and its surrounding region serve as a hub for environmental governance, economic cooperation, and spatial planning across Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Liechtenstein (as an observer). The International Water Protection Commission (IGKB) focuses on water quality and fisheries, while the International Lake Constance Conference (IBK), established in 1972, convenes regional governments to coordinate across sectors: planning, transport, environment, and culture.

Under IBK's umbrella, joint spatial development plans and initiatives like "Bodensee Agenda 21" have advanced sustainability goals at the regional scale. Economic integration is strong: daily cross-border commuting is widespread, and residents benefit from shared public services such as an integrated transit system and coordinated tourism promotion, including a unified "Bodensee" tourism brand and visitor card. Environmental governance, such as lake water quality maintenance, has been foundational to the region's economic success, especially tourism and water supply. In turn, these economic interdependencies have reinforced cooperation.

Multi-stakeholder involvement is another pillar of Lake Constance's model. NGOs like the Lake Constance Foundation engage in cross-border conservation efforts, and academic collaboration is well-established, now formalized through the Science Network EGTC. This institutional infrastructure creates a resilient system where both

top-down and bottom-up initiatives can thrive.

While often cited as a success story, Lake Constance also faces challenges, including competing interests between upstream and downstream users and the need to address climate-related shifts in lake levels. Nonetheless, the region's permanent governance structures enable regular negotiation and conflict resolution.

In summary, Lake Constance illustrates a mature form of transboundary governance where environmental management is one piece of a broader integration framework. Compared to the more biodiversity-driven cooperation seen in Prespa, it highlights how embedding conservation in regional economic and political frameworks can broaden stakeholder involvement and long-term stewardship.

EGTC's that Facilitate Environmental Protection

The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), established under EC Regulation 1082/2006 and amended by 1302/2013, is a legal tool designed to facilitate cross-border, transnational, or interregional cooperation. By granting legal personality, it enables authorities from different countries to form a joint institution that can manage projects, hire staff, and access EU funding, helping to overcome administrative and legal hurdles in cross-border initiatives.

Although EGTCs are commonly used in areas like transport, public services, and regional development, and of course territorial cohesion, their role in managing protected areas and environmental cooperation is still emerging. However, pioneering examples highlight their growing relevance.

- **ZASNET EGTC** (est. 2010) unites Portuguese and Spanish municipalities (Bragança and Zamora) to foster sustainable development in a cross-border area rich in natural and cultural heritage. It played a pivotal role in the creation of the Meseta Ibérica Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, designated by UNESCO in 2015. Its mandate goes beyond economic development to include biodiversity conservation and environmental planning. The EGTC is governed by a General Assembly of member authorities and operates via a technical secretariat that manages funding, coordination, and stakeholder engagement, functioning under EU Regulation 1082/2006.

- **Alpi Marittime–Mercantour EGTC** (est. 2013) formed the first transboundary protected-area EGTC, connecting France's Mercantour National Park and Italy's Alpi Marittime Natural Park. The EGTC provides a formal framework to undertake joint operations, from wildlife monitoring and habitat management to sustainable tourism promotion. Building on collaboration dating to the 1980s, this EGTC coordinates joint operations such as species reintroduction (e.g. ibex, vultures), habitat management, and ecotourism. In its initial years, it delivered 29 projects with €25 million in investments and positioned the region for potential UNESCO World Heritage status as the "Mediterranean Alps."

- **Duero-Douro EGTC** (est. 2009) links municipalities in Spain's Castilla y León and northern Portugal along

the Duero-Douro river corridor. It focuses on cross-border management of protected landscapes, including the Arribes del Duero and Douro International Natural Parks, both part of Natura 2000 network of protected areas. The Duero-Douro EGTC aims to facilitate integrated management of these transboundary protected areas through joint conservation planning, ecotourism development, and coordinated EU project implementation. Its structure includes a General Assembly, Executive Council, and Permanent Secretariat, enabling integrated conservation, rural development, and joint project implementation under EU programs like INTERREG and LIFE.

These cases show that EGTCs can effectively bridge the gap between conservation and development. By bringing municipalities, national parks, and other actors into a unified legal structure, they offer a governance model capable of streamlining decision-making and securing long-term support for cross-border projects.

Prespa Basin EGTC Initiative: Building on two decades of Prespa Park cooperation, the municipalities of Resen (North Macedonia), Prespes (Greece), and Pustec and Devoll (Albania) signed a memorandum in late 2024 to establish an EGTC for the Prespa region. This step aims to turn the basin into a model for cross-border innovation and sustainable development.

The initiative outlines key goals: environmental protection, climate adaptation, cultural heritage, and enhanced local services. Economic integration is also central, particularly promoting Prespa as a unified ecotourism destination and managing natural resources jointly. Supported by the EU Delegation, the initiative aligns with EGTC regulations and is seen as a major opportunity to professionalize regional cooperation.

If successfully implemented, the Prespa EGTC would formalise existing partnerships, fill longstanding coordination gaps, and enable legally backed, multi-level governance with dedicated project teams across all three countries.

Important Governance Issues

Stakeholder Participation and Multi-Level Collaboration

A recurring theme in the literature is that effective stakeholder participation is crucial to the success of transboundary environmental governance. European experience consistently shows that TBPA function more effectively when local communities, NGOs, and other non-state actors are meaningfully involved alongside national authorities. The EUROPARC Transboundary Parks Programme, which certifies cross-border parks meeting specific “Basic Standards”, explicitly includes participatory management as a requirement. It encourages parks to develop joint education initiatives, community outreach efforts, and local-level conflict resolution mechanisms (EUROPARC Federation, 2021). This approach is grounded in the understanding that communities on either side of a border often share deep historical and cultural connections to the land, and that their engagement and knowledge are vital to effective management.

In Prespa, a participatory ethos has been embedded in governance practices from the outset, forming a

cornerstone of the region’s collaborative model. In the Greek part, local stakeholders including fishers, farmers, and tourism actors are regularly engaged in the development and revision of management plans. A key mechanism for this is the annual stakeholder assembly, organized jointly by the Municipality of Prespes and Society for the Protection of Prespa, where pressing management issues such as water level regulation, fisheries policy, and watershed planning are discussed collectively. The outcomes of these discussions are then submitted as recommendations to the relevant national authorities, ensuring that community perspectives are formally integrated into decision-making processes. NGOs have played key roles in mediating resource-use disputes at the community level, such as regulating water abstraction and wetland usage. The Prespa Park Management Committee itself is composed of representatives from local municipalities and environmental NGOs, alongside national park authorities, central government ministries, and European Commission officials. PrespaNet, a collaborative network of NGOs from the three countries, exemplifies this bottom-up engagement, complementing official governance frameworks and facilitating cross-border cooperation on environmental issues.

A similar model can be seen in the Neusiedl–Fertő Lake region between Austria and Hungary, where a joint national park committee includes local mayors and landowners. This inclusive body has successfully aligned conservation goals with traditional grazing practices and regional wine tourism strategies, demonstrating how multi-stakeholder frameworks can generate mutually beneficial solutions.

Lake Constance, though not centered on a protected area, also illustrates the value of multi-level stakeholder coordination. Fisheries associations from across the region participate in the development of fishery regulations within the International Water Protection Commission (IGKB). Meanwhile, regular “Lake Forums” bring together diverse interest groups, including those from tourism, agriculture, navigation, and environmental sectors, to deliberate on lake management issues. Such broad-based participation has ensured that policies remain both practical and enforceable. The dramatic reduction in phosphorus levels around the lake, for example, was not achieved through top-down mandates alone but also through widespread public backing of wastewater infrastructure and farmers’ willingness to adopt fertilizer restrictions. The newly established Bodensee Science EGTC further enhances stakeholder inclusion by linking academic research with regional policy needs.

Taken together, these examples highlight how robust stakeholder involvement leads to more informed decision-making and boosts the legitimacy of conservation measures. By encouraging shared ownership of both challenges and solutions, whether through co-designing wetland restoration efforts or marketing cross-border hiking routes, participation strengthens the overall governance system. A common shortfall in earlier TBPA models was their tendency toward top-down structures, often excluding local voices. Over the past three decades, however, European practice has increasingly shifted toward more inclusive governance frameworks, reflecting broader international commitments such

as the Aarhus Convention on public participation and access to environmental information.

That said, challenges remain. Sustaining stakeholder engagement over time can be difficult, and ensuring that all relevant groups, especially marginalized communities, are adequately represented remains an ongoing concern. The literature emphasizes that building long-term participation requires targeted capacity-building initiatives, such as training local actors in conservation skills, and maintaining open channels of communication to keep stakeholders actively involved.

Interplay of Governance, Economic Integration, and Participation

Transboundary environmental governance in Europe is deeply intertwined with broader processes of regional integration. Rather than existing in isolation, it is both shaped by and contributes to social and economic dynamics. Several scholars suggest that transboundary protected areas (TBPAs) can act as engines for regional development and even peace-building. The term “peace parks” has been used to describe how shared stewardship of natural heritage can foster better interstate relations and support local livelihoods. Within the European context, where political stability is relatively high, the focus tends to be on regional cohesion and sustainable growth.

The goals of the Prespa Park initiative explicitly include improving the economic and social well-being of local communities, alongside ecological conservation. This dual focus is evident in activities such as the promotion of nature-based tourism, including birdwatching infrastructure and cross-border hiking trails, as well as efforts to develop a regional identity around Prespa-branded products like beans and fish. The planned Prespa Basin European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is expected to advance this integration further by coordinating tourism promotion and potentially facilitating cross-border mobility. One concrete step in this direction is the reopening of a long-closed border crossing with EU support, which is set to ease travel for both trade and tourism. These developments point to a virtuous cycle, where improved livelihoods reduce pressure on natural resources, and a well-conserved environment provides the foundation for a resilient local economy. Lake Constance, by contrast, illustrates a long-standing model of strong economic interdependence that has helped reinforce environmental cooperation. The region's shared identity is captured in the marketing phrase “Dreiländersee,” or “three-country lake.” Cross-border ferry operations, interconnected cycling routes, and coordinated responses to environmental issues such as invasive species or algal blooms reflect the harmony between economic use and environmental management. A study by ESPON (2021) found that border lake regions like Lake Constance have achieved what it terms “functional cross-border integration,” characterized by shared visions and services. Institutions such as the International Lake Constance Conference (IBK) ensure that environmental considerations are incorporated early in economic planning processes. When a new lakeside development is proposed, for instance, environmental assessments are part of

the transboundary spatial planning framework. In the reverse direction, conservation projects often include socio-economic benefits. The regeneration of wetlands in the Rhine delta has enhanced biodiversity, improved flood protection, and created recreation zones that directly benefit surrounding communities.

A key dimension of this relationship is the role of multi-level governance, connecting local, national, and EU-level efforts. The European Union has played a significant part in facilitating this cooperation. Funding programs like INTERREG and LIFE have supported a wide range of cross-border projects, from habitat restoration to shared visitor centres, providing incentives that help maintain collaborative momentum. EU directives, such as the Water Framework Directive and the Natura 2000 network, also offer shared targets and a common policy vocabulary, which align national actions toward collective goals.

Nonetheless, the diversity of legal and administrative systems across countries still poses challenges. This is where mechanisms like the EGTC become particularly valuable, by offering a legal structure that enables joint operations under a unified framework. The experience of the Mercantour–Alpi Maritime EGTC demonstrates the complexities of aligning administrative procedures across borders, especially in areas like procurement rules and employment regulations. However, once such hurdles are overcome, joint project execution becomes far more streamlined and effective.

Moreover, inclusive governance and stakeholder engagement have their own economic benefits. When local actors see that transboundary institutions respond to their needs, such as when fishermen are involved in setting quotas, or farmers are consulted about grazing practices, they are more inclined to support conservation efforts. This cooperation, in turn, can attract additional investment and tourism by presenting the region as politically stable and well-managed. In Prespa, for example, the collaborative governance framework helped secure major international funding, including a €15 million Global Environment Facility (GEF) project. It also positioned the region as a symbol of cross-border unity, a quality that can be a powerful asset for nature tourism marketing.

Rethinking Transboundary Governance: Insights, Innovations, and Institutional Futures

A few key considerations emerge when evaluating European experiences with the governance of transboundary protected areas. Multi-level governance frameworks have proven especially valuable. By combining international agreements, regional institutions, and local stakeholder networks, these systems can effectively address the ecological and administrative complexities inherent in TBPAs. Europe's politically diverse landscape means there is no universal model. Instead, governance arrangements must be adaptive. Examples such as the Prespa Park's lengthy journey toward a formal treaty-based structure, and Lake Constance's deeply institutionalized integration, each offer distinct but successful pathways. Although relatively few in number, EGTCs present a

promising instrument for enhancing transboundary conservation. When applied effectively, they can create permanent operational structures with legal personality, going beyond the advisory role that most existing committees play. EGTCs offer a legal basis for the direct participation of subnational actors, such as regions and municipalities, which is essential for issues like land-use planning and local development, often outside the jurisdiction of national environment ministries. The Alpi Marittime–Mercantour EGTC has already demonstrated that pooling resources and speaking collectively to donors yields tangible results. In similar fashion, the proposed Prespa EGTC could overcome coordination challenges by institutionalizing joint funding, staffing, and project implementation, while reinforcing the role of municipal authorities.

Increased use of EGTCs for TBPA's could lead to more professional, resilient governance systems that persist even when national political agendas shift. However, significant gaps remain. Many TBPA's still operate through ad-hoc projects with limited funding and no formal structure. The literature calls for clearer guidance and stronger support from the EU to help countries transition toward lasting transboundary governance models. Challenges persist in harmonizing legal frameworks, ensuring equitable cost and benefit sharing, and monitoring the effectiveness of governance interventions. Measuring ecological outcomes, in particular, remains complex. Improvements such as those observed at Lake Constance evolved over decades, and tracing them directly to governance interventions demands careful, long-term study.

Stakeholder participation, though improved, also requires further strengthening. Future research could explore how to better involve private sector actors, such as sustainable tourism operators or local agri-businesses, and how to sustain broad-based participation beyond initial engagement phases. Climate change will undoubtedly increase the demand for wider-scale cooperation. As species ranges shift and water regimes evolve, already evident in the Macro Prespa Lake region, transboundary areas will likely need to connect across larger landscapes, potentially coordinating wildlife corridors or shared watershed management frameworks that span multiple borders.

What three decades of European experience show is that TBPA's have the potential to evolve beyond conservation tools into platforms for regional integration and collective identity. Effective governance in these areas depends on three key elements: structures aligned with ecological boundaries, meaningful stakeholder participation, and bridging mechanisms that facilitate cooperation across jurisdictions. The EGTC framework offers a practical tool for achieving these aims, reducing barriers that typically complicate cross-border governance.

Prespa exemplifies the gradual alignment of institutional structures with ecological realities and community engagement. Lake Constance illustrates the broader possibilities that emerge when environmental and economic governance are pursued together. Lessons from both cases suggest that carefully designed tools, such as EGTCs, and a commitment to collaborative structures

can substantially improve the governance of transboundary protected areas. In doing so, they not only protect nature but also generate shared benefits for the people who depend on these landscapes and their cross-border connections.

Conclusions

The Prespa Lakes region offers more than a case study, it reflects a deeper transformation in how borders, ecosystems, and communities interact. Prespa's trajectory reveals that genuine progress in transboundary governance cannot rest solely on sound environmental strategies or institutional architecture. It must also be rooted in inclusive, durable, and locally embedded cooperation. The evolving Prespa EGTC initiative exemplifies how legal innovation can translate community trust, ecological interdependence, and political coordination into a functioning cross-border governance framework.

What distinguishes the EGTC model is its capacity to transcend administrative fragmentation by granting legal personality to a multi-actor entity. With this structure, municipalities, NGOs, and local stakeholders are empowered not only to participate, but to lead. It enables the implementation of long-term projects in areas ranging from habitat management to tourism development, embedding sustainability within a flexible and resilient governance system. Far from a procedural formality, the Prespa EGTC has the potential to become a living institution that operationalizes shared responsibility and gives real voice to those living in the landscape.

Translating the lessons of Prespa into broader policy action requires supportive frameworks and targeted reforms. The following priorities emerge as especially relevant for replicating and scaling this model across Europe's border regions:

- Promote the EGTC model as a strategic tool for protected areas: The EU should actively support EGTCs as governance platforms for cross-border Natura 2000 sites and similar landscapes, ensuring legal visibility, technical assistance, and integration within territorial cooperation policies.
- Empower local governments with legal and financial tools: National and EU frameworks must equip subnational actors, who are closest to local challenges and opportunities, with the autonomy, resources, and legal standing to co-manage cross-border initiatives effectively.
- Institutionalize stakeholder participation as a core governance function: Moving beyond symbolic inclusion, participation should be embedded through formal roles, long-term funding for facilitation, and joint mechanisms for monitoring, learning, and adaptive planning.

In an era marked by environmental volatility and geopolitical tension, Prespa stands as a powerful example of what transboundary cooperation can achieve. From its beginnings in grassroots activism to its present institutional maturity, and now its move toward EGTC-based collaboration, Prespa shows that governance grounded in place can endure and adapt. By linking ecosystems with institutions and communities, Prespa besides

protecting a landscape is quietly building a model of shared stewardship that others in Europe and beyond can learn from.

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