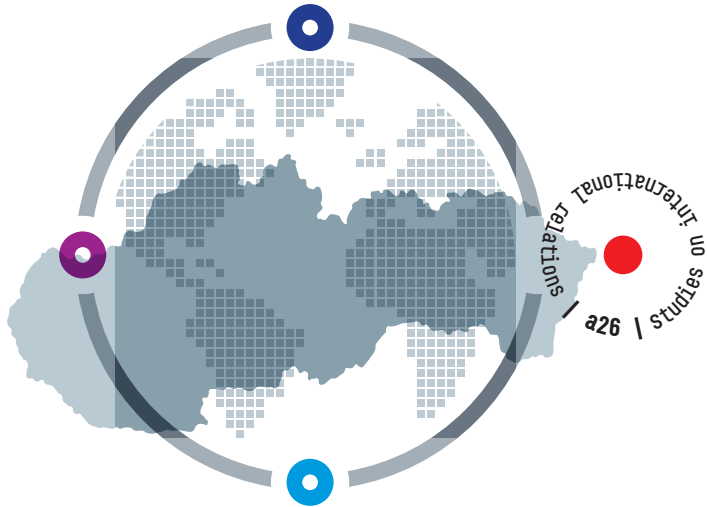




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# Cross-border cooperation capacities of regional and local actors: policies and practices

Olesya Benchak  
Hanna Melehanych  
Veronika Oravcová  
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& Oksana Svezhentseva

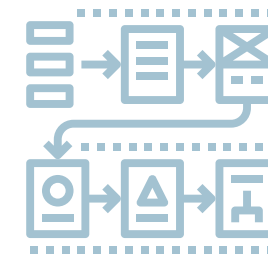
Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway grants



The project “Safe and Inclusive Border between Slovakia and Ukraine – SIBSU” is funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway in the amount of € 832 827 through EEA grants. The project is co-financed by the state budget of the Slovak Republic.



The overall goal of the SIBSU project is to facilitate the exchange of ideas, knowledge, information and experience among border and custom services of Slovakia, Ukraine and Norway. The aim is to analyze the opportunities for deepening integrated border management and increase awareness and understanding about the work of the border police and custom services in border regions and municipalities in Slovakia and Ukraine. The project also includes an analysis of the impact of the border on the socio-economic development of the border regions, as well as on opportunities for further cross-border cooperation on both sides border.



öpenhet



State Border Guard  
Service of Ukraine



To find out more about programs and projects funded by the EEA Grants in Slovakia, please visit [www.eeagrants.sk](http://www.eeagrants.sk)

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Iceland  
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Norway grants



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# Cross-border cooperation capacities of regional and local actors: policies and practices

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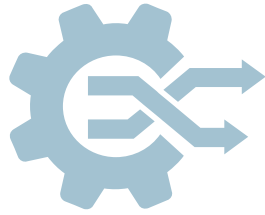
Cross-border cooperation in European countries is conducted in the light of such principles as partnership, subsidiarity and complementarity. Partnership is defined as close cooperation between the community and the respective public administration bodies and includes the preparation, financing, implementation and evaluation of the community's activities. Partnership consists of the various economic agents acting in line with official strategies and programs to achieve common goals in close cooperation with each other. Subsidiarity means the transfer of competence to the level that can most effectively solve problems. As a rule, that is the territorial communities and regions. Pursuing subsidiarity means acknowledging that priority is accorded to the lesser, local power that is in closest proximity to citizens. Complementarity is the third fundamental principle of EU regional development policy and relates to the co-financing of activities and projects.<sup>1</sup>

A study of the scientific, normative and regulatory sources shows that cross-border policy within the EU framework is divided into two types, depending on the country's relationship to the EU:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L.A. Melnyk, "European development management experience cross-border cooperation," *State Administration: Improvement and Development* UDK 339.92:327](4), No. 2/2018. Available online: [http://www.dy.nayka.com.ua/pdf/2\\_2018/30.pdf](http://www.dy.nayka.com.ua/pdf/2_2018/30.pdf) (accessed on February 24, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> R. Shohly Mirzoiev, "International legal regulation of cross-border cooperation (on the example of Ukraine)," PhD Thesis: 2020, 228 p.



- cross-border cooperation between EU member states comes under the Union's internal policy,
- cross-border cooperation between an EU member state and a neighboring third country comes under EU foreign policy.

6

The second type of EU cross-border policy applies to Ukraine, given that it is not a member of the EU.<sup>3</sup> The legal basis of this policy is Article 212 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union<sup>4</sup>, while European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and secondly the European Neighborhood Instrument (and its predecessor European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument) are the main means, and the EU funding procedure supplies the appropriate structural funds.<sup>5</sup> Cross-border cooperation in the Euro-

<sup>3</sup> R. Benko, "Prospects for the development of cross-border cooperation between the neighboring regions of Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine in the framework of EU cross-border cooperation policy. Ways to increase the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation on the new Eastern border of the European Union: the proceedings of the international scientific and practical conference. Stará Lesná, Slovak Republic, September 18–19, 2012," Uzhhorod, 2012, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> "Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union," *Official Journal of the European Union*, C202/3, 2016. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12016E/TXT&from=EN> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> "Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999," Document 32006R1083. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32006R1083> (accessed on February 24, 2023).



7

pean Neighborhood is an extension of the principles of cooperation within the EU and comes under the INTER-REG programs, adapted to the specificities of the EU external cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

Access to the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) and cross-border cooperation programs opens up new additional development opportunities for the cross-border territories of Ukraine and Slovakia. Cooperation between partners and project implementation is easiest for administrative units located in proximity to ENI program countries, in which local state authorities have cooperation memorandums and agreements. International technical assistance is encouraged through the ENI, EU Strategy for the Danube Region, but also other project frameworks such as the EEA and Norway Grants and the International Visegrad Fund.

<sup>6</sup> "Programme description," Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine, 2014. Available online: <https://huskroua-cbc.eu/about/programme-description> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

Cross-border cooperation capacities of regional and local actors



Up until 2007, the main source of donor funding for cross-border cooperation projects on the Slovak–Ukrainian border was the TACIS<sup>7</sup> program, which was replaced by the Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine 2007–2013 ENPI program. It entered into force on September 23, 2008, following approval from the European Commission. The ENPI program (later ENI program) was aimed at promoting activities with the support of the EU to encourage more intense and deeper social and economic cooperation between regions in Ukraine that share a border with an EU member state.<sup>8</sup> It is currently in its third programming period: the first period was 2007–2013, the second was 2014–2020 and the third started in 2021 and continues until 2027.

Our analysis shows that under the Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine ENI program 92 projects involving Slovakia and Ukraine have been carried out. Most of the projects that involved Slovakia and Ukraine were bilateral in nature and did not include Hungary and Romania. All four

<sup>7</sup> “Транскордонне співробітництво,” [Cross-border cooperation] *Noviny spivpraci z EC*, 2008. Available online: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/ukraine/documents/eucooperationnews/14\\_eucooperationnews\\_uk.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/ukraine/documents/eucooperationnews/14_eucooperationnews_uk.pdf) (accessed on February 24, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> “Information about the programme,” Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine, 2007. Available online: <http://www.huskroua-cbc.net/en/information-about-the-programm> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

countries participated in 22 projects. Twenty projects were conducted by 3 countries, 16 of which involved Hungary and just 4 were with partners in Romania. The small number can be explained by the fact there is no border between Romania and Slovakia and thus limited regional cooperation between the countries. Conversely, more than half of the bilateral projects were between Slovakia and Ukraine, which is a sign of good cooperation. However, the number is still relatively small.

Most projects were in the Culture category, which contained 18 projects, followed by Climate and Environment with 16 projects. Food and Tourism contained 13 projects and Administration 8 projects. This last category includes projects related to deepening cross-border cooperation and improving local administration, including the sharing of best practices. 9 projects, 16 on activities for children and youth, mainly educational activities and exchange programs. There were 8 Energy projects, 7 Transport and Health projects, while Economy and Innovation contained the fewest projects (6). This last category contained projects on entrepreneurial potential, business training, knowledge transfer and information sharing.

When we look at project funding, the situation differs slightly. Climate and Environment projects received the most funding, followed by Administration and Culture. The Climate and Environment projects were focused on early warning systems and natural disaster prevention, forest and water management, wildlife protection and environmental education and awareness. The Administration category included the project with the largest grant allocation, €6,795,000. The project “Modernization and Reconstruction of Border Crossing Points at the Slovak–Ukrainian Border” was conducted by national authorities: the Financial Directorate of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Revenue and Duties of Ukraine and Chop Customs Office, which comes under the revenue ministry. By contrast the smallest grant went to the Hungary–Slovakia–Ukraine project



led by Hungarian partners: “Understand and Prevent Violence among Youth”, aimed at learning how to deal with interpersonal and intergroup conflicts in a solution-orientated and peaceful way.<sup>9</sup>

Project partners in Slovakia led most of the projects (42), but overall, the number of project partners from Ukrainian organizations was highest (137). On the Slovak side, the Slovak Cystic Fibrosis Association was the most successful project beneficiary and led three projects. Two projects were led by Snina, Prešov Region, Roads Administration of Prešov Region, First Contact Centre – Michalovce and the Regional Development Support Agency in Košice.

On the Ukrainian side, the most successful project beneficiaries led three projects each. They were Uzhhorod National University (involved in 6 projects), Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas and the Transcarpathia Association of Student Economists. Transcarpathia Agency of Regional Development and Cross-Border

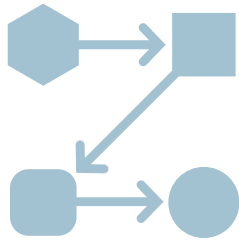
<sup>9</sup> See in “Project database,” information on “Understand and prevent violence among youth – ‘UviaYouth,’” Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine, 2014. Available online: <https://www.huskroua-cbc.net/en/project-database/292> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

Cooperation led two projects. FORZA Agency for the sustainable development of the Carpathian Region was involved in six projects and Velykyi Bereznyi Village Council in three. Altogether, 324 project partners participated in the projects. Most were regional authorities and non-governmental organizations and were involved in all types of projects. Regional authorities include schools and hospitals, while non-governmental organizations include churches and charities.

In addition to the data of the projects from the official websites of the programs, we looked also at the opinions of cross-border residents on the number of grants and ability to attract funding to the region and we found that views differed by area.<sup>10</sup> Culture, sports and leisure, tourism and education, science and research tended to be the areas with the most visible results. Most respondents in Ukraine mentioned these categories. However, the prevailing opinion among border residents was that in many



<sup>10</sup> These data were part of the sociological survey conducted from December 2021 to January 2022.



areas, EU funds are underused by local and regional authorities and so do not have obvious or desired results for the region. Areas that performed badly were social care and services (assistance in adverse social situations, social integration), health care, agriculture, and governance. Environment and transport infrastructure fared badly as well, and residents thought the EU funds were not used adequately.

Residents of the border areas are aware of the importance of EU funds for developing cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine. A significant proportion of respondents (Slovaks 33%, Ukrainians 48%) unequivocally stated that without the European funds, cooperation would not be so effective. Moreover, almost 40 per cent of the Ukrainian respondents thought that Slovak–Ukrainian cross-border cooperation would not exist at all were it not for the European funds. Slovak respondents were less likely to have this opinion, with only 23 per cent of them thinking that the funds played a primary role in developing cross-border cooperation.

About a third of respondents in the border area thought attracting European funding brought practical results, even though they were aware that grant funds can be associated with corruption. However, some respondents thought the grant funds fueled corruption and had no real practical results; sadly, as many as 24 per cent of respondents in Slovakia and 17 per cent in Ukraine thought this was the case. However, when it comes to the most

useful means of supporting cross-border cooperation, European funded projects still got the most votes, according to 78 per cent of Ukrainians and 53 per cent of Slovaks. Thus, even though project funding can sometimes be associated with corruption, it is still the best means of improving the lives of border residents.

Among the main challenges and needs currently prioritized by the most powerful Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine Joint Operational Program are a number of important areas: local culture and preservation of historical heritage; rational use of natural resources; responsible consumption culture; monitoring forecasting and preventing natural disasters; natural and man-made disasters; emergencies; energy efficiency; introduction of environmentally friendly technologies; production of renewable energy sources; and others.<sup>11</sup> Despite the highlighted advantages of this program, both Ukraine<sup>12</sup> and Slovakia have failed to exploit all implementation opportunities due to:

- insufficient experience of programs supporting cross-border cooperation among regional level and local authority officials;
- secondly, problems with implementing and regulating co-financed projects; and
- thirdly, regional actors face an imperfect lending environment, including limited capacity to obtain external funding for local budgets.

<sup>11</sup> “Joint Operational Program Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine 2014–2020,” 2014. Available online: <https://huskroua-cbc.eu/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Т. Зосюменко, “Проекти транскордонної співпраці ЄС: чому вони неефективні в Україні,” [EU cross-border cooperation projects: why they are ineffective in Ukraine] *Evropeyskaya Pravda*, August 16, 2018. Available online: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/experts/2018/08/16/7085038/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).



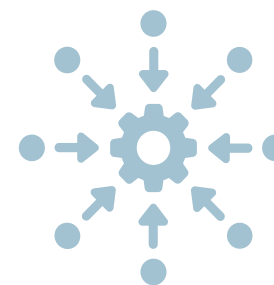


Conversely, successful beneficiaries have faced few obstacles to implementing cross-border projects. Leading Uzhhorod NGOs with many years of experience have been successful, having formed partner consortia, studied the legal, regulatory, national and European frameworks and established a mechanism for monitoring cross-border program deadlines, funds and donor organizations etc. Having a well-established mechanism produces visible results, for example, Uzhhorod National University has implemented more than ten successful cross-border projects (HUSKROUA, the Visegrad Fund, the Norwegian Financial Mechanism), together with Slovak partners – Pavel Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, the Technical University of Košice and the University of Prešov. Projects by universities and research institutes in the border region have proved competitive and successful primarily because they have enormous human resources potential. Other respondents actively participating in projects thought that university collaboration was crucial to project participation.

Recipients have identified the key to success as having individuals able to write project applications and perform the expert, analytical and organizational work. Another important aspect is being able to demonstrate the institution is financially stable and able to provide sufficient co-financing, which usually ranges from 10 to 20 per cent

of the total cost of the project. Co-financing is often the main obstacle to obtaining European funds for cross-border projects (project capacity is most frequently assessed by regional and local authorities). Less successful recipients put their problems down to not being able to write project ideas based on mere enthusiasm, being rejected by donors year in and year out as they are unable to convince them and lack of experience, the inability to work on a refinancing basis and so on.

Obstacles to obtaining grants from European funds include insufficient awareness of the opportunities, inadequate level of English, which is the language of project management communication, and sometimes a lack of information about potential partners. Although respondents on the Slovak side noted that the older generations can speak Slovak, Russian and Ukrainian and so are able to communicate; nonetheless, project design and implementation require English. All the respondents, both successful and unsuccessful, stressed that the implementation of joint ideas through project work was a great opportunity for cross-border regional development and had both financial and non-financial benefits. The financial benefits include the ability to attract EU funding to introduce innovations, conduct research and improve infrastructure. Non-financial aspects include better communication between people, primarily through the exchange of experience. However, respondents also mentioned that if you find good partners, future collaboration is likely and that networking and establishing long-term cooperation



help (not necessarily project-related, but also on best practices and policies and know-how exchange).

The results of the survey on cross-border cooperation show that opinions vary depending on the side of the border the respondents live on, which indicates that the population is poorly informed about this issue. An example is perceptions of the functioning of the state sector in the Ukrainian border area, where various civic associations are fairly successful in cross-border cooperation with Slovakia. They account for than fifty of the cross-border cooperation actors, which is almost half of all the actors involved.

The survey showed that on both sides of the border respondents are least aware of NGO support for cross-border cooperation. Among Ukrainians, 20.6 per cent and among Slovaks 28 per cent did not wish to answer this question or did not know anything about NGO participation in cross-border cooperation. At the same time, 17.4 per cent of Ukrainians and 31 per cent of Slovaks stated there was low or no support from the sector. That means that almost every third Ukrainian and every second Slovak knew nothing about NGO activities or thought they did little to support cross-border cooperation. Only 27.3 per cent of Ukrainians and 11 per cent of Slovaks thought the NGO sector supported cross-border cooperation. That indicates, first, that border residents know much less about the existence and activities of civil society organizations than about the activities of the government and local government; second, the NGO sector pays less attention to the publicizing its work; thirdly, some NGOs implement projects together with other entities that are more important or better known to the population and that way those involved in cross-border cooperation become more memorable and visible in the information space.

EU enlargement, globalization, internal political, economic, and social changes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine are creating new challenges

and opening up new opportunities for cross-border cooperation. The modern processes of globalization are having a significant impact on socio-economic development across the world. In many respects, this influence has weakened the role of state institutions, while strengthening the role of other actors, such as local communities and governments, NGOs, and multinational companies. At present, globalization is faltering, with regional and local factors becoming increasingly important and nation-states regaining their importance and role.

Global and regional trends in Ukraine are sometimes contradictory, which is reflected in the cross-border cooperation between Ukraine's regions and neighboring EU regions. Although we identified a number of common cooperation projects between Ukraine and Slovakia, the number is small and there is no systematic approach. For example, in most cases there were no follow-up projects building on previous successful cooperation between partners. On the positive side several small towns, and even some villages, regional agencies and local NGOs, were able to conduct projects.

Cross-border cooperation capacities of regional and local actors

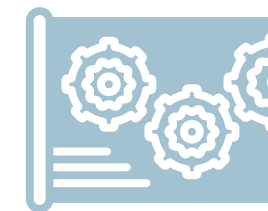


These days all countries think that border areas should establish and maintain partnerships with one another and thereby promote friendly interstate relations. The governments and local authorities of these countries are committed to using EU funding to try to solve poverty, unemployment and ensure regional development is more even. In many cases, there is a lack of the skills and capacity to do so on a larger scale. In turn, the EU should strive to ensure that the border areas of neighboring states are a continuation of the European zone of stability and prosperity, since only then can the new eastern borders be secured against, for example, illegal migration, smuggling and environmental disasters. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will bring the need for deeper cooperation among local and regional authorities.

Effective use of allocated funds should be improved through:

- proper coordination of existing financial assistance programs;
- more thoughtful consideration when preparing and selecting projects to be financed; project planning is crucial for border region development;
- simplification of the procedures, decision making on the allocation of financial assistance should be bureaucratized, while ensuring proper control over the targeted use of the funding provided;
- ensuring the public is properly informed about successfully implemented projects, their practical significance and even possible engagement;
- initiating the establishment of the Carpathian Centre for Training and Retraining the Management and Personnel of Cross-Border Cooperation in order to develop local and regional capacities for the successful implementation of cross-border cooperation projects and to train cross-border cooperation entities in the Carpathian region on European methods and technologies used in public and business administration;

- more coverage of the activities of local and regional authorities, local and/or regional public administrations and in particular the non-governmental (non-profit) sector in Ukraine and Slovakia implementing cross-border projects;
- cross-border cooperation development requires better financial support for projects implemented by local and regional entities, and the capacity of local and regional participants needs to be expanded so they can implement cooperation projects;
- developing agreed concepts of economic and social development in border areas, in Slovakia and Ukraine, as a basis for joint project proposals to high-level institutions, EU structural foundations of the EU and other donors;
- intensifying international cooperation activities between local authorities in the border areas, giving them sufficient independence and capacity from government agencies in cross-border cooperation;
- ensuring the allocation of sufficient funds for budget financing (or co-financing) of projects promoting Slovak–Ukrainian cross-border cooperation, and invest in human capacities;
- evaluating successful projects and plan follow-ups to obtain better results from the cooperation, bearing development in the region in mind.



# About SFPA

Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), founded in August 1993, is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit organization whose activities are devoted to active contribution to the integration of the Slovak Republic to the community of democratic states and their political and security structures. It is the oldest foreign policy think-tank in Slovakia. Through its programs of meetings, seminars, workshops and publications, the SFPA spreads objective information about international relations from primary sources. Its research center (RC) was established in 1995. In accordance with its status, the RC SFPA provides:

- independent expert analyses on crucial issues of international relations and foreign policy;
- publishes periodical and non-periodical expert publications serving to increase awareness in the field of international relations and foreign policy and to serve as a source of qualified information for both, the expert and general public;
- organizes expert events and participates in international scientific cooperation in the field of international relations and security;
- contributes to the fostering of the expert discourse on international relations and foreign policy;
- creates a favorable environment for the growth of the new generation of the Slovak experts in the field of international relations; and
- stimulates the interest of wider Slovak public in the global events as well as a deeper understanding of the significance of foreign policy and its link to the domestic policy.

## Slovak Foreign Policy Association

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