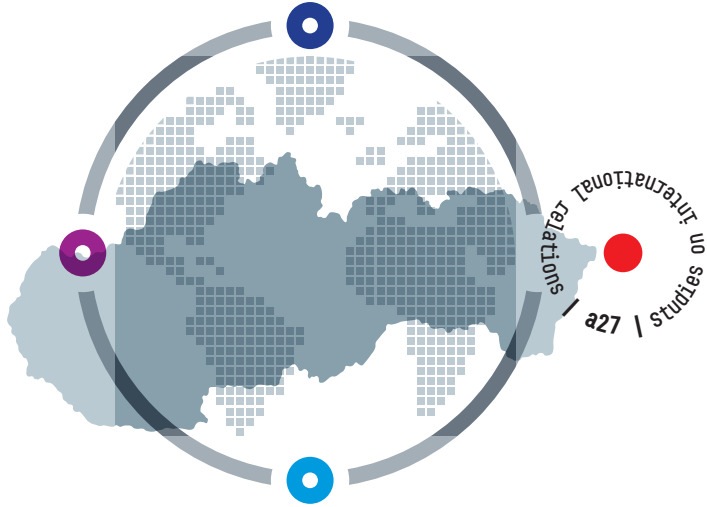




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# Citizens' perceptions on cross-border cooperation

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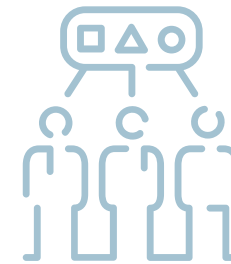
Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway grants



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.



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State Border Guard  
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Bratislava 2023  
© Authors & Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association

**publisher**

Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association  
Staromestska 6/D, 811 03 Bratislava

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**designed by**

© Zuzana Chmelová

**printed by**

Devin Printing House

The policy paper is published within the project Safe and inclusive border between Slovakia and Ukraine – SIBSU funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through EEA grants. The project is co-financed by the state budget of the Slovak Republic.

ISBN 978-80-89645-23-7



In this paper, we look closer at citizens' perceptions of cross-border cooperation. Previous public opinion research on cross-border regions, both on the external EU border and within the EU member states, has shed light on cross-border cooperation from the perspective of stakeholders and politicians, which is basically everyone that is directly involved in cross-border cooperation.<sup>1</sup> It has considered various aspects, for example regional development on the Italy–Tunisia border from the perspective of local private and public stakeholders,<sup>2</sup> quality and intensity of cross-border cooperation from the perspective of Euroregion mayors<sup>3</sup> and the opinion of public managers and employees involved in implementing cross-border cooperation at the Hungary–Romania border.<sup>4</sup> However, there are also several articles exploring the attitudes of citizens in border regions, for example on EU integration, by comparing opinions in border and non-border districts in France and Germany.<sup>5</sup>

To shed light on the cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine, a public opinion survey was conducted as part of the SIBSU

1 R. A. Castanho, A. Vulevic, J.M. Naranjo Gómez, et al., "Political commitment and transparency as a critical factor to achieve territorial cohesion and sustainable growth. European cross-border projects and strategies," *Regional Science Policy and Practice* Vol. 11, No. 1, 2019, pp. 423–35.

2 F. Celata, R. Coletti, A. Stocchiero, "Cross-border cooperation across Sicily and Tunisia: experiences and prospects," *Documenti Geografici* Vol. 2, 2015, pp. 7–32.

3 B. K. Muller, D. Kny, K. Fleissner, L. Frane, "Active borders and local politicians as key agents of the Europeanization cross border regions as an institutional attempt at boosting a European public sphere," *Political and Economic Unrest in the Contemporary Era*, 2019, pp. 158–73.

4 D. Badulescu, A. Badulescu, R. Simut, D. Bac, "Considerations on the effects of cross-border cooperation on fostering local public administration. Study-case: Hungarian–Romanian border area," *Lex Localis-Journal of Local Self-Government* Vol. 15, No. 3, 2017, pp. 583–604.

5 T. Kuhn, "Europa ante portas: Border residence, transnational interaction and Euroscepticism in Germany and France," *European Union Politics* Vol. 13, No. 1, 2012, pp. 94–117.

project. It was conducted from December 2021 to January 2022 by two leading professional research agencies on the Ukrainian and Slovak sides of the border. The aim of the survey was to examine public opinion on cross-border cooperation between these two countries and the functioning of the border regime.

On the Slovak side, there were 807 respondents in five selected districts: Snina, Humenné, Sobrance, Michalovce and Trebišov. Humenné is the only district that is not on the border with Ukraine. However, its proximity to Ukraine means it is affected by cross-border relations. The sample was representative. Respondents were aged 18 and over and were interviewed by telephone.

On the Ukrainian side, the same principle was followed, and 809 respondents were interviewed through personal formalized interviews (face-to-face) at their place of residence (Uzhhorod, Mukachevo and Berehovo Districts). The sample data (gender, age, education, nationality, size of location) allows us to generalize the main results of the survey with respect to the population of the selected districts aged 18 and over with a maximum deviation of  $\pm 3.5$  per cent. There were 24 items, of which 23 were closed questions and one was an open question. Most of the closed questions required respondents to rank the options according to attractiveness, agreement or disagreement and importance.

## Findings of the sociological research

According to the survey conducted on both sides of the border, respondents were fairly critical of the effectiveness of the border and customs services as well as border crossing practices (see Figure 1). Ukrainian respondents thought these were problematic or neutral, while Slovak respondents thought them less problematic or neutral. Slovak respondents evaluated the effectiveness of these services slightly more highly than Ukrainian respondents.

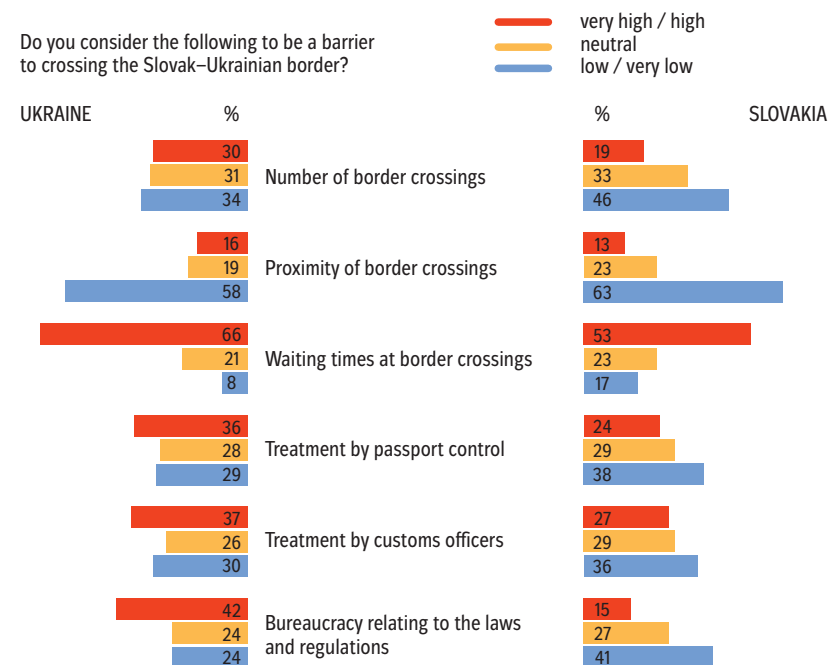
The survey showed there were several problems with the Ukrainian–Slovak border crossing, especially long waiting times at border checkpoints. The results showed that 66 per cent of Ukrainian and 53 per cent of Slovak respondents considered the long waits to be a serious problem and confirmed that they had often experienced it personally on both sides of the border. Among the Slovak respondents, the long waiting times were a particular problem for respondents in Michalovce District (almost 74 per cent of respondents were not satisfied with the waiting times). Only 8 per cent of Ukrainian respondents and 17 per cent of Slovaks thought it was a minor obstacle or no obstacle – these

respondents rarely traveled or did not travel at all. The number of crossing points was considered to be a major problem by 30 per cent of Ukrainian respondents and 19 per cent of Slovaks. By contrast, 34 per cent of Ukrainians and 46 per cent of Slovaks considered it a minor obstacle.

Regarding the proximity of border crossings, 58 per cent of Ukrainian and 63 per cent of Slovak respondents considered it a minor obstacle or no obstacle and only 16 per cent of Ukrainian and 13 per cent of Slovak respondents considered it a big problem. Among the respondents in Slovakia, waiting times were less of a problem for citizens in Sobrance District, followed by Snina, with 78.5 per cent and 76.7 per cent respectively, thinking it was not a problem.

**Figure 1.** Problems with the border crossing on the Slovak–Ukrainian border

Citizens' perceptions on cross-border cooperation



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Respondents also thought the attitudes of customs officers on the Slovak–Ukrainian border was a very big or big problem: 37.1 per cent on the Ukrainian side and 27 per cent on the Slovak side. Attitudes towards travelers at passport control was a problem for 36 per cent of Ukrainian respondents and 24 per cent of Slovaks. Bureaucracy

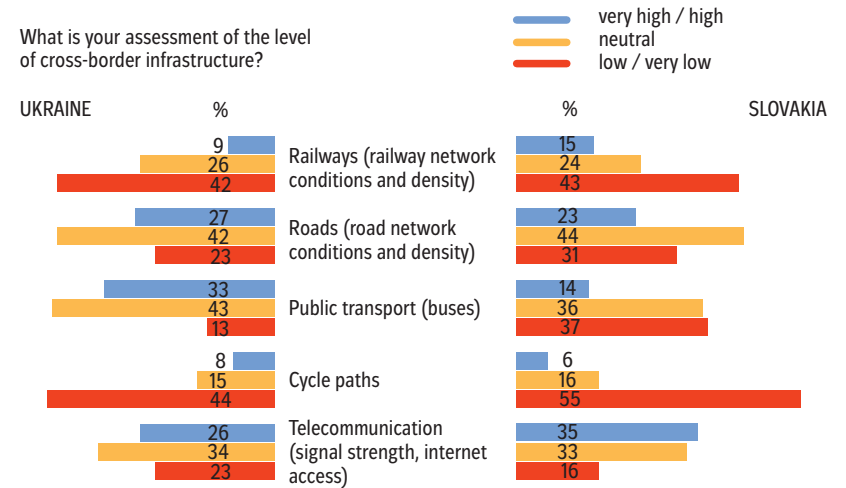
relating to the laws and regulations at the border was considered a major obstacle by 42 per cent of Ukrainian and only 15 per cent of Slovak respondents. On the Slovak side, among the surveyed groups, the bureaucracy was considered a problem mainly by citizens in Michalovce District and as least problematic by respondents in Sobrance District.

According to Ukrainian respondents, all these problems are primarily related to the numbers passing through the checkpoints, which makes it impossible to speed up vehicle registration and passage, with frequent breakdowns of the stationary scanning system, bureaucratic procedures at the border and customs officers working too slowly. The most critical problem for trucks is the queues, which mean they have to spend several days on the border, sometimes in queues of up to 10 km, and that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.<sup>6</sup>

The second question was related to the cross-border infrastructure (see Figure 2). While the Ukrainian respondents were mainly satisfied with public bus transport (33 per cent), the Slovak respondents were mainly satisfied with the telecommunication services (35 per cent). More than a quarter of Ukrainian respondents rated the telecommunications between Slovakia and Ukraine as very good or good (26 per cent). By contrast, 23 per cent of Ukrainian and 16 per cent of Slovak respondents considered the telecommunications to be poor or very poor.

6 "Черги чи корупція: що більше турбує українців на кордоні," [Queues or corruption: what worries Ukrainians at the border more] UKRINFORM, July 12, 2018. Available online: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-presshall/2493193-cergi-ci-korupcia-so-bilse-turbue-ukrainciv-na-kordoni.html> (accessed on February 24, 2024); "Від 5 тисяч гривень: на кордоні зі Словаччиною у перевізників вимагають гроші," [From 5,000 hryvnias: money is demanded from carriers at the border with Slovakia] *СторонКор*, November 10, 2020. Available online: <https://www.stopcor.org/ukr/section-ekonomika/news-vid-5-tisyach-griven-na-kordoni-zi-slovachchinoyu-u-pereviznikiv-vimagayut-groshi-10-11-2020.html> (accessed on February 24, 2023); "На українсько-словацькому кордоні 7-кілометрова черга в напрямку України," [On the Ukrainian-Slovak border, there is a 7-kilometer queue in the direction of Ukraine] *LB.ua*, December 24, 2020. Available online: [https://lb.ua/society/2017/12/24/385724\\_ukrainoslovatskoy\\_granitse.html](https://lb.ua/society/2017/12/24/385724_ukrainoslovatskoy_granitse.html) (accessed on February 24, 2023); "The prime ministers of Ukraine and Slovakia visited the Uzhhorod – Vyšné Nemecké checkpoint on the common border," Communications Department of the Secretariat of the CMU, November 12, 2021. Available online: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/premyer-ministri-ukrayini-j-slovachchini-vidvidali-na-spilnomu-kordoni-punkt-propusku-uzhgorod-vishnye-nyemecke> (accessed on February 24, 2023); "Рекетирів на кордоні поліція назвала хуліганями, а прикордонники їх взагалі не побачили (відео)," [The police called the racketeers at the border hooligans, but the border guards did not see them at all (video)] *DailyLviv.com*, October 27, 2021. Available online: <https://dailylviv.com/news/kryminal/reketyriv-na-kordoni-politsiya-nazvala-khulihanamy-a-prykordonnyky-yikh-vzahali-ne-pobachyly-sytsyliya-v-ukrayini-video-94809> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

Figure 2. Assessments of the cross-border infrastructure



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

All other cross-border infrastructure was viewed negatively rather than positively. In particular, only 27 per cent of Ukrainian and 23 per cent of Slovak respondents rated the condition of the roads between Slovakia and Ukraine as very high or high. On the other hand, 23 per cent of Ukrainian and 31 per cent of Slovak respondents thought the road network was bad or very bad. Slovak respondents in towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants tended to hold critical opinions, with 35.5 per cent being dissatisfied with the quality and density of the road network between the countries.

Respondents were even more critical of the rail connections between the two countries, with only 9 per cent of Ukrainian and 15 per cent of Slovak respondents rating the railway connections between Slovakia and Ukraine as very good or good. On the other hand, up to 42 per cent of Ukrainian and 43 per cent of Slovak respondents considered the rail service to be poor or very poor, which reflects the overall situation with the railways,<sup>7</sup> which are mainly low quality with

7 V. Khozhainova, "Україна відновила залізничне сполучення зі Словаччиною," [Ukraine has restored railway connections with Slovakia] *Суспільне Новини*, July 1, 2021. Available online: <https://susplne.media/143758-ukraina-vidnovlue-zaliznicne-spolucenna-zi-slovaccinou-ukrzaliznica/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

poor capacity.<sup>8</sup> Among the Slovak respondents, the most dissatisfied citizens were from Sobrance District (73.2 per cent of the answers).

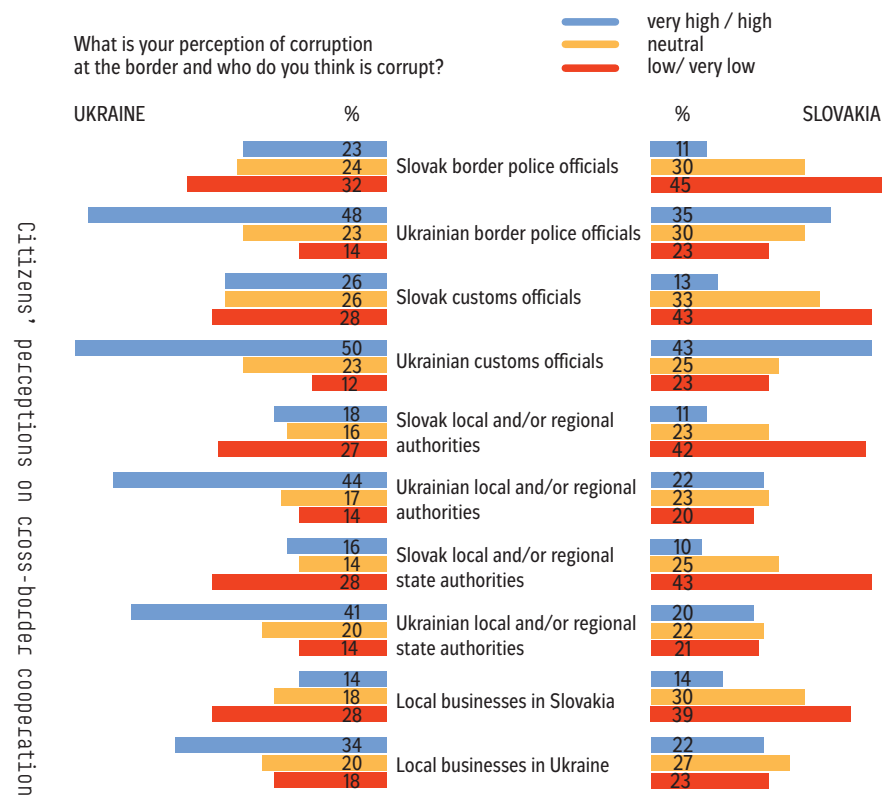
The situation with the public bus transport is a bit better, with 33 per cent of Ukrainian, but only 14 per cent of Slovak respondents rating public transport as very high or high. On the other hand, 13 per cent of Ukrainian and 37 per cent of Slovak respondents thought public transport was bad or very bad. The most satisfied group among the respondents in Slovakia were elderly people (over 65), but even in that category the level of satisfaction was low (16.5 per cent).

The main problem for bicycle traffic across the border is the law. In Ukrainian law and international agreements with EU countries, cyclists are not mentioned as part of the cross-border traffic, except for the Mali Selmentsi–Velké Slemence checkpoint on the border with Slovakia. The information systems used by customs and border guards do not allow them to record persons who cross the border without a vehicle. Legally, a bicycle is a personal belonging, not a means of transport. That leads to difficulties crossing the border, particularly the unpredictability (there are checkpoints where cyclists may or may not be allowed to pass depending on the decision of border guards). Another problem is the lack of infrastructure and the lack of opportunities for multimodal cycling (for example, using a train or bus as well). Therefore, only 8 per cent of Ukrainian and 6 per cent of Slovak respondents rated the bicycle paths between Slovakia and Ukraine as very good or good. On the other hand, 44 per cent of Ukrainian and 55 per cent of Slovak respondents described the condition of bicycle paths as bad or very bad.<sup>9</sup>

On the issue of corruption at the border checkpoints, there was a large percentage of negative assessments from the Ukrainian respondents (see Figure 3). In particular, the results showed that corruption is very high or high among Ukrainian customs officials (according to 50 per cent) and less so among Slovak customs officers (26 per cent). Slovak and Ukrainian journalists refer to the Slovak and Ukrainian sides of the border as part of the border mafia chain. The main problem is

officials abusing their powers and extortion.<sup>10</sup> Ukrainians and Slovaks are much more critical of the Ukrainians officials and authorities. In general, Ukraine is a country with higher perception of corruption also according to corruption perceptions index by Transparency International.

**Figure 3.** Perceptions of corruption at the border



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

10 "Безсмертно-корупційна Закарпатська митниця. Частина 1," [The immortally corrupt Transcarpathian Customs. Part 1] *Незалежна Служба Новин*, May 15, 2022. Available online: <https://bloginside.in.ua/Безсмертно-корупційна-Закарпатська/> (accessed on February 24, 2023); "Митниця залишається однією з найбільш корумпованих систем" – Кушнірук, [‘Customs remains one of the most corrupt systems’ – Kushniruk] *Незалежна Служба Новин*, April 22, 2022. Available online: <https://bloginside.in.ua/Митниця-залишається-однією-з-найбільш/> (accessed on February 24, 2023). "Словацький журналіст розповів про корупцію та кримінал на словацько-українському кордоні на Закарпатті," [A Slovak journalist talked about corruption and crime on the Slovak–Ukrainian border in Transcarpathia] *Незалежна Служба Новин*, December 14, 2022. Available online: <https://bloginside.in.ua/Словацький-журналіст-розповів-про-ко/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

8 "Problémy železničných dopravcov bude riešiť medzirezortná skupina," [The problems of railway carriers will be solved by an interdepartmental group] *TASR*, June 16, 2022. Available online: <https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/problemy-zeleznicnych-dopravcov-bude/641346-clanok.html> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

9 "Велосипедний рух через кордон з ЄС," [Cycling across the border with the EU] *Europe without Barriers*, June 8, 2021. Available online: <https://europewb.org.ua/velosipednyj-ruh-cherez-kordon-z-yes/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

Perceptions of border police officials are similarly negative. Ukrainian respondents had negative perceptions of Ukrainian officials, with 48 per cent of respondents perceiving Ukrainian border guards to be corrupt, but they thought only 23 per cent of Slovak border guards were corrupt. Slovak respondents (35 per cent) thought Ukrainian border police were more corrupt than Slovak officials, while 11 per cent of respondents thought Slovak officials were corrupt.

The picture is no better when it comes to local and regional authorities, with 44 per cent of Ukrainian respondents noting a very high or high level of corruption among local and regional authority officials in Ukraine and 41 per cent among state officials in the regions in Ukraine. In Slovakia, the figures are very much different, 10 per cent considered state authorities within the region to be corrupt and 11 per cent thinking the same of the local regional authorities.

One third of Ukrainian respondents thought Ukrainian businesses were very or mostly corrupt, but only 14 per cent perceived corruption among local businesses in Slovakia. In Slovakia 14 per cent of respondents perceiving Slovak businesses to be corrupt and 22 per cent perceiving Ukrainian business to be corrupt.

**Figure 4.** Impact of illegal cross-border activities on the situation in border areas



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Figure 4 shows the impact of illegal cross-border activities. According to Ukrainian respondents, illegal cross-border activities have a very large or large impact on the situation in border areas. In particular, illegal cross-border activities (smuggling goods and people across the border) have a very or very large impact on crime and public safety in the border region for up to 28 per cent of Slovak respondents and 47 per

cent of Ukrainians. Among the Slovak respondents, this is a particular concern for people living in municipalities of between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants, where 43 per cent of respondents think there is a strong connection between illegal activities and threats to safety.

Perceptions of the effect of illegal activities on organized crime, corruption and local government transparency are similar, with 37 per cent of Slovaks (mostly in Michalovce District, in almost 48 per cent cases) and as much as 60 per cent of Ukrainian respondents seeing it as a problem. Moreover, 34 per cent of Slovak and 61 per cent of Ukrainian respondents thought the shadow economy (impact on prices of goods and services) had a high and very high impact. Illegal cross-border activities were often assumed to have little or no effect on local labor market competition and unemployment.<sup>11</sup> However, in Ukraine 52 per cent thought illegal activities had an impact on local markets and unemployment.

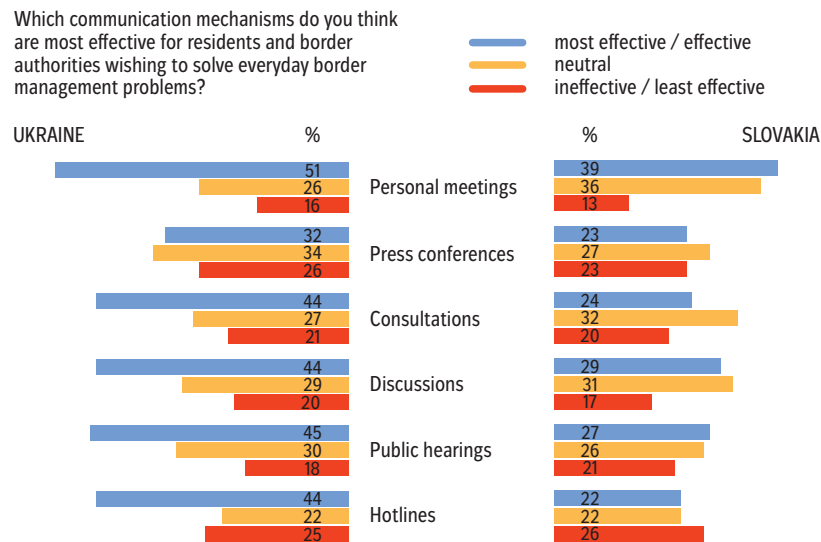
When it comes to effective communication between authorities and citizens, respondents in both countries differed in their views about the effective mechanisms of communication between residents of border areas and border authorities for solving everyday border management problems in the border areas (see Figure 5). According to the respondents in both countries, the most effective ways of communication are those that actively involve both parties in the process. In particular, meetings with citizens were thought to be very effective by 51 per cent of Ukrainian respondents and 39 per cent of Slovaks. In Slovakia, this was the preferred option, especially among citizens living in municipalities of between 1,000 and 5,000 inhabitants and in Michalovce District. In both of these groups, more than 45 per cent gave positive answers on in-person meetings.

11 J. Loginov, "В Україну через Словаччину," [To Ukraine through Slovakia] *Nasze Slowo*, November 12, 2016. Available online: <https://nasze-slowo.pl/v-ukrainu-cherez-slovachчину/> (accessed on February 24, 2023); "Словацький журналіст розповів про корупцію та кримінал на словацько-українському кордоні на Закарпатті," op. cit.



Moreover, about a quarter of Slovak respondents think that discussions (29 per cent), public hearings (27 per cent) and consultations (24 per cent) are very effective and efficient ways of communicating. Ukrainian respondents believe that discussions (44 per cent), public hearings (45 per cent), consultations (44 per cent) and hotlines (44 per cent) are very effective or efficient means of communication.

**Figure 5.** Effectiveness of means of communication between residents and authorities in border areas



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

The least preferred option among Ukrainian respondents was press conferences given by officials. This interesting finding suggests that people prefer in-person modes, as press conferences are a one-way medium with no direct involvement.

Another area that we investigated was reasons for crossing the border. Residents of the Ukrainian and Slovak border regions tended to cross the border for personal reasons (visiting relatives, shopping, hiking, etc.; see Figure 6). The majority of respondents in Slovakia (59 per cent) crossed the border to visit cross-border areas in Ukraine, and the majority of Ukrainians (75 per cent) crossed the border to visit cross-border areas in Slovakia. In Slovakia, this was highest among citizens in Sobrance District (almost 70 per cent), and in Ukraine it applied almost equally to Mukachevo. This can be explained partly by

the visa-free regime and partly by the local border traffic agreement in place since 2008 (most recently amended on July 31, 2019).<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 6.** Reasons for crossing the border



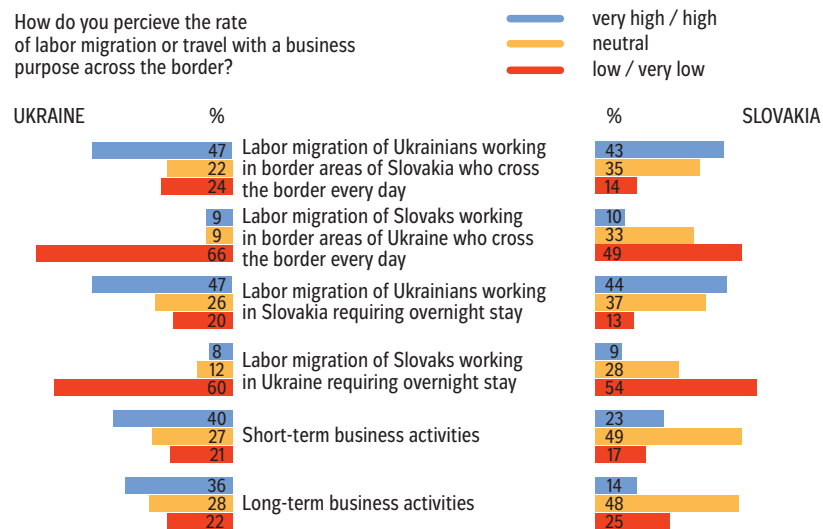
Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

There are noteworthy differences in the number of people crossing the border. The largest category is Ukrainians who work in the Slovak border area and cross the border on a daily basis – according to 47 per cent of Ukrainian and 43 per cent of Slovak respondents (see Figure 7). Among the Slovak respondents, almost 70 per cent of respondents in Sobrance District think Ukrainians cross the border for work. Opinions relating to the smallest category of reasons for crossing the border were similar, with people thinking that few Slovaks work on the Ukrainian side of the border. Only 8 to 10 per cent of respondents in both border regions thought there were Slovaks who worked in Ukraine and crossed the border daily or stayed for several days or more. In Ukraine, the figures were 60 per cent and

<sup>12</sup> “Угода між Україною та Словацькою Республікою про внесення змін до Угоди між Україною та Словацькою Республікою про місцевий прикордонний рух від 30 травня 2008 року,” [Agreement between Ukraine and the Slovak Republic on amendments to the Agreement between Ukraine and the Slovak Republic on local border traffic dated May 30, 2008] Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2008. Available online: [https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/703\\_001-19#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/703_001-19#Text) (accessed on February 24, 2023).

66 per cent of respondents, with 54 per cent and 49 per cent thinking that the numbers of cross-border workers from Slovakia needing overnight accommodation or crossing the border, was very small or negligible. Most Slovak respondents reporting that Slovaks traveled to Ukraine for work lived in Humenné District. The answers can be explained by the fact that the pay is much higher in Slovakia, as it is an EU country, and many Ukrainians living in the border regions are interested in working in Slovakia and living in Ukraine. These answers were mostly given by respondents in municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants, where finding work is harder.

**Figure 7.** Crossing the border for work or business

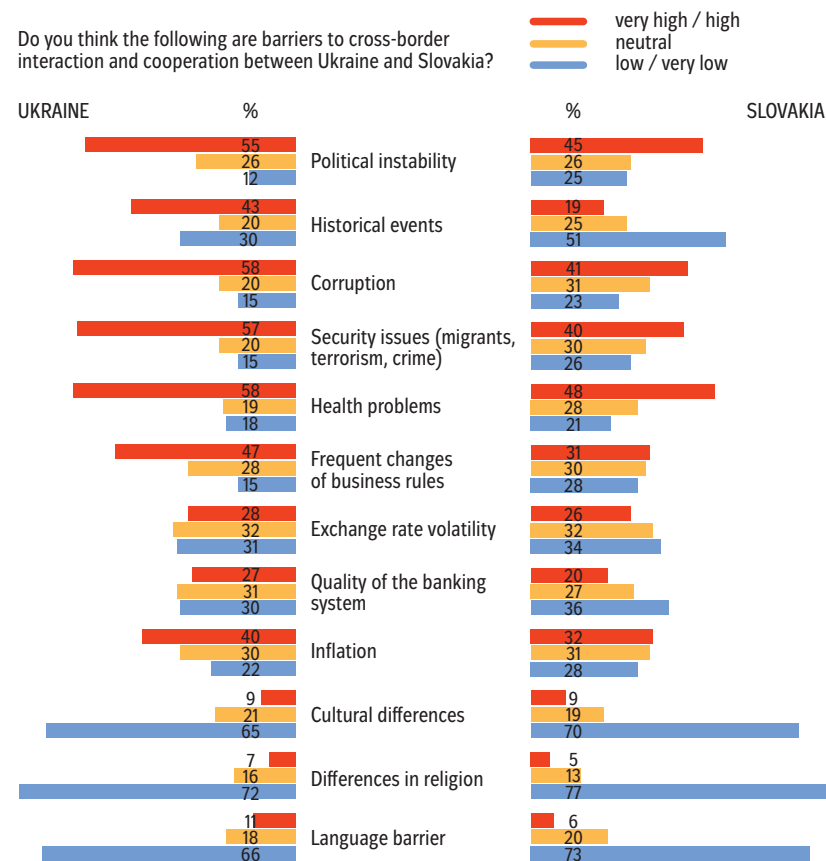


Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

People perceived more Ukrainians than Slovaks crossing the border for business, whether short-term or long-term, and had to stay in the country. More than a third of Ukrainian respondents thought a large or very large proportion crossed the border for short-term business purposes (local traders selling products on the other side of the border during short trips) (40 per cent) and long-term business purposes (business on the other side border requiring a long stay) (36 per cent). Slovak answers to this question differed. Almost half of respondents thought the numbers crossing for business purposes was neither high nor low with the mean engaging in short-term business – 49 per cent of respondents – and long-term business (business on the other side of the border requiring a long stay) – 48 per

cent. These days, many people register or expand their businesses abroad, but that is clearly not widely known, which is why there is a difference in respondents' views on either side of the border.

**Figure 8.** Barriers to the development of border areas



Source: Authors, based on sociological survey data

There are many factors affecting the intensity of cooperation in the Slovak–Ukrainian border regions, including major obstacles. The majority of the Ukrainians surveyed (55–58 per cent) thought health (the spread of disease, viruses, epidemics), security (migrants, terrorism, crime), corruption (taking bribes – customs officers, policemen, officials) were very big or big obstacles (see Figure 8). Slovak respondents held the same opinion, but not to the same extent, which was true for a number of other issues as well. The main difference is the

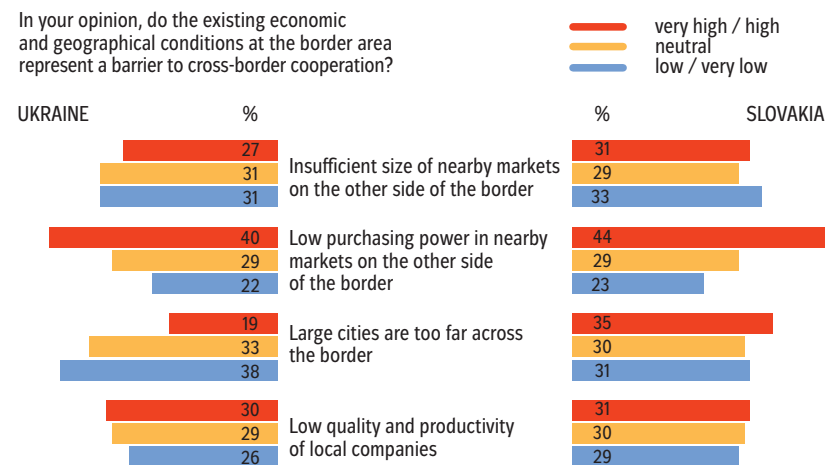
ranking. Health comes first for both Ukrainians and Slovaks (58 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively). But these answers were skewed by the Covid-19 pandemic, as the survey was conducted in the winter 2021/2022.

Corruption also came first for Ukrainians (58 per cent) and third in Slovakia (41 per cent). Political instability was second for Slovaks, 45 per cent, whereas for Ukrainians it was third (55 per cent). It is worth noting that corruption ranked highest for Ukrainians in a study conducted in 2019.<sup>13</sup> Factors that were negligible or that cannot be considered an obstacle were cultural differences, religious differences, and the language barrier. These aspects are crucial for good relations and common understanding.

The list is far from exhaustive, but the similar views among respondents on both sides of the border is good reason for stakeholder to take them into account when making decisions or implementing programs and projects. The economic and geographical conditions were usually considered relevant to cross-border cooperation (see Figure 9). However, the same respondents thought the low purchasing power of the population on the other side of the border (being unable to afford purchases) was a very big or big obstacle. This was the view among 40 per cent of the Ukrainians and 44 per cent of the Slovaks. Interestingly, these answers were more common in Slovak municipalities of between 1,000 and 5,000 inhabitants and among degree-holders, whereas in Ukraine they were more common in cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants and among other ethnic groups (non-Ukrainians). Just over a third of Ukrainians (38 per cent) thought that the fact that the larger cities with a richer population were situated far from the border was only a minor obstacle or no obstacle. Only 19 per cent of Ukrainians thought distance was a problem, compared to 35 per cent of Slovak respondents (especially in Trebišov District and municipalities of between 1,000 and 5,000 inhabitants). In Ukraine, the majority of respondents in Uzhhorod and Mukachevo Districts held this view. Furthermore, comparable numbers of Slovaks and Ukrainians thought neighboring markets were underdeveloped (limited supply of goods and services, small product range).

13 A. Duleba, ed., *Cross-Border Cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine: Volume II: Impact of intergovernmental relations*. Prešov: Prešov University Publishing House, 2019, p. 170. Projects: "EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border cooperation: impacts and opportunities," APVV-15-0369. Available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341161640\\_Cross-Border\\_Cooperation\\_between\\_Slovakia\\_and\\_Ukraine\\_Volume\\_II\\_Impact\\_of\\_intergovernmental\\_relations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341161640_Cross-Border_Cooperation_between_Slovakia_and_Ukraine_Volume_II_Impact_of_intergovernmental_relations) (accessed on February 24, 2023).

**Figure 9.** Economic and geographical barriers to development



Source: Authors, based on sociological survey data

Citizens' perceptions on cross-border cooperation

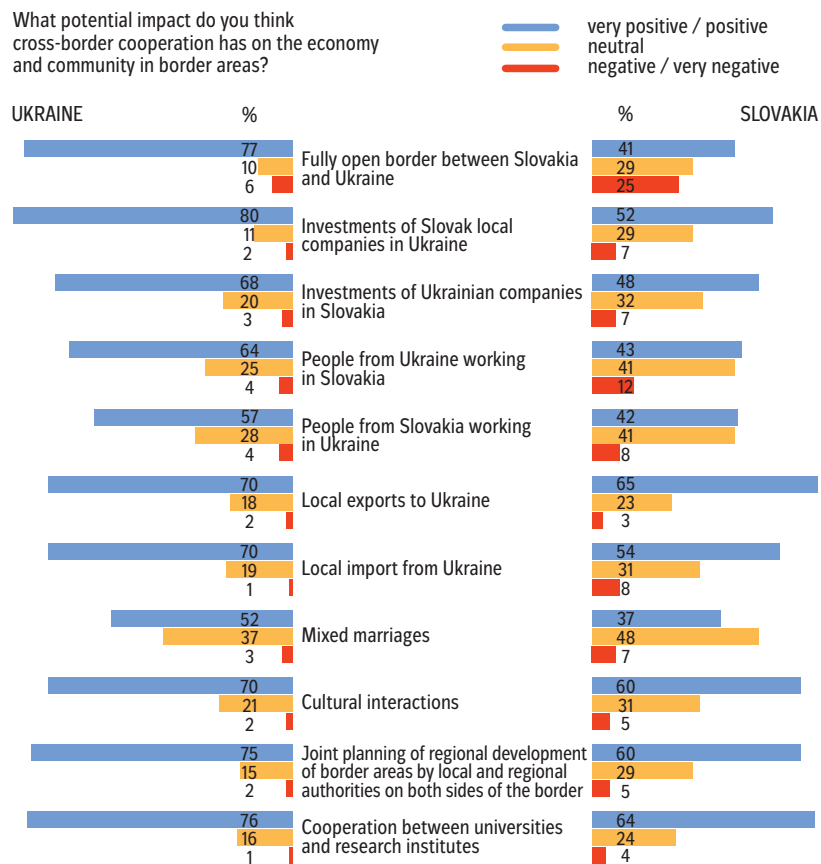
Another set of questions was dedicated to what one might call the prospects for cross-border cooperation, including factors that could benefit (or even harm) the potential for cross-border relations, particularly, economic and social cooperation in the border areas (see Figure 10). The 11 factors were viewed positively by a majority of Ukrainians (from 52 per cent to 80 per cent), who thought they would have a very positive or positive impact. The respondents in Slovakia were more critical, with positive answers ranging from 37–65 per cent.

For Ukrainian respondents, the most important factor was Slovak companies investing in Ukraine, 80 per cent of whom thought this was positive. On the Slovak side, the most important factor was local exports to Ukraine, with 65 per cent viewing this positively. The least important factor was mixed marriages, for both countries.

From the perspective of the Ukrainian respondents, having a fully open border between Slovakia and Ukraine was important and came second with 77 per cent of the answers, followed by cooperation between universities and research institutes (76 per cent) and joint planning of regional development (75 per cent). Among the Slovaks, an absolute majority (over 50 per cent) thought only 6 out of the 11 options would have a positive or very positive impact. Apart from local exports to Ukraine, the following were considered important: cooperation between universities and research institutes (64 per cent), cultural interactions (cultural or sports events, festivals, pilgrimages, exhibitions)

and the joint planning of the regional development of the border areas by local and regional authorities on both sides of the border (with 60 per cent for each).

**Figure 10.** Potential impact of certain factors on cross-border cooperation development



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Very few people thought these factors would have a negative impact, although 25 per cent of Slovaks and 6 per cent of Ukrainians thought a fully open border would have a negative or very negative impact. Many Slovaks thought the 11 factors would have neither a positive nor a negative impact. Around third of respondents in Slovakia gave this answer. As can be seen from the survey, the answers differ in potential impact accorded to a number of factor and on the proportion

holding the same view. There is more diversity of opinion among the Slovaks, with a higher proportion of neutral responses. Most of the answers by the Slovaks and Ukrainians on the potential impact are in line with two of the three ENI CBC strategic goals and thematic goals in the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) regulation adopted in March 2014.<sup>14</sup>

The impact of cross-border cooperation has affected the socioeconomics of the border areas differently. This is despite the priority directions of the cross-border programs over the past ten years being aimed at many areas – local culture and preservation of historical heritage, rational use of natural resources, economic development and tourism, health care, education, science and research, agriculture, fostering a responsible consumption culture, monitoring, forecasting and preventing natural disasters, natural and human-induced disasters, emergency situations, energy efficiency, implementation of environmentally friendly technologies, energy production from renewable sources<sup>15</sup> and a number of others.

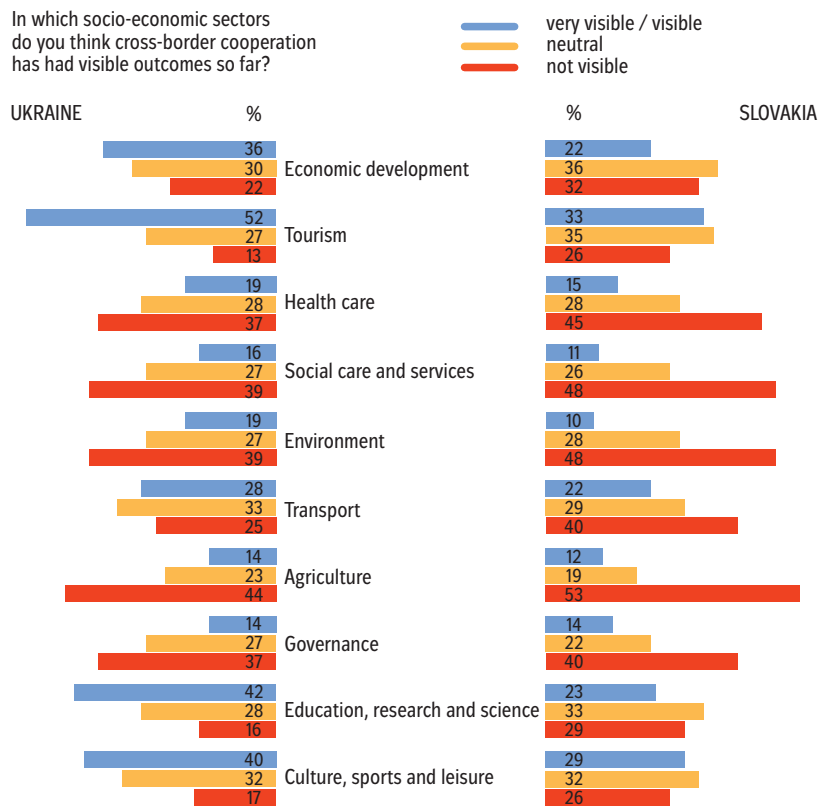
According to the survey, so far cross-border cooperation has so far had the most visible results in tourism, followed by culture, sports, leisure, education, science and research (see Figure 11). The majority of respondents thought cross-border cooperation had been most successful in tourism. More than a third of respondents in Slovakia (33 per cent) and more than half in Ukraine (52 per cent) thought cross-border cooperation had led to the development of tourist facilities and that there was a high or noticeable number of tourists. It is worth emphasizing that the highest rates were reported in Michalovce District, Mukachevo and Mukachevo District, particularly among young people. In these regions, and more generally, achievements in culture, sports and leisure were also positively evaluated on the Slovak side (by 29 per cent) and 40 per cent on the Ukrainian side. Among the Slovak respondents, those living in municipalities with 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants tended to evaluate tourist development more positively.

Citizens' perceptions on cross-border cooperation

<sup>14</sup> "Regulation (EU) No 232/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 establishing the European Neighbourhood Instrument," *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 77/27, March 11, 2014. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0232> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> "Постанова Кабінету Міністрів України Про затвердження Державної програми розвитку транскордонного співробітництва на 2021–2027 роки," [Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on approval of the State program for the development of cross-border cooperation for 2021–2027] Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, April 14, 2021. Available online: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/408-2021-n?lang=en#Text> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

**Figure 11.** Evaluation of visible outcomes of cross-border cooperation



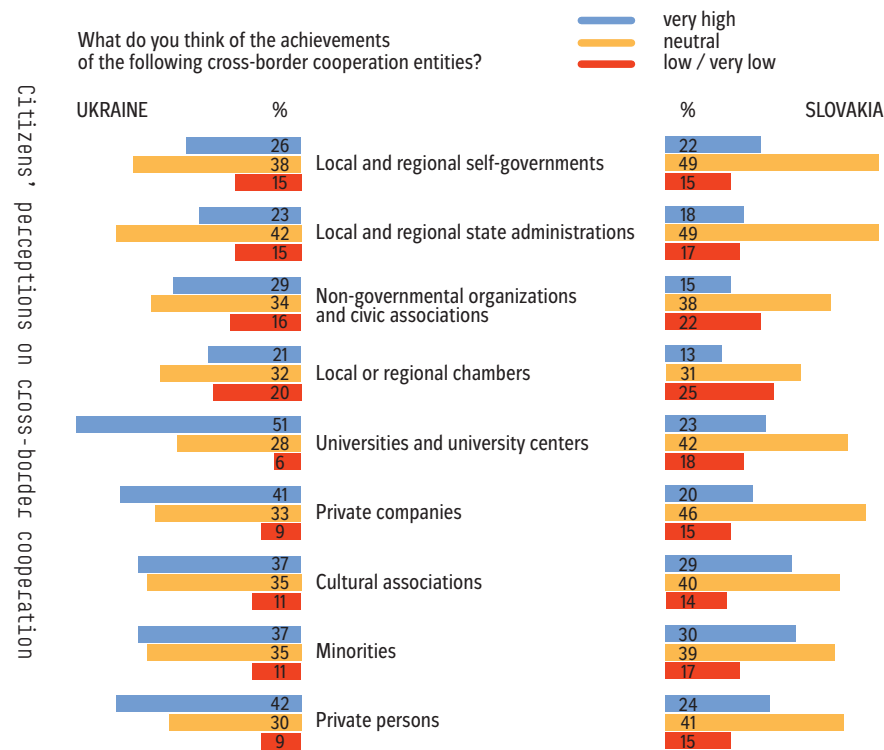
Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

A substantial percentage of respondents from the Ukrainian side of the border (42 per cent) thought there had been visible results in education, science, and research, particularly in Uzhhorod and Mukachevo Districts, and a substantial percentage of the visible results of cooperation can be attributed to the involvement of educational institutions in cross-border cooperation and projects.<sup>16</sup> Uzhhorod National University, comprehensive schools and preschools have all participated in cross-border educational and research activities.

16 For more See official website of Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine ENI CBC Programme 2014–2020. Available online: <https://huskroua-cbc.eu> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

About a fifth of Slovak respondents (23 per cent) noted significant results in education and science, especially inhabitants of municipalities with 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants. Cross-border cooperation outcomes were also partially observed in transport infrastructure in border areas (22 per cent on the Slovak side, 28 per cent on the Ukrainian side). Opinions differed on economic development, with only 22 per cent of respondents in Slovakia and 36 per cent of Ukrainian respondents rating trade, investment and employment positively.

**Figure 12.** Successful actors in cross-border cooperation



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

The results of cross-border cooperation in health care, particularly hospitals and medical and rehabilitation facilities, were quite similar on both sides of the border and leave much to be desired. Less than 20 per cent of the population of the border areas in Slovakia and Ukraine could see notable achievements, and around 40 per cent of respondents said there were no results or barely visible results in health-care. According to experts health-care cooperation will be

the focus of upcoming cross-border programs. The impact of cross-border cooperation on local and regional government was evaluated identically in both border areas – with 14 per cent of Slovak and Ukrainian respondents reporting visible results and 40 per cent and 37 per cent respectively reporting no results. A small number of people reported positive changes in agriculture, with about half of the respondents on both sides feeling dissatisfied at the pace of cross-border relations between farmers and other agricultural stakeholders. In Slovakia, respondents in Sobrance District were most critical of the agricultural development and saw no positives at all. Social care and social services need significant improvement as does environmental protection. As much as 48 per cent in Slovakia and 39 per cent in Ukraine could see no obvious changes in these spheres. Cross-border social services were perceived as worst by respondents in Snina, Sobrance and Trebišov Districts and in municipalities of up to 1,000 inhabitants. Further planning to improve and enhance Slovak–Ukrainian cross-border cooperation should take this urgent need into account. Improvements to agricultural productivity and health-care and environmental safety should be considered first.

In these spheres, there are varying degrees of success among cross-border cooperation actors (see Figure 12). The majority of respondents in Slovakia thought ethnic minorities, religious and ethnic groups and cultural associations were successful at cross-border cooperation. In Ukraine, universities and university centers, individuals and private companies did a little bit better than the ethnic minorities, religious organizations and cultural associations and were considered to be more successful at cross-border cooperation.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, local and regional chambers, local and regional state administrations and local and regional self-government bodies were either considered to be moderately successful or unsuccessful on both sides of the border. This is primarily because expectations are much higher. About a third of respondents in Slovakia (30 per cent) and Ukraine (37 per cent) thought that minorities (ethnic minorities and religious groups, and their organizations) were very successful or successful at cross-border cooperation. Views of cultural unions and associations were similar, with 29 per cent and 37 per cent respectively considering their cross-border cooperation successful.

17 For more see official website of Transcarpathian Regional State Administration. Available online: <https://oda.carpathia.gov.ua/storinka/yevropeyskyy-institut-susidstva> (accessed on February 24, 2023); and at the official website of Uzhhorod National University: <https://www.uzhnu.edu.ua/uk/cat/irelations-projects> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

However, a striking number of Slovak respondents were neutral, which may indicate a lack of knowledge about cross-border cooperation and projects in the border area. On the other hand, a relatively high number of Ukrainian respondents thought universities were successful. Not only do they win projects, but as the survey results show their work is well-communicated and visible to ordinary citizens.

About half of the Ukrainian respondents thought universities, university centers (51 per cent), individuals (42 per cent) and private companies (41 per cent) were very successful. Slovak respondents also thought individuals tended to be more successful than unsuccessful, 24 per cent rated them as very successful or successful, 23 per cent thought the same of universities and university centers in Slovakia. Ukrainian (29 per cent) and Slovak (15 per cent) respondents put non-governmental organizations and social associations in this category. The success of local and regional authorities was assessed as quite low – 26 per cent in Ukraine and 22 per cent in Slovakia. Moreover, 23 per cent and 18 per cent of respondents voiced support for local and regional state administrations. About a third of respondents thought local and regional chambers, chambers of commerce and professional associations achieved average success rates.

Figure 13. Forms of cross-border cooperation support



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

When it comes to direct support for cross-border cooperation, border region residents were unanimous in thinking that various forms were beneficial for cross-border cooperation on the Slovak–Ukrainian border: first came direct financial support for cross-border cooperation projects carried out by local and regional entities – municipalities, cities, communities, regions, enterprises, non-profit organizations, according

to a majority of respondents in Slovakia and the overwhelming majority in Ukraine (see Figure 13). A stable and favorable legal environment is thought to have a positive effect on cross-border cooperation. Exactly half of the respondents in Slovakia thought this was a useful form of support, and in Ukraine the figure was 76 per cent. Developing local and regional actors' potential for implementing cross-border cooperation projects was considered useful by 50 per cent of respondents in Slovakia and 75 per cent in Ukraine.

Among the Slovak respondents, two groups in particular thought better support was needed: people with university degrees thought support should be provided through directly financed projects and people in Michalovce District would welcome national government support (almost 70 per cent of the answers). However, some respondents thought such support was useless: about a tenth of Slovak respondents and four per cent of Ukrainians. A large proportion of Ukrainians could not answer the question about the potential of local and regional actors for implementing cross-border cooperation projects.<sup>18</sup>

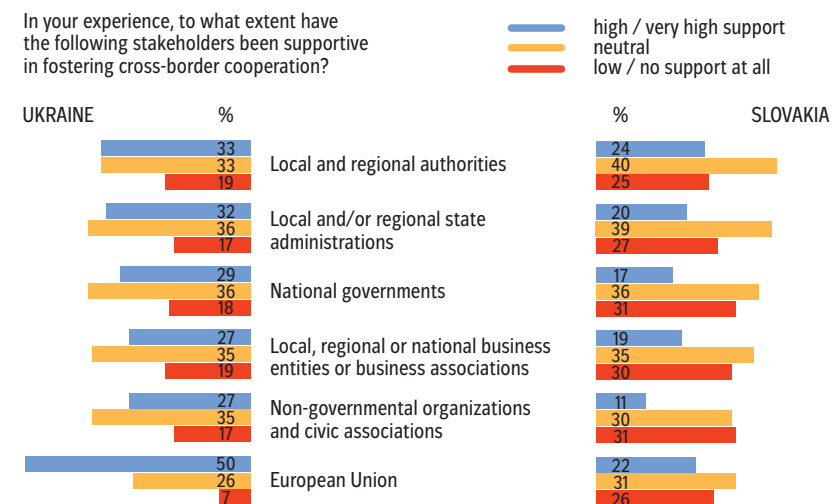
There were very different results on perceptions of the organizations related to cross-border development (see Figure 14). Ukrainians rated the EU as providing the highest level of support for cross-border cooperation, according to half of the respondents. On the other hand, the Slovak side rated local and regional authorities as giving the highest support for cross-border cooperation. Survey participants' assessments of the actors involved in supporting cross-border cooperation indicate a lack of knowledge on the topic. Respondents either knew less or did not want to provide answers, as indicated by many neutral responses.

When it comes to perceptions of the EU, Slovakia and Ukraine being reliable partners, respondents on the Slovak side of the border were more critical of Ukraine than vice-versa, but they were also more critical of the EU (see Figure 15). Only 47 per cent of respondents in Slovakia thought the EU was a reliable partner toward Ukraine, compared to 71 per cent of respondents in Ukraine. On the other hand, 16 per cent of respondents in Slovakia thought Ukraine cannot consider the EU a reliable partner, compared to 6 per cent of respondents in Ukraine. The most positive views among respondents in Slovakia

<sup>18</sup> "Проекты трансграничной співпраці ЄС: чому вони неефективні в Україні," [Cross-border cooperation projects: why they are ineffective in Ukraine] *Європейська правда*, August 16, 2018. Available online: <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/experts/2018/08/16/7085038/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

came from Michalovce District (55.5 per cent) and municipalities of 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants (55.6 per cent). Those most critical of the idea the EU is a reliable partner to Ukraine were university degree holders (more than 25 per cent) and inhabitants of towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants (23.4 per cent).

**Figure 14.** Supporting stakeholders and cross-border cooperation organizations



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Looking further at perceptions of EU-Ukrainian relations, 22 per cent of respondents in both Slovakia and Ukraine did not consider Ukraine a reliable partner to the EU. But 46 per cent of Ukrainians thought Ukraine was reliable; a much higher number than among respondents in Slovakia, of whom only 26 per cent thought Ukraine was trustworthy. However, these attitudes may have changed considerably following the Russian invasion and the EU leaders' decision to grant Ukraine candidate status in June 2022.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Ukrainian respondents thought themselves a less reliable partner than Slovakia; only 53 per cent of Ukrainian respondents thought

<sup>19</sup> J. Rankin, "Ukraine's future is in the EU: Zelenskiy welcomes granting of candidate status," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2022. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/23/eu-leaders-ukraine-candidate-status-russian-attack> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

Ukraine was a reliable and trustworthy partner to Slovakia, while 65 per cent thought Slovakia was a reliable and trustworthy partner to Ukraine. That is a remarkable critical opinion. Respondents from Slovakia were much more positive about their own country, with 68 per cent considering Slovakia a reliable and trustworthy partner to Ukraine (similar to the Ukrainian perceptions).

Those most confident about their own country were respondents from municipalities of 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants and Michalovce District and middle-aged people, approximately 73 per cent of whom gave positive answers. Inhabitants of Snina District were more negative with 10 per cent not considering Slovakia to be a reliable partner to Ukraine, which is relatively high given that 4 per cent was the average. Respondents in Slovakia share a more cautious approach toward Ukraine, as only 37 per cent of them saw Ukraine as a reliable and trustworthy partner to Slovakia. Their perceptions were not entirely negative, as 43 per cent were neutral. Slovak respondents in municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants (46 per cent) had the most positive perceptions of Ukraine.

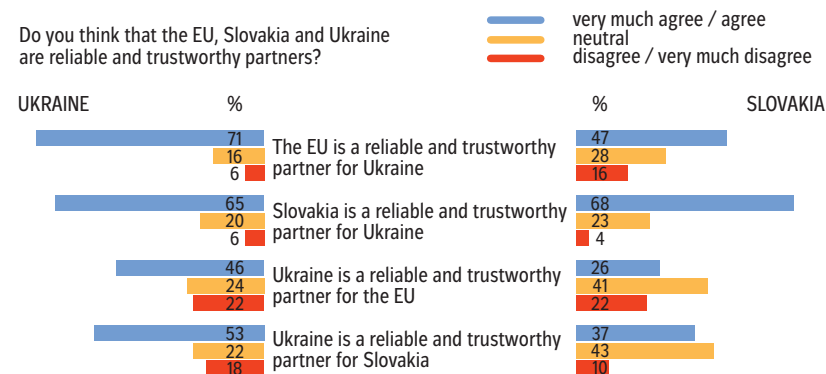
The visa-free regime between Ukraine and the EU member states came into effect on June 11, 2017. That means Ukrainian biometric passport holders wishing to travel to the Schengen zone (including Slovakia since December 2007) for a short stay do not need a visa.<sup>20</sup> Ukrainian respondents positive evaluated the visa-free regime. Indeed, this question received the most evaluations of the whole questionnaire, with only one per cent expressing a negative view. Positive or very positive answers were expressed by 77 per cent of respondents. Conversely, only 45 per cent of Slovaks evaluated this positively, with 35 per cent remaining neutral (see Figure 16). One explanation could be that they did not think the visa-free regime benefited themselves or their families.

Ukrainians (77 per cent) were much more positive in their assessments of the visa-free regime than Slovaks, 45 per cent of whom thought it very positive or positive. Ukrainians may have been more positive because of the new opportunities for Ukrainians to visit not only Slovakia, but also other EU countries, as Slovakia has been part

20 "Visa liberalisation with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia," European Commission, 2017. Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/international-affairs/collaboration-countries/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/international-affairs/collaboration-countries/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia_en) (accessed on February 24, 2023).

of Schengen since 2007. As more people prefer road transportation<sup>21</sup>, driving through neighboring countries (including Slovakia) is a convenient way of reaching other EU countries.

Figure 15. Reliability and trust



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

While the visa-free regime was not perceived negatively in Ukraine (only 1 per cent of respondents shared this view), in Slovakia 11 per cent of all the answers were negative. Middle-aged respondents (13 per cent) were particularly negative, as were inhabitants of Sobrance District (16 per cent of respondents had negative views and 25 per cent positive views). On the other hand, respondents in Michalovce District were most positive among Slovak respondents (56 per cent positive views compared to 8 per cent negative views). That could be explained by the fact that people living in Michalovce travel to Ukraine for leisure or shopping.

Looking more closely at the reasons for the negative and positive stances on the visa-free regime, two types of answers can be identified (see Figure 17). Respondents from both countries agreed the visa-free regime had expanded the possibilities for legal economic and trade cooperation – 71 per cent of Ukrainian and 63 per cent of Slovak

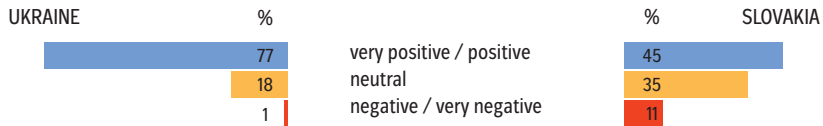
21 "Ukrajinci už do Únie cestujú bez víz," [Ukrainians are already traveling to the Union without visas] *Euractiv*, June 12, 2017. Available online: <https://euractiv.sk/section/mobilita/news/ukrajinci-uz-unie-cestuju-bez-viz/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).



respondents. This view was popular in Michalovce District, where 75.5 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement. Ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia were more positive with 72 per cent agreeing.

**Figure 16.** Assessment of the visa-free regime

Overall, how would you assess the impact of the visa-free regime (in force since 2017) on the development of relations and cooperation between Ukraine and the EU?



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

However, respondents also felt the visa-free regime had created opportunities for illegal activities: this view was shared by 46 per cent of Ukrainians and 53 per cent of Slovaks. The highest rate was for Michalovce District, where almost 66 per cent of respondents shared this view, followed by ethnic Hungarians (more than 61 per cent), those with a high-school education and the over 65s.

**Figure 17.** Impact of the visa-free regime

In your opinion, what impact did the visa-free regime have on cross-border relations and cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine?



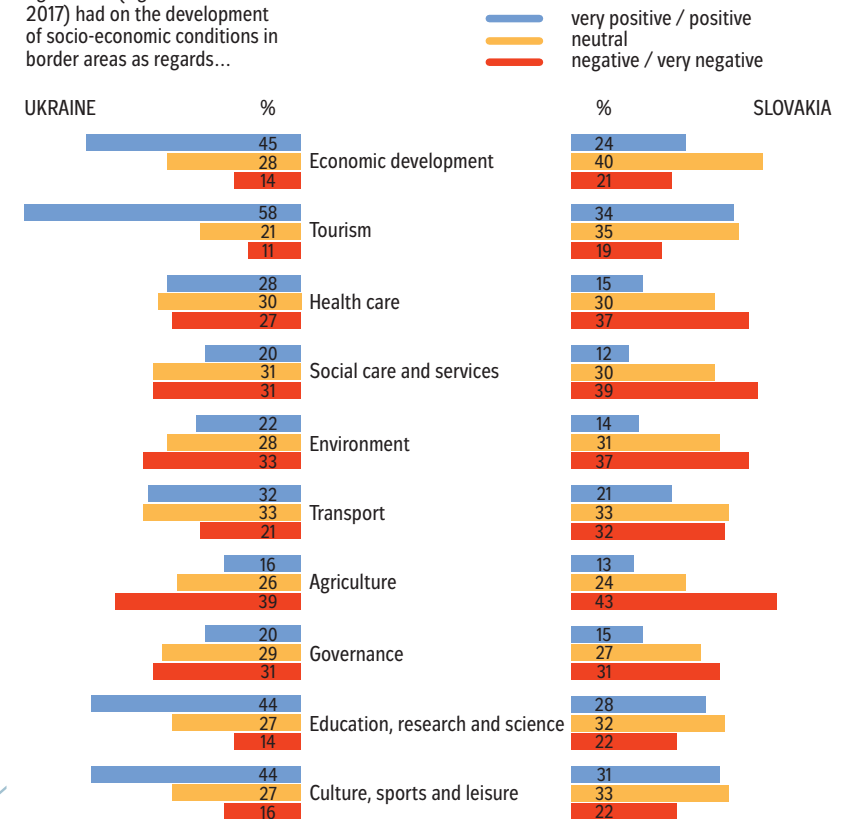
Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Interestingly, both countries share a similar view of cheap labor and about a third of respondents in both countries agreed it was a consequence of the visa-free regime. However, about one third in both countries disagreed, so it seems to be a very divisive issue among

the population, but similar in both countries. The highest disagreement was again found among the ethnic Hungarian population in Slovakia, at more than 48 per cent of respondents, followed by municipalities of 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants (41 per cent). Interestingly, in Sobrance District more than 23 per cent refused to or could not answer this question. That is a very high percentage, as around 5.7 per cent of answers by respondents in Slovakia were N/A.

**Figure 18.** Impact of the Association Agreement

What impact has the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (signed in 2014 and in force since 2017) had on the development of socio-economic conditions in border areas as regards...



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

According to almost 33 per cent of respondents in Ukraine, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement had a positive impact on socio-economic conditions in border areas, whereas 21 per cent of respondents in Slovakia shared this view. Despite this gap, respondents of

both countries thought the same areas showed positive development: economic development; tourism; education research and science; culture, sports, and leisure activities. These areas cooperate intensively on cross-border projects.

The gap between Slovak and Ukrainian respondents on negative answers was not remarkable, with 24 per cent of respondents in Ukraine and 30 per cent of respondents in Slovakia thinking the Association Agreement had negatively impacted socio-economic development. The negatively perceived areas were the same ones, with agriculture at the top of the list, 43 per cent for Slovakia and 39 per cent for Ukraine, followed closely by social care and social services and the environment. Slovaks also thought it had a negative effect on healthcare (37 per cent of answers) (see Figure 18).

The question about the role of the EU funds and their role in cross-border cooperation revealed more positive answers among respondents on the Ukrainian side of the border. That can be explained by Slovakia's negative experiences of the use of EU funds nationally. Since the beginning of the first programming period, Slovakia has struggled to make effective use of EU funds, been affected by corruption scandals and has been among the slowest member states to spend the funds.<sup>22</sup> A larger percentage of Ukrainian respondents than Slovaks thought the EU funds were crucial for cross-border development: 48 per cent thought Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border cooperation would be much less intensive without EU funds and 40 per cent stated that cross-border cooperation would not exist without financial support from the EU. By comparison, only 33 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively, of respondents in Slovakia held this view (see Figure 19).

These views were relatively equally distributed among the different groups of respondents: more than 27 per cent respondents in Snina and Humenné Districts thought the EU funds were crucial for cross-border cooperation, while at the other extreme 18 per cent of ethnic Hungarians held this view. Major differences were identified in perceptions of the importance of the EU funds: 42.5 per cent of respondents in Michalovce District thought the EU funds important for the intensity of cross-border cooperation, while the other extreme is Trebišov District, where 23 per cent expressed this view. Moreover,

22 "Druhý najpomalší v EÚ: Ako Slovensko čerpá eurofondy," [The second slowest in the EU: how Slovakia spends EU funds] *Euractiv*, July 1, 2021. Available online: <https://euractiv.sk/section/ekonomika-a-euro/infographic/druhy-najpomalsi-v-eu-ako-slovensko-cerpa-eurofondy/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

33 per cent of respondents in Slovakia did not consider EU funds essential for cross-border cooperation.

Slovak respondents were more likely to think the EU funds were a source of corruption: 24 per cent of them thought the EU funds were just a source of corruption in cross-border cooperation and had no practical benefit, while 33 per cent adopted a neutral stance and 27 per cent did not share this view. Respondents from Humenné District were the most critical, with 33 per cent sharing this view. Among the Ukrainian respondents, only 17 per cent considered the EU funds a source of corruption with no benefit, 26 per cent had a neutral stance and 40 per cent were against this idea.

**Figure 19.** The importance of EU funds in cross-border development

Citizens' perceptions on cross-border cooperation

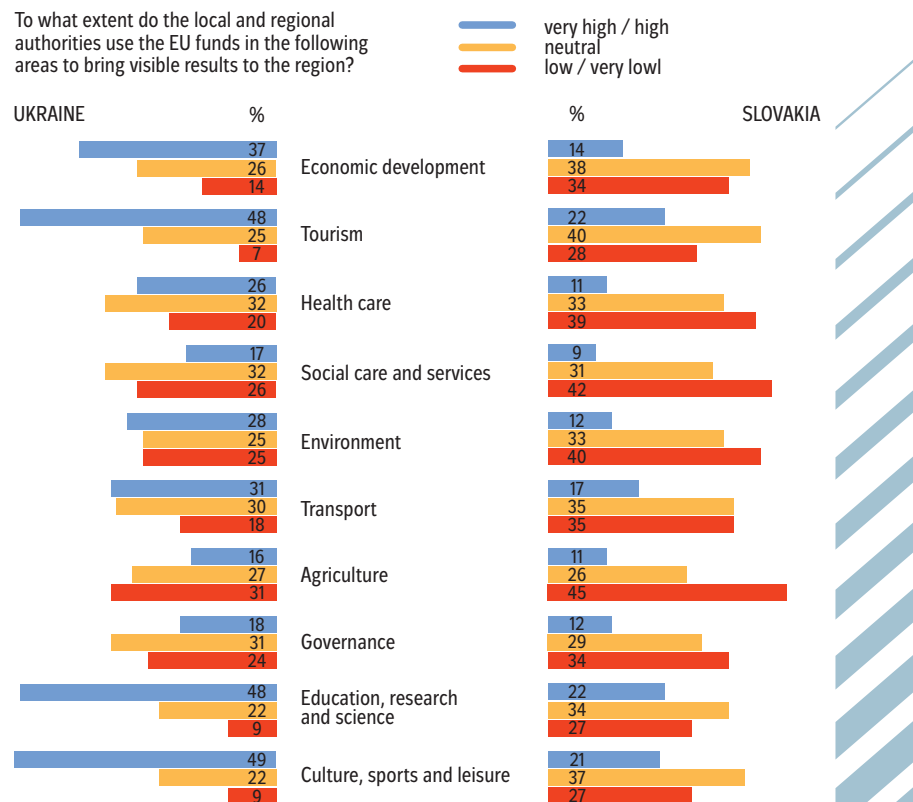


Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

The answers to the previous two questions nicely mirror the question on the visible results of EU fund use by local and regional authorities (see Figure 20). On average, almost 32 per cent of respondents in Ukraine thought there was a high usage of EU funds, compared to 15 per cent in Slovakia. In Ukraine, 18 per cent of respondents thought usage was low and in Slovakia the figure was 35 per cent. Although both countries thought the areas where the EU funds had the most visible results were the same, there was a big gap in the percentage positively and negatively perceiving these areas. In both countries, respondents thought EU fund usage was highest in these areas: tourism; education and research; culture, sports, and leisure activities. While Ukrainian respondents thought local and regional authorities

made relatively high usage of EU funds in these areas (with 48–49 per cent of positive answers in each category), Slovak respondents thought there was much less success (with only 21–22 per cent of positive answers in each category).

**Figure 20.** Results of the use of EU funds



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

EU funds were not thought to bring visible results in the environment, social care and social services and agriculture. This last area is particularly interesting, as many cross-border projects are targeted at cooperation in environmental issues (see Study 4.1 for a detailed overview). EU fund use in environmental issues was perceived to be low by 25 per cent of respondents in Ukraine and 40 per cent in Slovakia. EU fund performance in social services was thought to be poor by 26 per cent of respondents in Ukraine and 42 per cent in Slovakia.

In agriculture, the figures were 31 per cent of Ukrainian respondents and 45 per cent of Slovak respondents. However, it should be noted that in Slovakia, agriculture has its own chapter of EU funds, and the perceived low use of EU funds could be linked to a lack of transparency at the national level as well.

Slovak inhabitants are more critical of regional and local authority use of EU funds for cross-border cooperation and regional development in border areas. Only 11 per cent thought the local and regional authorities were sufficiently trained at using the EU funds, for example the ability to prepare quality projects (see Figure 21), while 38 per cent thought they were poorly trained and 36 per cent find thought it was about average. The most striking difference could be seen between Humenné and Sobrance Districts, which gave the highest and lowest percentages. In Humenné, around 20 per cent of respondents thought the local authorities had good skills, while in Sobrance it was less than 2 per cent. In Sobrance, the majority thought the local authorities were poorly trained, at almost 60 per cent. That indicates there are high levels of dissatisfaction with local authorities.

In December 2000, the Slovak and Ukrainian governments signed an agreement on cross-border cooperation aimed at developing cooperation and facilitating good relations and mutual understanding. Cooperation has taken place in all sorts of sphere, such as regional development and spatial planning, transport and communications, cross-border trade, energy, environmental protection, research and education, healthcare, culture, leisure, sports, mutual assistance in the event of natural disasters and other disasters, tourism, agriculture and social care.<sup>23</sup>

To support closer cross-border cooperation between local and regional authorities, a Slovak–Ukrainian working group was set up, which later became the Slovak–Ukrainian (Ukrainian–Slovak) Intergovernmental Commission for Cross-Border Cooperation. In Ukraine, the cooperation will focus on Transcarpathian Region, as well as Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv Regions.<sup>24</sup>

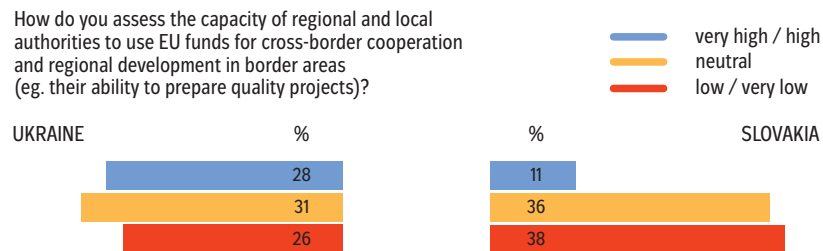
Citizens' perceptions on cross-border cooperation

<sup>23</sup> For more see official website of Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic: <https://www.minv.sk/?bilateralne-dohody-a-zmluvy-o-cezhranicnej-spolupraci> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> For more details about Intergovernmental commissions for cross-border cooperation see official website of Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic: <https://www.minv.sk/?medzivladne-komisie-pre-cezhranicnu-spolupracu> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

However, the ICCC does not seem to fulfill its mission properly, as the majority of respondents on both side of the border were unfamiliar with its activities.

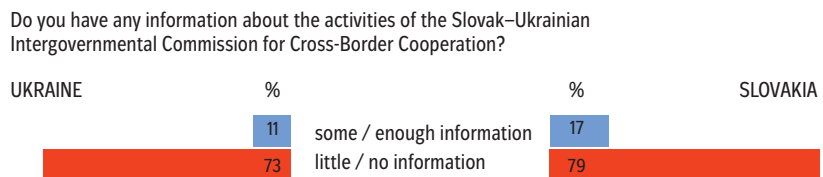
**Figure 21.** Capacities of the local and regional actors to use EU funds



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Only 11 per cent of respondents in Ukraine and 17 per cent of respondents in Slovakia thought they had enough information about the ICCC's activities. In Ukraine, 73 per cent of respondents and in Slovakia 79 per cent of respondents had very little or almost no information at all (see Figure 22).

**Figure 22.** Slovak–Ukrainian Intergovernmental Commission for Cross-Border Cooperation

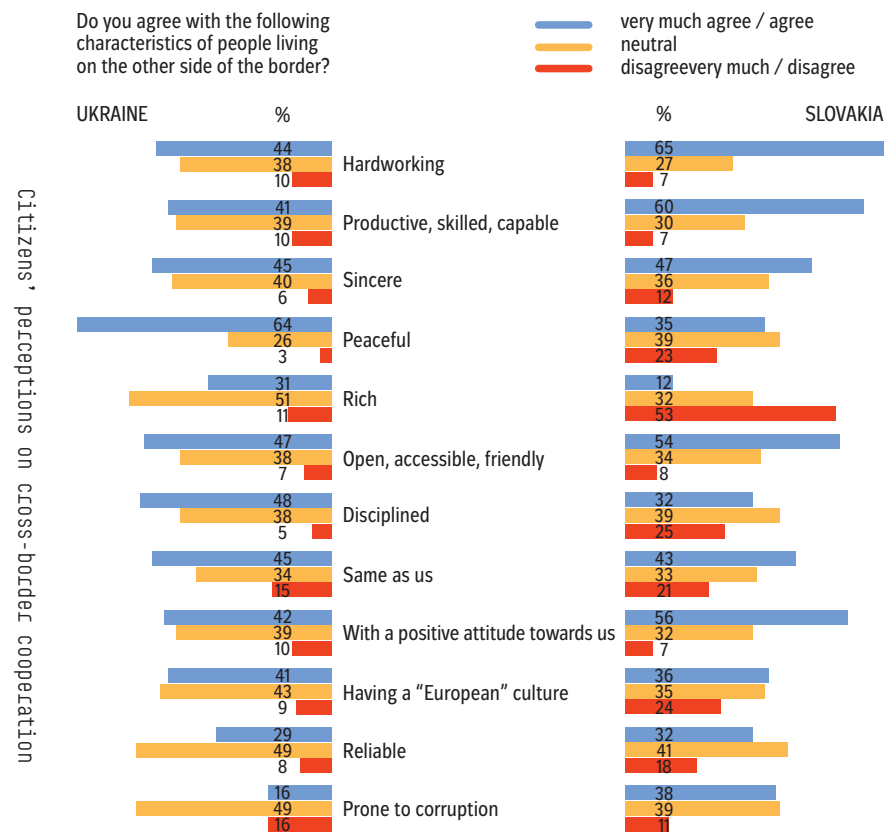


Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

Interestingly, respondents on both the Ukrainian and Slovak side of the border gave quite different answers regarding perceptions of their counterparts. Respondents in Slovakia thought Ukrainians were mostly perceived as hardworking (in 65 per cent of the answers), productive (60 per cent) and having a positive attitude toward Slovaks (56 per cent) (see Figure 23). The first two qualities relate to work skills, which is hardly surprising, as Ukrainian workers have represented the biggest share of foreign workers for several

years now.<sup>25</sup> Over 70 per cent of respondents from Michalovce District, primarily municipalities of 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants, as well as retired people and ethnic Hungarians, thought Ukrainians were hardworking.

**Figure 23.** Perceptions of the people living on the other side of the border



Source: Authors, based on the sociological survey data

25 M. Halečka, "Ako cudzinci (ne)zaplavujú Slovensko (príbeh v obrázkoch a dátach)," [How foreigners (do not) flood Slovakia (story in pictures and data)] *Denník N Blog*, February 12, 2022. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/blog/681399/ako-cudzinci-nezaplavuju-slovensko-pribeh-v-obrazkoch-a-datach/> (accessed on February 24, 2023).

Respondents from Michalovce District were most likely to rate Ukrainians as productive (68.5 per cent). Retired people were most likely to think Ukrainians had a positive attitude. More than 64 per cent of responses in Michalovce District and towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants were positive. However, only 32 per cent of respondents in Slovakia agreed that their Ukrainian neighbors were disciplined and reliable.

Most people on the Slovak side of the border do not think their neighbors are rich (53 per cent), especially in Sobrance District where the figure was 75 per cent. About one fourth of the respondents disagreed that Ukrainians were peaceful, disciplined and had a "European culture." This last perception may have changed in light of the Russian invasion, in which Ukrainians proved that not only do they respect European culture and values but that they are prepared to fight for them.

Respondents in Ukraine thought their neighbors were mostly peaceful (64 per cent), open and disciplined (almost 50 per cent positive answers for both categories). On the other side of the spectrum, 16 per cent of Ukrainians thought there was a proclivity for corruption, and the same percentage disagreed, with 49 per cent adopting a neutral stance. Interestingly, although the answers were completely different completely on each side of the border, the proportion of positive answers among respondents in Slovakia and Ukraine toward the people in the neighboring country was very similar (42.5 per cent and 41 per cent respectively).



## Conclusions

This paper looked at perceptions of citizens living on each side of the border. The survey is unique because it was conducted in both countries, Slovakia and Ukraine, and so has comparable results. Generally, the Slovak respondents were more critical of the cross-border day-to-day reality than their Ukrainian counterparts were. In this part, we provide recommendations and summarize the main problems identified by the respondents. These are the main areas that should be improved in order to ensure cross-border cooperation benefits citizens living in border regions:

- Waiting times at the borders were considered a problem by respondents on both sides. Ukrainian respondents had negative perceptions of the additional bureaucracy and treatment by customs official and passport control. There is room for improvement on both these problems, especially when it comes to training officials.
- Respondents were not satisfied with the cross-border infrastructure, especially the bicycle paths and railways. It is worth thinking about large scale investment in the railways in particular, as they will be an important mode of transport in the future. Cycle paths could be supported through cross-border projects in the new HUSKROUA programming period.
- Corruption is a huge problem in both countries, and this was reflected in respondents' answers. However, our survey indicates it is more of a national issue, with respondents on both sides perceiving their own side (customs, police officials, local and regional politicians and businessmen) to be corrupt compared to the neighboring country. As domestic corruption levels are perceived to be high, the authorities should take measures to improve openness, transparency and accountability.

- Ukrainian respondents generally thought the impact of illegal cross-border activities was felt in local markets and organized crime. Slovak respondents thought it affected safety and security. This represents a great challenge for both the local and national authorities.
- Respondents' preferred in-person bi-directional forms of communication between local officials and inhabitants, whether in the form of meetings, discussions or public hearings. That is a good signal suggesting that people are willing to participate directly in daily life in the border regions.
- The fact that respondents on both sides of the border thought residents of Ukraine crossed the border for work – whether on a daily commuting basis or for longer periods requiring a stay – is unsurprising. It can be explained by the economic conditions in the two countries, and the greater work opportunities in Slovakia than in Ukraine.
- Respondents identified several factors that they thought were major obstacles to cross-border cooperation, namely corruption, political instability and health concerns. While the first two are more systemic, the health concerns are connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the survey was conducted in the winter. Conversely, the language barrier, cultural and religious differences were considered unimportant on both sides of the border, which means there are good prospects for developing cross-border cooperation based on mutual understanding and respect.
- The economic and geographical barriers identified by respondents on both sides of the border were low purchasing power and the difficulty of expanding business as a result. More targeted help from the state would be beneficial, so the region can attract more private investment, especially for private businesses.
- Looking at the future of cross-border development, the most important factor for Ukrainian respondents was Slovak companies investing in Ukraine, while on the Slovak side it was local exports



to Ukraine. The least important factor was mixed marriages between the nationals of the two countries. However, Ukrainian respondents thought all the 11 economic and cultural factors were much more important for cross-border development than their Slovak counterparts. Ukrainians saw opportunities in fully open borders, and respondents in both countries acknowledged the importance of joint research and regional planning, which could inspire regional authorities trying to coordinate regional development with the neighboring country.

- Several areas represent a window of opportunity for intense cross-border cooperation. In the past, tourism cooperation has brought positive results, according to both sides, but respondents were critical of results in other areas. Perceptions of cooperation in social care and social services, environmental protection and agriculture were poor – especially in Sobrance District where the last category did particularly badly. Cooperation in these areas needs to be intensified to produce visible results for citizens. Here, projects under the new HUSKROUA programming period could prove very beneficial, especially ones relating to environmental protection, as climate change is a top EU priority.
- When it comes to the actors of cross-border cooperation, the results between the two countries vary substantially. While the majority of answers from Slovak respondents were neutral, which could suggest inadequate knowledge of cross-border cooperation and projects implemented in the border area, a relatively high number of Ukrainian respondents thought universities were successful (52 per cent). They are able to win projects, but as the survey results show their work is also well-communicated and visible to regular citizens, which could set an example for other actors in the border region.
- Respondents on both sides of the border thought there was a need for cross-border cooperation support, a view that was mainly seen among Ukrainian respondents (in about 75 per cent of the answers), but also among Slovak ones (in more than 50 per cent). There is a need for financial support, additional capacity building and political support from national governments, not to mention political stability. This should be borne in mind, especially during the upcoming 2021–2027 programming period, where national governments should create a favorable environment for further cross-border development. Ukrainian respondents thought the EU was the leading authority in the enhancement of cross-border cooperation, while Slovaks thought it was local and regional bodies.

- In Ukraine, the EU is generally viewed very positively as a reliable partner, but in Slovakia only around half of respondents trusted the EU, which can be related to the fact that Slovakia has more experience of the EU as a member state and the pre-accession optimism has vanished. Slovak–Ukrainian relations are also interesting. Ukrainian respondents considered themselves to be a less reliable partner than Slovakia, which is a remarkably critical view of the country. Respondents in Slovakia were much more positive toward their own country than toward Ukraine.
- Ukrainians gave some surprising answers on the visa-free regime, with only one per cent holding a negative stance. By contrast, only 45 per cent of Slovaks gave a positive evaluation, while 35 per cent remained neutral. That can be explained by the fact they thought the visa-free regime brought little benefit for themselves or their families. Both sides agreed that the visa-free regime opened the door to legal (mainly among Ukrainians) as well as illegal (mainly among Slovaks) economic activities.
- The EU–Ukraine Association Agreement has had a positive impact on the socio-economic conditions, mainly from the Ukrainian perspective, but the percentage was relatively low (only 33 per cent). Respondents in both countries evaluated the agreement positively in these spheres: economic development; tourism; education, research and science; culture, sports and leisure activities, which form the core of cross-border cooperation projects.
- Respondents on the Ukrainian side of the border gave more positive answers about the role of the EU funds in cross-border cooperation. This can be explained by Slovakia's negative experience of the national use of EU funds. For example, the survey showed that Slovak respondents were more likely to see the EU funds as a source of corruption. Moreover, the perception is that EU funds have not produced visible results for the region, which is something that should be considered during project planning. Respondents were also critical (mostly in Slovakia) of local authority capacity to use the funding and design good quality projects.



- These results have shed light on the everyday problems of people living in border areas as well as problems with the local administration, national legislation and stakeholders. With the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situation on the border has changed and the need to rebuild Ukraine has become a (EU) priority, especially in the areas most affected by the war. Well-functioning cross-border cooperation could help to achieve this.

# 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.

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Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway grants



The policy paper is published within the project Safe and inclusive border between Slovakia and Ukraine – SIBSU funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through EEA grants. The project is co-financed by the state budget of the Slovak Republic.

ISBN 978-80-89645-23-7



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