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Cross-Border Cooperation in Slovak-Ukrainian Borderlands

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The present policy report looks at the recent empirical research findings on barriers to cross-border cooperation (CBC) and the effects of cross-border interaction on local economies and regional development as perceived by local cross-border cooperation actors in Slovak-Ukrainian border regions. It compares the differing degrees of attention paid by regional authorities to the opportunities provided by the changing character of the border and exogenous factors influencing CBC-based development impulses.

Keywords: Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands, Schengen border, cross-border cooperation, regional development.

Introduction

The border regions of Ukraine and the neighbouring EU countries can be usually considered as peripheries that are not the most important centres of economic activity. Their development potential depends largely on the conditions for mutual trade and cross-border cooperation (CBC). From their mutual proximity and connections, they can draw productive advantages and learn to build on their strengths and economic development opportunities (Liikanen et al. 2016, 33–35).

The borderland on the Slovak side of the Slovak-Ukrainian border includes the self-governing regions of Prešov (8,993 km², pop. 810,000) and Košice (6,755 km², pop. 775,000); the Ukrainian side is the Transcarpathian region (12,777 km², pop. 1,282,000). The lack of transport connectivity is one of the main challenges in the analysed border area, especially since the region is bisected by the Schengen external border.

Not only the small number of crossing points but also their distribution and capacity (e.g., weight limitation) and the bottlenecks of the cross-border road and rail networks pose problems. On the 97-km Slovak-Ukrainian joint border section, only two road crossings accommodate vehicles (Vyšné Nemecké-Uzhhorod; Ubľa-Malyi Bereznyi). The third road border crossing (Veľké Slemence-Mali Selmenci) is intended solely for pedestrians and cyclists. Waiting times at border crossings often run for several hours, which is not conducive to collaborations requiring physical contact, including economic ones (e.g., labour market commuting) and person-to-person meetings (CESCI 2020, 68–71; Brenzovych et al. 2023, 89–91).

According to analyses conducted by the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, the optimal use of cross-border cooperation with Ukraine under the

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Figure 1. Slovak Prešov and Košice Self-governing Regions Bordering Ukrainian Transcarpathian Region. Source: the authors.

conditions of the Association Agreement, and within it, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (AA/DCFTA) represented an opportunity to increase the annual turnover of bilateral trade by potentially €1 billion (Duleba 2005). However, in the current context, the nature of exogenous factors has been fundamentally and dynamically changing. Restrictive anti-pandemic measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have closed the Schengen border in many ways in recent years (referred to as re-bordering or covid-fencing), the daily functioning of border regions has changed dramatically during particular pandemic waves, and the border has become simultaneously a testing ground for existing and novel forms of cross-border cooperation. Subsequently, in 2022, the exogenous factor of the war in Ukraine re-opened this border in many ways (in the sense of de-bordering) and significantly influenced migration flows and border management, as well as the forms and intensity of cross-border cooperation. Following the onset of the war, Ukraine became a candidate country for accession to the EU, thereby changing a significant pair of exogenous factors (the implementation of the AA/DCFTA), which have in the last few years determined the conditions and dynamics of cross-border cooperation.

State of Play

The Prešov Region is an industrial and agricultural region (2023 regional GDP per capita over €14,000; unemployment slightly below eight percent). Key economic sectors in the region include processing industries, namely food, based on local agricultural production, clothing, textiles, wood processing (specializing in furniture and interiors), motor vehicles, and other transport industries. Electrical engineering and chemical and pharmaceutical industries are also important, while rubber, plastic products, metals, and metal products are key strategic industries. There is no heavy industry located in the region (Slivková et al. 2022; Brenzovych et al. 2023).

The economy of the Košice Region (2023 regional GDP per capita over €19,000; unemployment slightly below seven percent) encompasses all sectors from food to metallurgy. Its potential is dependent on its strong industrial base in the Košice agglomeration and in the Michalovce, Spišská Nová Ves, and Košice districts, where the largest concentration of large companies and small and medium-sized enterprises can be found. Regional GDP is very sensitive to the performance of the largest employers in the area, as well as to investment inflows, especially foreign investment. In recent years, foreign direct investment in the Košice Region has mainly benefited the engineering, IT, automotive, and chemical industries. The regional economy is shaped by the strong industrial, financial, research, and educational base in the Košice agglomeration, which has the potential to boost growth across Eastern Slovakia (Rosičová & Kováčová et al. 2023; Brenzovych et al. 2023).

Transcarpathia's regional economy (2021 regional GDP per capita over €19,000; unemployment over 11 percent)¹ is mainly dependent on cross-border trade, wine production, and forestry, including wood processing. The industrial complex in the Transcarpathian Region ranges from mining to mechanical engineering to the production of essential goods including food. The region's machine-building industry manufactures computers, electrical and electronic products, electrical equipment, machinery, and motor vehicles. One third of enterprises in this sector are engaged in toll manufacturing and are increasingly dependent on foreign partners, which hinders the expansion of domestic enterprises that specialize in the production of raw materials and semi-finished products, mainly under contracts with foreign partners. Moreover, the sale of unprocessed wood is having a negative impact on the woodworking and furniture industry, with the region becoming an exporter of low-grade wood (Duran et al. 2019; Brenzovych et al. 2023).

Slovak-Ukrainian Research on Cross-Border Cooperation

The first comprehensive research project, entitled "Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine and Cross-border Cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine: Implications and Opportunities" (AASKUA, project code: APVV-15-0369),² was implemented by the Institute of Political Science at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Prešov over the period from 2016 to 2019.

Recent follow-up research includes a representative opinion poll of residents of the border areas, carried out from July 2021 to August 2022 as a part of the project "Safe and Inclusive Border between Slovakia and Ukraine", which was implemented by a consortium of organizations led by the Bureau of Border and Foreign

Police of the Presidium of the Police Force/Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic with the support of the EEA Grants (SIBSU, project code: GGC01005).³

In case of the AASKUA project, the data collection focused on surveying the positions of a wider circle of local cross-border cooperation actors took place from November 2017 to January 2018, a few months after the introduction of the visa-free regime in Ukraine (for more details: Lačný & Polačková 2019). In the case of the SIBSU project, data collection in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands was conducted from December 2021 to January 2022, shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine (for more details: Benchak et al. 2023).

Perceptions of Local Cross-Border Cooperation Actors

Respondents in the AASKUA and SIBSU projects were asked to identify barriers to CBC, understood as conditions or activities that hinder or restrict the free movement and interaction of people, capital, goods, services, ideas, etc. In particular areas (infrastructure, border-crossing, the level of CBC support, and general and economic–geographic conditions as barriers), the total mean values of responses ranged around the middle of the scale between “no barriers” and “insurmountable barriers” (corresponding to the permeability of the border between two regions of the same country). Although the respondents were of different backgrounds and experiences, comparison of the results of both surveys provides a picture worth noting. The most significant, persistent barriers to CBC perceived by local actors can be categorized as follow: corruption, security issues, and frequent changes of business rules. Moreover, in the SIBSU survey, the respondents identified two additional factors that they thought were major obstacles to cross-border cooperation at that time: namely, political instability and health concerns. While the first of these barriers was more systemic, the health concerns were associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as the survey was conducted in winter 2021/2022.

On the other hand, local actors in the particular sub-dimensions used in both surveys identified the following as relatively low barriers to CBC: telecommunications (telephoning, postal mail, and Internet access); support for CBC by NGOs; differences in religion, language, and culture; and the size of nearby markets on the other side of the border (for more details: Lačný & Polačková 2019, 30–46; Benchak et al. 2023, 7–19). Among the economic and geographical barriers identified by respondents to both surveys, there was a low purchasing power resulting in the difficulty of expanding business. In this regard, more targeted help from the state would be beneficial, as it would allow the regions to attract more private investment, especially

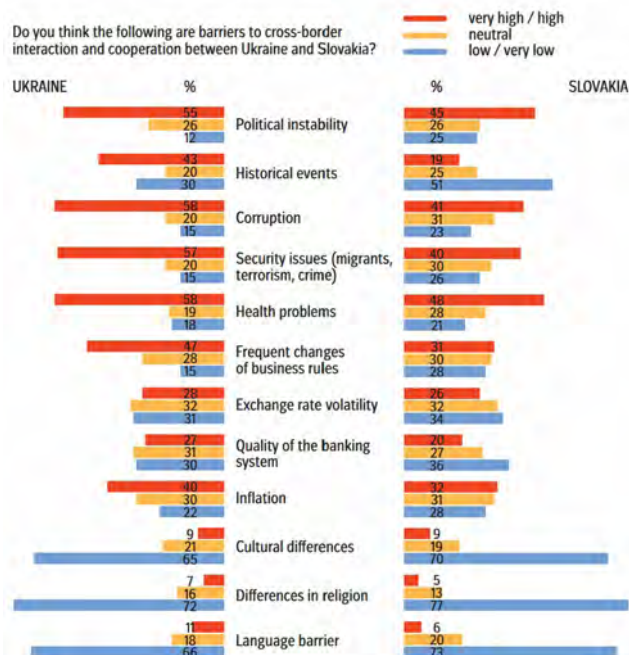


Figure 2. Perceived Barriers to Slovak-Ukrainian CBC. Source: reproduced from Benchak et al. 2023, 17.

for private businesses, as concluded by Benchak et al. (2023, 40).

The most significant and persistent difference in the perceptions of Ukrainian and Slovak local actors has been related to support from European organizations, especially the EU. In the case of both the AASKUA data from 2017/2018 and the SIBSU data from 2021/2022, Slovak respondents saw support from European organizations as the largest obstacle to CBC among the monitored factors, while for Ukrainian respondents this represented one of the lowest barriers (compare Lačný & Polačková 2019, 62–66; Benchak et al. 2023, 26–27). However, this finding indicates the need to strengthen EU support for the Slovak border regions and to target a communication campaign to support CBC, especially in the direction of Slovak actors and local communities in the districts near the Slovak-Ukrainian border, since Ukrainian CBC actors appeared to be rather satisfied with the support from the EU.

In both surveys, according to Slovak and Ukrainian local CBC actors, more intense cross-border interaction had a rather positive impact on the local economies and societies; however, the difference in responses from Slovak and Ukrainian respondents was statistically significant across some of the assessed factors. The replies of Slovak respondents were slightly more neutral than those of Ukrainian respondents, while the perception of more intense cross-border interaction by the Ukrainian respondents appeared to be more positive. Slovak respondents rated a prospective possibility of completely open borders within the wider Europe

and the immigrants from Ukraine working in Slovakia as the relatively least positive impact of more intense CBC (at the level of a slightly negative evaluation). In contrast, the 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 neighbouring country. Within this context, both Slovak and Ukrainian respondents saw the most positive impact of intense cross-border interaction in cooperation between universities, research institutes, etc., in cultural interaction and in terms of local exports to the other side of the border (compare: Lačný & Polačková 2019, 52–55; Benchak et al. 2023, 19–21). At the same time, it is necessary to add that among respondents on both sides of the border, the predominant opinion was that both countries benefited from mutual cooperation, and that both border zones benefited from more intense cross-border interaction.

Respondents assessed the effectiveness of particular CBC policies as largely positive both in the AASKUA and SIBSU surveys, except for national CBC policies, which were perceived significantly more critically than regional CBC policies or the CBC policy of the EU. In particular, local actors on both sides of the border considered the policy of cultural cooperation, the education and research cooperation policy, the CBC policies of the NGOs, and the European Union's CBC policy to be the most effective. They considered the following to be relatively less effective (at the level of neutral evaluation): cooperation policies on environmental issues and natural disasters, cooperation policies on organized crime,

cooperation policies on migration, and a trust-building policy. Slightly more critical views were present among Slovak respondents. The local CBC actors considered minorities and their organizations, cultural associations, NGOs, universities, and research centres as the most active CBC actors, while private businesses and local and regional state administration were considered the least active ones (at the level of neutral or moderately critical assessments) (for more details: Lačný & Polačková 2019, 62–71; Benchak et al. 2023, 26–28).

In case of both surveys, perceptions of local CBC actors regarding the partnership of Ukraine, Slovakia, and the EU can be considered relatively significant correlates of local actors' views on the effects of cross-border economic interaction, cross-border cooperation, and the effects of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine. Local CBC actors who considered Ukraine or Slovakia as a reliable partner have shown a (moderately strong) tendency to positively evaluate the impacts of various forms of cross-border economic interaction and cross-border cooperation. At the same time, Slovak and Ukrainian actors, perceiving the EU as a reliable partner for Ukraine, did not show a tendency to conclude that the EU should primarily benefit from the implementation of the Association Agreement, but were more inclined towards the opinion that Ukraine would benefit from its implementation. The predominantly positive perceptions of the effects of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement also correlated positively with the assessment of the effectiveness of CBC policies. Slovak respondents who positively evaluated the impact of the Association Agreement on local, regional, or national CBC policy also showed a moderately strong tendency to positively assess both the effectiveness of local and regional CBC policies and the effectiveness of national CBC policies. Ukrainian respondents who positively assessed the impact of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement on local, regional, and national CBC policy also showed a moderately strong tendency to positively evaluate the effectiveness of local and regional CBC policies, but only a weak tendency to positively assess the effectiveness of national CBC policies (compare Lačný & Polačková 2019, 101–109; Benchak et al. 2023, 27–29, 39–42).

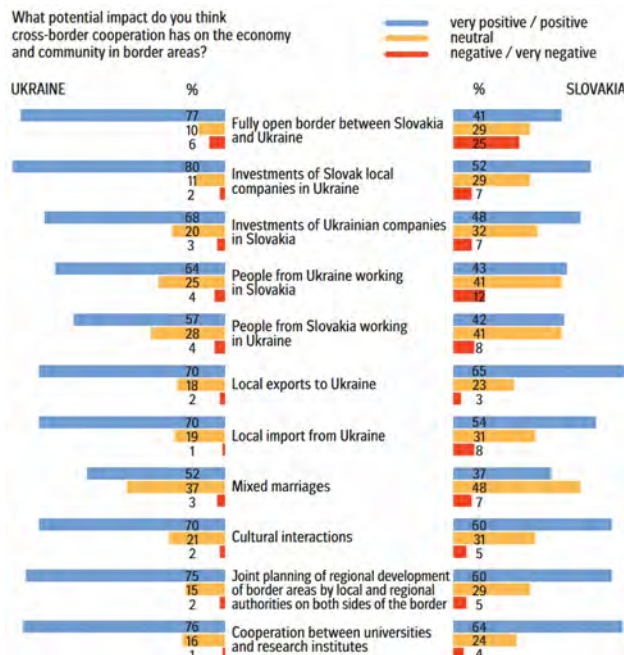


Figure 3. Perceived Potential Impact of Factors on CBC Development. Source: reproduced from Benchak et al. 2023, 20.

Implications for Regional Development Management

In the field of regional development management of borderlands, cross-border cooperation is being utilised as one of the significant tools generating growth impulses for regional economies and a synergistic effect in the use of existing resources and capacities in cross-border entrepreneurship, as well as in cross-border public services. Cross-border cooperation and cross-border public services contribute to cohesion by connecting border regions more effectively, supporting cross-border flows, developing functional

areas of regional economies, overcoming gaps in service provision, increasing the efficiency of production and service provision, opening new perspectives, and ensuring the sustainability of interregional achievements (Mariančíková & Király 2022). From this point of view, when formulating strategies for the regional development of border regions, the identification of opportunities and barriers to cross-border cooperation and the subsequent incorporation of the findings into strategic objectives and operational measures are very important.

In the above context, the strategic documents prospectively setting the development priorities of the Prešov self-governing region, the Košice self-governing region, and the Transcarpathian region should by default include cross-border cooperation in the portfolio of tools for achieving defined development goals. When analysing these documents, however, we see a different degree to which the strategies employed by individual regional authorities reflect the importance and need of using cross-border cooperation in the regional development, as well as a different level of attention paid to the opportunities wrought by the changing character of the border and exogenous factors influencing CBC-based development impulses. The Economic and Social Development Program of the Prešov self-governing region for the years 2021–2030 currently envisages the support of cross-border cooperation explicitly in the field of tourism and the support of improved access to the TEN-T infrastructure and cross-border mobility. In the currently available Economic and Social Development Program of the Košice self-governing region, there is stated intent to support the development of east–west and north–south transport corridors and the connection of adjacent cross-border regions; interest in the continuation and development of cross-border cooperation with Ukrainian regions is declared here as well. In contrast to these strategic documents of the Slovak border regions, the Regional Development Strategy of the Transcarpathian Region from 2021 to 2027 includes cross-border cooperation among the elementary growth factors of the regional economy, while considering it a tool for accelerating competitiveness and innovation of the regional economy, for removing cross-border asymmetries and achieving development levels of Central European cross-border regions in the medium term. In this strategic document, the regional self-government of the Transcarpathian region declares its interest in developing particular ties based on cross-border cooperation with the countries of the Carpathian macro-region (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania), or with the regional self-governments of the border regions of these countries, especially in the fields of transport, construction of road and border infrastructure, spatial and territorial planning, environmental protection, tourism, promotion and protection of cultural heritage, provision of social services, and the creation of cross-border clusters such as industrial parks, science parks, eco-parks, cross-border

parks and logistics centres, and business and start-up incubators. With regard to the use of the Interreg program to support cross-border cooperation projects, the Prešov self-governing region focuses primarily on the Interreg Poland–Slovakia Cross-Border Cooperation Program from 2021 to 2027, while the Košice Self-Governing Region focuses mainly on the Interreg Hungary–Slovakia Cross-Border Cooperation Program for the same period. Because the Transcarpathian region borders several EU member countries, it is oriented to cross-border cooperation programs for Poland–Belarus–Ukraine, Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine, and Romania–Ukraine, as well as the Danube Transnational Program (Lačný 2023, 118–124). A brief comparison of the different approaches of regional development management actors to the utilisation of cross-border cooperation points to the need to develop joint solutions for managing the regional development of the Slovak–Ukrainian borderlands and to update strategic objectives with regard to the new exogenous factors (e.g., Ukraine’s recovery plan). Coordinated management of the regional development of border regions could contribute to a more efficient use of opportunities, including the planning, financing, and implementation of development projects.

One of the possible practical solutions is institutionalizing the cooperation of regional development management actors in the form of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), which is a multinational entity that facilitates and supports territorial cooperation with the aim of strengthening economic, social, and territorial cohesion and overcoming obstacles, including the implementation of operations supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, and the Cohesion Fund (European Union 2014). Coordinated management of regional development within the EGTC would have the potential to ensure harmonization of strategic planning of regional development of the respective border regions on both sides of the Schengen border and synergy in the use of opportunities, including the financing of development projects.

Policy Considerations and Perspectives

The conventional objective of cross-border cooperation is the removal of barriers and other factors that contribute to the division of political and economic entities across the border. For the Slovak–Ukrainian border, its open character can be a great vision and opportunity for the regional development of the border area. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that cooperation mechanisms at the external Schengen border of the EU have to face a different reality than the internal borders of the EU, where the objectives of cooperation are concentrated exclusively on cohesion and balancing differences between border regions. The specificity

of the situation at this particular border is primarily due to the gradual implementation of the Association Agreement and the gradually changing nature of the border. Throughout this process, the border is successively reproduced and acquires new roles. It still functions as a barrier and filter, but its partial permeability is increasingly enabling the development of cross-border activities. In this context, the EU brought the necessary impulses not only in the form of financing but also in terms of ideas and policies (Lačný et al. 2022). Since Ukraine became a candidate for EU membership in 2022, it may be included in the EU and the Schengen area. This adoption could radically change the situation in the Slovak-Ukrainian border regions in the future as the Slovak-Ukrainian border will cease to be the EU's external border. The presented research points out that both the EU's ability to stimulate cross-border cooperation and the impact of more intense cross-border interaction are perceived by local actors of cross-border cooperation as beneficial from the point of view of the border region's development. The perception of the EU as a reliable partner appears to be an important factor affecting the perception of the impacts of cross-border interaction by local actors in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands, which represents important feedback in relation to the design and communication of cross-border cooperation policies at the transnational, national, regional, and local levels. The perceptions of local actors also point to existing barriers to cross-border cooperation and cross-border business, which need to be reduced from the point of view of regional development management in order to take advantage of the opportunities provided by integration processes and thus support the economic and social development of border regions.

Notes

- 1 The latest regional data provided by the State Statistics Service of Ukraine are from 2021, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- 2 The AASKUA project outcomes are available here: <https://www.unipo.sk/filozoficka-fakulta/institut-fakulty/ipol-ff/projekty/44911/>
- 3 The SIBSU project outcomes are available here: <https://www.sibsu.sk/publications>

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