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Two Regions, One Vision: The Cross-Border Mission of the Via Carpatia EGTC

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This article illustrates how the organization European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Via Carpatia (from here on referred to as Via Carpatia EGTC) with limited liability exemplifies the potential of EGTCs to act as effective platforms for overcoming administrative borders and fostering meaningful, results-oriented cooperation that responds to local needs while aligning with broader EU objectives. The Via Carpatia EGTC has played an important role since 2013 in promoting cross-border cooperation between Slovakia's Košice Self-governing Region and Hungary's Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. Its activities contribute to regional development through coordinated projects and initiatives focused on infrastructure, culture, and economic growth. The Via Carpatia EGTC serves as a key policy instrument for fostering territorial cohesion, addressing regional disparities, and enhancing cooperation in various thematic areas including education, ecology, social policy, and infrastructure. A significant component of Via Carpatia EGTC's work is the Small Project Fund (SPF), through which numerous local initiatives such as cultural events, sports programs, and support for regional producers have been financed. In this article, we also highlight several international collaborations aimed at improving digitalization in elderly care, promoting environmental awareness among youth, and advancing circular economy models. Since 2013, Via Carpatia EGTC has mobilized more than €19 million in investments, contributed to the creation and support of over 1,100 jobs, and implemented more than 40 successful projects.

Key words: Cross-border cooperation, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, Small Project Fund, Regional development, Interregional partnership, Building partnerships.

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1. A European Literature Overview of EGTCs

European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) are legal tools established by the European Union to support cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation (van Lierop 2015). EGTCs were introduced through Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and the Council with the aim of overcoming administrative, legal, and political barriers between member states (European Commission 2006). A revision of this regulation in 2013 (Regulation No. 1302/2013) further enhanced the flexibility and effectiveness of EGTC as a regional policy instrument (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2013). The primary mission of an EGTC is to enable public authorities from different member states to jointly implement projects and manage EU funding. Within cohesion policy, EGTCs play a key role in supporting regional development, economic cooperation, and better coordination between regions facing common challenges and objectives. Currently, there are more than 80 active EGTCs in the EU, each focusing on various areas of cooperation, ranging from infrastructure and transport to culture and environmental projects (Gouardères 2025).

EGTCs bring several significant benefits, which have been confirmed by various studies. They support increased integration between different EU regions, leading to improved coordination and stronger regional ties, as shown in the study *The Role of EGTCs in Territorial Cooperation* (van Lierop 2015). EGTCs are also effective legal instruments that enhance and streamline cross-border cooperation within the European Union. According to the study by Anca-Adriana Cucu, the EGTC structure improves coordination between different levels of public administration, reducing administrative burdens and increasing the efficiency of project implementation. By establishing joint administrative frameworks, EGTCs help overcome bureaucratic barriers that typically hinder international collaboration. Thanks to their flexibility, these groupings can adapt to the specific needs of regions, supporting efficient project management and fostering sustainable development. In addition to cross-border cooperation, they also support transnational cooperation, enabling better use of shared opportunities, such as natural resources or tourism potential (Cucu 2011).

This article is based on internal documents and materials from the Via Carpatia EGTC outlining its activities and achievements. The primary sources of information include official reports, project documentation, and archival materials collected throughout the organization's existence. Images included in the paper illustrate specific project results (e.g., cultural festivals, local production facilities, educational initiatives) and are sourced from Via Carpatia EGTC's internal archives and official documentation.

The article provides an overview of projects which have been implemented. The paper first introduces the concept and legal background of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), with a specific focus on the Via Carpatia EGTC. Then, it outlines the organizational structure and mission of Via Carpatia, highlighting its role in fostering cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Hungary. Subsequently, the paper presents examples of successful projects implemented through the departments of Small Project Fund and Implementation of international projects with international funding mechanisms, covering topics such as education, environment, digitalization in elderly care, and local economic development. The final sections assess the broader impact of Via Carpatia's work, identify challenges, and outline the organization's future vision within the framework of EU territorial cooperation.

The authors represent the organization and support its work in their professional capacities as project managers. Our ultimate goal is to describe the benefits of EGTCs to a cross-border region, in this specific case our region, and to explain the functioning of EGTCs to the readers. This specific study highlights how EGTCs contribute to regional development, improve policy coordination, and aid in overcoming administrative and legal barriers between European Union member states. This approach allows us to present a comprehensive overview of EGTCs, emphasizing their positive impact on cross-border cooperation and the practical mechanisms through which these organizations operate.

2. The Via Carpatia EGTC



Figure 1. Logo of Via Carpatia EGTC. All images reproduced in this article are sourced from internal materials of Via Carpatia EGTC.

The Via Carpatia EGTC with limited liability was founded in 2013 (official logo illustrated in Figure 1). The grouping consists of two members: The Košice Self-governing Region (Slovakia) and the county of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (Hungary). It operates on a territory with an area of just over 14 thousand square kilometers, with over 1.4 million inhabitants. The chairman of the general assembly of the Via Carpatia EGTC is Bánné dr. Gál Boglárka from Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County and the vice-chairman of the general assembly is Rastislav Trnka from the Košice Self-governing Region.

The director of the Via Carpatia EGTC is Julianna Máté. The organizational structure of Via Carpatia comprises three departments: the International Projects Implementation Department, the Small Projects Fund Department, and the Social Projects Department, each focused on different aspects of community development and support in the region.

The mission of the Via Carpatia EGTC is to connect the regions of Košice and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County and to develop them through projects in various areas, such as ecology, education, silver economy, local economy, employment, and many other topics that will improve the lives of people in the region on both sides of the border. The key goals of Via Carpatia are to promote cross-border, transnational, and regional cooperation, strengthen economic and social cohesion, and implement development programs. It provides expert consultations and strategic guidance tailored to regional needs, engaging professionals across diverse fields. Through dialogue and knowledge exchange among experts and policymakers, it fosters innovation, shares best practices, and encourages collaboration across Europe. By analyzing data and consulting stakeholders, Via Carpatia identifies core socio-economic and territorial challenges, enabling targeted and effective solutions that support sustainable development and cohesion within the European Union. Zdenko Trebula, vice-chairman of Via Carpatia from 2014 to 2017, described its inception: "in 2011, when the preparation of the founding documents of the Via Carpatia EGTC began, I knew that it would be the right decision. Working within one institution with a cross-border partner was a challenge for us, but we knew that we could handle it and success would come with time".

2.1. Via Carpatia transit route

The Via Carpatia EGTC was initially established to support the development of the Via Carpatia transit corridor. Over time, its focus shifted toward implementing projects with direct regional impact. Via Carpatia is a historical route connecting the Baltic Sea to the Aegean, crucial for economic growth. The route passes through several countries (Figure 2) including Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. Its development was identified as having potential to boost various sectors such as small businesses, research, and technology. The Lancut Declaration in 2006 initiated cooperation among Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia for its construction. Since then, significant progress has been made through various conferences and agreements. The Via Carpatia Transit Route is a priority for national transport policies in the countries involved. It aims to enhance connectivity and regional development. Numerous activities have been undertaken to promote the route's construction and integration into the TEN-T network. Cooperation agreements have been signed among regional governments to facilitate its implementation. The corridor's significance lies

in its potential to stimulate economic growth and development across regions, and it symbolizes cooperation and connectivity among European nations. The route's completion would therefore streamline transportation and trade across borders. Overall, the Via Carpatia project holds immense promise for the economic and social advancement of the involved countries and regions. Nowadays, this topic is less central for the Via Carpatia EGTC, as all the involved countries are independently working on the development and improvement of the transit route.



Figure 2. Map of Via Carpatia Transit Route.

3. Small Project Fund

3.1. Direct support to the territory

One of the exceptional projects implemented by the Via Carpatia EGTC, thanks to its uniqueness in Europe, is the Small Project Fund (SPF). The overall objective of the SPF is to strengthen social cohesion across borders by supporting local-level cooperation and establishing and improving long-term collaboration between actors on both sides of the border through the implementation of local and regional projects. The SPF supports activities intended to develop cross-border cooperation, including cultural exchange, human resources, planning and development studies, economic development, environment, tourism, and communication. The Via Carpatia EGTC has managed the SPF within the programme Interreg Slovak Republic-Hungary. The total budget for the 2017-2023 programming period was €7,332,185, of which €6,232,359 was allocated to the Small Projects Fund, which supported 127 projects. In the new programming period of 2023 to 2027, the

total budget was €7,593,457, of which €6,454,438 has been allocated to the Small Projects Fund (Via Carpatia EGTC 2023).

The Small Project Fund initiatives must contribute to Via Carpatia's priority objectives. One of these objectives is to increase the attractiveness of the border area, focusing on better utilization of the region's natural and cultural potential. Another priority objective is to improve the level of cross-border inter-institutional cooperation and broaden cross-border cooperation between citizens by fostering the exchange of experience between citizens, strengthening institutional capacities and encouraging greater public participation in cross-border activities, improving mutual understanding and fostering closer relationships between ethnic groups living in the region, increasing the number of long-term institutional partnerships, encouraging greater public participation on cross-border activities, increasing the number of common sustainable events and activities, and improving the level of bilingualism in the program area. The minimum amount of an SPF project is €10,569 and the maximum is €63,431. Each project needs to contribute to the results of the priority axis set out in the program manual.

3.2. Examples of successful projects

Projects that have been implemented within the Small Projects Fund contribute to the improvement of cross-border inter-institutional cooperation as well as the strengthening of connections between citizens.

3.2.1. Puppet theater in Košice

The aim of the Košice puppet theater project was to improve the cross-border flow of information about the border regions of Hungary and Slovakia by presenting common cultural heritage in an innovative form primarily focused on children. Throughout the project we wanted to move cooperation to the neighboring Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. The main outputs of the project included 10 puppet television fairy tales (evenings), based on folk and fairy tales from the involved regions (for example, Figure 3). The implementation team in the Hungarian-Slovak co-production provides an opportunity to promote both regions, while at the same time introducing the younger generation to the traditional cultural art of puppetry, which is included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

3.2.2. Sárospatak Város Önkormányzata

After the closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was once again a high demand for cultural festivals on both the Hungarian and Slovak sides of the border (see Figure 4 for example). The main purpose of the Sárospatak Város Önkormányzata festival was to connect partners through joint organization and implementation, creating long-term cooperation between the partner organizations and other institutions in the



Figure 3. Puppet Theater in Kosice.



Figure 4. Sárospatak Város Önkormányzata Festival.

Bodrog region. In the coming years, this cooperation will be able to ensure the delivery of high-quality events of international importance for both local residents and tourists.

3.2.3. Civic Association for the Development of Gombasek

The Gombaszög 2024—Cultural Dialogue Without Borders project, implemented under the Small Project Fund, aimed to strengthen cultural and cross-border ties between Slovakia and Hungary. It was focused on promoting cultural diversity and cooperation between communities (Figure 5). The project partner was the Pro Minoritate Foundation from Hungary, an organization dedicated to supporting minorities and cross-border relations. The project increased awareness of regional cultural identities, attracted more Hungarian visitors

to the festival, and enriched the event with Hungarian cultural elements.



Figure 5. Gombaszög 2024 Festival.

4. Implementation of International Projects

Throughout our activities, we have implemented a substantial number of international projects encompassing diverse thematic areas such as education, social development, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, regional growth, and cross-border collaboration. Our portfolio demonstrates a comprehensive approach to addressing both local and broader European priorities. The majority of these projects have been successfully realized within funding frameworks, including the Norway Grants, Interreg Central Europe, Interreg Danube Region, Interreg Hungary–Slovakia, and a national Call for Applications for Grant Funding in the Area of Regional Development Support. Rastislav Trnka, vice-chairman of the Via Carpatia EGTC and president of Košice Self-governing Region from 2017 to present, observes that “the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Via Carpatia has created one big family in both regions with over 1.4 million inhabitants. It is a proof of the above-standard cooperation of Košice self-governing region with our good neighbors, the counties on the Hungarian border whether it concerns employment, education, regional development or social issues. Although we are separated by kilometers, thanks to common projects we are closer to each other and thanks to this we can grow together. I’m extremely proud of this cooperation”.

4.1. Territorial Action Plan for Employment (TAPE): Employment cross-border action plan of the Cserehát Micro-Region

The “Szép Cserehát” (Beautiful Cseherát) action plan represents a major initiative coordinated by the Via Carpatia EGTC. The main goals of the action plan were to decrease the unemployment rate, find solutions to the region’s most serious problems, and improve

conditions in the micro-region “Szép Cserehát” by utilizing its internal potential. The action plan was implemented through the INTERREG V-A SKHU cooperation programme from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) with a total budget of €4,417,494. The project was implemented between the years of 2019 and 2022. There were seven smaller projects within this action plan, each with different goals (see Figure 6, for example). The communication and coordination of all projects was the responsibility of the Via Carpatia EGTC. Promotion was identified as a key factor in project success. The Via Carpatia EGTC developed the complete marketing concept that supports and still serves as the basis for the regional branding of “Szép Cserehát”. As part of this effort, the “Local Image” project supported local producers through a web platform and the creation of a regional product identity (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 6. Marketplace Constructed within the Framework of the Action Plan.

Gyula Ocskay, Secretary General of the CESC (Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives), shares that “the Via Carpatia EGTC perfectly embodies all the benefits that the EU legislators intended to achieve with this instrument in the mid-2000s: the EGTC has become a successful workshop and the real owner of the border region which connect all actors who can effectively contribute to the development of the region; numerous implemented projects prove that the EGTC has an impact on cross-border development if it is carefully managed and led by a professional team; Via Carpatia also proved that this form of cooperation can also be used for the successful management of programs or their parts, since as the eastern manager of the Small Projects Fund of Slovakia-Hungarian cooperation contributed to the implementation of several local initiatives. The key to success of the EGTC is a dedicated team that works hard day after day, sometimes invisibly, to elevate the border region. We thank all the employees, especially the director who leads the team and we wish you success in your next challenges!”

i. Project: Coordination and communication—CCP

The objective of the coordination and communication project was to facilitate seven projects of the action plan. For this purpose, the Via Carpatia EGTC organized several meetings with individual project partners where further steps to be taken in each project were discussed (for example, Figures 7 and 8). During the three-year duration of the action plan, it worked as a supporting instrument for all partners. Another significant purpose of the project was to provide a communication aspect of the action plan. This was on one side a provision of obligatory communication elements on the level of the Interreg Slovakia-Hungary Cooperation Program and, on the other hand, promotion of project activities in media and on social networks. The total budget was €218,052 (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 7. Opening Conference of Local Image.



Figure 8. Meetings with Individual Project Partners.

ii. Project: Development of local products

Support for local production became the main tool in this area of Cserehát. The project helped local people by improving job opportunities, education, production, and cross-border cooperation. Here are some inspiring examples of what has been achieved:

- Plant for pumpkin oil pressing, fruit juices, and seed-roasting in Buzica

In Buzica, the firm BARTRANZ Ltd. had the opportunity, thanks to the project, to expand its existing production of sunflower oil and rapeseed oil by adding technology to produce pumpkin oil (Figure 9). At the same time, the warehouse was renovated for the storage of cereals and grains. In Gagyvendégi, the entrepreneurs of Cserehát Völgy Kft. (Cserehát Valley Ltd.) and Dsupin János e.v. built a plant consisting of two sections, one for producing fruit juices and another for roasting seeds (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 9. Pumpkin Oil Pressing Plant in Buzica.

- Plant for sauerkraut pressing in Hidasnémeti

Our projects supported both local production and manufacturing for further use of their products. A sauerkraut processing plant was established in Hidasnémeti and a confectionery in Košice focused on processing and selling local confectionery products and from regional producers (Figure 10). In May 2021, the stone foundation for a sauerkraut processing plant was laid in Hidasnémeti. A year later, in May 2022, the plant became operational, fermenting and packing sauerkraut and other cabbage products (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 10. Sauerkraut Pressing Plant in Hidasnémeti.

- GESTO Gelato & Pastry

GESTO Gelato & Pastry, a confectionery and outlet of local products, also began operations in May 2022.

The operating unit purchased raw materials from local producers to create confectionery products (Figure 11). In the up-to-date facility, the tasting of local products provides culinary enjoyment (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 11. GESTO Gelato and Pastry Products.

iii. SKHU Markets project: Meeting local needs

Infrastructure is a key factor for effective development and prosperity. A survey of the conditions in the Cserehát micro-region found that a great number of municipalities suffer from a shortage of infrastructure and urban functions. The SKHU Markets project addressed this situation by constructing five marketplaces on both the Slovak and Hungarian sides of the micro-region for the sale of products from local producers (Figures 12-16). In addition to the five marketplaces, the construction of the House of St. Stephen (Figure 15), which was to function as the region's educational center, was also part of the project. The renovation of a manor house in Gagyvendégi was included as well. The SKHU Markets project began in September 2019. In Spring 2020, the foundation stones for marketplaces were laid on the Slovak side in the municipality of Buzica and on the Hungarian side in the municipality of Gagyvendégi. The marketplaces were officially opened in Summer 2021 and have since been holding farmers' and craftsmen's markets with active participation by sellers and buyers from the region (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 12. Micro-region Marketplace in Buzica.



Figure 13. Micro-region Marketplace in Gagyvendégi.



Figure 14. Opening Marketplace in Encs.



Figure 15. Products from Local Farmers.



Figure 16. House of St. Stephen.

Within the framework of social initiatives, not only were construction projects carried out, but efforts also focused on improving the population's educational level. Common educational and training programs in the fields of social and communication skills, social enterprise, and farming were implemented. Workshops were held to inform residents about current job opportunities, and, in cooperation with employment agencies, efforts were made to find suitable employment for participants, especially for those in the region experiencing long-term unemployment (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).

iv. Project: Renovation & Education

Activities in the project have been implemented to reduce human resources deficiencies. The low educational level has a direct relation to high unemployment. Both of these phenomena contribute to the current situation of the Cserehát micro-region and therefore the implementation of the action plan was aimed at addressing their impacts. As part of this, in Moldava nad Bodvou, the project “Renovation & Education” included a professional renovation of an electro-technical laboratory. In Encs, at the organization “Abaúji Területfejlesztési Önkormányzati Szövetség” (Society of the Regional Development of Abaúj Self-Government), the facilities of the development center were renovated (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).

- The specialized laboratory of Secondary Vocational School in Moldava nad Bodvou

At the Secondary Vocational School of Agro-Technology in Moldava nad Bodvou, the project enabled the school to provide a high-quality electro-technical laboratory for the new generation of electro-technicians (Figures 17 and 18). As a result, the school was able to open a new course in Agromechatronics. The laboratory is equipped with up-to-date technology, and students are taught subjects such as Basics of Electro-Technology and Electronics using a modular system. This teaching method allowed students to enter the labor market more easily and quickly (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).

- Development centre in Encs

In the town of Encs, in the seat of project partner “Abaúji Területfejlesztési Önkormányzati Szövetség” (Society of the Regional Development of Abaúj Self-Government), one whole floor comprising a conference room was renovated (Figure 19). The space is used for the organization of professional conferences, trainings, and other activities. The aim of this project was to provide adequate facilities for education of all those who plan to make moves in their professional life (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 17. Secondary Vocational School Moldava nad Bodvou

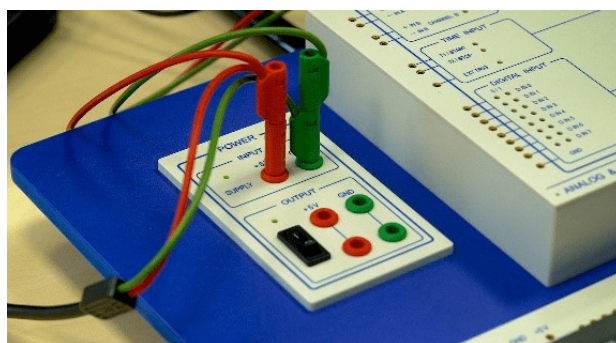


Figure 18. High-quality Electro-technical Equipment.



Figure 19. New Conference Room in Encs.

v. Project: Find Your Way

The central topic of the project Find Your Way was to increase the employment of the population of Cserehát. The Via Carpatia EGTC received a grant of €109,088 for implementation. This project organized training sessions for people experiencing long-term unemployment, providing the opportunity to learn the basics of financial literacy and social communication (Figure 20). In addition, participants were introduced to ways of overcoming dependencies. The most important parts of the program were helping them to create CVs with the assistance of professionals and offering model job interviews to better prepare them for the labor market. Up to 80 unemployed persons participated in the sessions organized within the framework of this project. Sessions were held in the facilities renovated with the resources of the project Renovation & Education on both the Slovak and Hungarian sides of Cserehát. The Via Carpatia EGTC received a grant of €298,153 for implementation. Subsequently, up to 100 persons were interested in an option to participate in a meeting with recruitment agencies where they obtained offers of specific open work positions and had the opportunity to apply for positions immediately on-site. The second part of the project included training on social entrepreneurship for individuals interested in establishing social enterprises. Participants were introduced to relevant legislation, exchanged best practices, and worked together on setting up new social enterprises aimed at employing socially disadvantaged people, thus contributing to the reduction of unemployment (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 20. Training Session, Project Find Your Way.

vi. Project: Build the Local Image

The project "Local Image" (brand) was symbolic of the whole action plan. It aimed to promote the results of completed projects of the action plan and to support promotion of local producers via the development of a web platform for local producers and the creation

of regional brands for local products of the Cserehát region. The promotion of completed projects was carried out through the organization of agro-festivals (Figures 21 and 22), at the newly built marketplaces constructed under the SKHU Markets project, with the goal of popularizing them amongst the general public. One of the key outputs of the project was a local agro study to determine the best options for developing local production in the Cserehát micro-region. Another output was the web platform of local producers, which was available on the internet for the public. The platform included a database of local producers from the Cserehát region, allowing users to easily find high-quality local products nearby. The platform possesses various features besides the database of local producers, including reports on markets, assessments of producers, maps of producers, offers of products and services in the local area, and more. Finally, another important output of the project was the regional image (brand) and marketing of Cserehát's local products to guarantee their locality and high quality. This brand is awarded only to verified producers from the region. At the end of the project, an "Agro EXPO" presented the developed platform and the regional brand (image) to the broad public (Via Carpatia EGTC 2022).



Figure 21. Agro Festivals in Hidasnémeti.



Figure 22. Agro Festival in Gagyvendégi.

4.2. Social topics

4.2.1. I-CARE-SMART project

Social issues also appeared in other projects, such as the international project “Innovation Ecosystem for Smart Elderly Care” (I-CARE-SMART). The project focused on the health and well-being of elderly people in Central Europe. This area represents a social challenge, but also an opportunity to promote growth. Therefore, the goal of the project was to maintain the development of innovative products and services that corresponded to the special needs of elderly community members, contributing to the development of the “silver economy”. The role of the partners in the I-CARE-SMART project was to bring these innovations closer to senior citizens and to create a structured framework for cooperation among all stakeholders in this area. I-CARE-SMART brings a comprehensive set of tools and recommendations aimed at involving seniors and businesses in the co-creation of innovations. The ultimate goal of the project was to build a transnational innovation ecosystem for smart elderly care, enabling collaboration and regular knowledge-sharing between public authorities, universities, businesses, and representatives of the elderly. A total of 13 partners from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Italy, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany participated in the project. The following materials in the field of innovations for seniors were created within the project: Toolbox Senior Business Engagement, Handbook on Co-Creation & Open Innovation Methods for Smart Elderly Care, a regional action plan, and regional reports to summarize the findings of the co-creation based needs assessment process. The project was co-financed from the Interreg Central Europe programme, amounting to €2,593,039 (Figure 23 depicts innovative elderly care and Figure 24 shows partners addressing the topic).



Figure 23. I-CARE-SMART Innovation in Elderly Care.



Figure 24. Partners Presenting Outcomes.

4.2.2. SKHU Ambassadors project: Active Ageing— Create a cross-border team of ambassadors in order to improve the quality of life for Slovak and Hungarian seniors

Another example of cooperation in the social field is the project “Active Ageing—Create a cross-border team of ambassadors in order to improve the quality of life for Slovak and Hungarian seniors—SKHU Ambassadors”. It was implemented throughout the Interreg SKHU programme, presenting an innovative approach primarily aimed at improving the quality of life for seniors. The project focused on supporting their health, physical activity, and socialization through the creation of cross-border services and the establishment of an Active Ageing Centre. The total budget of €195,942 covered the following:

- Bank of Kindness: an online platform through which seniors and institutions, based on volunteering, can provide help to those who need it the most
- Active Ageing Centres: the establishment of two senior centres where visitors can spend their free time, learn, and engage in various creative or physical activities while also making new contacts (Figures 25–28 show activities of the Active Ageing Centre in Košice)
- Ambassadors team: creating a senior ambassadors team on the Hungarian and Slovak border



Figure 25. Crafts Made by Seniors.



Figure 26. Cooking Course



Figure 27. Awarding Certificates to Seniors.



Figure 28. Opening of the Active Ageing Center in Košice.

4.2.3. DigiCare4CE project: Digital transformation of long-term care facilities for older people

Our commitment to social responsibility is also reflected in the international project DigiCare4CE, which is aimed at helping to increase the level of digitalization in long-term care facilities for the elderly (Figures 29 and 30). It is supported and implemented within the Interreg Central Europe programme and financed by the European Regional Development Fund with a budget of €2,184,181. A total of 10 partners from Slovakia, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Poland are participating in its implementation in the years 2023 through 2026.



Figure 29. VR Headset for Therapy in Long-term Care Facilities.



Figure 30. Personnel of Long-term Care Facilities Using the VR.

4.3. Educational topics

Education is a continual process at any age and that is why the Via Carpatia EGTC also focuses on this issue. The project "Let's Improve the Environmental Responsibility of the Pupils!" contributed to environmental awareness and responsibility amongst primary and secondary school pupils in the Košice region. One of the outcomes of the project was the development of the educative online game EcoHero (logo shown in Figure 32). The result of the project was an improvement of the overall awareness of students in the field of ecology, as well as in waste recycling, waste management, separate collection of waste, circular economy, and sustainable development (Figure 33). The project was implemented with the financial support of the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development, and Informatization of the Slovak Republic with a total budget of €47,158.



Figure 32. Logo of EcoHero Game.



Figure 33. Awarding Certificates to Students in Ecology.

4.4. Green topics

We are always working on bringing interesting and useful projects to the region, especially those focused on the environment and sustainability. Among them is Safety4TMF, which works on improving the safe handling of mining waste to better protect nature, and REHEATEAST, which promotes renewable energy and more efficient heating systems. These efforts support a greener and healthier future for the region, along with other initiatives described below.

4.4.1. CITYCIRCLE project

The development of our territory is facilitated especially when we also focus on topics that have economic importance. The CITYCIRCLE project facilitated innovation and technology transfer and improved services and business models in peripheral cities. By providing the tools and knowledge associated with the circular economy (depicted in Figures 34 and 35), the project enabled a new generation of innovative solutions in Central European urban ecosystems in the long term. The project was financed by the Interreg Central Europe programme with a total budget of €2,001,705.



Figure 34 Composters Provided to Secondary Schools, Circular Economy Initiatives.



Figure 35. Handbook Developed for CITYCIRCLE Project.

4.4.2 Young4Climate project

We implemented projects with green themes because they are an integral part of our effort to ensure the long-term health of the planet and sustainable environment for current and future generations. The significant project Young4Climate received a grant from Norway of €373,603 and it is co-financed by the state budget of the Slovak Republic, which contributed €56,050. The goal of this project is to increase awareness of climate crisis adaptation and mitigation by implementing a series of innovative activities aimed mainly at students at 62 secondary schools in the Košice region, helping them to understand the climate agenda and preparing them to fight the climate crisis (for example, Figure 36, the installation of green walls at a secondary school). This was successfully featured in the online game *Young4Climate*, which focused on raising awareness about green themes.



Figure 36. Green Walls Unveiled at a Secondary School.

4.4.3. REHEATEAST project

Switching to clean and renewable energy is important for protecting the environment and reducing dependence on fossil fuels. REHEATEAST is an international project implemented within the framework of the Danube Region Interreg programme and it is funded by the European Regional Development Fund. The total budget of the project is €2,214,691. The REHEATEAST project aims to contribute to reducing the demand for fossil energy in district heating systems in the Eastern Danube Region while promoting the use of renewable energy (for example, Figure 37 shows heat pumps enabled through cooperation between the public and private sectors). The pilot of the project consists of GeoMap, an interactive visual tool that displays key data layers relevant to the Košice region. It helps users easily explore and analyze important indicators such as the layout of the DHC pipeline network and local infrastructure. This map supports better decision-making, raises awareness, and improves planning by offering clear and accessible information on the topic of renewable sources.



Figure 37. Heat Pumps as Part of Renewable Energy Solutions.

4.4.4. Safety4TMF project

Tailing ponds represent a significant environmental concern, as they are frequently neglected yet demand focused attention and remediation. The Safety4TMF project aims to provide coordinated measures for the prevention and disaster management of waste material (tailings) derived from excavation and ore extraction in the Danube region, with the goal of preventing environmental disasters while ensuring permanent safety conditions and measures in cooperation with various stakeholders. The project emphasizes the importance of cooperation among multi-level governance actors, including authorities, municipalities, first responders, academia, and others. By promoting collaboration and knowledge exchange through training, workshops, conferences, and peer-review visits, the project fosters transnational cooperation to address TMF-related risks. The total budget of the Safety4TMF project is €2,458,381.

4.4.5. MOUNT GREENFRA project

Protecting nature and using natural resources in a smart and sustainable way is the key to building a better future for people and the environment. The MOUNT GREENFRA project, with a total budget of €1,379,008, focuses on the restoration of natural resources and their sustainable use to create a healthier and more resilient environment for current and future generations. Through the development of green infrastructure, effective rainwater management, and innovative solutions, the project contributes to protecting nature and improving the quality of life in the cross-border region. Beyond its environmental goals, the project places strong emphasis on education and community involvement. It engages children from kindergartens as well as students from primary schools, secondary schools, and universities to learn about the importance of sustainability.

5. Impact of the Projects

The implementation of international projects has a direct and long-term impact on regional development. By carefully selecting project themes such as education, environment, mobility, or social innovation, regions can respond to local needs more effectively and create targeted solutions. Projects often introduce new approaches, tools, or services that improve the quality of life for residents, strengthen local institutions, and make the region more resilient and attractive for future investments. In this way, project implementation is not just about fulfilling program requirements. It becomes a strategic instrument for shaping a smarter, greener, and more inclusive regional environment.

Positive points of projects:

- **Environmental and Climate Education Initiatives:** The Via Carpatia EGTC has implemented several initiatives aimed at raising environmental and climate awareness, particularly among students in the Košice region. Projects such as "Let's Improve the Environmental Responsibility of the Pupils!" and Young4Climate focused on educating young people about recycling, waste management, sustainable development, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. Interactive tools, like the EcoHero online game, made learning engaging and accessible. In addition, the REHEATEAST project promoted energy efficiency by supporting the use of renewable energy and waste heat in district heating systems, contributing to greener and more sustainable regional development.
- **International Collaboration:** The WEROPE—We are Europe project fostered cooperation among several European countries, aiming to fight poverty and promote solidarity and volunteerism. It shared best practices and knowledge across countries, strengthening social cohesion.
- **Economic Development through Innovation:** The CITYCIRCLE project supported innovation and technology transfer in peripheral cities, focusing on circular economy solutions. It helped improve urban ecosystems and services, promoting long-term sustainable development.
- **Risk Management and Environmental Safety:** The Safety4TMF project focused on waste material management from mining activities, preventing environmental disasters through multi-level governance and stakeholder cooperation in the Danube region.

Weak Points of the Projects:

- **Limited Scope of Implementation:** The Young4Climate project had a limited geographical reach, impacting only schools in the Košice region. Expanding it could increase its impact.
- **Financial Constraints:** Projects like WEROPE—We are Europe had limited budgets, which may have restricted their scope and effectiveness. Larger budgets could have allowed for more comprehensive activities.
- **Challenges in Multi-Sector Collaboration:** The Safety4TMF project required coordination among multiple stakeholders, which can be challenging due to differing interests. Effective collaboration is the key to project success.
- **Long-Term Sustainability:** Ensuring the continued success of projects like CITYCIRCLE after completion is important for maintaining the benefits of innovative solutions.
- **Potential for Lack of Immediate Impact:** Projects such as REHEATEAST may take time to show visible results, making it crucial to manage expectations and demonstrate short-term achievements.

6. Future Directions for EGTC Development

Our goal is to create a viable and prosperous environment for all people who live in our regions and to be an active player in the transformation of our regions into modern and competitive places where people enjoy life and have all the conditions necessary for personal growth. The results of hard work on these goals often appear years later. We have become accustomed to this fact and therefore nothing will stop us from creating other successful stories in the form of new projects. We are determined to be a catalyst for positive change and an engine of development in our regions. We believe that in cooperation with all our partners, we will achieve a real impact via positive change in our regions. Inclusive and participatory approaches are the key to success. We listen to the opinions and needs of our citizens and involve them in decision-making processes. We are proud of our work and enthusiastically look to the future, ready for the next challenges and opportunities that it will bring.



Figure 38. Team of Via Carpatia EGTC.



Figure 39. Director of Via Carpatia EGTC Julianna Máté.

7. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to demonstrate the value of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) in fostering development and integration in cross-border regions. Our case study of the Via Carpatia EGTC offers a concrete example of how these organizations can generate lasting benefits. A significant contribution to regional development is made by EGTCs. Since its establishment in 2013, the Via Carpatia EGTC has brought more than €19 million in investments to the region. These funds have strengthened local economies, enhanced social infrastructure, and fostered equal opportunities through improvements in education, healthcare, and cultural life. The support for over 1,140 jobs during this time has further promoted social stability and improved quality of life for residents. Additionally, Via Carpatia EGTC plays a crucial role in improving policy coordination across borders. Through the submission of 91 projects, of which 45 were successfully implemented with a total budget exceeding €30 million, Via Carpatia has supported better planning, infrastructure modernization, and innovation that align with both local and European development strategies.

One of the key benefits of EGTCs is their ability to overcome administrative and legal barriers between member states. By fostering long-term partnerships with more than 600 organizations across Europe, Via Carpatia has built bridges between institutions and stakeholders, facilitating smoother cooperation and the sharing of best practices in project implementation and governance. The positive impact of EGTCs on cross-border cooperation is evident. The trust-based relationships established through this mechanism have led to the exchange of knowledge, strengthening of mutual capacities, and creation of joint visions for sustainable territorial development. Cross-border projects have not only brought economic growth but have also improved access to education and health services, supported cultural initiatives, and reinforced community ties. The organization's effectiveness is reflected in its ability to produce measurable, practical results. The effectiveness of the Via Carpatia EGTC is underscored by its financial productivity: for every €1 invested in the organization, an average of €35 is returned to the region in the form of development projects. This multiplier effect highlights the efficiency and impact of EGTCs in turning strategic visions into tangible results for communities. Through this comprehensive overview, we have shown that EGTCs such as Via Carpatia are not only functional tools of European territorial cooperation, but also catalysts for inclusive and sustainable regional development.

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