The Role of Cross-Border Cooperation in Democracy Promotion Between Slovakia and Ukraine: The Zakarpattia (Transcarpathia) Region

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This paper argues that cross-border cooperation practices stand as a vehicle of Ukraine's bottom-up integration with the EU, ultimately helping to grow public trust in democratic governance in Ukraine. By looking at the case of cross-border cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia, this paper shows how cross-border cooperation practices are developing between two neighbouring states and how mutual trust between the border communities and with their local and national authorities has been established across the border. The cross-border cooperation policy of the European Union is a reasonably new policy for Ukraine. Therefore, best practices established by the neighbouring EU states have been of great significance for Ukraine from both political and territorial perspectives, and in relation to the Ukrainian state's progress towards integration into Europe.

Introduction

The role of borders in democracy promotion has been studied considerably by border and democracy scholars. However, what do we know about democracy promotion across borders between the European Union (EU) states and Ukraine? Ukraine and Slovakia have considerable relationships among border communities, but we do not know much about their character and how sustainable they are. This paper questions cross-border cooperation (CBC) trends on the Slovakia–Ukraine border in Zakarpattia region, and, mainly, it raises the research question of how efficient Slovak involvement and participation in Ukrainian democratic development, including cross-border governance, has been since August 1991 when the Ukrainian state gained its independence. The paper contributes to the wider literature on the EU's policies for efficient border governance in broader Europe by examining and highlighting important factors that develop the basis for democratic cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine at different levels and with multiple actors.

The Zakarpattia region (Figure 1) is a unique territory within the Ukrainian state. It is Ukraine's most western territory and borders four EU member states at once: Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland. To answer the main question, this paper proceeds in four steps. First, it introduces Slovakian–Ukrainian cooperation at the EU and local levels. Second, it provides a brief literature review of recent academic debates on EU regionalisation and its border governance, which have paid extensive attention to the development of its CBC activities. Scholarly debates provide a conceptual

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Figure 1. **Zakarpattia Oblast of Ukraine (Red). The region is also known as Transcarpathia or Carpathian Ruthenia .** Source: TUBS, Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zakarpattia_in_Ukraine.svg

framework for the EU as a transformative power and as a good governance actor. These help explain Slovakia's external performance in promoting democracy, security and welfare in the border region. Finally, the paper examines the relationship of Slovakia and Ukraine by looking at the development and progress of specific programs and instruments employed in Zakarpattia region. In addition, it analyses the territorial and security challenges Slovakia and Ukraine encounter on the ground. It is remarkable that there is little research done on Slovak-Ukrainian border cooperation in the field of democracy promotion. This paper aims to fill that gap by looking at socio-economic and political developments in the Zakarpattia border region.

Methodology

This paper uses a regional approach, which looks at interactions among various stakeholders who can make an impact and contribute to decision-making at various state and non-state levels. By helping countries to focus on common challenges, a regional approach has the potential to enhance confidence among partner countries, thus promoting security, stability, and prosperity. According to the European Commission (henceforth, the Commission), the concept of *European governance* encompasses five principles of good

governance—i.e., openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence—in a comprehensive framework for consistent policies associating civil society organizations and European institutions (Commission of the European Communities 2001, 10). The change that is occurring within the understanding of the concept of governance is nuanced by the emergence and importance of cross-border cooperation outside the EU. Therefore, EU border politics comprises a complex range of programmes, policies and imaginaries of political community in which borders are used as resources for different specific aims.

CBC has a significant local dimension where cooperation develops between regions that are closely interconnected. Since May 2004, Ukraine has had direct border connections with three EU member countries: Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. The Law of Ukraine "On Cross-Border Cooperation" (2004) defined the legal, economic, and organizational principles of Ukrainian cooperation in the border regions. As it is defined in the law, CBC is a sequence of actions aimed to establish and intensify economic, social, scientific, technical, environmental, cultural, and other relations between territorial communities and their representative bodies, local executive authorities of Ukraine, and similar public institutions of other states. Thus, the European

Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of the EU was not just about the integration scenario, but also about managing the existing cultural, political, and religious differences through CBC and exchanges so that each side can learn and acquire knowledge about the other.

This paper does not focus on democratic development covering immigration and human rights debates for it has been published broadly in the literature (i.e., Liikanen et al. 2016), including a number of the most recent media publications. It mainly studies the EU and Slovakia's good governance initiatives and programmes, covering welfare, border management, and security issues in order to analyze their role in the democratic development of the Ukrainian state. Cross-border cooperation and partnership is described in accordance with the definition used by the Association of European Border Regions as "neighbourly cooperation in all areas of life between regional and local authorities along the border and involving all actors" (2000). Moreover, in the EU, CBC activities actively contribute to transforming the operation of power across various levels of governance, and a "new mode" of governance emerges from this development. This form of governance incorporates a new style of decision-making that is dependent on non-hierarchical and mutually interdependent relationships aimed at building consensus among various actors whose interests may differ. Border scholars also investigate the proliferation of borders in contemporary societies by examining the role of multiple agents, networks, and forces in shaping or challenging them (Newman & Paasi 1998; Paasi 2001; Van Houtum 2005).

Ukrainian Zakarpattia and Slovakia: Different paths towards European integration

In the 1990s, two neighbouring countries, post-Socialist Ukraine and Slovakia, shared a common history. Both had been under a communist regime for much of the 20th century and at the end of the Cold War experienced similar political and economic ambitions. Since the 1990s, Ukraine saw itself as a European state actor and sought to move into the European political mainstream. In 1997, it signed a Charter on Distinctive Partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization establishing a framework for cooperation and consultation in various areas. Yet, it was not ever seriously considered to become an EU member (Verdun & Chira 2011) until Russia launched a war with Ukraine in 2022. The Slovak Republic, which came into existence on 1 January 1993, after the 'Velvet Revolution' and the 'Velvet Divorce',[1] had a very different path towards European integration. Once it was accepted as an accession country to the EU, it went through enormous political, economic, social, and cultural transformations (Bitušíková 2002) in order to become a member state in 2004.

At the bilateral level, the ENP provided a framework for the strengthening of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements and the Association Agreements with its Eastern European partners (Commission of the European Communities 2004). The EU–Ukraine Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLAP)[2] was launched on 29 October 2008 and presented to Ukraine on 22 November 2010. The VLAP for Ukraine also required that the government implement specific national reforms. However, the EU itself had relatively low leverage in Ukrainian regions in those days. Given that Ukraine preserved Soviet administrative divisions without democratic self-government, the highest leverage was exercised by the Council of Europe. Its norms focused on the local level which had been important for sub-state institutional reform in Western Ukraine and the Ukrainian territory in general.

Zakarpattia region (Oblast') has been characterized by geographical exclusivity, poor historical links with Ukrainian statehood, the independence of local politicians, ethnic groups' aspirations for autonomy, and the ambitions of local elites with sufficient financial independence, including the relatively limited influence of Russia in the region (Kałan 2014; Tokar 2016, 2022). Slovakia, and more specifically Prešov and Košice autonomous counties of the Slovak republic, has a border of almost 100 kilometres with Ukrainian Zakarpattia (Vegeš 2004). Zakarpattia's main city, Uzhgorod, is located directly at the border with Slovakia and very near the Hungarian border. The majority of the local population on the Slovakian–Ukrainian border is comprised of a group known as the Carpatho-Rusyns.[3] In 2007, this border became part of the EU's Schengen Area.[4] Most notably, major energy pipelines[5] pass from Russia into the EU through Slovakia–Ukraine borderlands. Regarding the multilateral dimension of Ukrainian–Slovakian partnership, cooperative efforts were mostly meant to address challenges that had an integral cross-border character and could have consequently been addressed at the regional level. For example, under the terms of the EU response to Covid-19, assistance was provided as part of the official development cooperation activities of the Slovak Republic under the Slovak Aid brand. Through these activities, Slovakia joined the broader EU initiatives (the so-called Team Europe) aimed at supporting partner countries, including Ukraine, in their fight against the new coronavirus. In financial terms, the value of the material humanitarian aid was €186,000 (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic n.d.). A large part of its transport costs was financed through the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre. As a result, the strategic importance of regional cooperation lay in the fact that while supplementing national policies and promoting cross regional cooperation and integration, it dealt with issues that were common to both partners (Tokar 2012). In that way, it brought together people from the partner countries and helped them to engage in discussions and exchange appropriate views and experiences.

Literature Review

Cross-border cooperation and democracy

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) policy has been an important element of the EU's regional policy since its formulation. According to Perkmann, it aims to bridge countries, civilisations, and continents and involves a certain stabilization of cross-border contacts, that is, institution-building, over time (2003, 156). It is also assumed that with time, CBC breaks down barriers to deeper political and social integration, and creates new development opportunities through communication, ideas, and synergy (Scott 2006). Like other social and cultural processes, borders can be contested, subverted, and dismantled, opening up new spaces for inclusion, solidarity, and democracy (Mogiani 2024). However, some scholars argue that the different objectives of the EU regional cooperation agenda have been mutually contradictory and contained both elements of potential regional partnerships and exclusionary and discriminatory aspects (Scott 2009; Angelovi 2014; Liikanen et al. 2016). In addition to differentiation and coordination problems, Paasi (2001) notes that the dominating hegemonic identity of the EU tends to suppress other voices. Dimitrova suggests that there are grounds to look at the integration motivation of the ENP with pessimism due to distrust, the EU's self-interests (or those of its member states), geopolitics, and a perception of power asymmetries which undermine the networking function of borders and can be seen as damaging to effective cross-border governance and border transcendence (2010). Consequently, the 2014 Ukrainian crises seriously challenged the EU's integration project and questioned its legitimacy as a new kind of international actor and an effective crisis manager. Furthermore, following the revision of the ENP in the autumn of 2015, official EU documents argue for the first time that the neighbourhood is a geopolitical space and there is a need for the EU to engage in conflict resolution in the region (European Commission 2015).

The international community as a whole, as well as both Western and Central Eastern actors, played an important role in the process of shaping Ukrainian governing structures. The Association Agreement (AA) and Free Trade Cooperation Agreement (DCFTA)[6], the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and other legal acts of the EU and the Council of Europe formed the basis for regional integration. They envisaged the setting up and deepening of direct contacts between Ukrainian regions and countries which were either members or candidate members of the EU. The development of those contacts was in line with the directions specified in the Agreement with the aim of transferring the focus of the integration process from central bodies of executive power to regions, to bodies of local self-government, and to territorial Hromadas (Ukrainian communities) in order to secure the widest possible cooperation and integration with the EU and its member states. According to Strážay (2010), the shared values and common interests of participating countries enable them to cooperate in a number of areas, while the borders as such are considered to be a linking point, not a divisive one. In 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) of the EU was launched by 27 EU member states and the six partner countries[7]—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—with the adoption of the Prague Declaration as a specific Eastern dimension of the ENP. As a result, the EaP opened up the scope for more involvement of non-state actors in multilateral settings, in order to contribute to processes of regional social integration and to the sharing of experiences to enhance democratisation processes.

Europeanisation and governance

The literature on Europeanisation suggests that the EU exerts important transformative power outside its borders. The concept of 'Wider Europe' implied increasing openness and inclusionary politics where neighbourhood relationships could be jointly negotiated between the EU and its regional partners (Commission of the European Communities 2003; European Commission 2009). It was launched with the objective of avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours to the south and east, and of strengthening the prosperity, stability, and security of all countries concerned. The concept served as the basis for the European Neighbourhood and the Eastern Partnership policies. In other words, the overall objective of the policy was to draw both old and new neighbours closer into the EU's political, economic, and cultural realm, short of full membership. In a reorganised EaP initiative, the 'more for more' principle was further strengthened, systematically providing more support in expertise, twinning, and technical and financial assistance in proportion to the achievements and effectiveness of implementation to date. Better functioning institutions were intended to give Ukraine stronger de facto sovereignty and the confidence to choose its own form of strategic identity. New priorities, such as border management and a focus on multilateral initiatives under the EaP, signalled the continuation of a region-based approach (Simão 2013; 2017; Slavkova 2015) and recognition of shared values, common traditions, and histories among neighbours in its shared borderland. It is also important that the features of community appear, such as trust, undisputable social norms, and the local nets of organizations which increase the efficiency of the regional and local community (Putnam 1993; Perkmann 2003). The creation of these communities is a result of activities aiming at satisfying mutual needs, and their space is determined by the net of ties between inhabitants and associations. As a result, more actors are engaged in border-related activities and management. Moreover, in light of regional conflicts and threats (Haukkala 2003; Sasse

2008; Schimmelfennig 2009; Börzel & van Hüllen 2011; 2013; Papadimitriou et al. 2017; Chlôn 2017) to the international order that seem to require joint efforts by the international community in response, the Commission called for a comprehensive approach[8] to the management of external conflicts and crises.

In addition to security matters, scholarly research claims that improved governance in the neighbourhood remains crucial to its economic growth (Åslund 2015). In Ukraine, the EU provided constant financial and political support to public administration reform, regarded as central to country's democratic consolidation (Youngs 2009). From 2011 onward, the EU initiated various forms of governance in its external neighbourhood— supporting local initiatives, diversifying stakeholders, and speaking to all levels of society—from business communities, local authorities, educational circles, and civil society to government-level officials and civil servants (Casier 2013; Solonenko 2009). Through the conclusion of bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, the EU created preferential trade relations with third countries and promoted processes of economic, political, and social transformation. Slovakia aimed to achieve 'good governance' standards in respect of the functional quality and effectiveness of democratic institutions.[9] Ever since the beginning of Slovak involvement in the Eastern neighborhood, the majority of the Slovak governing elite and intellectuals have frequently highlighted that Slovakia's experience of democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration was an asset in understanding and helping its Eastern neighbours (Najslova 2011, 101). In addition, the Visegrad[10] (also known as the 'Visegrad Four' or simply 'V4') countries provided many forms of assistance to Ukraine and its people. Ukraine received more attention in the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic because the Visegrad countries agreed to provide sponsorship and assistance to Ukraine with reforms (Plenta 2017, 5).

The transition experience of Slovakia

The EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe started their dual transition process from planned economy to market economy and from single party state to democracy at the end of the Cold War. In Slovakia itself, democracy promotion became the solution to the economic and political destabilization of the former Yugoslav and Soviet republics in the region. Therefore, Petrova suggested that it could be expected that in both Ukraine and Belarus, Slovakia would be most interested in supporting the governing institutions as the most efficient way to stabilize these regions and promote Slovak economic expansion there (Petrova 2015, 140). Slovakia was responsible for energy security and reform of the security sector; the Czech Republic assisted with civil society, media, and education; Poland covered decentralisation and public finance reform, and Hungary helped in supporting small and medium

enterprises as well as Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement implementation (Visegrad Group 2014). According to Petrova, Poland and Slovakia were two of the most active democracy promoters in Ukraine (2012; 2015).

Slovak domestic discourse accepted that a democratic and free neighborhood with good governance corresponds more to the Slovak national interest than one which is poor, unstable, and conflict-ridden (Najslova 2011). During the 20th century, this area was governed by six different entities (the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, the Soviet Union, and Ukraine) with complex and occasionally shifting borders. Various nationalities lived together in a heterogeneous area that was also characterized by a mixture of major religions and ethnicities: Orthodoxy, Greek Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Calvinism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Roma (Tanaka 2006, 65). Together, these features characterized the area as "a mosaic zone of ethnicities, cultures and religions" and "a microcosm of new Europe" (Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association 2001, 6, 11). The only exception to this are the Carpatho-Ukrainians (also known as the Carpathian Ruthenians or Rusyns) of the far-west Zakarpattia Oblast' who speak their own distinct East Slavic language. When analysing the Ukraine–Slovak regions it is possible to state that these border regions are among the most economically underdeveloped ones (Angelovič et al. 2011). Since the early 1990s, Transcarpathians have become increasingly dependent for economic survival on crossing the borders westwards, primarily into Slovakia and Hungary. According to Benč (2014), cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine had been primarily determined by external factors and, to a far lesser extent, by local and regional initiatives, opportunities, and partnerships. Certain cross-border initiatives have survived in bad as well as good times through their personal commitment and long-term cross-border partnerships at the local level, but there are just a few examples of these (Lačny et al. 2019). Academic debates emphasise that in the absence of strong formal institutions, informal networks and decision-making play a crucial role (Solonenko 2015). In the end, such partnership activities endorsed the development of good governing practices at the local and regional levels through the exchange of experience, ideas, and best practices in Ukraine. Domestic agents of change and lobbying activities by civil society actors in the shared neighbourhood were supported through various trans-governmental initiatives and regional and inter-regional cooperation programs, mainly in education (Tempus, Erasmus Mundus), transport and border assistance, institution-building (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange, TAIEX, and Support for Improvement in Governance and Management, SIGMA[11]), and twinning and investment.

Slovak and EU Regional Programs and Instruments: Slovakia as a 'Friendly Pragmatist' in Ukraine

Ukraine is the only Eastern European country with which Slovakia shares a border, albeit a relatively short one at 97 kilometres long. The vision for the current 2014–2020 CBC programme of the Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine region stated that "in 2030 the area along the borders of Ukraine with the three members states of Hungary, Slovakia and Romania will be a cooperative cross-border region that efficiently functions and works together" (Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine n.d.). This programme has four objectives, six priorities, and EU funding totalling €81,347,200. Thus, CBC contributes to the overall objective of progress towards 'an area of shared prosperity and good neighbourliness' (Article 8, the Treaty on European Union) between EU member states and their neighbours. What characterises the current CBC programmes and makes them a unique cooperation mechanism is the participating countries' strong commitment and ownership based on balanced partnership between the participating countries on either side of a border. Member states and neighbouring countries have an equal say in the programs' decisions and joint projects receive funding only if implemented by partners on both sides.

Ukraine was one of Slovakia's Official Development Assistance project countries as part of the EaP programmes, which focused on support of the democratic and reform process in Ukraine. Slovakia provided its experience with political and economic transformation through financial support of projects prepared and implemented together by Slovak and Ukrainian organisations in Ukraine (Buchtová et al. 2016, 74). There were several research projects, activities, and conferences regarding cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine as well. However, there was no institution carrying out regular and independent research on Slovak–Ukrainian relations with a focus on cross-border cooperation and issues (SFPA 2016). Since the early 1990s, Transcarpathian Ukraine became increasingly dependent for economic survival on crossing the borders westwards, primarily into Slovakia and Hungary. Likewise, Eastern Slovakia was one of the most underdeveloped regions of Slovakia and the EU in terms of social and economic aspects, lacking necessary infrastructure. The character of the borderland between 1990 and 2004 depended particularly on the policies of the national governments of the Slovak Republic and Ukraine and the interests of national actors that influenced the policies of their governments and ultimately the framework between the two countries that controlled the common border. The Dzurinda Government (1998–2006) in Slovakia saw Ukraine as an important neighbor and partner. The key issues which were always addressed included economic cooperation, democratic development, state-building, energy security, and Ukraine's European integration ambitions. To confirm the above, the Slovak Strategy stated that unless the level of relations between the EU and Ukraine were to change, no major developments in the institutional terms for Slovakian and Ukrainian CBC development on the bilateral and regional levels could occur (Plenta 2017). However, in 2000, Slovakia introduced a visa regime for the citizens of Ukraine (along with Russia and Belarus) in order to harmonize its national visa policy with the EU. As a result, the introduction of the visa regime had a negative impact on bilateral Slovak–Ukrainian relations (Vorotnyuk 2016, 10). In addition, the accession of Slovakia to the EU in 2004, including the application of the Schengen Agreement, led to an important change in the character of the border. It reduced or limited the capacities of the Slovak government to regulate the border with Ukraine while strengthening the EU's influence on the nature of the Slovakia–Ukraine border. It created new obstacles to cross-border cooperation, limiting the movement of persons through the border due to the introduction of a restrictive visa regime for Ukrainian citizens.

In the period of 2007 to 2013, the Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine ENPI CBC Programme[12] was implemented on the external border between participating EU member states and Ukraine. The Programme offered a wide range of opportunities to potential beneficiaries through its four priorities: economic and social development, enhanced environmental quality, increased border efficiency, and supporting people-to-people cooperation. In parallel, it envisaged a reinforcement of bilateral cooperation at various levels, i.e., of relations with neighbours through the negotiation of AAs, DCFTAs, visa liberalization, cooperation in the field of energy, support to social and economic policies, and assistance aimed at strengthening institutional capacities in order to meet the requirements of negotiated agreements. Also, the EaP set up a network of civil society organizations in the EU and partner countries. Assistance in this area provided administrative and financial support for cross-border cooperation across the region and sub-regions between civil society organizations. According to Slovakia's official development strategy, "Slovakia's comparative advantages as a new donor, including mainly its experiences with the transition to democracy and market economy backed by its knowledge of the territory of priority countries, represent the most notable added value that Slovakia may bring to the donor community" (Slovak Agency 2009, 12). Also, in the wake of the European integration, Slovakia launched National Conventions for European Integration in Moldova and Ukraine, developed by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association to institutionalize public debate in EU-related issues based on the partnership of governmental, non-governmental and business organizations, and the Centre for Experience Transfer from Integration and Reforms from the accession process, later transformed into Sharing Slovak Expertise, a development tool, of the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation and the

Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava. Using standard tools and additional financial capacity, the International Visegrad Fund[13] started with flagship projects aimed at promoting the Slovak Democratization and Transformation experience, developing regional cooperation, and supporting civil society.

In 2003, the Slovak government included Ukraine (and Belarus) in its framework for the official development assistance program of the Slovak Republic, and after the Orange revolution, it adopted a Proposal for Assistance to Ukraine which consisted of more than 40 activities. Those actions were supported through Slovak and EU funding programmes, which facilitated contact-building between local and regional actors within Ukraine (Committee of the Regions 2011). Out of all the Eastern European countries, Ukraine received the most long-term attention from Slovakia's government at a number of different stages. According to the Intergovernmental Agreement of the Slovak Republic and Ukraine on Cross-Border Cooperation (in force as of 29th January, 2001) and the Protocol from the Second Meeting of the Slovak–Ukraine (Ukrainian–Slovak) Intergovernmental Commission for Cross-Border Cooperation (Protocol 2005), the Transcarpathian, Lviv, and Ivano-Frankivsk Regions of Ukraine and two Self-governing Regions of Slovakia, Prešov and Košice, were identified as regions involved in CBC between the Slovak Republic and Ukraine. Since then, non-governmental organisations, regional institutions, and towns/villages on both sides of the border became the main engine of CBC.

The Carpathian Mountains play a major part in the oblast's economy, making the region an important tourist and travel destination with many ski and spa resorts. Major attractions of the region are Ukrainian castles, of which the most notable are the castles of Uzhgorod and Mukachevo. Zakarpattia Region is situated in the Carpathian Mountains of Western Ukraine, the only Ukrainian administrative division which borders upon four countries: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. In the area, a major source of water for the population is river water and groundwater. These rivers cross borders, so their protection from contamination is very important. The hydrographic network of the region consists of 152 rivers which belong to the Tisza river basin. However, rivers of the basin are polluted, in particular through illegal waste storage, and consequently need to be protected; such pollution also leads to a bad quality of drinking water (water treatment plants are also outdated and need to be reconstructed). In their turn, the Slovak regions situated adjacent to these borders are characterised by beautiful landscapes and forests. Prešov Region also has considerable potential for tourism and recreation, as it owns 358 cultural-educational facilities (Draft Joint Operational Programme 2015, 86). Four of the seven sites listed in the UNESCO World Heritage list in Slovakia are located in the territory of Prešov region: Bardejov Town Conservation Reserve, Wooden Churches of the Slovak part of the Carpathian Mountain Area, Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Levoča, and the associated cultural monuments. Prešov Region is witnessing a growing interest in the areas of renewable energy resources, green technologies, and energy efficiency. Košický Region is considered to be the second largest region in the Slovak Republic. The city of Košice is the second largest city in Slovakia and has a range of cultural and historical monuments (the Slovak Karst National Park, caves of Aggtelek Karst, and Slovak Karstand Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians which are both transboundary UNESCO World Heritage Sites).

However, compared to other neighbouring countries, cooperation between local Slovak governments and Ukraine was the least efficient. One of the problems was the reluctant attitude of the local Slovak authorities to cooperate with Ukrainian partners due to issues arising in the relations with Ukraine (Mrinska et al. 2012, 181). During the Yanukovich presidency (2010–2014), Slovakia, following Poland's example, intensified its political dialogue with Ukraine. At the same time, Miroslav Lajčák, who served as a Foreign Minister of Slovakia during two terms (2009–2010; 2012–2020), stated in the presence of Organisation of Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) Council members that it is important to focus primarily on how to assist Ukraine rather than how to weaken Russia. He also noted that Slovakia was going to make a €25,000 voluntary contribution to the OECD project for fighting corruption in Ukraine. The Revolution of Dignity in 2014 re-enforced Ukraine's strategic importance for Slovakia, while Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military involvement in the Donbas region changed Slovakia's security focus (Marusiak 2013). According to Badida (2014), the gas map of Europe had been gradually changing, to the disadvantage of Slovakia. It started to move towards a greater geopolitical logic in relation with Russia. Slovakia's biggest support to Ukraine came in the form of energy security[14] at its own cost almost without EU resources. Following the 2009 gas crisis,[15] an interconnection with the Czech Republic was constructed which made reverse gas flow technically available for Ukraine. As a result, gas supplies from Russia were cut by 40 to 50 percent after Slovakia started to supply gas to Ukraine via the reverse flow mechanism at the end of 2014 (Plenta 2017). That contributed to Ukraine's energy security and saved up to $3 billion according to Ukrainian government estimates.

Ukraine and Slovakia took part in ENPI CBC programmes through two financial periods: 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 (ongoing). The Neighbourhood Programme "Hungary–Slovakia–Ukraine" covered a population of about 11 million inhabitants. This programme aimed at strengthening economic and social integration in the cross-border region (Figure 2) through infrastructure

development and support of local initiatives. Its total EU funding amounted to €27.8 million, with €23.8 million coming from European Regional Policy resources and €4 million from the Tacis programme for Ukraine. The Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine (HUSKROUA) ENI CBC Programme of 2014–2020 is one of 16 CBC programmes on the external borders of the EU, implemented under the European Neighbourhood Instrument. Its goals were to promote economic and social development, enhance environmental quality, increase border efficiency, and support people-to-people cooperation. The programme area is located on the Hungarian-Slovak-Romanian-Ukrainian border, and among others includes four territorial units in Slovakia and Ukraine: Košický and Prešovský regions in Slovakia and Zakarpattia, Ivano–Frankivska and Chernivetska regions in Ukraine. The programming area covers 32 percent of Slovak Republic and six percent of Ukraine. It includes approximately 599 kilometres of joint border with Ukraine, which covers fully the Slovak–Ukrainian (98 kilometres) and Hungarian–Ukrainian (135 kilometres) borders and partially the Romanian–Ukrainian border (366 kilometres). The HUSKROUA total funding had a budget of €68.6 million.

As an example of a cross-border cooperation case study, the Vyšne Nemecke–Uzhorod border crossing point was planned for reconstruction in order to increase border efficiency (Duleba et al 2023, 248). However, while activities on the Slovak side of the border were successfully implemented, the Ukrainian part of the project was another story. Due to long-lasting problems with public procurement procedures and other obstacles with re-organizations of partners between 2013 and 2016, the Commission conducted an assessment of six border infrastructure projects related to Border Crossing Points at the Ukrainian borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania in 2017 and recommended suspending the implementation of these projects (European Commission 2018). In the end, the Zakarpattia Customs Office planned to completely finalize this large infrastructure project from the state budget of Ukraine.

Overall, Slovakia's regional support enhanced cooperation between relevant justice actors and institutions across the regions, and, to a more limited extent, with the EU. In the justice sector, Slovak cooperation with Ukraine was mainly aimed at supporting national reforms of the judiciary systems and at developing the institutional and administrative capacities of the justice administrations at the national level through the Action Plans. In addition to the above, in the ENP East region, a specific platform for dialogue on democratic governance, was established between the EaP countries and the EU and in cooperation with the Council of Europe; multilateral seminars were conducted to discuss electoral standards, judicial reform, the fight against corruption, and more. As a result of these activities, professional and personal relations were established (Jaresko 2017) among legal and judicial professionals in the Eastern region, and with Europe. Recognising the overall success of the first program, the Government Office of the Slovak Republic decided to continue

Western Ukraine, particularly its border regions (oblasts), is emerging as a promising area for business and foreign investment. These include **Lviv**, **Volyn**, **Zakarpattia** and **Chernivtsi**, which all share borders with EU member states **Poland**, **Slovakia**, **Hungary** and **Romania**.

Strategic advantages:
· Proximity to EU markets
· Skilled workforce
· Infrastructure development

Government incentives:
· Tax benefits
· Special Economic Zones (SEZs)
· Investment promotion agencies

Figure 2. Strengthening Economic and Social Integration in Western Ukraine's Cross-border Region. Source: Mycyk (2024), © Dentons.

to support of CBC with Ukraine in the period from 2014 to 2020[16] within the Good Governance and CBC programme, with the allocation of €8,500,000 from the EEA Financial Mechanism and co-financing of €1,500,000 from the State budget of the Slovak Republic. The Programme objective was to improve the integrity and accountability of public administration. Within the Programme the Area "Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Judicial System, Strengthening Rule of Law" was managed by the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic, and the second Programme Area "Good Governance, Accountable Institutions, Transparency" by its Government Office.

On July 3, 2020, material humanitarian aid in the total amount of €83,902 was sent from Slovakia to Ukraine. In this way, Slovakia responded to Ukraine's request for assistance in connection with the mitigation of the consequences of the devastating floods that affected the Western regions of Ukraine on from June 22 to 24 of 2020. The floods destroyed more than 130 bridges and 430 kilometres of roads. The assistance was provided as part of the official development cooperation of the Slovak Republic under the SlovakAid brand on the basis of a specific request from Ukraine. A large part of the transport costs was financed through the EU Emergency Response Coordination Center. To add, the Regional Fund for the Support of Entrepreneurship (RFSE) was one of the main and regular participants in the Regional Programme for the Support and Development of Entrepreneurship in Ukraine. Within the Programme, the RFSE organized free-of-charge seminars and round-tables for small-scale enterprises on a quarterly basis and maintained a 'hotline business consultation' facility. CBC financing also came from external sources, either the EU budget, the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, the International Visegrad Fund, or other donors subsidising it. For instance, from Norway, a financial mechanism has supported 33 projects of cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine totalling €10.8 million (Úrad vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2016). There are several examples of increased aid cooperation between different Slovak and Ukrainian institutions after Russian intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Probably one of the most visible examples of the Slovak Republic's assistance to Ukraine was the provision of recreation for Ukrainian children, and recovery and rehabilitation stays for wounded soldiers (Buchtová et al. 2016, 75). However, there remains a need to create an environment for countries to creäte their own regional and local instruments to support cross-border cooperation.

Conclusion

The EU's neighbourhood is complex and far from being stable. In Ukraine, significant progress occurred in many areas of transition; however, much work remains to be done, especially in the field of regional development and governance where many legacies of the Soviet model remain. Ukraine was one of the biggest recipients of Slovakia's transformation aid in the field of political and economic reform. Slovak civil society also played an important role in Slovakia's democracy assistance and transformation aid to Ukraine. However, the Slovak contribution to strengthening governance through regional programmes was rather limited, reflecting minimal resources allocated to these areas of cooperation and lack of overall coherent EU strategy to address problems through concrete actions. Before 2007, in the Eastern region, there was no clear policy framework to support civil society and relatively small amount of funds allocated to regional civil society programmes. This lack of support for civil society involvement explains to some extent the limited results of the EU programmes in Ukraine. Citizens in Ukraine were not well prepared to exercise effective control over politicians and bureaucrats, neither at the central nor at the local level. People seeking something to which they were entitled by law thought they had to offer money or other benefits to get service of the expected quality.

To conclude, the role of border-adjacent regions in the Slovak-Ukraine borderland in international cooperation is of great significance from both political and territorial perspectives, and with regard to the course of European integration of the Ukrainian state. Notwithstanding these limitations and the ongoing war, policy-makers in Slovakia perceive Ukraine as a successful example of transformation and EU integration. The EU and its member states' assistance have introduced, increased, and reinforced the level of understanding of EU norms and values on the part of the government, civil actors, and society at large in Ukraine.

Notes

1   The Czecho-Slovak Federal Republic was peacefully dissolved as a result of the agreement between the parliaments and governments of the Czech and the Slovak Republics in 1992.

2   VLAP included four blocks of benchmarks related to document security, including biometrics; border management, migration and asylum; public order and security; and external relations and fundamental rights. The benchmarks concerned both the policy and institutional framework (legislation and planning) and the effective and sustainable implementation of this framework.

3   The Carpatho-Rusyns are a distinct ethnic group, indicating 'people of the Rus'—East Slavic people who share a similar language, faith, and identity (Magocsi 2015; Batt 2002).

4   Slovakia joined the EU and became a member of NATO in 2004. In the same year, it signed the Schengen agreement, and in December 2007 it started implementing the (Schengen) Convention.

5   The Druzhba energy pipeline splits into two branches in Mazyr (Belarus) and goes to Poland and Ukraine. From Ukrainian territory, it passes to Slovakia which is among

the largest Russian gas transit countries. The Slovak gas transmission system operator is Eustream A.S..

6 Currently, the AA provides a new legal framework for bilateral EU–Ukraine relations after being ratified by all 28 EU member states on September 1, 2017. Substantial parts of it have been applied provisionally since 1 November 2014 and 1 January 2016 for the DCFTA. In June 2017 the visa liberalisation process was finalised. As of 11 June 2017, the visa obligation for citizens of Ukraine who hold a biometric passport and want to travel to the Schengen zone for a short stay was abolished (Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission, last update 19/04/2018).

7 The EaP aimed to support Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in advancing to a market economy, sustainable development, and good governance. It was built on the framework of the ENP and designed to "accelerate political association and further economic integration" (Council of the European Union 2009, 6) in several areas, including governance, trade, migration and border management, energy, and the environment, between the EU and its partner countries.

8 The EU comprehensive approach towards crises is understood as providing security and building up a security community based on liberal democracy and a market economy, and not just management of the conflict itself.

9 Generally, the Central Eastern European countries are now considered consolidated democracies, even though they still face governance problems such as corruption, lower levels of political accountability, issues with transparency, as well as wider problems like public apathy towards politics and weak civil societies. In some countries, most notably Hungary, and to a lesser extent Romania and Slovakia, recent democratic rollbacks are also evident (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel 2020).

10 The V4 reflects the efforts of four Central European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) to work together in a number of fields of common interest in the broader context of European integration, which prioritize strengthening the rule of law, the efficiency of national government and local governments, the transparency of public procurement, the reduction of state regulation, and the fight against corruption.

11 SIGMA is a joint initiative of the Commission and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, principally financed by the EU. It focuses on strengthening public management in areas such as administrative reform, public procurement, public sector ethics, anti-corruption, and external and internal financial control.

12 The Programme entered into force on 23 September 2008, after the approval of the European Commission. It allocated €68,638,283 in ENPI funding for the seven years. As a result, 46 new projects were approved for funding in the framework of the HUSKROUA ENPI CBC Programme, requesting about €17 million in co-financing from the ENPI, complemented by state co-financing of the three member states and the contributions of the Applicants and Partners.

13 Information about Visegrad is also available here: http://visegradfund.org/home/.

14 A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) enabling gas flows from Slovakia to Ukraine was signed by the pipeline operators concerned, the Slovakian company Eustream and the Ukrainian company Ukrtransgaz (Memo, 13 May 2014). Along with the MoU the companies signed a Framework Interconnection Agreement laying out the technical details: the existing and unused Vojany (Vojany-Uzhgorod) pipeline at Veľké Kapušany (Budince cross-border interconnection

point) on the Slovakian side was planned to be modernised during a short construction period.

15 Ukraine stopped buying Russian gas directly in November 2015. It started importing gas from Poland via backhauling since January 1 and planned to launch virtual reverse flow from Hungary later that year, according to the Gas Transmission System Operator of Ukraine. Russia's Gazprom opposed backhauling practices, but in December 2019 signed a new five-year gas transit agreement with Ukraine.

16 The Joint Operational Programme (JOP) for implementation of the Hungary–Slovakia–Romania–Ukraine ENI CBC Programme 2014–2020 was approved by the Commission Implementing Decision no. C (2015) 9180 on 17 December 2015. The JOP receives €74 million in EU funding from the ENI as well as from the European Regional Development Fund (Draft Joint Operational Programme 2015, 64).

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