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European Union Borders with Ukraine

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INTRODUCTION: European Union Borders with Ukraine

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This special section, European Union Borders with Ukraine, provides a unique assessment of the understudied process of cross-border relationship-building that takes place between Ukraine, the European Union, and EU member states. Collectively, the six papers look at the progressive alignment of Ukraine with the Visegrad countries, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, and Ukraine, assessing the state of democratic and security concerns, regional development and education, healthcare, culture, and energy, as a multipronged way to understand cross-border integration and European integration.

This special issue was made possible in November of 2023 by a partnership that brought together various pan-European organisations for the establishment in Košice, Slovakia, of a four-day event connected to the annual meeting of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), including the conference titled:

European Integration of Ukraine across borders (the Conference)—Ukraine on the road to EU integration (reconstruction, cooperation, pre-accession). What lessons to learn for Ukraine from the V4 countries' experiences in the field of cross-border cooperation?

The rationale for the unfolding events were set in 2014 when Ukraine signed with the European Union (EU) the **EU–Ukraine Association Agreement**, and since then, undertook together several steps to adapt Ukraine to Common European values, to improve Ukraine's administrative system, and more broadly, to introduce and align Ukraine with the Union Policies.

In 2023, it was generally agreed upon that the integration process had been very slow and seemed long lasting (Shaban 2019). Also and most importantly, in June 2022, only six months after submitting its application

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for European Membership, because of the Russian invasion, Ukraine had been granted 'candidate status'. The general understanding was that after the war, Ukraine would have to make remarkable efforts to reach 'accession status into the EU'.

The *Košice* events provided excellent opportunities to gain a better understanding of the achievements of Ukraine in matters of EU integration from 2017 to 2023. And it was also an opportunity to assess the geopolitical role Ukraine played between the EU and Russia.

The Hungarian Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI), as well as the largest European regional gathering and European lobby group for regional cooperation, the AEBR, had agreed to partner together and to bring along numerous other public sector organisations and universities to work on a broad assessment of lessons learned and to provide best practices from the experiences for all Ukrainian partners of the Four Visegrad countries: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, which had joined the EU in 2004.

The AEBR, CESCI, CESCI Carpathia, the University of Prešov (Slovakia), the Technical University of Liberec (Czech Republic), the WSB University (Poland), and the National University of Uzhhorod (Ukraine), as well as the University of Victoria (Canada), the Province of Gelderland and Radboud University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, all contributed time and funds to this broad partnership on cross-border cooperation in the EU and with Ukraine.

All together numerous other partners including academics, policy and decision makers, and elected officials from Belgium, Canada, France, Hungary, Israel, Poland, Slovakia, the United States, and Ukraine contributed to the conference and other activities, including the AEBR annual conference and executive meeting and the AEBR/Borders in Globalization (BIG) Cross-Border School.

The event was co-sponsored by a CESCI held Visegrad grant (a fund created by the governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) to advance ideas for *sustainable regional development in Central Europe* and was made up of four main events, which together gave life to four days of intense discussions.

The partnership allowed for a BIG Cross-Border School to shoulder the core events, i.e., the AEBR members' annual conference and the AEBR executive meetings. Those events were complemented by an ambitious program for an international conference led by CESCI; it brought together scholars from the EU, central and eastern Europe, and Ukraine.

At inception, the idea of the event was to contribute to the *Košice* Platform, a *Central and Eastern European*

Partnership for experts and practitioners focusing on the Eastern Partnership. It was to organise, for instance, activities that would facilitate knowledge exchange in cross-border cooperation among Central and Eastern European public and not-for-profit organisations. Another goal of the *Košice* platform was to inform and support EU policy makers and national governments in their work with the Central and Eastern regions of Europe and, in particular, cross-border cooperation.

Such goals were reflected in the key players of those partnerships, including the CESCI, the AEBR, and the European Commission Directorate in charge of enlargement policy and for the management of relations with countries in the Eastern and Southern Neighborhoods of the European Union, i.e., the EU Commission's Directorate General NEAR (*Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations*) (DG Near).

In part due to the *Košice platform* of October 04, 2016, the city of *Košice* had become the symbol of such cooperative approaches in European Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC). The originally modest platform was able to bring together both the CESCI and the AEBR as well as many partners from across Europe alongside several universities in support of Central and Eastern border regions partnerships to enhance effective European integration.

On Day One, events were kicked off by the AEBR BIG_Lab Cross-Border School (CB-School), which was then followed Day Two, with the annual AEBR statutory events: **Conference and Board/executive meeting**. Day Three then focused on central and eastern partnerships with the CESCI's international conference: the three days final programme (as it happened), including links to the all presentations, are available on [the AEBR main webpage](#). Day Four was spent in Ukraine with a study visit to Uzhhorod.

The idea of the AEBR Border School came together in 2017. Noting that stakeholders operating within European border regions—including governmental bodies, private enterprises, civil society organisations, and academic institutions—consistently had a deficit in systematic knowledge exchanges, a representative of the Dutch provinces of Gelderland and Overijssel, and the German federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia, and the secretary general of the AEBR, floated the idea of an annual Border School. The CB-School was conceived as an annual meeting between professionals and academics working on cross-border issues. The goals were to fight the fragmentation of ideas and to counter the limited reciprocal dissemination of research findings and best policy outcomes, and, to bring together border managers and professionals and the academic sector.

In response to those observations, the Dutch Nijmegen Centre for Border Research at Radboud University,

together with the AEBR and the Province of Gelderland, initiated a strategic intervention aimed at fostering sustained and structured knowledge exchange between practitioners and academics. The initiative targeted long-term collaboration among (early-career) academics, (emerging) policymakers, and professionals. The cornerstone of this initiative was the establishment in 2017 of a Cross-Border School in Cáceres (Extremadura, Espana/Portugal border), with the support of Interreg Danish/Dutch (DE), employing an interactive format, including workshops and presentations, to facilitate knowledge transfer and capacity building. The intent was to institutionalise the CB-School as an annual event, thereby creating a recurring platform for scholarly and policy engagement. The meeting in Košice in 2023 was the 7th such School, which has been organised annually without interruption, despite the COVID pandemic and other challenges. The CB-School program in Košice focused on cross-border cooperation with Ukraine. It was introduced by the vice dean of the faculty of Law, Professor Alena Krunkova, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University of Košice, and the AEBR secretary general Martín Guillermo Ramírez. A first panel discussed Ukrainian war refugees in Poland in 2022–23, a second panel looked at cross-border cooperation between Ukraine and the Visegrad countries in various sectors: energy, education, and cross-border labour markets. A third panel comparatively reviewed challenges to cross-border cooperation before and during the pandemic. The fourth session was a roundtable to debate what research and practicing borders are.

Day Two focused on the statutory meetings of the members of the AEBR and their Annual Conference. Established in 1971, the AEBR is a European organisation inspired by the **European Charter for Border and Cross-border regions**. In 2022, to attract attention to the Russian invasion of eastern and southern Ukraine and to join efforts that enable Ukraine's accession to the European Union, the AEBR welcomed the invitation of the CESC and CESC Carpathia to host their annual activities in Košice in 2023, because of the preexisting *Košice Platform* but also because Košice is located about 100 kilometers from the Ukraine border close to the border city of Uzhhorod in Zakarpattia Oblast, Ukraine (i.e., Transcarpathian Region).

The AEBR and CESC agreed on a suite of events that could take place over several days. The AEBR annual conference's three initial panels launched the conference with a panel dealing with "general challenges for Cross-Border Cooperation", including a presentation by the European Commission on the post-2027 Interreg by Ms. Simona Pohlova, deputy head of the DG Regio Unit on Internal borders/Interreg cross-border cooperation; a Horizon Europe project on EU citizens' perceptions of borders by Professor Sara Svensson (Halmstadt University, Sweden); and a keynote presentation by professor David Newman (Ben Gurion University, Israel) on the borders of the Gaza Strip. Two panels

dealt with "CB Labour Markets", with a perspective from practitioners by Frederic Siebenhaar of the AEBR task force on Labour Markets, EGTC Pamina (France/Germany), Leyre Azcona of the EGTC Euroregion Nouvelle Aquitaine Euskadi Navarra (France/Spain), and Madelene Kutt, Innlandet Country Council in Norway; and another series of contributions from the institutions, with Balazs Lengyel from the European Labour Authority, Niina Malm, Member of the Finnish Parliament, and Dirk Peters, legal expert at DG Regio.

On Day Three, the CESC partnership conference focused on the role of borders in Ukraine's EU accession. This was addressed through panels supported by the International Visegrad Fund and organised by the CESC and CESC Carpathia in cooperation with the University of Prešov (Slovakia, SK), the WSB University (Poland, PL), the Technical University of Liberec (Czechia, CZ), and the National University of Uzhhorod (Ukraine, UA). All together, representatives from more than 30 countries attended.

The panels had two-fold aims: (i) to summarise the efforts Ukraine has made for EU integration, and (ii) to collect and share experiences of the four Visegrad countries on the role of cross-border cooperation in the adaptation of EU policies and values.

Accordingly, in the first panel, Oleksandr Ilkov (Director General of the Government Office for Coordination on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine) gave an overview of the process of adopting the EU acquis; Myroslava Lendel (Vice-Rector of the National University of Uzhhorod, Ukraine (UZhNU) focused on the cooperation activities of the tertiary educational institutions; Mykhailo Buromenskyi (Co-chairman of the Commission on Legal Reform under the President of Ukraine) gave an overview on the progress of legal harmonisation during which 90 acts had been approved by the Ukrainian Parliament by that time; finally, Yaroslav Lazur (Dean of the Faculty of Law of UZhNU) summed up the evolution of the legal background for cross-border cooperation in Ukraine.

The second and third panels included presentations on the evolution of cross-border cooperation in the Visegrad countries, illustrated by representatives from Academia in the four Visegrad Countries: Universities of Prešov (SK), Ludovika of Public Services in Budapest, Technical of Liberec (CZ) and WSB in Dąbrowa Górnicza (PL); and various cross-border structures; *Neisse-Nisa-Nysa* Euroregion (DE/CZ/PL) and *Tisza* (HU/UA), *Tritia* (CZ/PL/SK), and *Via Carpathia* (HU/SK) EGTCs.

The program was completed with a round-table discussion whose participants (Nathalie Verschelde, deputy head of unit of the DG REGIO, Eduard Buraš, former advisor of the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Michal Lebduška, research fellow of the Czech Association for International Affairs, Wojciech Opiola, professor at the

University of Opole, and Gyula Ocskay, secretary general of the CESCO) spoke about the role of cross-border cooperation in the EU integration process of the four countries.

For Day Four, as a post-conference shoulder activity, the CESCO and CESCO Carpathia organised a study visit for the AEBR members and partners to Uzhhorod (Ukraine) where the participants were briefed on the situation in Ukraine directly from the regional governor Viktor Mykyta, the head of the regional council Roman Saray, and vice-rector of the UZhNU University Ivan Myroniuk.

The following papers emerged during and after the events thanks to a call for papers set by the organisers to invite participants to showcase internationally their works; works done and necessary, and current works that encourage and foster cross-border coordination, cooperation and collaboration in borderland regions between Visegrad countries and Ukraine. Note that the authors are both professionals and researchers, and together they provide a unique review of the complexity of cross-border coordination and cooperation in that part of the EU, i.e., the Visegrad countries and Ukraine.

Andrzej Jakubowski (Professor, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland) in "From Commuting to Connectivity? The Evolution of Cross-Border Telework in Cross-Border Labour Markets" explores the interplay between cross-border telework and traditional cross-border labor mobility, focusing on two case studies: Cascadia (US/Canada) and the Greater Region (EU). It examines how national borders and telework shape the development of digital cross-border labour markets and the regulatory frameworks of telework. The article concludes that cross-border telework complements and reshapes traditional cross-border labor markets, presenting both opportunities and challenges for regional economic integration in a digitally connected world.

In "Cross-Border Cooperation in Slovak-Ukrainian Borderlands", Martin Lačný (Professor, Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, University of Prešov, Slovakia) and Jana Michalková (PhD, Research fellow, Department of Geography and Applied Geoinformatics, Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, University of Prešov, Slovakia), analyse the socio-economic situation of Prešov and Košice, two self-governing regions in Slovakia's Transcarpathian region on the other side of the Schengen border in Ukraine. Their analysis of cross-border cooperation tendencies leads to policy recommendations, including future regional development strategies across the Slovakia-Ukraine borderlands. The analysis focuses on the impact, i.e., the challenges and opportunities as perceived by local borderland actors, of such cooperation on the local cross-border economies.

Julianna Máté, Monika Koľvek, Iveta Kubeková, and Daniela Kolcunová who each work for the Via Carpatia EGTC, in "Two Regions, One Vision: The Cross-Border Mission of the Via Carpatia EGTC" review cross-border activities and implemented projects of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Via Carpatia (EGTC), which was founded in 2013. The EGTC consists of two members: the Košice Self-governing Region in Slovakia and the county of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén in Hungary. This EGTC operates on a territory with an area of just over 14,000 square kilometers, where over 1.4 million inhabitants live in the cross-border region. The grouping initially planned well over 90 projects and €30 million in investments. As of 2023, projects in education, healthcare, and culture mobilized €19 million and sustained over one thousand jobs: thus, bridging the boundary line in the process thanks to trust and better cross-border governance.

In "Digitization in Higher Educational Institutions as a Catalyst for Cross-border Cooperation", Marija Mendzhul (Professor, Doctor of Science of Law, Department of Civil Law and Procedure, Faculty of Law of the Uzhhorod National University) analyses the digitalisation of educational services at higher educational institutions. The focus is a legal analysis of cross-border cooperation between higher educational institutions in Ukraine and the EU. The research focuses on the EU regulatory environment at the EU and Ukrainian levels and its impact on academic mobility. Along with a review of current academic projects between the EU and Ukraine, the paper's core suggestion is a proposal for a more effective development of cross-border educational services at the external border of the EU, including problems of online services and of control and quality of educational processes.

Tatiana Shaban (BIG_Lab non-resident fellow, University of Victoria) in "The Role of Cross-Border Cooperation in Democracy Promotion Between Slovakia and Ukraine: The Zakarpattia (Transcarpathia) Region" studies the development of existing cross-border relations between Ukraine and Slovakia and looks more specifically at the Prešov and Košice autonomous counties of the Slovak republic with the Ukrainian Zakarpattia region. The core finding is that cross-border cooperation practices stand as a vehicle of Ukraine's bottom-up integration with the European Union. Such cooperation also helps establish mutual public trust in neighbouring border communities with their local and regional authorities.

In "EU-Ukraine Cross-Border Energy Cooperation: Trends and Directions for Post-War Reconstruction" Iryna Yaremak (Professor, Department of Electric Power, Electrical Engineering and Electromechanics, Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine) presents a comprehensive up-to-date analysis of the Ukrainian integration into the EU energy market. After a detailed overview

of the Ukrainian cross-border sectoral cooperation with its neighboring states (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Moldova) the paper presents the scope of destruction of Ukrainian energy infrastructure due to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Such study of interstate powerlines across the borders of member states of the EU and including Moldova underscores the importance of energy cross-border potentials and EU-Ukraine cooperation.

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