

## **Policy Brief**

# **How to make Ukraine's cross-border cooperation effective: lessons from the Visegrad Four countries**

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## **Findings and Recommendations**

The experience of the Visegrad Four (V4) countries demonstrates that effective cross-border cooperation (CBC) does not emerge from isolated projects or one-off initiatives. Instead, it is shaped by a combination of clear state policy, legal certainty, the institutional capacity of subnational actors, and systemic participation in European Union programs, primarily Interreg. Under the influence of Europeanization, more precisely, EU-ization, CBC in the V4 countries has become an integral part of cohesion policy and multi-level governance. This has enabled regions and communities to assume stable managerial roles without conflicting with national governments.

A key element of this model is a multi-level institutional architecture that combines temporary forms of cooperation (informal arrangements, ad hoc agreements, and projects), flexible forms (bilateral or multilateral agreements, programs and strategies, city twinning, platforms, and coalitions), and «mirror» associations of communities and authorities (Euroregions) with more formalized public law instruments, such as European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). Specifically, Euroregions in the Visegrad countries have proven effective as platforms for networking among communities and for administering Interreg Small Project Funds to support their initiatives. Meanwhile, EGTCs are more effective for implementing more complex, long-term, and institutionally demanding tasks. At the same time, the V4 experience suggests that no single form of CBC is universal: their effectiveness depends on the level of managerial maturity, clear functional content, political support, and integration into the programmatic logic of Interreg.

For Ukraine, cross-border cooperation remains largely fragmented and project-oriented, with limited integration into the public administration and regional policy systems. Despite international legal obligations and the gradual adaptation of national legislation to the EU acquis, a gap persists between regulatory declarations and practical implementation mechanisms. Key constraining factors include the fragmentation of state policy, legal and procedural uncertainty regarding institutional forms of cooperation, a lack of stable co-financing, and the limited human resources and managerial capacity of local communities.

Against this background, Zakarpattia oblast possesses unique prerequisites to serve as a pilot region for the institutionalization of CBC on the EU's external border. Its geographical location, years of experience participating in Interreg programmes, the existence of the «Tysa» EGTC, and dense contacts with communities and regions of

the Visegrad Four countries create an opportunity to move from the logic of individual applications to a programmatic and portfolio-based approach.

**Key recommendations for stakeholders of cross-border cooperation in Ukraine:**

1) to treat cross-border cooperation as the strategic area of state policy, integrated into the policies of European integration and EU accession preparation, regional development, and post-war recovery;

2) to ensure legal certainty and procedural compatibility of CBC institutional forms (Euroregions, EGTCs) with the standards and/or best practices of the EU and its member states;

3) to introduce stable mechanisms for state and regional co-financing of participation in Interreg and other EU programmes;

4) to shift from a fragmented project-based approach to the strategic programming of CBC and the development of coordinated portfolios of cross-border projects;

5) to designate Zakarpattia oblast as a pilot platform for testing the multi-level institutional model of CBC, with subsequent adaptation to other border regions of Ukraine.

## Introduction

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) is one of the key instruments for regional development and territorial cohesion within the European Union, with a focus on border regions. For Ukraine, which is currently in the process of European integration and preparation for EU accession, while simultaneously addressing wartime challenges and post-war recovery, CBC takes on additional strategic significance. It is viewed not only as a mechanism for attracting external resources but also as a tool for the EU-ization of governance practices, building institutional capacity for regions and communities, and preparing for participation in the EU's Cohesion Policy.

The comparison with the Visegrad Four (V4) countries is fundamentally important for several reasons. First, these states underwent a similar historical transformation from post-socialist systems to full members of the European Union. Second, the border regions of the V4 served as «laboratories» for institutional experiments in cross-border cooperation, where models of Euroregions, EGTCs, and participation in Interreg programmes were refined. Third, the experience of the Visegrad countries demonstrates how CBC can be integrated into national and regional policies without the central government losing control over paradiplomacy. Fourth, in the context of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, the large-scale displacement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is reshaping the demographic and ethnic composition of border regions and communities in both Ukraine and the Visegrad Four countries, thereby creating a need to introduce effective integration mechanisms and to strengthen the capacity of local self-government authorities to respond adequately.

**The purpose of this policy brief** is to assess the effectiveness of CBC models in the Visegrad Four countries and identify opportunities for their adaptation in Ukraine, taking into account the national legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and current development challenges. Special attention is paid to Zakarpattia oblast, a border region with extensive practical experience in EU programmes and a «pioneer» in implementing new institutional formats (such as the Carpathian Euroregion (1993) and the «Tysa» EGTC (2015)), which consequently has the potential to serve as a pilot.

The study combines qualitative analysis of legal and regulatory frameworks, the practical application of various institutional forms of CBC across the Visegrad Four countries and Ukraine, and survey results, in which cross-border cooperation practitioners served as respondents. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the work draws on border studies, multi-level governance, and the concept of

Europeanization (EU-ization), allowing CBC to be viewed as an element of interaction among the supranational, national, regional, and local levels.

The **policy problem formulated** in this brief is that, despite international legal obligations and a defined course toward accelerated EU accession, cross-border cooperation in Ukraine remains insufficiently institutionalized and poorly integrated into the system of public policy and administration. Overcoming this gap requires not only legislative adjustments but also a reimagining of CBC's role as a tool for long-term development policy in border regions.

# **1. What Works in the Visegrad Four Countries and What Constraints They Face**

## **1.1. The Institutional Logic of Cross-Border Cooperation in the Visegrad Four Countries**

The experience of the Visegrad Four countries demonstrates that cross-border cooperation in Central Europe did not develop as a single universal model, but rather as a collection of institutional forms adapted to the legal, political, and socio-economic conditions of specific border territories. Since the 1990s, the dominant approach has been to combine temporary, flexible, and partially institutionalized structures with more formalized legal instruments.

The most common forms of CBC among public institutions in the Visegrad Group countries include:

- official and informal contacts between local and regional self-government bodies;
- project-based cooperation focused on the implementation of a single initiative or a portfolio of projects according to an agreed-upon program or strategy;
- bilateral and multilateral agreements that facilitate the institutionalization of CBC in various formats, such as city/town twinning, platforms, and cooperation coalitions;
- Euroregions as platforms for communities and subnational authorities to coordinate and implement joint initiatives and projects;
- European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) as legally formalized structures under public law.

This is further supported by the results of a study conducted among CBC practitioners in the Visegrad Four countries. They identified bilateral and multilateral agreements, ad hoc projects, EGTCs, and Euroregions as the most common forms of CBC. European practitioners attribute the popularity of these specific forms to initiatives from neighbors across the border, historical patterns of coexistence and cooperation, the requirements for implementing EU cohesion and territorial cooperation policies, shared cross-border opportunities to address regional needs and challenges, and the exchange of experience.

It is precisely this multi-level institutional configuration that has allowed subnational authorities in the Visegrad Four countries to participate actively in European cohesion and territorial cooperation policies without entering into direct

conflict with national governments. Importantly, CBC is viewed not only as a regional development tool but also as a mechanism for EU-ization and multi-level governance, through which regions and communities have gradually acquired new managerial roles and self-government functions.

Notably, the perspective of Ukrainian practitioner-respondents (from Zakarpattia oblast) on the most common forms of CBC is similar to that of their European colleagues, except for the role of the EGTC. This is reasonable, given the lack of practical experience in creating or participating in such structures.

### ***Lesson for Ukraine***

*An effective CBC model does not imply abandoning «simple» forms of cooperation; rather, it requires supplementing them with institutional structures that ensure the sustainability and scalability of results.*

*The similarity in understanding of the most common and, consequently, effective forms of cross-border cooperation, as well as shared challenges – including limited practical experience in applying certain institutional instruments (such as EGTCs) – characterizes both Ukraine and its European partners and creates favourable conditions for strengthening cooperation and exchanging best practices. At the same time, the development of cross-border cooperation should not be reduced solely to participation in Interreg programmes; rather, it should encompass a broader range of institutional forms and interaction mechanisms integrated into the strategic framework of regional development policy.*

**Town (municipal) twinning** in the Visegrad Four countries represents one of the oldest and, at the same time, most flexible institutional forms of cross-border cooperation. It establishes stable channels of horizontal interaction between local self-government authorities, fostering trust, institutional memory, and long-term partnerships. In the V4 states, such linkages have often served as an «incubator» for broader formats of cooperation – ranging from joint cultural and educational initiatives to participation in Interreg programmes and the establishment of EGTCs. Twinning arrangements also play an important role in mobilizing civil society, small and medium-sized enterprises, thereby providing a social foundation for more formalized cross-border structures. In the context of European integration, they have functioned as a mechanism for the gradual Europeanization of local governance through the exchange of practices and administrative models. Thus, in the Visegrad Four countries, town

twinning operates as a foundational yet strategically significant layer of the institutional architecture of cross-border cooperation.

### ***Lesson for Ukraine***

*Municipal twinning can serve as a foundational institutional platform for building trust, developing partnership networks, and preparing joint cross-border initiatives. In the Visegrad Four countries, such horizontal linkages became a precondition for the transition to more formalized forms of cooperation.*

**Euroregions** remain a widespread and resilient institutional form of cross-border cooperation in the Visegrad Four countries, possessing the characteristics of an organization. They function as «mirror» associations of local self-governments on both sides of the border; therefore, they do not constitute a single legal entity. Their activities are based on inter-municipal agreements and are managed by permanent secretariats and working groups.

A key advantage of Euroregions is their flexibility and ability to effectively administer not only their own projects but also EU programme instruments, primarily Small Project Funds (SPFs) within the Interreg framework. These mechanisms are used to implement «people-to-people» initiatives, which foster trust, reduce historical barriers, and promote the development of paradiplomacy at the local level.

At the same time, the experience of the Visegrad countries reveals significant limitations of Euroregions:

- lack of full legal personality;
- limited capacity to implement large-scale infrastructural or strategic projects;
- dependence on the interests of local political elites and the stability of funding.

**European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs)** represent the most formalized institutional form of CBC within the European Union. They are, in most cases, legal entities under public law and can directly enter into contracts, manage financial resources, and implement projects on behalf of their members. This format is often viewed as the «next stage» in the evolution of CBC.

EGTCs have occupied a significant place within the institutional architecture of cross-border cooperation in the Visegrad Four countries and are regarded as a more advanced instrument of interaction, requiring a higher level of managerial and organizational maturity from the participating partners. This format has been most actively applied in Hungary, whereas in the other V4 countries its diffusion has been

more limited and selective. This state of affairs in Hungary is explained by clear regulatory support and backing from the state, in contrast to its neighboring countries.

Thus, the experience of the Visegrad Group shows that the EGTC is not a universal institutional solution. In many cases, these structures face:

- complex approval procedures at the national level;
- limited political mandate, including insufficient recognition of their status as independent legal entities by authorities on both sides of the border;
- lack of access to management functions in the majority of Interreg programmes.

The key conclusion is that the effectiveness of an EGTC is determined not by its legal status alone, but by the presence of a clear functional role, a stable project portfolio aligned with CBC's strategic vision (often with a predefined list of cooperation areas), and political support from its founders.

Due to Zakarpattia oblast's location on the border and proximity to four EU member states, the EGTC can serve as a practical and effective tool for cross-border cooperation. This geographical position creates the prerequisites for integrating the region into joint transport, infrastructure, and economic networks with neighboring countries, as well as for broader involvement of European financial, logistical, and innovative resources. This is significant not only for the region's development but also for Ukraine as a whole, particularly in the context of post-war recovery.

A key advantage of the EGTC is its participation as a sole beneficiary in Interreg programmes, which, in European practice, are considered among the most effective tools for supporting cross-border cooperation alongside other EU financial mechanisms. This opens the door to joint project implementation in the fields of culture, environment, tourism, healthcare, and transport. At the same time, the priorities in these areas do not currently fully coincide for Ukrainian and European stakeholders. This is due to differing conditions in CBC development, specifically the combination of wartime challenges and accelerated European integration in Ukraine.

### ***Lessons for Ukraine***

*It is advisable to consider Euroregions as the first level of the institutional CBC architecture, effective for networking but insufficient for managing complex cross-border tasks without supplementation by other forms.*

*The «Tysa» EGTC can be positioned as a pilot institution, with an emphasis not on formal status but on expanding its project portfolio, integrating into Interreg NEXT programmes, and strengthening its managerial capacity.*

## **1.2. Legal Opportunities for Cross-Border Cooperation in the Visegrad Four Countries.**

The European model of cross-border cooperation has evolved from contractual mechanisms developed within the framework of the Council of Europe to an institutionalized legal model embedded in European Union law. Within this framework, cross-border cooperation is integrated into the EU's economic, social and territorial cohesion policy and implemented through the instruments of European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) and the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). For candidate countries, the relevant requirements are systematized under Chapter 22 of the EU acquis (Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments). Under EU law, EGTCs constitute a public-law form of territorial cooperation that enables joint management of programmes and projects, with clearly defined mechanisms for responsibility, financial management, and control. The interaction between Council of Europe law and EU law has resulted in a multi-level legal framework that allows local authorities to act as full-fledged subjects of public-law relations in the cross-border dimension.

In this context, the experience of the Visegrad Group countries (the Republic of Poland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, and Hungary) is particularly illustrative, as they ensured both normative and institutional adaptation of their national legislation to the relevant EU acquis standards. Comparative analysis demonstrates that the Visegrad countries have developed an effective legal model of cross-border cooperation that combines Council of Europe norms with EU acquis requirements. Their legislation guarantees the legal personality of local authorities, establishes transparent registration and financial procedures, provides for a clear distribution of competences, and ensures effective supervisory oversight. The Visegrad model confirms that the sustainability of cross-border interaction is achieved through a combination of legal certainty, financial accountability, institutional capacity and transparency, thereby forming a solid legal foundation for stable regional integration.

The practice of EU Member States, including the Visegrad Four, demonstrates that EGTCs enable a transition from fragmented project-based formats to sustainable institutional mechanisms of cooperation based on joint governance bodies, clearly defined legal personality, transparent financial procedures, harmonized audit standards and accountability mechanisms. EU regulations defining the status, organizational and procedural standards of EGTCs serve as a normative framework ensuring predictability of legal application and compatibility of actions across different legal systems. A

significant feature of EGTC development has been the expansion of eligible participants and the institutionalization of the external dimension of territorial cooperation. This allows not only public authorities but also entities providing services of general interest (such as healthcare, transport, environment and education) to participate in institutionalized forms of cooperation. The experience of the Visegrad Group demonstrates that EGTCs can function effectively in these sectors and ensure stable cross-border interaction.

### **1.3. Best Practices of Cross-Border Cooperation in the Visegrad Four Countries: The Role of European Union Programmes**

Interreg programmes play a system-forming role in the development of cross-border cooperation in the Visegrad Four countries. Their significance lies not only in financing individual projects but also in shaping sustainable institutional practices, including professional secretariats, transparent selection procedures, partnership networks and strategic programming.

The multi-cycle implementation of Interreg contributes to the accumulation of administrative capacity, the diffusion of shared governance standards and the development of long-term development visions, thereby enabling a shift from ad hoc initiatives to stable models of cooperation. Admittedly, Interreg performs a socialization function in the field of cross-border cooperation by engaging new stakeholders and fostering a «learning by doing» approach through participation in joint projects.

The sustainability component within Interreg programmes manifests through the preparation and submission of grant applications that serve as continuations or subsequent phases of previously successful cross-border projects. This practice demonstrates the resilience of partnerships between actors on different sides of the border, as well as the institutional capacity of beneficiaries to operate within a long-term strategic frame. Sustainability encompasses several interconnected dimensions: institutional sustainability, which involves preserving joint project management structures and partnership networks; output sustainability, expressed in the continued use or scaling of jointly developed solutions and tools; and financial sustainability, ensured by securing subsequent rounds of funding within Interreg programmes or related EU instruments. Launching interinstitutional cooperation between regional and national authorities, which are, in principle, bound to the national confines, is another important outcome of the CBC programmes. These collaboration projects have been

sensitizing the civil servants towards the problems of border people. The establishment of interinstitutional cooperation between regional and national authorities, which by their nature operate within national borders, represents another important outcome of cross-border cooperation programmes. Such collaborative initiatives contribute to increasing the awareness and responsiveness of policymakers and administrators to the needs and challenges faced by populations in border regions.

The experience of the V4 countries convincingly demonstrates that the ability to manage small project funds and participate in Interreg programming has been the key incentive for the development of Euroregions and, to a lesser extent, EGTCs. At the same time, excessive dependence on grant resources without developing one's own institutional capacity leads to the niche character and fragmentation of cross-border structures' activities.

### ***Lesson for Ukraine***

*The establishment of interinstitutional cooperation between regional and national authorities, which traditionally operate within the confines of national borders, is a significant outcome of cross-border cooperation programmes. Such collaborative initiatives enhance the awareness, policy sensitivity, and responsiveness of decision-makers and public administrators to the specific needs and challenges faced by border communities.*

*Participation in Interreg programs calls should be viewed as a tool for shaping CBC policy rather than exclusively as a source of funding. For Zakarpattia oblast, this necessitates a transition from the logic of individual applications toward a portfolio and strategic approach.*

### **Conclusion on Policy Development**

The most effective model of cross-border cooperation in the Visegrad Four countries is a combination of flexible organizational platforms (Euroregions) and formalized institutional instruments (EGTCs), reinforced by systemic realization of the Interreg projects. It is precisely this multi-level institutional architecture that can be adapted in Ukraine, using Zakarpattia oblast as a pilot region. This choice is driven by its specific characteristics, notably its unique geographical location at the crossroads of several borders, as well as its favourable resource potential, which promotes cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries and enables the implementation of large-scale, long-term projects (the region has the most extensive experience in project management and implementation). Accordingly, the region plays a strategic role not

only in cross-border cooperation but also in the state's broader international engagement and, under conditions of effective planning and management, represents a promising platform for promoting neighborhood policy and European integration.

For Ukraine, it is advisable to transition from a fragmented project-based approach to a strategic logic of cross-border cooperation, with an emphasis on team retention, institutional memory, and long-term interaction networks with EU partners. The adaptation of such practices will improve the efficiency of utilizing European funds, strengthen the role of border regions in recovery and integration processes, and foster the gradual harmonization of administrative procedures with the approaches applied within the Interreg framework.

Zakarpattia oblast can, through opportunities provided by cross-border cooperation, become a vital transmitter of European governance practices at the regional level. It can prepare the state for the adaptation of standards (for cooperating) in Cohesion Policy and help build and accumulate the institutional and human resource capacity and experience necessary for cooperation with the EU.

## **2. Key Problems of Cross-Border Cooperation in Ukraine**

### **2.1. Fragmentary Nature of State Policy in the Sphere of Cross-Border Cooperation**

One of the key problems for CBC development in Ukraine remains the lack of a cohesive, consistent state policy in this field. CBC is viewed primarily as an auxiliary tool for regional development or as an element of external cooperation, rather than as an integral component of European integration policy and multi-level governance. Unlike the Visegrad Four countries, where cross-border cooperation is embedded in cohesion policy and operates within a clearly defined system of competences across levels of government, Ukraine's national-level cross-border cooperation policy remains insufficiently coordinated. The absence of a coherent strategic vision and effective mechanisms of horizontal and vertical coordination results in fragmented initiatives by central authorities, regions and municipalities, thereby reducing the efficiency of EU programme resource utilization.

#### ***Impact on Zakarpattia Oblast***

*Despite accumulated experience in cross-border cooperation, the region operates in conditions of strategic uncertainty and without a clearly articulated national policy framework in this field. At the same time, its border location and intensive interaction with EU Member States create the preconditions for Zakarpattia oblast to serve as a pilot territory for testing new institutional approaches that could subsequently be scaled up at the national level.*

### **2.2. Limited Legal Opportunities for Institutionalizing Cooperation**

Although Ukraine's national legislation formally allows local self-government bodies and regions to engage in international cooperation, the practical opportunities for creating and developing institutionalized forms of CBC remain limited. Current legal norms do not establish a clear «roadmap» for the participation of Ukrainian subnational authorities in EGTCs or other formalized structures.

In practice, this translates into complex approval procedures, an unclear distribution of powers between authorities at different levels, and increased political risks for those initiating such forms of cooperation. Compared to the Visegrad Four

countries, where legal frameworks clearly define the competencies of communities and regions in the CBC sphere, the Ukrainian system remains institutionally undefined.

According to survey results, CBC practitioners in Zakarpattia oblast also emphasize the negative impact of legal and administrative barriers. These obstacles range from a lack of harmonized legislation regarding cross-border cooperation and projects, lengthy and complex approval or permitting procedures, and restrictions on financing or transferring funds abroad, to a lack of clear coordination mechanisms between central and local authorities and other organizations, as well as negative experiences interacting with the State Treasury Service of Ukraine.

### ***Impact on Zakarpattia Oblast***

*The functioning of the EGTC «Tysa» appears to be more situational than the result of a coherent state policy in the field of cross-border cooperation, which significantly limits the prospects for the institutional replication and adaptation of this experience in other border regions of Ukraine.*

### **2.3. Deficit of Stable Co-financing and Institutional Capacity**

Another systemic problem is the lack of stable state mechanisms for the co-financing of cross-border initiatives. Unlike in the Visegrad Four countries, where the co-financing of Interreg projects is often provided through national or regional budgets, in Ukraine, the burden falls almost entirely on local communities and their partners.

This creates an asymmetry between Ukrainian CBC participants and their EU partners, who have access to significantly broader financial and human resources. Consequently, Ukrainian communities are forced to limit themselves to small-scale projects or withdraw from participating in more complex initiatives.

A specific financial complication for Ukrainian participants in cross-border programmes is the reimbursement mechanism, which requires beneficiaries to cover costs upfront and receive reimbursement only after the expenditures have been verified. In the absence of state-level pre-financing instruments or guaranteed co-financing, Ukrainian communities must cover project costs from limited local budgets or through external borrowing. This significantly increases financial risks, complicates budget planning, and restricts community liquidity, particularly in multi-component or infrastructure projects with long expenditure verification cycles. Combined with currency risks and reimbursement delays, this creates additional barriers for Ukrainian beneficiaries in Interreg programmes, effectively narrowing the circle of potential

participants to only the most financially capable organizations and exacerbating inequality in access to EU cross-border instruments. Furthermore, survey results indicate that the reimbursement model is also a partial obstacle for Visegrad Four stakeholders. Both European and Ukrainian (Zakarpattia) respondents mention co-financing mechanisms and complex reporting and auditing procedures as the most significant barriers to effective cross-border cooperation.

### ***Impact on Zakarpattia Oblast***

*Even with prior experience in EU programmes, the lack of stable co-financing and professional management teams constrains the institutional development of cross-border cooperation and hinders the transition from the implementation of individual projects to the formation of a strategically aligned portfolio of cross-border initiatives.*

## **2.4. Project-Based Approach versus Strategic Programming**

The development of cross-border cooperation in Ukraine can be meaningfully analyzed through three interrelated dimensions: *exclusion* (overcoming infrastructural and spatial disparities), *filtering* (taking into account cultural and linguistic factors and their impact on interaction), and *contacting* (building sustainable institutional and interpersonal networks while utilizing emerging windows of opportunity).

Within these dimensions, key constraints of Ukrainian cross-border cooperation become evident, particularly the dominance of a short-term project-based approach and the implementation of initiatives primarily as one-off grant projects lacking strategic integration into regional development policies. Such practices hinder the formation of long-term partnerships and result in fragmented outcomes.

In contrast, in the Visegrad Four countries, participation in Interreg programmes has gradually evolved into a mechanism of strategic programming, involving the development of a coherent portfolio of projects aligned with regional and national strategies. The absence of a comparable systemic approach in Ukraine limits the accumulation of institutional memory and constrains the institutional maturation of cross-border cooperation.

A critical element of strategic programming is accounting for beneficiaries' positions and needs across the cross-border territory. This involves public opinion research, which enables an assessment of which programme priorities are most relevant to the region's needs. This also directly affects the efficiency of securing grant funds: projects that clearly respond to local needs and community expectations are more likely

to secure funding and be successfully implemented. Furthermore, regular surveys and feedback loops strengthen trust between partners, increase transparency in selection processes, and enable dynamic adjustment of strategic programme priorities to improve economic and social conditions.

Another essential aspect concerns the application of integrated spatial planning methods and practices, with particular attention to functional areas, urban–rural partnerships, and polycentric territorial development across administrative boundaries. European instruments for integrated planning contribute to disseminating a strategic approach among the involved stakeholders. At the same time, cross-border spatial planning and related initiatives should be systematically supported by cross-border consultations to ensure that the expectations and needs of local communities are adequately reflected. Cross-border planning cannot be conceived as a purely top-down process; rather, it requires inclusive and participatory governance mechanisms.

### ***Impact on Zakarpattia Oblast***

*The region has the potential to transition to the strategic and portfolio approach; however, this requires institutional support and stable management structures.*

## **2.5. Asymmetry in Relations with European Union Partners**

A significant challenge for Ukraine remains the institutional asymmetry in relations with partners from EU member states. This manifests as a disparity in managerial capacities, access to financial resources, and experience with European programmes.

Under these conditions, Ukrainian CBC participants often act as «junior partners», which diminishes their influence on agenda-setting and the selection of institutional forms of cooperation. Without a targeted policy to address these asymmetries, the potential of CBC remains only partially fulfilled.

One of the key institutional challenges for Ukrainian cross-border cooperation participants is the lack of qualified project managers at the level of territorial communities, and the training projects that could compensate for this shortage. The absence of experienced specialists complicates the preparation of high-quality grant applications, the maintenance of accounting and administrative documentation, and coordination between partners. This leads to delays in project implementation, lower reporting quality, and increased risks of non-reimbursement of expenditures. In the long term, the shortage of personnel limits communities' capacity to strategically plan

cross-border initiatives and reduces their competitiveness during the project selection process in Interreg programmes.

Another barrier is the incomplete readiness of Ukrainian participants to work in English, which is the primary working language of EU programmes, including Interreg. This complicates the preparation of grant applications, communication with international partners, the maintenance of financial and administrative documentation, and participation in seminars and training sessions. Insufficient English proficiency increases the risk of documentation errors and delays in report approvals, and diminishes opportunities for full participation in shaping joint project ideas. At the same time, the need for translators or additional courses increases project administration costs, further straining communities' financial capacity and reinforcing the asymmetry in relations with EU partners.

Most Ukrainian state institutions do not work directly with English-language documents. Consequently, for example, without a certified translation of a grant agreement, a bank cannot process the grant, and the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine cannot register it as international technical assistance. This requirement creates additional timelines and burdens on communities, often delaying the start of project implementation, especially given limited human resources and a lack of experienced project managers. Meanwhile, partners from EU countries do not face such procedural restrictions, which further amplifies the asymmetry in meeting administrative and financial requirements, hinders equal participation by Ukrainian beneficiaries, and increases the risk of documentation errors.

The existence of these obstacles is confirmed by the opinions of the surveyed Ukrainian respondents from Zakarpattia oblast. Compared to European respondents, the vast majority of Ukrainian participants highlighted these barriers, particularly the lack of human resources. Although this obstacle is also reported by European respondents, the percentage of respondents who perceive a negative impact is significantly lower among them.

### ***Impact on Zakarpattia Oblast***

*The region's proximity to the Visegrad Four countries creates unique opportunities for learning and institutional «catching up»; however, without systemic support, these opportunities are utilized only fragmentarily.*

## **Conclusion on Policy Development**

The key problems of cross-border cooperation in Ukraine are systemic and cannot be overcome solely at the level of individual projects, partnerships, or regions. The experience of the Visegrad Four countries demonstrates that effective CBC requires a combination of clear state policy, legal certainty, stable co-financing, and the institutional capacity of subnational actors. Zakarpattia oblast can serve as a pilot region for testing and refining these approaches.

### **3. Recommendations for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Cross-Border Cooperation in Ukraine**

#### **3.1. Recommendations for National Authorities of Ukraine**

##### **3.1.1. Institutionalizing Cross-Border Cooperation as a Distinct Branch of State Policy**

It is advisable to view CBC not merely as a regional development tool but as an integral component of European integration policy, post-war recovery, and multi-level governance. This involves enshrining CBC in strategic state-level documents and establishing clear priorities for border regions, specifically within the State Strategy for Regional Development by clearly defining priorities for border territories and linking CBC with recovery and cohesion instruments.

##### **3.1.2. Implementing an Effective Interagency Coordination Mechanism**

It is recommended to establish or strengthen an interagency coordination mechanism for CBC. This mechanism should ensure the alignment of actions between central and regional authorities responsible for regional development, European integration, recovery, and international cooperation, while providing methodological support and harmonizing law enforcement practices.

Such a mechanism could be established by a dedicated Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. Its functions would include strategic planning, coordinating Ukraine's participation in Interreg and Interreg NEXT programmes, and providing support for pilot regions, specifically Zakarpattia oblast.

##### **3.1.3. Ensuring Legal Certainty for Institutional Forms of CBC**

Specialized legislation in the field of cross-border cooperation requires systematic revision in order to ensure its harmonization with EU law and the standards of the Council of Europe. In particular, the status, competences, and participation procedures of cross-border cooperation actors must be clearly defined to guarantee legal certainty and predictability of administrative decisions. This would create the regulatory preconditions for establishing a coherent model of participation by local self-government authorities and other Ukrainian stakeholders in institutionalized forms of cross-border cooperation, including EGTCs, taking into account the practices of the Visegrad Four countries.

At the same time, strengthening the legal framework would allow the EGTC «Tysa» and other newly established groupings to be considered pilot institutional solutions, with the potential to replicate and scale their legal and governance practices in other border regions of Ukraine.

#### **3.1.4. Establishing Stable Mechanisms for CBC Co-financing**

It is recommended to provide targeted budgetary instruments for the co-financing of CBC projects and institutions (such as targeted programs or subventions), particularly within the framework of Interreg and Interreg NEXT programmes. This is essential to reduce the current asymmetries between Ukrainian and European partners.

#### **3.1.5. Simplifying and Harmonizing Financial and Administrative Procedures**

It is necessary to standardize and procedurally simplify (while maintaining the proper monitoring) the mechanisms for the approval, reporting, and auditing of CBC agreements and projects. This should be achieved via introducing standardized procedural mechanisms, clear timelines for document review, rules for resubmission, and definitive requirements for documentation sufficiency.

Financial and legal procedures, specifically those concerning auditing rules, budgetary liability, and financial reporting, should be harmonized in accordance with EU standards.

### **3.2. Recommendations for the Regional Authorities**

#### **3.2.1. Integrating CBC into Regional Development Strategies**

Regional authorities should regard CBC as a tool for achieving strategic regional development goals rather than an isolated sphere of international activity. This involves integrating the cross-border dimension into regional development strategies and recovery plans on a systemic basis.

At the regulatory level, this should be facilitated by updating the central government's methodological guidelines for regional strategy development and by establishing CBC as a mandatory element for border regions.

#### **3.2.2. Transitioning to a Portfolio and Strategic Approach**

Regional authorities are advised to form portfolios of cross-border projects united by a common development logic that aligns with regional and national strategic

objectives. This approach enables a shift from fragmented initiatives toward the accumulation of institutional capacity and strategic results.

Zakarpattia oblast possesses all the prerequisites to pilot this portfolio approach through its participation in Interreg programmes, serving as a best-practice model on the EU's external border. The region's geographic position, neighbored by four EU Member States, predestines it to become a pilot area for cross-border integrated planning of functional areas and to adapt European practices in this field.

### **3.2.3. Professionalizing CBC Management**

It is advisable to create or strengthen specialized structural units or CBC teams responsible for project preparation, partnership coordination, and the preservation of institutional memory. This requires developing a system for the training and professional development of personnel responsible for cross-border initiatives.

Zakarpattia can serve as a pilot platform for testing the portfolio approach to Interreg participation, building a specialized talent pool for the region.

### **3.2.4. Establishing Regular Cooperation with CBC Stakeholders**

It is advisable to engage regularly with stakeholders to ascertain the current state of affairs in the CBC sector domestically and across state borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, gather their assessments of problematic issues and obstacles, and identify potential opportunities.

### **3.2.5. Ensuring Financial Means for Sustainable Cooperation**

In the post-war period, the financial capacity of regional governments will improve significantly, enabling them to (re-)create a regional support system for cross-border cooperation. It may include a reserve designed to pre-finance the costs occurring at the local actors when starting CBC projects (easing therefore their burdens, and improving their capacities to effectively take part in project consortia); and a Small Project Fund designed to inspire varied actors (e.g. schools, health and social institutions, professional organizations, CSOs and NGOs, small local municipalities, etc.) starting cooperation with their counterparts beyond the border. Even a smaller budget may have a ripple effect on cooperation initiatives.

### **3.3. Recommendations for Territorial Communities (Hromadas)**

#### **3.3.1. Considering CBC as a Long-term Tool for Community Development**

Communities should view cross-border cooperation as a long-term development tool, integrating it into their own socio-economic development strategies. Particular attention should be paid to investing in human resources and project capacity, as well as transitioning from one-off contacts to stable, multi-year partnerships with communities and public institutions in EU countries.

#### **3.3.2. Investing in Human Resources and Project Capacity**

It is recommended to allocate resources to the professional development of personnel responsible for CBC, particularly in drafting applications and EU project management. The staffing deficit should be addressed not through one-off training sessions, but by establishing a stable pool of project managers. It is advisable to implement regional or inter-municipal CBC project offices that would serve multiple communities and accumulate specialized expertise.

It is necessary to ensure permanent co-financing and institutional development opportunities for project managers to reduce staff turnover. This would allow communities to transition from episodic participation in Interreg programmes to a strategic approach to projects, including expanding financial support from other EU funds. The development of territorial communities in the context of European integration should be viewed through the prism of the synergy between various EU programmes, specifically Interreg and Erasmus+ (KA2), which provide distinct yet complementary instruments for institutional development.

#### **3.3.3. Developing Stable Partnerships**

Communities should move beyond ad hoc partnerships and establish sustained, long-term cooperation with municipalities, institutions in EU countries, and other relevant stakeholders.

The presence of established and trusted partnerships facilitates the preparation of project applications, reduces administrative costs, minimizes resources required for negotiations, and enhances credibility vis-à-vis donors and EU programmes. Submitting projects within stable consortia enhances their quality and competitiveness, as each partner makes contributions based on their expertise, capacities, and experience, thereby mutually reinforcing the consortia's overall effectiveness.

### **3.4. Recommendations for Practitioners and Other Stakeholders (Universities, NGOs, Regional Development Agencies, Expert Organisations)**

#### **3.4.1. Serving as «Knowledge Brokers»**

Practitioners should focus on supporting authorities in project preparation, barrier analysis, and the dissemination of CBC best practices. To improve their capacities for maintaining long-term, sustainable partnerships, as well as for becoming lead beneficiaries in CBC projects, their teams should be actively involved in training activities offered by the relevant knowledge centers. Furthermore, international networking may remarkably expand their knowledge and experience, enabling them to become engines of regional cross-border cooperation.

#### **3.4.2. Supporting Intersectoral Partnerships**

It is recommended to foster cooperation between government bodies, businesses, educational institutions, and civil society organizations within cross-border projects and other initiatives.

Universities have the potential to become hubs for human capital development in cross-border cooperation. It is advisable to integrate modules on EU project management into training programs for specialists in public administration, political science, economics, law, and international relations. Furthermore, postgraduate programs and short-term certification courses for local government employees should be introduced. Engaging universities as partners or project coordinators will also allow communities to compensate for their lack of managerial and analytical experience.

### **3.5. Recommendations for European Union Institutions and Visegrad Four Partners**

#### **3.5.1. Contributing to Mitigating Disparities in Institutional Capacity.**

During the programming and implementation of Interreg NEXT, it is advisable to provide additional technical assistance instruments for Ukrainian partners. The European Union should expand funding for preparatory and institutional-development tools targeted at Ukrainian communities. These instruments should be accessible before the announcement of calls for proposals or during their early stages, to lower entry barriers for partners with limited institutional and English-language capacity.

Specifically, to facilitate project preparation, it is recommended to hold thematic «workshops» to jointly formulate the project logic, distribute roles, budget, and align expectations between partners.

To support communities, it is essential to provide language support during the preparatory stage, including translation of working materials, bilingual event facilitation, and access to professional English-language assistance. Consideration should be given to allowing concept notes or initial applications to be submitted in Ukrainian, with subsequent translation at the full application stage, and to providing bilingual templates for key documents and guidelines.

It is recommended to combine project preparation support with long-term capacity building focused on developing internal project teams within communities, rather than solely on preparing individual applications. Investing in such instruments will improve the quality of submitted projects, reduce the number of formal errors, ensure more equitable participation by Ukrainian partners in consortia, and lay the foundation for stable, multi-year partnerships within Interreg NEXT programmes.

### **3.5.2. Supporting Institutional Development rather than just Funding Projects (focusing on the systemic growth of the organization itself rather than just funding one-off activities)**

It is recommended to combine infrastructure and «soft» project funding with investments in professional secretariats, staff training, and strategic planning.

Programme bodies or technical secretariats could facilitate the selection of compatible partners and the formation of balanced consortia. Furthermore, they should organize so-called «proposal-writing trainings» with practical support for Ukrainian communities to improve the quality of project proposals, including consultations on alignment with programme priorities, EU procedures, financial rules, and reporting requirements.

### **3.5.3. Considering Zakarpattia Oblast as a Pilot Region**

It is advisable to utilize Zakarpattia oblast as a testing ground for piloting new approaches to CBC at the EU's external border, with subsequent scaling to other regions of Ukraine.

The implementation of the proposed recommendations will enable a transition from fragmented, project-based cross-border cooperation to a systemic, institutionally capable policy integrated into the processes of European integration and Ukraine's post-war recovery. Zakarpattia oblast has the potential to become a pilot region for the implementation of such a model.

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