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# **FOSTERING EUROREGIONAL COOPERATION IN PUBLIC SERVICES EVIDENCE FROM BIHOR – HAJDU-BIHAR EUROREGION**

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## **Abstract**

The sustainability and effectiveness of the new European construction relies on good relations between neighbouring countries. The importance and effectiveness of cross-border exchanges and co-operation, although recognised in theory, must be approached in a more specific manner, by evaluating and assessing previous co-operation actions and projects. In this context, our paper approaches the institutional co-operation framework, focusing on the provision of public services within a euroregional framework, i.e. the Bihor – Hajdu-Bihar euroregion (located on Romanian-Hungarian border). The paper investigates, on a survey-based research, the effectiveness of the cooperation actions undertaken within an EU co-financed project, developed in this euroregion. The actions undertaken within this project covered the joint provision of public services, especially in the field of police and public order services. The paper focuses on revealing aspects such as aims and results, effects and limits, constraints and long-run sustainability etc. of the cross-border cooperation actions, as from the perspective of the experts questioned, i.e. police managers and public order management personnel. The paper also draws conclusions and provides further recommendations for ensuring the sustainability and enhancing the effectiveness of future cross-border cooperation programs.

*Keywords:* cross-border, euroregional cooperation, public services, police, public order

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## **1. Introduction**

The late 80s and early 90s experienced unprecedented political, social and economic changes in Europe, preceding EU integration processes. European integration through its various forms gave a completely different meaning to both internal and external borders, by ‘melting’ internal borders of the EU (e.g. European single market), and at the same time by ‘freezing’ outside borders (e.g.

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Schengen Agreement) [1]. Cross-border cooperation (CBC) refers to establishing neighbourly relations between communities and local authorities on both sides of a border, but this simple definition denotes a complex reality of the past 50 years, inseparably related to historical and political developments in Europe [2].

Consequently, CBC has experienced a significant expansion and a lot of intergovernmental commissions at regional/local level, cross-border euroregions or 'associations' with similar structure have emerged. The most complex CBC takes the form of euroregions, defined by Perkmann as: "the classical form of a Euroregion is the 'twin association': on each side of the border, municipalities and districts form an association according to a legal form suitable within their own national legal systems" [3].

Our paper approaches the issue of the euroregional cooperation in public services' provision, by specifically investigating the case of a cooperation project within police and public order services developed in Bihor – Hajdu-Bihar Euroregion. After reviewing the literature on cross-border cooperation and euroregions as framework for local development, the paper focuses on the above mentioned case, analysing aspects such as objectives, achievements and obstacles experiences in the process of euroregional cooperation, effectiveness of main activities and actual benefits and prospects, and sustainability issues.

## **2. Cross-border cooperation and euroregions: a review of literature**

The topic of CBC is a relatively new one, hence the first approaches have emerged for the last 20 years. Its origin is related to Krugman's 'core-periphery model' [4], describing the interactions between firm's increasing returns to scale, transportation cost and the mobility of labour factor and how can be initiated and provided a spatial structure of economic development. Later, the new growth theory exploits the Krugman's model, arguing that growth can be a destabilizing force, *social learning* induces stabilization effects and industry agglomeration leads to accelerating growth both in central (core) areas, both in peripheral ones [5]. Obviously, euroregions as border areas are adequate for the core-periphery model, and the main developments are to be mentioned:

- Erkut and Ozgen, and then Brodzicki, analysing differences between several regions, concluded there are both significant regional differences concerning the economic and social development, persistent and even increasing discrepancies between central and peripheral regions after EU enlargement [G. Erkut and C. Özgen, *The Economic and Spatial Peripherality of Border Regions in Southeastern Europe*, Proc. of the 43<sup>rd</sup> European Congress of the Regional Science Association (on CD-Rom), University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, 2003; T. Brodzicki, *Relative Centrality or Peripherality and the Growth Effects of Relative Centrality or Peripherality and the Growth Effects of Economic Integration within the European Union*, International Trade, 0510005 (2005) ,available at: <http://econpapers.repec.org/paper/wpawuwpit/0510005.htm>];

- Niebuhr, analysing EU enlargement effects on the economic development of EU border regions, has revealed that the effects of integration on market access are even stronger than expected [6];
- Petrakos and Economou have concluded that the growing differential between metropolitan and border regions requires measures to support and accelerate the development of cross-border cooperation [G. Petrakos and D. Economou, *The Spatial Aspects of Development in Southeastern Europe*, 2007, available at: <http://www.sre.wu-wien.ac.at/ersa/ersaconfs/ersa02/cd-rom/papers/139.pdf>];
- Topaloglou and Petrakos have demonstrated (studying the northern Greece border regions), that the market size of the border and the proximity to a large city are important determinants in boosting cross-border trade and investment flows in those region [L. Topaloglou and G. Petrakos, *The new economic geography of the Northern Greek border regions*, The 46<sup>th</sup> Congress of the European Regional Science Association, Volos, 2006, available at: [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/23732098\\_The\\_New\\_Economic\\_Geography\\_of\\_the\\_Northern\\_Greek\\_Border\\_Regions](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/23732098_The_New_Economic_Geography_of_the_Northern_Greek_Border_Regions)];
- Uiboupin have suggested that CBC is an essential instrument to reduce regional underdevelopment of border areas and the similarity and trust could be important factors for the success of cross-border economic relations [J. Uiboupin, *Cross-border cooperation and economic development in border regions of Western Ukraine*, Electronic Publications of Pan-European Institute, 2007, 1-36, available at: [http://www.utu.fi/fi/yksikot/tse/yksikot/PEI/raportit-ja-tietopakettit/Documents/Uiboupin\\_92007.pdf](http://www.utu.fi/fi/yksikot/tse/yksikot/PEI/raportit-ja-tietopakettit/Documents/Uiboupin_92007.pdf)].

The concept of *growth triangle* (i.e. a border area, including territories belonging to three or more countries) is another theoretical concept searching to shape some aspects of cross-border regional integration. The main positive effects of a growth triangle are scale and scope economies, clusters that generate economic growth, technology transfer and foreign direct investments [J. Uiboupin, *Cross-border cooperation and economic development in border regions of Western Ukraine*]. Katri-Liis Lepik, based on Etzkowitz research [7], proposes the *triple helix model* to cross-border cooperation: the cooperation between the public sector, the business community and the education system, at regional, national and multinational levels [8].

According to AEBR, regional cooperation relates to the following areas and sectors: environment, agriculture and planning; transportation and telecommunications security; economics and labour; border populations, social protection and public health; education, research, culture [9]. Among other relevant sectors, public order and security is undoubtedly one of the main categories taken into consideration within the CBC. The beginnings of cross-border cooperation, as they were later formalized in the Madrid Convention [Council of Europe, *European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities*, Madrid, 1980, available at: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/106.htm>], date

immediately after the Second World War in the form of so-called ‘twinings’, settled between different municipalities and communities in Europe [3]. Creation and development of numerous euroregions (over 100 at present), in a relatively short time, represent a good confirmation of the first European foresighted, and a highly suggestive image of contemporary realities.

For local and regional authorities, engaging in CBC means they enter a field long time reserved for central state actors [3], but euroregions and other forms of cross border cooperation (CBC) do not create a new type of governance across borders, they exercise no political power, and, within the geographical limits and the purpose of their foundation, these structures are based on cooperation arrangements for promoting common interests and improving the living standards of the population in the border area [2, 10], they foster and enable cooperation between countries, without affecting the territorial integrity of the countries concerned.

### **3. Case-study: cross-border cooperation (CBC) in joint-provision of police and public order services within Bihor – Hajdu-Bihar Euroregion**

In line with the transformations occurred within the EU accession process [11], gradually Romania made its first steps on fostering CBC. At present, many counties or regions in Romania are involved in 12 CBC structures, with all neighbouring countries (EU or non-EU). One of the most recent ones, but still very dynamic, is Bihor – Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion, located in the North-West of Romania and Eastern Hungary, result of the initiative of the Bihor County Council (Romania) and Hajdu-Bihar Self-Government (Hungary) [BRECO, Regional Office for Cross-border Cooperation for Romanian-Hungarian Border, 2012, available at: <http://www.brecoadea.ro/index.php/programe/cooperare-teritoriala-europeana>].

Within Bihor – Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion there are several CBC projects that have received pre-accession funds of PHARE CBC even before 1998 (when the border between Romania and Hungary became eligible for this program). Thus, during 1996-2003, there were allocated 28 million Euros for cross-border projects for the Romanian part and 34 million Euros for the Hungarian part [<http://www.brecoadea.ro/index.php/programe/cooperare-teritoriala-europeana>]. Subsequently, the PHARE CBC Program was implemented in Romania (from 2004 to 2006), together with INTERREG IIIA sub-program in Hungary.

Currently, the CBC Program Hungary-Romania 2007-2013 continues the previously implemented programs (INTERREG IIIA Hungary and PHARE CBC in Romania), expanding and developing the results and lessons already learned [<http://www.brecoadea.ro/index.php/programe/cooperare-teritoriala-europeana>]. The distinctive feature of this period is the focus on the objectives of the Lisbon and Goteborg strategies, with greater emphasis on competitiveness and environmental issues, and joint (both European and national) financed projects.

The area of public services has enjoyed great interest within CBC actions already undertaken in specific fields such as: modernizing local roads, border services, population registering services, preventing common impacts of flooding and waste, integrated monitoring and information, operational data transfer, radioactivity and heavy metals content joint operational monitoring, CBC for sustainable development, local management performance and local development, euroregional centre for cross border crime prevention etc [<http://www.breacoradea.ro/index.php/programe/cooperare-teritoriala-europeana>].

Among the projects addressing public order and security, we focus in this paper on the project 'Operational network and data transfer', implemented by Bihor County Police Inspectorate, aiming at creating an operational transfer data centre and network in Bihor county's capital and main city Oradea (Romania). The general objective of the project was to develop institutions at European standards in the Bihor County Police, based on common institutional architecture, transfer of knowledge and expertise in the field of European integration from the Hungarian partners' experience.

The specific objectives of the project were mainly two: (1) accelerating the exchange of information between the two police Inspectorates via fostering communication, enabling the settlement of a local network with six users in Bihor County, processing network centre in Oradea (Bihor County Police Headquarters, Romania), connected to the existing network at the Hajdu-Bihar County Police (Hungary), releasing joint publication of printed and online material (books, brochures, leaflets) on the prevention of aggression and criminal acts, and (2) management and personnel training in the field of preventing and fighting against crime, through cross-border information exchange and collaboration, specific trainings and seminars on crime prevention.

The target group consisted of six police offices in Bihor County Police Inspectorate and other adjacent institutions responsible for preventing and combating crimes, in the final benefit of all local communities in Bihor and Hajdú-Bihar. The specialized publications were available to around 20,000 people, and the training involved 50 police officers and other officials.

The project was a pioneering achievement for Romania, representing a model for other similar initiative that could be implemented by other county police inspectorates located in border areas.

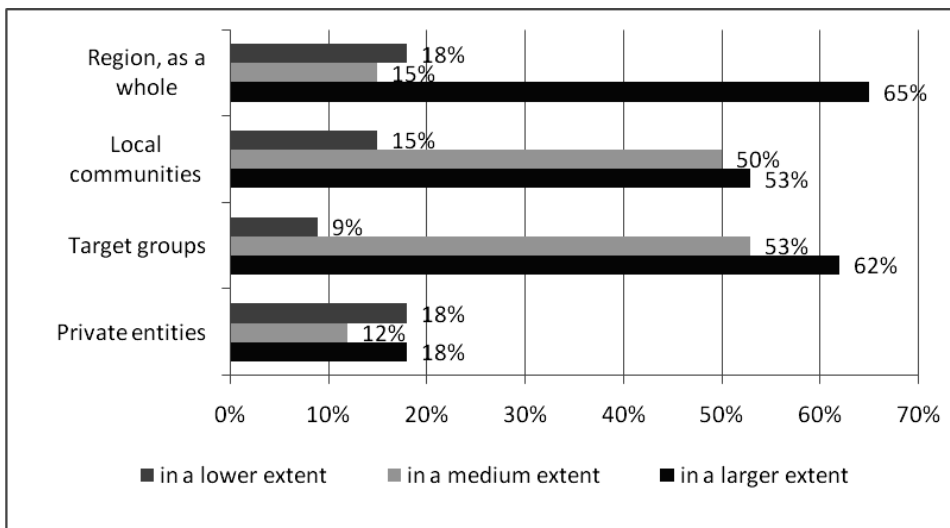
#### **4. Assessing effectiveness of the cooperation: methods, results and discussion**

In order to investigate the importance, role, consequences, limits and prospects of successful local and regional cross-border cooperation, we developed a survey-based research by designing a questionnaire and addressing it to specific targeted experts. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions (9 were opened questions and 11 closed -Yes/No type) specifically related to the following issues: the nature of beneficiaries, specific involvement in cross-border cooperation projects, objectives and effects, communication and relations

among partners, benefits and obstacles, sustainability and future prospects of such programs. The survey was conducted during November-December 2011 and 52 experts, i.e. cross-border project managers, managers/deputies involved in public order and civil protection institutions across the Hungarian-Romanian border were questioned. Their distribution by field was as follows: Regular Police (36), Border Police (8), Gendarmerie (4), Emergency and special interventions services (4). They were all located in border areas: i.e. 27 were from Romanian institutions and 25 from Hungarian ones.

The valid responses to administered questionnaires have indicated a number of 72 actions undertaken within CBC projects in which our respondents have been involved; the majority of them (i.e. 68%) took the form of mixed patrols, followed by PHARE CBC, HU-RO programs etc. As a first evaluation we can notice that the initial stage was dominated by limited and reduced scale cooperation actions, focused on addressing specific problems, as a primary means for mutual knowledge and identifying common problems.

A first step in assessing the effectiveness and benefices of the cooperation is to identify who were the stakeholders, i.e. the actual beneficiaries of the actions undertaken. As Figure 1 reveals, the region as a whole and local communities have been considered, to a large extent, as being the main actual beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation actions. Although this high level of generalization could generate some criticism, the role of these projects has been exactly to create a secure environment for economic, social, cultural activities, and to involve a large number of participants on both sides of the border.

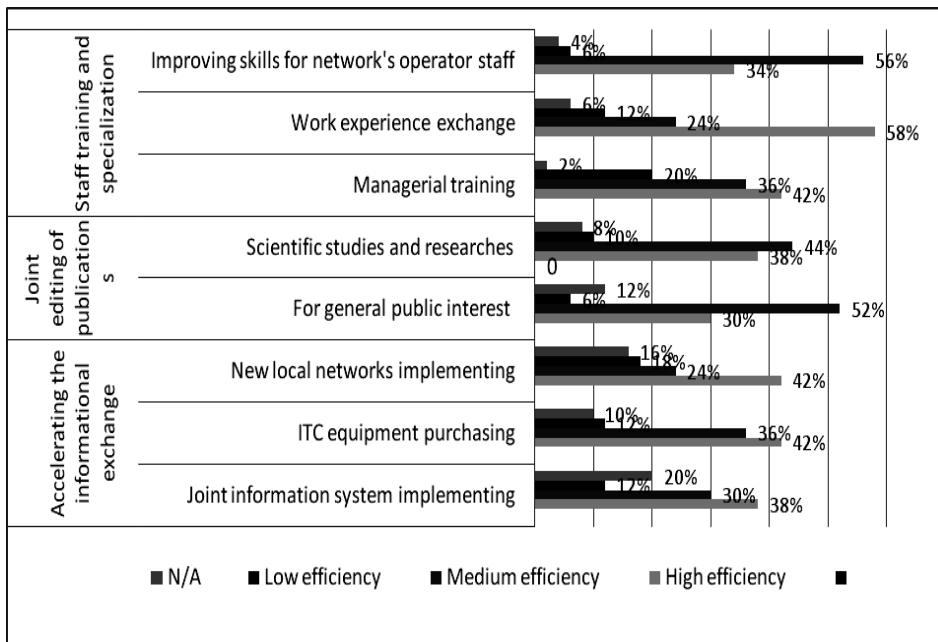


**Figure 1.** The main actual beneficiaries of CBC programs.

The survey data has indicated that respondents share mutual interests and objectives and a high awareness on these issues. 44% of them ‘agreed’ that the benefits of existing cooperation are ‘strong’ and ‘sustainable’ enough to constitute a framework for further development or to enhance CBC in the field

of public order and security; 47% ‘strongly agreed’ with this statement, and only 9% did not agree/did not respond to this question. The answers indicate a tempered optimism, based on daily work realities, but also express the relatively limited experience in these programs. . If separately analyzed by origin country of the respondents, it can be noticed a relatively balanced distribution in the case of Romanian and Hungarian respondents.

When it comes to report actual, specific achievements of CBC programs, the opinions are much more diverse: purchase or access to common information systems and equipment, joint specialized training, regular meetings, complementary actions in neighbouring county partner institution, reducing the minimum time required for information, improvement of the public image of institutions, increasing trust and confidence in police, enhancing cooperation and joint common (re)actions in case of emergencies or disasters.



**Figure 2.** The effectiveness of cross-border cooperation (CBC) in the field of public order and security.

One of the most important enablers for all types of cross-border cooperation is the quality of communication with national/cross-border partner units. The responses indicated a medium or high efficiency of communication (scoring respectively 92% (in the case of communication with national partners) and 94% (for cross-border partners) of the answers). Referring only to the responses attributing ‘maximum efficiency’ and ‘high efficiency’, we find only minor differences regarding the quality of communication with the two categories of partners (i.e. national and cross-border) involved in such actions: 58% of the experts appreciated the quality of the communication with national partners as ‘maximum’ or ‘highly efficient’ and 8% considered it as ‘difficult’ or

‘very difficult’; in the case of the communication with cross-border partners, 49% of the experts considered it as ‘maximum’ or ‘highly efficient’ and only 6% as ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’. Figure 2 shows the perception of respondents on the effectiveness of CBC in police and public order, separately for each type of action undertaken within the project.

The most important issues, with relevance for all CBC actions, are the process of exchanging information and human resources improvement through training programs. The effectiveness of cross border cooperation considered through acceleration of the information exchange has received a positive assessment. Thus, between 38% and 42% of the respondents have evaluated as ‘highly efficient’ the introduction of jointly managed informational systems, purchasing computer and communication equipment, creation and development of local networks, also an expression of an important and specific need for improving the informational and ITC related side of the activities. This is particularly the case of ‘ITC equipment purchasing’ (with 42% of the respondents assessing ‘high efficiency’ and 36% ‘medium efficiency’) and ‘joint information system implementing’ (with 38% of the respondents assessing ‘high efficiency’ and 30% ‘medium efficiency’). Between 24% and 36% of the respondents associate a ‘medium efficiency’ for these actions and less than a quarter associate ‘no efficiency’ or the answers were ‘not applicable’ (explicable otherwise: in some cases, purchasing or implementing an ITC system could not be a purpose by itself).

Management and professional training, work experience sharing, improving skills for network operators staff appear to be associated with the most positive responses and high score (between 34% and 58% for ‘high efficiency’). However, the highest score (i.e. 56%) was registered for medium efficiency at ‘improving skills for staff operators’ sub-activity. This testifies about the gap that still exists between the necessary and the actual skills of the operating staff, and indicates the directions where future co-operation programmes should be focused to improving skills and abilities of the personnel. The most effective cross-border activities considered by Romanian representatives were: data exchange and accessing the Schengen Information System; joint border patrols; PHARE CBC programs; actions against road traffic crime and contraventions; joint supervision on human trafficking; training and work experience exchanges; joint interventions in case of fire on border area; common tactical application on evacuations; executive staff exercises in emergency situations or disasters, etc. Among the less effective actions, there were mentioned: inconsistent and irregular information exchange on fraud areas; some excessive formal meetings and theoretical seminars; formal actions; uncertain and costly (in terms of time and human resources) access to finance. On the other side, the Hungarian representatives’ opinions are unanimously stating that all actions undertaken were highly effective; the only notable exception goes to ‘access to funding’.

The sustainability and further prospects of CBC are also influenced by the perceived barriers and obstacles and the capacity of surpassing them. Main



obstacles are related, in the opinion of the respondents, to: specific laws and regulations (indicated by 42% of the respondents) – partially expected due to the long history of separate development of the national institutions and also to the relatively limited convergence; insufficient financial resources (26% of the respondents); the bureaucracy, centralization and hierarchical pyramid management specific to public institution (18% of the respondents). The fundamentally different nature and purpose of national institutions, or the mentality, attitudes and mutual suspicions cumulate relatively small scores (i.e. 6% and 8%, respectively), but should not be ignored. Thus, most responses of the Hungarian partners' representatives focused on difficulties such as lack of financial resources, followed by the fundamentally different nature and purpose of national institutions, and, finally, mentalities, attitudes and mutual distrust. On the other hand, Romanian respondents assigned a greater importance to obstacles represented by different laws (CBC), bureaucracy, excessive centralization etc.

Concerning the prospects of cross-border cooperation in the field of public order and security, the main threats and risks associated with CBC programs, and particularly how actions and projects can go further and continue in the future, the opinions converge on the idea of their future sustainability. Nevertheless, the optimism must be tempered and turned in a more realistic view when considering the sustainability after ceasing the EU funds, due to the effective limitation of financial resources and budget constraints. The majority of the respondents (i.e. 70%) scored positive the prospects of cross-border cooperation, but also a majority (i.e. 72% of the respondents) was clear moderate when assessing future sustainability after EU funds ceasing.

## **5. Conclusion**

The euroregional framework for CBC and the approach of the contribution of euroregional structures to achieving development goals have been little addressed in the existing literature. Within this context, we tried to investigate the situation of the CBC in the field of public services, focusing on a specific euroregion, i.e. Bihor – Hajdu-Bihar Euroregion and a specific type of public services, i.e. police and public order and safety. As expected, CBC in the field of public order and security at euroregional level is only at the beginning; however, considering the nature of the police organization, traditionally more reluctant to the idea of openness and cooperation, the results are more than promising and encouraging.

Based on a questionnaire related to CBC actions already undertaken, we investigated the opinions of experts and top managers in public order and security institutions on both sides of the Romania-Hungarian border. We approached different issues of the specific way that institutions and persons have been involved in standard cross-border interventions or projects and their experience, how the initial objectives have been achieved, the obstacles and achievements in CBC actions, the effectiveness of communication and cooperation, the effects on beneficiaries, how work experiences can be shared as

a premise for further deepening cooperation in the same or in other cross border areas. The main conclusions are as follows:

- The cooperation actions are still limited, focused on solving specific problems and playing an exploratory role, e.g. mutual knowledge, identifying common problems, etc.;
- The CBC actions already completed have been achieved in a greater extent their initial objectives and proved their benefices for the local communities and the region as a whole;
- The most important obstacles come from specific laws and regulations, lack of financial resources, bureaucracy and centralization;
- All activities listed, e.g. accelerating the information exchange, joint publication, staff development, partnerships between national/transnational institutions, developing necessarily skills for more effectively accessing European funds, are considered to have medium or high efficiency;
- The experts consider these programs as sharing an undeniable future, exceeding the current initial stage; however, their post-funding continuity remains a challenge.

Local public services and their provision across euro-borders are still new interesting research areas, for both scientists and practitioners involved in specific cooperation actions. For many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, CBC is, undoubtedly, at its beginnings, but the results already obtained by an ordinary euroregion, such as Bihor – Hajdu-Bihar Euroregion, are encouraging and mobilizing.

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