

## ROMANIAN HUNGARIAN CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION, EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**Abstract.** *The aim of this paper is to provide an example of good practice regarding cross-border cooperation at the Romanian - Hungarian border.*

*To be more specific, our aim is to refer to the Regional Policies which, through the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), and its' programmes, directed towards cross-border cooperation at the internal and external borders of the European Union, can help in increasing life quality in the region, on multiple levels.*

*The target area of this study includes the eligible counties from the Romanian - Hungarian border, four on each side. The monitored timeframe extends between the years 2004 and 2020, which includes three funding intervals, and three cross-border cooperation programmes, with specific objectives.*

*Thus, in consequence, we will try to provide a series of solutions for the Western Balkans, through our evaluation of cross-border cooperation at the Romanian - Hungarian border; that could improve cooperation in the area. At the same time, we are proposing a model to be followed for identifying and preparing common objectives, which can lead to an efficient, harmonious and lasting cooperation at their borders.*

**Keywords:** *CBC, models of cross-border cooperation, cross-border projects, CBC examples of good practice*

### 1. Introduction

Through history, frontiers played a significant role in the development of European countries. After the Second World War, the meaning of this concept diversified in the speciality literature, the terms of *border*, *boundary*, and *frontier* carrying different characteristics for these dividing lines, which also provide contact opportunities for neighbouring countries (Caesar, Pallagst, 2022).

A new form of cooperation emerged, starting with the 1950s, across the borders of European Countries. This cooperation moved from a geographically limited unregulated slow start, to intensified, institutionalized, and financially backed instruments of cross-border cooperation (CBC) (Czimre, 2013:14-15 apud Durf-Guimer, González, 2010). Germany (Westmuensterland and Grafschaft Bentheim) and the

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Netherlands (Twente and Oostgerland) created the first form of cross-border cooperation in 1958, Euroregio (for more details see: Molle, 2016:25-26, Basboda, 2020: 536).

CBC has been discussed at length in the speciality literature, covering many aspects, though, we think the following paragraph highlights some of the important elements that are also relevant for our paper: “CBC processes have a crucial importance in reducing all sorts of barrier effects on borderlands [...]. Euroregions, in particular, play a big role in this process, creating networks that involve a wider range of local and regional actors into the CBC process, on both sides of the borders [...].” (Kurowska-Pysz, Castanho, Loures, 2018: 2).

The aim of CBC is to improve the quality of life for the European Union’s (EU) member states, reducing economic decline, while also favouring the growth of resilient and collaborative border cities, in which cultural, environmental and economic issues are identified and evaluated in an exhaustive manner by neighbouring countries (Castanho, Loures, Fernandez, 2018: 93).

The aim of this paper is to extract examples of good practice out of the cross-border cooperation activity that took place around the Hungarian - Romanian border. We do this, first, by analysing some of the models proposed by the speciality literature but also by the experience of some of the member partners that have been involved in such projects. This guarantees a wider view of the matter as it includes both practical and theoretical aspects. As a second step, we analysed projects implemented under the umbrella of CBC, at the Romanian – Hungarian border, in three different timeframes, which correspond to three different programmes. The fact that, in the first timeframe, Romania was not part of the EU, makes the results of our study particularly relevant for the Western Balkans. We conclude the study by drafting a general model, that identifies two levels of cooperation for CBC, inspired by the speciality literature, the practical experience of other entities involved in such activities and the results of CBC at the Hungarian - Romanian border.

## **2. Models and stages in cross-border cooperation**

There are various models of cross-border cooperation proposed in the speciality literature. They present, from different perspectives, alternative approaches, stages (or steps), or systems that should help the development of sustainable cross-border cooperation.

For example, Kurowska-Pysz, Castanho and Loures (2018), describe four stages for the development of a strategy for the development of an alliance of border cities. Thus, the focus falls more on the strategy for building cross-border cooperation than the cooperation itself.

*Table 1.* The key stages of the process of building a strategy for the development of a cross-border alliance of border city (source: Joanna Kurowska-Pysz, Rui Alexandre Castanho, Luís Loures, 2018)

<b>Initiation of Cooperation in Alliance</b>	<b>Diagnosis of Alliance Development Direction</b>	<b>Inclusion of new Stakeholders to Alliance</b>	<b>Development of Alliance Development Strategy</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- selection of partners</li> <li>- establishing cooperation and communication rules</li> <li>- institutionalization of cooperation</li> <li>- establishment of a joint team and selection of leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- analysis of the cross-border environment national and regional</li> <li>- identification of problems, needs and objectives of the alliance</li> <li>- resource and potentials analysis of alliance partners</li> <li>- determining the directions of alliance development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- promotion of alliance among various stakeholders</li> <li>- selection of stakeholders for the alliance (formal and informalized participation)</li> <li>- redefinition of the problems, needs and goals of alliance</li> <li>- redefinition of alliance development directions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mission</li> <li>- vision</li> <li>- strategic objectives</li> <li>- directions of activities (present and future)</li> <li>- bilateral and network projects</li> <li>- results</li> </ul>

E-DEN, a platform built by the International Institute of Sociology from Gorizia for the Council of Europe, based on a large database of cross-border cooperation cases, present the stages through which CBC cooperation normally develops, however, the results of such cooperation may vary from case to case, and they are not certain. Six stages were identified by the authors:

1. No relations: initial phase. Inward looking border area characterised by stereotypes and diffidence.

2. Info exchange: Parallel identification of border as common generator of problems and resources.

3. Consultation: The cross-border interdependency is understood. Actions separately carried out but envisaging joint actions.

4. Cooperation: Common goal is set, and actions are carried out according to a shared agenda (and within the limits of each actor's competencies and authority).

5. Harmonisation: Policies are designed taking into consideration the cross-border nature of the area.

6. Integration: Borders are virtual. CBC is fully integrated in the policy making process (compiled from Centre of Expertise for Good Governance, 2021).

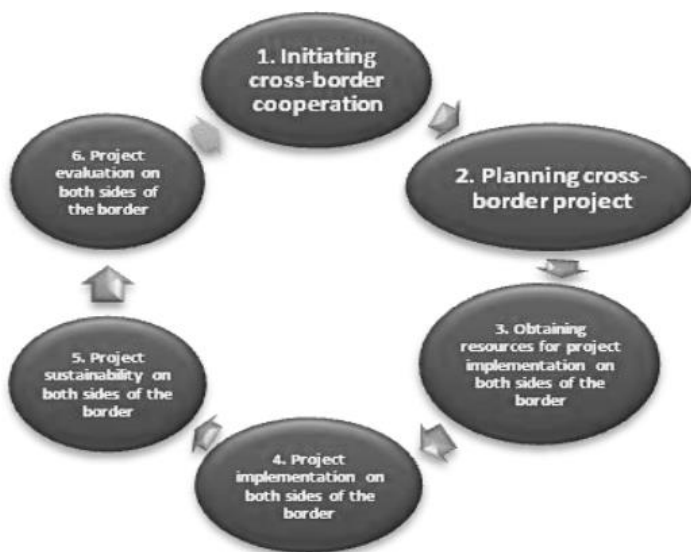
The EUROPARC Federation proposes seven steps for "effective" cross-border cooperation. However, this time, the perspective is that of river ecosystems and comes as a result of the cooperation between two neighbouring national parks from Austria and the Czech Republic. The cooperation was built based on a common, more specific objective, that of the optimization of the impact of conservation management (EUROPARC Federation, 2019). The proposed steps are:

- find objectives,
- set up common research,
- common strategy for management,
- apply a common policy towards main stakeholders,
- joint financing,
- identify and work on multiple political and institutional levels,
- effective public relations strategy for transboundary cooperation.

From the perspective of building a **cross-border cooperation partnership, for steps are proposed by the e-learning platform built by the consortium led by GDSI:**

- finding partners,
- project development,
- defining roles and responsibilities,
- partnership Agreement (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility, 2022).

At the level of an individual cross-border project, the life cycle proposed by Kurowska-Pysz (2020) includes 6 steps designed in a circular fashion, that includes a lesson learned perspective. Figure 1 presents this perspective that includes the initiation of cross-border cooperation as an initial step, which, in some of the cases presented above, is divided in several stages.



**Figure 1.** Cross-border project lifecycle (Source: Joanna KUROWSKA-PYSZ, 2020: 53)

However, learning is not guaranteed, and the same author identifies a few key requirements that must be met so that the project implementation life cycle can facilitate learning:

- “Knowledge transfer (between partners or to the borderland environment).
- joint creation of new knowledge within the framework of the project.
- absorption of knowledge by partners (obtained from one another or imported from the borderland environment).
- individual use of knowledge in cooperating organisations.
- joint use of knowledge by both project partners, to their benefit and/or to the benefit of the borderland environment” (Kurowska-Pysz, 2020: 54).

An alternative to the steps proposed above, for effective cross-border cooperation, divides the initial phase in more specific steps, as opposed to the more general ones mentioned above. They are:

- SWOT analysis.
- General vision.
- Objectives and priorities.
- Common cross-border development strategy.

- Implementation.
- Monitoring and assessment” (translated from Țoca, 2011:7 apud Boar, 2005:53).

According to the models presented above, the phases preceding the development of sustainable cross-border cooperation include a few crucial steps such as the identification of cross-border partners and of common topics of interest.

For instance, in the example given above, proposed by Boar, the first step is that of a SWOT analysis which facilitates the realization of a preliminary study that should make it easier to identify the common strengths, that would present interest for both sides of a border, but also the opportunities provided by funding programmes, that would make the cooperation possible and, through a well thought through general vision, also sustainable.

At the level of the communities of Debrecen and Oradea, county seats on both sides of the Hungarian - Romanian border, a SWOT analysis was done, based on the answers to a questionnaire, provided by a target group consisting of students (50%), people over the age of 25 (40%), and representatives of various institutions (10%). The objective was to identify the main objectives of a future cross-border cooperation, and the result was that various indicators for each element in a SWOT analysis were identified: 20 for the strengths, 17 for the weak points, 18 for opportunities and 16 for threats (Țoca, 2013: 194). Through this, five main dimensions of cooperation were identified for the communities of Oradea and Debrecen. They include cultural, educational, neighborhood, transport and tourism and city modernization objectives, with slightly different interest points for each of the two cities, in most dimensions of cooperation.

Table 2. The objectives of a future Debrecen – Oradea, Eurometropolis (Țoca, 2013: 125)

Criteria	Oradea	Debrecen
Cultural	Cultural objectives, Buildings Architecture, Churches	Culture region
Educational	Academic background, High school background	Academic background
Neighbourhood	Geographical position, Frontier, Custom house	Regional point
Transport	Transport infrastructure	Transport infrastructure
Tourism and modernization of the city		

As Table 2 shows, the result of the SWOT analysis identifies the dimension of *Tourism and City Modernization* as a shared one between the two communities, an outcome also sustained by the specialty literature, which should prompt involvement from the local authorities in supporting cross-border cooperation, not only at the level of the two cities, but also at the level of the Bihor and Hajdú-Bihar counties (Bădulescu, Hoffman, Bădulescu, Simuț, 2016, Bădulescu, Bădulescu, Borma, 2014), especially in what rural tourism is regarded (Bădulescu, Bădulescu, 2017).

There are a few aspects that can be noticed by looking at the examples above. First, as with many other things, both top-down approaches as well as bottom-up approaches are valid. Bottom-up approaches are, generally, more specific, targeting very

clear objectives and the choices of partners are more straight-forward<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, top-down approaches are more general, defining general areas of cooperation, which require a more intensive process of defining objectives and finding partners, which, in return, requires willingness from the relevant institutions.

Second, defining a good model on which future cross-border cooperation can be built depends on many factors so, such a model must be general enough, so that it does not block its users through specific requirements that cannot be met, and must be specific enough that it doesn't become unusable.

Thus, if border areas from certain countries, in this case, the West-Balkans, are interested in cross-border cooperation, some freedom must be given to bottom-up initiatives, and a general strategy should be considered as well, so that a general direction of mutually useful projects can be outlined.

### **3. Cross-border cooperation results at the Hungarian - Romanian border**

The Romanian – Hungarian border has been through three budgeting intervals between 2004-2020, which included programmes dedicated to cross-border cooperation. The **Phare CBC 2004 - 2006** programme was implemented in Romania alongside the Interreg IIIA in Hungary because, at this time, Romania wasn't yet a member of the European Union. The Hungarian - Romanian Cross-border Cooperation programme 2007-2013 (abbreviated as HU-RO 2007-2013) was the next programme, followed by Interreg V-A Romania – Hungary 2014-2020 (Țoca, Chiriac, Chirodea, 2021: 143-144).

Though these programmes cover, geographically, the entire Hungarian – Romanian border, two counties stand out for the funding obtained: Bihor from Romania and Hajdú-Bihar from Hungary. This alone, recommends them as examples of good practice. The two counties that together form the Bihor - Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion, are also part of other similar associations such as the Carpathian Euroregion, one of the largest from Europe, and the Dunăre, Mureș, Criș, Tisa Euroregion. If in the first interval (2004-2006), the two counties didn't really excel at attracting cross-border cooperation related funding, in the following two financial time frames they managed to clearly outdo the other counties. Between 2004 and 2006, 28 million euros on the Romanian side and 34 million euros on the Hungarian side were obtained for cross-border cooperation projects (BRECO, n.d.). Between 2007 and 2013, from the total of 248 million euros, the budget of all the projects implemented at the Hungarian – Romanian border, no less than 43% was allocated to projects from the Bihor - Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion (Programul de cooperare transfrontalieră Ungaria-România, 2007-2013, n.d.). Furthermore, between 2014 and 2020, the two counties implemented projects with a total budget exceeding 80 million euros, representing around 35% of the total available budget (232 million euros). In the same time frame, for cross-border cooperation, Oradea alone obtained more than a fifth of the total budget of the implemented projects (Autoritatea de Management pentru Programul Interreg V-A România-Ungaria, n.d.). Table 3 presents these details in a synthesized manner.

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<sup>1</sup> See the example of the natural parks from Austria and the Czech Republic presented above.

**Table 3.** Budgets of cross-border cooperation projects at the Romanian – Hungarian border between 2004 and 2020. (Own elaboration. Data sources: Breco, Programul Phare CBC RO-HU 2004 – 2006, BRECO Oradea - Biroul Regional Pentru Colaborare Transfrontaliera Oradea, n.d., Hungarian Romanian Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013, Managing Authority of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme, n.d.)

	PHARE CBC (2004 - 2006) & INTERREG IIIA (2004-2006) <sup>2</sup>	HU-RO (2007-2013)	INTERREG VA (2014-2020)
<b>Total budget of projects</b>	28 mil RO + 34 mil HU	248 mil EURO	232 mil Euro
<b>Budget of the Bihor - Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion</b>	6.387.996 Euro 22,81% of total	106.640.000 Euro 43% of total	80.000.000 Euro 37,4% of total
<b>Budget of the projects involving Oradea</b>	3.212.303 Euro 11,5% of total	30.519.373 Euro 12,30% of total	50.775.789 Euro 21,88% of total
<b>Budget of the projects involving Debrecen</b>	- -	22.928.541 Euro 9,3% of total	13.019.373 Euro 5,61% of total
<b>Total budget for Oradea &amp; Debrecen</b>	- -	53.447.914 Euro 21,55% of total	63.795.162 Euro 27,5% of total

Focusing on each individual time frame, we looked at the field of interest of the projects implemented at the Romanian – Hungarian border, within each programme.

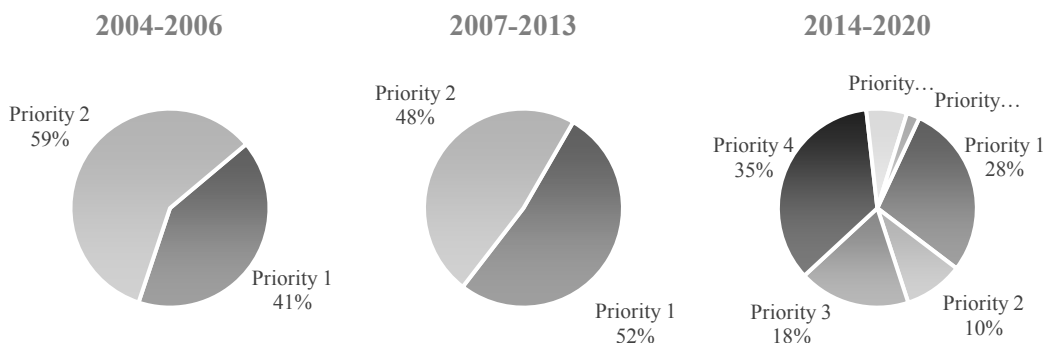
For the first time frame (2004-2006), there were two main priorities for which projects could be proposed: *Strengthening the spatial, physical & infrastructure integrity of the HU-RO cross-border area* as Priority 1 and *Promotion of cooperation initiatives (market integration & societal coherence)* as Priority 2. Thus, the first priority targeted the aspects of the physical world, that would help cooperation and interaction between border areas, while the second priority aimed to spark social, cultural and economic cooperation. Around 60% of the funds from the 2004-2006 timeframe went towards the second priority, while 40% went towards the first one (Graphic 1). However, the Phare CBC programme was far less generous than the other two from the subsequent timeframes. Thus, only a limited number of projects were implemented. A few larger ones within the first priority, that were directed towards road rehabilitation and water sector improvements, while within the second sector a larger number of smaller projects were implemented, with diverse market and social related topics.

During the 2007-2013 timeframe, the Hungarian - Romanian Cross-border Cooperation programme, or Hu-Ro, was split in two priorities and several key areas of intervention. The objective of the first priority was to *Improve the key conditions of joint, sustainable development of the cooperation area*, while the second one was to *Strengthen social and economic cohesion of the border area*, which keeps the same logic of the previous programme. The funds allocated for the projects implemented within this timeframe are divided almost equally between the two priorities. Most funds allocated to the first priority projects were directed towards road development (around two thirds). From the second priority, a significant part of the funds went towards the development of business infrastructure (29%) and health and risk prevention (22%) projects. Most

<sup>2</sup> The Interreg IIIA programme was active between 2000 and 2008, but we only considered the projects implement between 2004 and 2006.

other projects were directed towards tourism (13%), research infrastructure (12%) and other key actions with less than 10% of the funding individually.

The priorities of the 2014-2020 timeframe were much more specific. They were six in total and they targeted the following areas of cooperation: *Joint protection and efficient use of common values and resources* (Priority 1), *Improve sustainable cross-border mobility and remove bottlenecks* (Priority 2), *Improve employment and promote cross-border labour mobility* (Priority 3), *Improving health-care services* (Priority 4), *Improve risk prevention and disaster management* (Priority 5), *Promoting cross-border cooperation between institutions and citizens* (Priority 6). Most funding went towards the first and fourth priorities, which means that most projects targeted the improvement of health-care services as well as the protection and efficient use of common values and resources. Most projects that focused on health care were concerned with the acquisition of medical equipment, as priority 4 was more specific. The projects implemented under the first priority were more diverse and included some projects invested in water sector improvements, some in the protection of natural habitats as well as on cultural and tourist objectives.



**Graphic 1.** The distribution of funding by priorities, in the timeframes of the Phare CBC (2004-2006), HU-RO (2007-2013) and Interreg VA (2014-2020) programmes.

#### 4. Conclusions

All of the above lead to a model we propose regarding the development of efficient and sustainable cross-border cooperation. We built these conclusions on the outcomes of previous research identified in the speciality literature, the experience of other entities engaged in CBC, as well as on examples of good practice that we have identified at the Hungarian – Romanian border. They all depend on several factors such as the existing legislation, regional politics, the European Regional Development Fund with its institutions and programmes directed at CBC, amongst others. Nevertheless, these aspects are the ones that make CBC possible. The cooperation itself depends mostly on the administrative entities or other institutions that are directly or indirectly involved.

The different forms of cooperation, such as the Euroregions, European groupings of territorial cooperation (EGTCs), or others, offer support for efficient and sustainable cooperation between member states. They show an intent for continuous cooperation, though they do not guarantee it.

Considering the models presented in the second section of this paper, we concluded that they are usually built on aspects which are specific to certain scenarios. Thus, identifying a model that suits the needs of a certain border area depends on the



initial phases in which the potential for cooperation is uncovered which is, in many ways, similar in most cases. This search, in itself, is problematic as, sometimes, certain factors remain hidden until the cooperation unfolds, which also implies that there should always be room for adjustments. Thus, by taking a broader glance at cross-border cooperation, we identified two general levels for cooperation that branch out into smaller, specific, actions and tasks, that lead to efficient cross-border cooperation. They are:

I. *Setting the stage for CBC*. This level would include any actions that could help identify the need for cooperation as well as to prepare the needed cooperation framework, which includes actions for the improvement of the existing cooperation.

II. *Implementation of cross-border cooperation projects*. This is the level in which cross-border cooperation projects unfold.

As we have seen in examples presented above, a circular flow can be outlined when it comes to cross-border cooperation, in most cases. This can happen at various levels. At a higher level, where the stage is set for CBC, or at a more practical level, in which existing projects lead to continued cooperation, which is what CBC actually should strive for. As the EU wants to help border areas improve economically and socially in a sustainable manner, any CBC projects that do not really lead, directly or indirectly, to sustainable cooperation and interactions around the border, do not really meet the end goal of CBC.

Below, we synthesized a list of actions or tasks that are relevant for the first level of cooperation listed above. Some of the steps presented below do not have to be performed in the order in which they were listed. The actions or tasks we included are the following:

1. Creating the cooperation framework:
  - It can take the form of an Euroregion which are not administrative entities, but they facilitate cooperation in more ways.
  - It can take the form of collaboration protocols or initiatives between private or public institutions, NGOs, or others, depending on the field of activity or interest.
  - They are not mutually exclusive.
2. Understanding the context for cooperation which can be identified in many ways, and it can help in highlighting the potentials for cooperation but also potential pitfalls to avoid. We have presented previously the SWOT analysis done for the communities of Debrecen and Oradea, one of the techniques that can be used to this end.
3. Establishing a common cross-border cooperation strategy, established through the outcomes of the previous point and should also involve discussions with stakeholders from the border area in question.
4. Identifying individual, SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) objectives, which should be a natural outcome of the previous two points, but it requires targeted actions.
5. An option is to set up common funds, provided by administrative entities of various levels from the areas in question, that should help in various ways: sustaining the initial efforts of attracting funding or sustaining post project implementation efforts.

Some of the steps mentioned may need to be revisited, occasionally. The context of cooperation, and the strategy may need to be updated as cooperation initiatives unfold and are finalized while some objectives may be reached and new ones identified.

The second level of cooperation covers the actions and tasks related to the implementation of projects. They include the steps preceding the actual implementation of the projects, as the efforts needed to obtain funding are not insignificant. The steps are:

1. Following the activities of EU institutions that provide funding, whether they are pre-accession funds or cross-border cooperation funds, that can involve a member state and a non-EU state.

2. Identifying the main eligibility areas of the available programmes, that helps interested parties find the main categories of applicants that can be involved in CBC projects, whether they are public authorities, NGOs or private entities, depending on the case of each individual project.

3. Applying for funding. This is the step in which the necessary paperwork is done, and the application is sent to the funding authority. This involves intensive cooperation and the implication of all of the organizations, institutions or other entities that might be involved in the implementation of the project. It can also benefit heavily from the cross-border cooperation strategy and objectives mentioned above.

4. Project implementation. This is the step in which the actual project implementation efforts unfold. This could be broken down into multiple steps, but the experience can be vastly different from one project to another, and it might relate more to project management practices than anything else. Nevertheless, the important aspect here is to keep an eye on the project objectives, and the responsible spending of available funding. Also, timely reporting is essential as, failing to do so, it can have heavy implications on the successful implementation of the project and it can result in delays, at a minimum.

5. Monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring is obviously an on-going activity. Evaluation can be either on-going, ex-ante, or ex-post. Even though they can be considered part of the project management processes, both are important activities which is why they are mentioned separately. They provide the means to keep a project on track while also providing relevant information for future cooperation opportunities, which takes us back to the first step, which focuses on finding funding opportunities.

Thus, to conclude, we propose a model which implies both top-down and bottom-up approaches, which relies on consistency, as well as on timely and continuous efforts directed towards cross-border cooperation. Without all these elements, cross-border cooperation will not help peripheric border areas develop, an important objective of the EU towards territorial cohesion. The Hungarian – Romanian border area and, especially, the Bihor – Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion serve as examples of good practice through the continuous efforts they concentrate towards cross-border cooperation, which provides the means for the development of these areas, and towards natural and continuous growth of interactions between the communities found on both sides of the border.

Our model, which is made up of two levels of cooperation, both detailed above, was conceived mainly based on the experience of Hungarian – Romanian border in the matter of cross-border cooperation. Nevertheless, we think it is general enough to be applied in many other border areas that want to engage in cross-border cooperation to boost their development levels, including the West Balkans.

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