

Promoting people-to-people contacts through cross-border cooperation programmes in Eastern Partnership countries

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1. Context

A strong, cohesive society is the fundamental prerequisite for the harmonious development of towns, regions and countries. This is why this topic was selected as one of the priorities listed by the 2015 Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, which focused more closely on mobility and people-to-people contacts. These contacts are even more important for the border regions affected by the dividing role of borders, which are sometimes regarded as the scars of history.

In order to overcome the dividing effect of borders, the European Union began supporting cross-border cooperation (CBC) in the 1990s through the Interreg programme. Since then it has become one of the key EU instruments for supporting cooperation across borders through project funding. Its aim is to jointly tackle common challenges and find shared solutions in various fields. In many border regions the CBC programmes also support people-to-people projects focusing primarily on promoting contacts and interaction between people on different sides of the border.

The Joint Communication, "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood", of 2011 underscored the importance of cross-border cooperation between the Eastern Partnership countries as one of the tools to overcome the economic inequalities of the regions and improve quality of life on the basis of sustainable development. In 2012, the European Commission launched the Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation programme, aimed at developing sustainable cooperation between the border regions in order to facilitate their socio-economic development. Territorial cooperation covers four regional programmes between the border regions of Azerbaijan and Georgia, Armenia and Georgia, Belarus and Ukraine, Moldova and Ukraine.

Figure 1: Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation Programme (Source: EC)



The aim of the report is to summarise experiences and best practices with regard to people-to-people projects in Interreg and explore the possibility of transferring these projects to the above-mentioned EaPTC programmes.

2. People-to-people projects in Interreg programmes (internal EU borders)

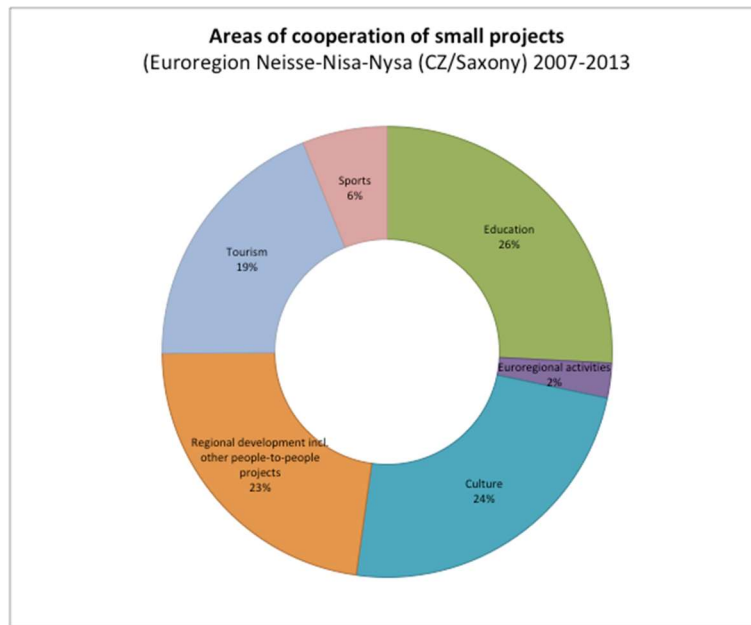
Definition

People-to-people (P2P) projects are an important and successful tool in CBC programmes that are designed to initiate and promote grassroots contacts and interaction between people on different sides of the border. They usually have a smaller budget and a limited duration. The activities of the project take place in smaller geographical areas (often at Euroregional level) and their approaches are usually place-based.

Areas of cooperation

P2P projects are carried out in a wide range of fields such as culture (e.g. learning the neighbouring language), sport, tourism, education and vocational training, economy, science, environmental protection and ecology, healthcare, transport and small-scale infrastructure (cross-border gaps), administrative cooperation, promotional activities, etc.

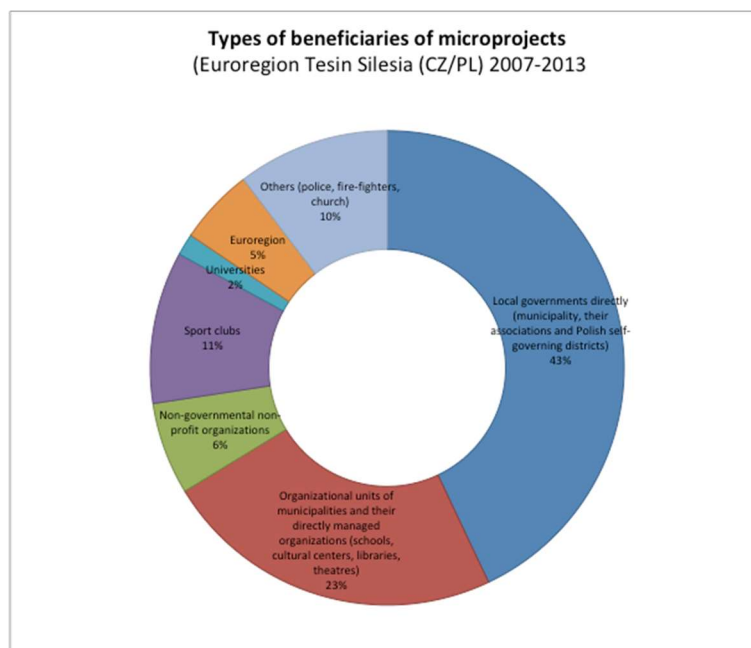
Figure 2: Example: Areas of cooperation of small projects in Euroregion Neisse-Nisa-Nysa within the cross-border cooperation programme Czech Republic – Saxony 2007-2013 (Source: Euroregion Nisa 2014)



Beneficiaries

P2P and small-scale projects are accessible to a wide range of beneficiaries: municipalities, NGOs (numerous types of associations, platforms, networks, foundations, churches, etc.), educational institutions (schools, vocational training centres and universities), and research and business-support institutions, among others.

Figure 3: Example: Types of beneficiaries of P2P projects (microprojects) in Euroregion Tesin Silesia within the Czech-Polish cross-border cooperation programme 2007-2013 (Source: Olszewski, Böhm 2017)



Support for P2P projects within the CBC programmes

P2P projects have been supported by several generations of CBC programmes. In the current period, P2P projects are financed by 19 CBC programmes (approximately one third of them). They are mainly being supported through a Small Project Fund (SPF) or similar instrument (sometimes called micro-projects, disposition funds, or framework projects to support small projects/initiatives). These SPFs usually take the form of an "umbrella project" under which several smaller sub-projects are implemented.

In general, the funding has been rather low – from 1.5% to 20% of the allocation of the programmes (rates are lower in the older EU Member States, while in the new Member States and along the "old" external borders the demand has been much higher).

Added value and benefits of P2P projects

P2P projects generally provide considerable European added value and make a substantial contribution to the overall objective of CBC programmes by overcoming border obstacles and integrating border areas and their citizens. The following specific benefits of such projects should be underlined:

- Helping to develop larger projects and substantially supporting effective cooperation within the whole CBC programme (improving the necessary professional and intercultural skills of beneficiaries and building capacities at local and regional level, providing room for experimentation, serving as "incubators" for bigger projects).
- Learning about the culture of neighbouring areas. Promoting intercultural skills among the citizens of border regions.
- Promoting the ability of people to study, work and do business across borders.
- Facilitating communication between people, overcoming the language barrier by stimulating language learning.
- Developing interpersonal contacts and building up partnerships. Many cross-border partnerships are initiated and then developed into long-term cooperation by small P2P projects.
- Mobilising wider civil society and encouraging the development of cross-border civil society.
- Exchanging experiences. These projects create a platform for sharing experiences and best practices between all CBC players, from civil society to local and regional authorities.
- Addressing local problems of everyday relevance and finding local solutions. P2P and small-scale projects help implement common visions.
- Building trust. Removing stereotypes and prejudices caused by the sometimes-difficult history of border areas or even current developments. CBC and especially P2P projects help heal the "scars" produced by borders. They advertise the principle of tolerance and respect.
- Promoting the European idea. The benefit of European integration is felt in the cross-border interactions of people and in their ability to work together with their neighbours.

Decentralised implementation of Small Project Funds (SPFs)

SPFs are usually implemented in a decentralised way by Euroregions and similar cross-border structures, which enable close cooperation with local applicants and beneficiaries by connecting partners across borders, developing project ideas, helping convert these ideas into actual project applications, monitoring the projects, focusing on prevention and helping correct mistakes. In this way these projects are close to the applicants and thus more accessible even for the smaller municipalities, civil society organisations, non-profit organisations, etc.

Main challenges

Among the main challenges and shortcomings of such projects are:

- Difficulty in measuring their impact because of their soft nature. It is challenging to come up with easily measurable indicators to evaluate their impact.
- Higher administrative costs. The successful implementation of SPFs is more time consuming, which is why administrative costs are quite high in comparison to the size of the SPF.
- Some projects tend to be repeated (continuation of existing contacts).
- The actual involvement of partners and the genuine cross-border character of some projects can sometimes be called into question.
- Certain SPFs are becoming increasingly complex.

3. EaPTC programmes and best practices from Interreg

The Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation programme (EaPTC) was launched by the European Commission in 2012. Territorial cooperation programmes present an opportunity for the Eastern Partnership countries to identify and jointly address common challenges for the border regions.

Achieving the specific objective of promoting cross-border contacts

The overall objective of the EaPTC is to encourage sustainable territorial cooperation between border regions so as to improve their social and economic development. The specific objective of the programme already has a very clear local and regional dimension: strengthening cross-border contacts between local authorities, communities and civil society organisations for the development of joint solutions to common social and economic challenges. Moreover, in the specific bilateral programmes, operational objective culture, education and sports projects were selected for support, which demonstrated a clear desire to promote P2P contacts on the ground. Nevertheless this objective was hard to achieve by supporting a limited number of big projects (e.g. 15 projects in the Moldova-Ukraine programme or 18 projects in the Belarus-Ukraine programme).

In Interreg programmes this goal is best achieved by small P2P projects. For example, the Interreg programme Czech Republic – Poland 2007-2013 managed to involve 400 000 participants in cultural, sporting and other events. Over 300 000 of those participants were involved through more than 2900 small P2P projects implemented through SPFs.

Involvement of local and regional authorities in the preparation, management and implementation of the programme, building permanent structures

The main stakeholders of the programme are state and non-state institutions with a capacity to develop and implement territorial cooperation programmes. These include state institutions such as local and regional authorities, and public service providers (hospitals, educational and research institutions, communal and social service entities, cultural institutions). The non-state institutions involved include a wide range of civil society organisations (independent political and research foundations, citizens' initiatives and unions, trade unions, youth organisations, associations of small and medium-sized enterprises, etc.). The involvement of local and regional authorities and non-state institutions is essential for the success of such programmes.

In Interreg programmes these actors also take on an active role in the implementation of SPFs, which they manage and bring closer to citizens. This is usually done through Euroregions – permanent cross-border cooperation structures set up at local and regional level. The implementation of EaPTC programmes was more centralised. This is understandable for this pilot phase. For the next generation of programmes it would be advisable to try to involve LRAs in more decentralised implementation. It would help them to build the necessary capacity, gain experience and give easier access to all citizens to participate in the programmes. The systematic access to EU financing could also encourage the setting up of and support for Euroregions (an example is an Armenian and Georgian border region where a Euroregion was founded but only lasted for a few years as it had no access to financing).

For the future development of permanent structures with legal personality, it could also be analysed whether a sort of "EaP Grouping of Territorial Cooperation" (similar to EGTC) could be envisaged.

Budget, project size

The total budget of the EaPTC programme amounted to EUR 17.5 million, including: Support Programme – EUR 5 million, the Managing Authority (GIZ) – EUR 3.2 million, Belarus-Ukraine Programme – EUR 3.3 million, Moldova-Ukraine Programme – EUR 3.3 million, Armenia-Georgia Programme – EUR 1.35 million, Azerbaijan-Georgia Programme – EUR 1.35 million. The total EU contribution to the EaPTC is EUR 12.5 million. This means that the budget available to the EaPTC was very modest and should be significantly strengthened in order to achieve real results in the border regions, bearing in mind its overall positive effect on the development of cross-border cooperation. This would make it possible to allocate certain parts of the budget to P2P projects and also to lower the percentage spent on implementation.

As for the project level, the current minimum project size (as high as 60 000 EUR in the Ukraine-Belarus and Ukraine-Moldova programmes) meant that those programmes focused primarily on several large projects. The creation of a special category of project (small projects or P2P projects) should be considered. These projects should have a much lower minimum size so that a larger number of small projects could be supported. It would make these projects more accessible for LRAs and civil society organisations. A lower co-financing rate and the provision of national resources to co-finance the projects of smaller applicants could also be considered in order to stimulate their involvement in cross-border cooperation.

Complexity of application process, simplification

The application process for projects under the EaPTC was quite complicated: applicants needed to submit project applications in English, prepare a large number of supporting documents, negotiate a complicated reporting system and comply not only with the programme rules but also with specific national requirements (e.g. compulsory registration of projects with the Republic of Belarus's Ministry of the Economy).

Applying for big projects as part of Interreg programmes may be more demanding. This is why special simplified rules often apply to small P2P projects: short, simple application forms, simpler reporting procedures etc. If a special project category is created for the next generation of EaPTC programmes, these projects should be as simple as possible. Experiences from partner EU countries could be shared.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

For the next generation of EaPTC programmes the following recommendations are to be considered for promoting people-to-people contacts among EaP countries:

- to introduce the support of people-to-people projects programmes to effectively promote and strengthen cross-border contacts between local authorities, communities and civil society organisation. This would enable to support a larger number of small projects.
- to involve local and regional authorities in more decentralised implementation of these programmes – especially in the implementation of Small project funds supporting people-to-people projects so they build the necessary administrative capacity, gain valuable experience and be able to bring the future programmes closer to citizens.
- to encourage the setting up of and functioning of permanent cross-border structures such as euroregions or structures similar to EGTCs that would help create a wider partnership of all relevant actors (incl. LRA's) in the border region. These structures can then take role in the implementation of Small project funds.
- to significantly strengthen the budget of the EaPTC programmes that would make it possible to allocate certain shares of the budget to P2P projects and also to lower the percentage spent on implementation.
- to create a special category of small people-to-people projects with much lower minimum project size and lower co-financing rate so that a larger number of small projects could be supported and participation of smaller applicants (smaller municipalities and civil society organizations) would be encouraged.
- to simplify the proposed P2P projects as much as possible, inter alia by short, simple application forms and simpler reporting procedures.

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