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Perceptions on cross-border cooperation in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands

Abstract: *The article overviews the development of legislative and executive framework for CBC in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands. Subsequently, it summarises the findings of research on the perceptions of local CBC actors regarding migration and social interaction, barriers to CBC, assessment of CBC policies, expected impacts of CBC and the implementation of the Association Agreement of EU with Ukraine.*

Keywords: *Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands, Association Agreement, cross-border cooperation*

JEL code: *F15, F59, Z13*

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Introduction

The opportunity for partnership countries to conclude the Association Agreements with the EU, including agreements on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA), has become a crucial new component of the EU's offer under Eastern Partnership. The combination of sectorial reforms and the adaptation of the *acquis* together with the opening of the internal EU market under a comprehensive agreement turned the AA/DCFTA into a unique integration type of agreement within the existing contractual practice of the EU with third countries, which is comparable with the EEA type of agreement (with Norway, Iceland, and Lichtenstein). Thus, contemporary research on cross-border cooperation (CBC) along the external borders of the EU within border studies has included the Association Agreement between the EU and the neighbouring country as one of the exogenous factors of the EU policies that create opportunities for the development of CBC between regional and local actors along the Union's external border.

Based on the EU's existing contractual practice, as well as the experience of the Visegrad Four (V4) countries in implementing Association Agreements, one may estimate that Ukraine will need about 10 years at least to fully meet its own legislation with the EU *acquis* and to implement the provisions of the AA. The length of this transitional implementation period will, first and foremost, depend on the political will of Ukraine's leadership to implement the difficult reforms required by European legislation and policies as well as on Ukraine's administrative capacity to carry out the reform and implementation process (*Duleba 2019*).

Slovakia's accession to the EU in the course of 1999–2004 tightened up the border regime and generated restrictions on CBC at the border with Ukraine compared to the pre-accession period. However, CBC with Ukraine represents an important source for economic development of Slovakia. According to the projection made by the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Slovakia (SR), if Ukraine becomes part of the EU single market, in line with the normal scenario, the turnover of the bilateral Slovak-Ukrainian foreign trade will at least double and first of all it will create additional impetus for economic development for the regions in Eastern Slovakia bordering Ukraine and contribute to balancing disparities between Western and Eastern regions of Slovakia (*Duleba 2005*).

Changes in the regulations of border crossing along Slovak-Ukrainian state borders, 1993–2017

The regime of Slovak borders has changed in the course of the following periods: a) 1993–2004 – the bilateral intergovernmental regime of the border with all neighbouring countries except Austria, which had been a member of the Schengen Area since 1995. In this period a special border

regime was established between Slovakia and the Czech republic, which in the course of the split of Czechoslovakia signed a bilateral Customs Union Treaty in accordance with the provisions of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), lasting from 1993 until both countries entered the EU in 2004; b) since 2004 – after Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary became EU member states and part of its common market, a community regime of the border between the EU and Ukraine was established; c) since 2007 – after Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary became members of the Schengen Area, their citizens were free to travel throughout the Schengen Area and cross internal borders at any place without delay or control. This also applied to foreigners, such as Ukrainians, with the Schengen visa. At the external borders of the Schengen Area (including airports) a border check valid for all Schengen states was carried out; d) a new border regime came about after the signing of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement as well as an agreement on a visa-free regime between the EU and Ukraine.

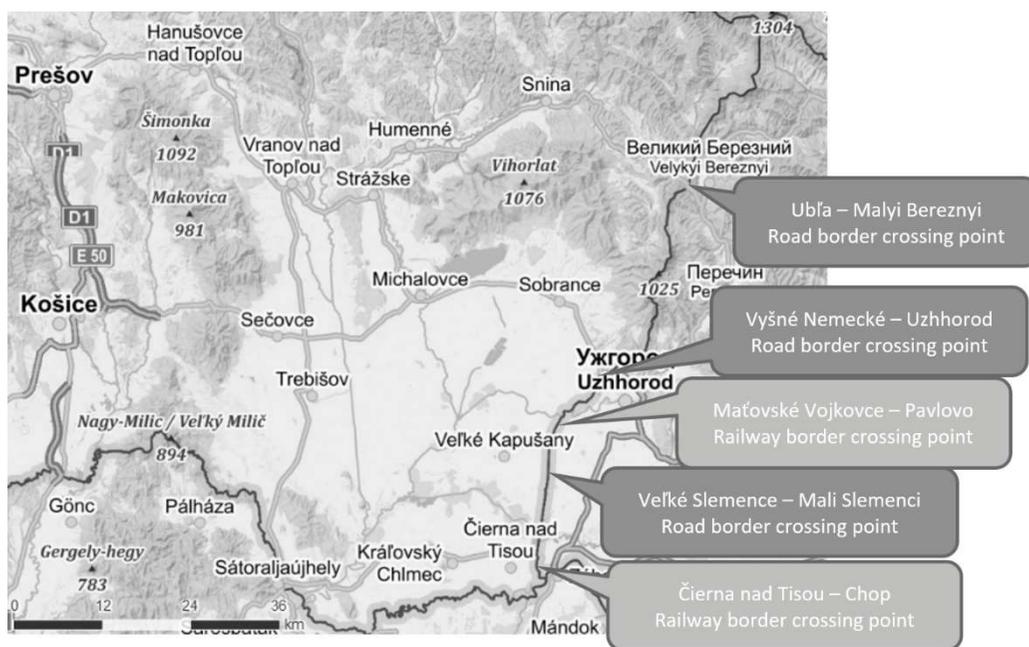


Figure 1. The Schengen border between Slovakia and Ukraine and border crossing points

Source: Mapy.cz

The EU-Ukraine AA was signed in June 2014 and its implementation began in November 2014, with the implementation of the DCFTA itself starting on 1 January 2016 (unilateral autonomous EU trade preferences were applied as early as 2015). Since then Ukraine has had to fully implement the AA – if we take into account the transitional periods, this will happen in 10–15 years, which means by the horizon of 2027–2032. The liberalization of EU-Ukraine trade within the DCFTA covers all areas of trade, including services, copyright protection, customs, public procurement, energy, technical standards, trade dispute resolution, competition protection and more. The DCFTA in general offers Ukraine a framework for modernising its trade relations and for economic development by the opening of markets via the progressive removal of customs tariffs and quotas, and by an extensive harmonisation of laws, norms and regulations in various

trade-related sectors, creating the conditions for aligning key sectors of the Ukrainian economy to EU standards.

The visa requirement has been lifted against nationals of Ukraine who hold biometric passports and are travelling to EU countries for a maximum of 90 days for business, tourist or family purposes, beginning on 11 June 2017. However, the introduction of visa-free travel in itself does not mean automatic freeing up of security regulations on the Slovak-Ukrainian border. Citizens on both sides are still subject to border checks, despite the cancelled visa obligation. Visa-free travel also does not give Ukrainian citizens the right to work within the EU, which may dissuade some Ukrainians from a long-term stay in Slovakia. Nevertheless, in the wake of the visa-free regime, reports of the Slovak Central Office on Labour, Social Affairs and Family show that there has been a significant increase of Ukrainians working in Slovakia. At present, the majority of the incoming Ukrainian workforce is employed in the more developed regions of Western and Central Slovakia (only a maximum of 20% of them work in the Prešov and Košice regions), mostly on short- and medium-term contracts up to 24 months as operators and installers of machinery and equipment, or as skilled workers and craftsmen (*Lačný* 2019).

The Slovak-Ukrainian border regime, including conditions for cross-border cooperation (CBC) between regional and local actors, has been following the dynamics of a changing intergovernmental framework since the early 1990s. The windows of opportunity for regional and local CBC actors on both sides of the border have been opening and/or closing accordingly. In order to understand the state of play and prospects for Slovak-Ukrainian CBC, it is essential to identify both opportunities and obstacles for CBC actors generated by the evolving supranational as well as intergovernmental framework for Slovak-Ukrainian relations.

In summary, the border relations of Slovakia gradually went through the processes of liberalisation or de-bordering for the neighbouring countries that are currently part of the Schengen Area. The nature of the Slovak-Ukrainian border has fundamentally changed since Slovakia's accession to the EU and the Schengen Area. Recently we can identify two key exogenous factors determining the political opportunity structure for CBC and trans-border regional development on the Slovak-Ukrainian border as a part of the EU external border: 1) EU CBC programmes, including the programmes of the European Neighbourhood Policy; and 2) the national policies of the Slovak Republic as an EU member country and Ukraine as a neighbouring country sharing an EU external border. As documented by results of the research projects EXLINEA (*Scott & Matzeit* 2006), EUDIMENSIONS (*Büchner & Scott* 2009) and EUBORDERREGIONS (*Final Report* 2015), understanding of the particular political opportunity structure may contribute to building capacities of CBC actors to make the best use of opportunities brought about by AA/DCFTA and thus consequently to boost economic development of the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands.

Evolution of cross-border cooperation in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands

The representatives of Slovak local authorities and self-governments in Eastern Slovakia were first active in launching interregional cooperation with neighbouring partners from Poland, Ukraine and Hungary in the early 1990s and expected successful CBC to promote the revitalisation and development of Eastern Slovakia. They also thought that a lack of governmental investment in the transport and communication infrastructure of the region and support for private business and educational and cultural programs in Eastern Slovakia could be at least partly compensated for by the activities of the Carpathian Euroregion as the main CBC initiative on the Slovak-Ukrainian border. These expectations were increased due to the fact that some Western financial institutions showed a readiness to support the Carpathian Euroregion (*Duleba* 1993). However, CBC within the Carpathian Euroregion did not meet the expectations of Eastern Slovakia from the beginning of 1990s. In the period 1993–1998 the Slovak government under Vladimír Mečiar adopted a negative attitude towards the participation of Slovak local government

representatives in CBC, arguing that first a legislative framework should be created in terms of appropriate competencies of local governments to develop CBC with foreign partners. Even though Slovakia signed the European CBC framework convention of the Council of Europe in 1994, it came into force only in 2000. Furthermore, Slovakia finished concluding bilateral treaties on CBC with respective neighbouring countries only in 2001, whereas before 2000 it signed its only CBC treaty with Poland in 1994 (treaties with the Czech Republic and Ukraine followed in 2000 and with Hungary in 2001) (Duleba 2014). This was due to the fact that the Slovak government of Mikuláš Dzurinda that came to power after the September 1998 parliamentary elections changed Slovakia's policy towards CBC with the participation of Slovak regional and local authorities. Thanks to the principal reform of public administration in Slovakia, self-governing regions also acquired broad competencies in the area of CBC. As a result, the eastern Slovak regions of Prešov and Košice were allowed to sign accession agreements and became members of the Carpathian Euroregion in November 1999 (Duleba 2019).

In addition to multilateral CBC activities, the regional and local authorities of the two eastern Slovak regions that share the Slovak-Ukrainian border with the Transcarpathian Region of Ukraine established a bilateral network of contacts with their Ukrainian counterparts. The Prešov Region concluded bilateral agreements on cooperation with the following Ukrainian regions: the Transcarpathian Region, Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv. The Košice Region signed a bilateral cooperation agreement with the Transcarpathian Region. Moreover, the following agreements have been made on the level of administrative districts of Slovakia and Ukraine: Michalovce–Uzhhorod, Prešov–Uzhhorod, Košice–Uzhhorod and Snina–Velyky Berezny. In total fifteen Ukrainian and Slovak cities concluded partnership agreements, including the capital cities of Kyiv and Bratislava (*Vel'vyslanectvo Ukrajiny* 2019). The above agreements are aimed at helping to improve people-to-people as well as business-to-business contacts in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands.

These bilateral Slovak-Ukrainian inter-regional and local arrangements became possible thanks to the intergovernmental agreement on CBC which was signed on 5 December 2000 and entered into force on 29 January 2001 (Dohoda 2001). Under the agreement the governments of Slovakia and Ukraine committed to consult each other on any legal, administrative or technical problems that could hinder the development and smooth running of CBC, support activities of local and regional authorities to initiate and develop CBC, and provide financial resources to local and regional authorities, within the limits of their capabilities, for initiating and developing CBC (Art. 4). The agreement includes an exact list of sectorial areas in which regional and local actors are authorised to establish and develop CBC: a) regional development and spatial planning; b) transport and communications (passenger transport, roads and motorways, airports, waterways, etc.); c) cross-border trade; d) energy; e) nature protection (protected areas, recreation centres, parks, etc.); f) protection and rational use of water resources (elimination of pollution, construction of waste water management plants); g) protection of the environment (air pollution, noise reduction, etc.); h) education, training, research and science; i) health care (use of healthcare facilities by residents of the neighbouring territory); j) culture, leisure, sport (theatres, music festivals, sport centres, youth centres, etc.); k) mutual assistance in case of natural disasters and other disasters (fires, floods, epidemics, earthquakes, etc.); l) tourism (tourism support projects); m) problems of workers in the border regions (transport, housing, social insurance, taxation, employment, etc.); n) economic cooperation (joint ventures); o) other cooperation projects (waste management, communal economy, etc.); p) agricultural development, and q) social care (Art. 9).

With the aim of promoting and coordinating CBC, Article 7 of the agreement established the Slovak-Ukrainian Intergovernmental Commission on Cross-Border Cooperation, with the right to set up working groups to address specific issues. The Statute of the Commission that specified the scope of its activities, organisational structure, budget and procedures was adopted at the first meeting of the Commission on 6 May 2004, in Zemplínska Šírava (Slovakia). The Commission is co-chaired by the Deputy Interior Minister of the Slovak Republic and the Deputy Minister of Ukraine on Regional Development, Construction, Housing and Communal Services and it has

become the main institutional intergovernmental platform for the coordination and development of CBC on the Slovak-Ukrainian border.

It might thus be concluded that the evolution of supranational and national frameworks for CBC at the Slovak-Ukrainian border has been positive in the course of the last three decades in terms of creating a positive political, legal and institutional set up for the CBC activities of regional and local actors. EU-Ukraine and bilateral Slovakia-Ukraine relations have developed in a progressive way, as they have gradually eliminated obstacles and generated more opportunities for CBC on the common border. However, the practice of Slovak-Ukrainian CBC shows the rather limited capacities of regional and local CBC actors to fully use the opportunities available. The main problems of Slovak-Ukrainian CBC at national and regional levels relate to financing and planning. The EU's multilateral programme to support CBC at the borders of Slovakia, Hungary and Romania with Ukraine does not take into account the specific conditions and needs for the development of CBC between regional and local actors on the Slovak-Ukrainian border. The Intergovernmental Commission for Cross-border Cooperation has no direct impact on it. At the same time, the governments of Slovakia and Ukraine have not been able to create an intergovernmental financial instrument to support CBC. The Commission allows for coordination and common activities of the two governments, but, without a financial instrument, it has limited opportunities to implement the achieved agreements. It is capable of delivering in some cases related to border management, but hardly at all in the case of cooperation between regional and local actors. At the same time, neither the Intergovernmental Commission nor the regional authorities are in a position to jointly plan the territorial development of borderlands. They lack institutional and human capacities, financial resources and often political will (Duleba 2019).

Research on perceptions of local CBC actors

Research on CBC on the Slovak-Ukrainian border was not included in any of the major research projects (such as EXLINEA, EUBorderConf, EUDIMENSIONS, EUBORDERREGIONS, etc.) which have been implemented in recent years in the European area. The research project titled the “Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine and Cross-border Cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine: Implications and Opportunities” (AASKUA, APVV-15-0369), implemented by the Institute of Political Science at the University of Prešov in 2016-2019, aimed to cover this gap. The research primarily focused on CBC between Slovakia and Ukraine in the context of existing experience/practice, including identifying the political interests of the actors involved, their preferences/motivations, perceptions and strategies at three vertical levels: transnational (EU), national (Slovakia, Ukraine), regional (Prešov and Košice self-governing regions, Transcarpathian region) and local (towns and municipalities in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands).

The aim of the research on the local level was to survey the perceptions, preferences, motivation and strategies of local actors residing in towns and municipalities of the Prešov Self-governing Region (PSK) and the Košice Self-governing Region (KSK) in Slovakia and the Transcarpathian Region (ZOU) in Ukraine, from the viewpoint of their ability to take advantage of the structure of the political opportunities created by exogenous factors for establishing CBC mechanisms, including an assessment of existing experiences and practices. The standardised questionnaire started from questions that were the subject of the largest and most complex study of CBC on the external border of the EU, carried out within the EXLINEA project. Obviously, the local specifics of the Slovak-Ukrainian CBC were projected into the content of questionnaire, which was structured into six basic categories focused on (1) *migration and social interaction* (the level of migration/emigration between Ukraine (UA) and SR, the numbers arriving for work across the border, the amount of social interaction between SR and UA); (2) *identifying barriers to interaction and CBC* (barriers in the sense of the current state of infrastructure, the level of support from local and regional self-government, local state administration, governments,

businesses, the non-profit sector, international organisations, economic-geographical conditions, etc.); (3) *perceptions and ideas about residents on the other side of the border, the impact of more intensive cross-border interaction, the impact of conditions on the Slovak-Ukrainian border for cross-border interaction*; (4) *assessment of CBC policies* (the effect of CBC policies, the activity of local participants in cross-border interaction or cooperation, experience with the drawing of European funds (Eurofunds) for the development of CBC, the importance of Eurofunds for Slovak-Ukrainian CBC); (5) *expected impacts of CBC* (assessment of results of interactions between SR and UA); (6) *expected effects of the AA of the EU with Ukraine* (a comparative assessment of the impacts of this AA, the impact of this agreement on CBC, the impact of the visa-free regime of UA with the EU on relations and/or CBC, the opening of new areas of integration beyond the framework of the AA). Particular items within a specific category of questions were structured so that they were answered in this same construct (i.e. on social interaction, on barriers to CBC, on perceptions and ideas about the people on the other side of the border, on CBC policies, on the expected impacts of CBC and the AA of the EU with Ukraine), and thus they could acquire a similar psychological “weight” in the mind of the respondent.

Respondents

Data collection took place from November 2017 to January 2018 and was primarily focused on surveying the positions of a wider circle of local CBC actors (representatives of municipalities in border areas, local economic actors, representatives of ethnic minorities and churches). A total of 400 residents were surveyed: 200 respondents in the border districts of the Prešov and Košice Regions in Slovakia and 200 respondents on the Ukrainian side of the border in the Transcarpathia Region. For non-interventional studies (surveys) ethical approval was not required. All participant data have been anonymised, however, these alterations have not distorted the scholarly meaning. The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

	Slovakia (<i>N</i> = 200)		Ukraine (<i>N</i> = 200)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender				
Women	106	53	107	53.5
Men	94	47	93	46.5
Age				
18–25	22	11	76	38
26–40	72	36	63	31.5
41–60	79	39.5	49	24.5
Over 60	27	13.5	12	6
Education				
Secondary	118	59	48	24
University	82	41	152	76

Source: Author’s own calculation

Slovak respondents came from the following towns and villages: Belá nad Cirochou, Biel, Cejkov, Čel'ovce, Čičarovce, Čierna nad Tisou, Hlivišťa, Jasenov, Kazimír, Košice, Kráľovský Chlmec, Krásnovce, Kuzmice, Lekárovce, Ložín, Makovce, Michalovce, Michal'any, Palín, Papín, Parchovany, Pčoliné, Petrovce, Porúbka, Prešov, Pusté Čemerné, Ruská Poruba, Sečovce,

Snina, Strážske, Tibava, Trebišov, Veľké Kapušany, Veľké Trakany, Veľký Kamenec, Vyšný Hrušov, Zalužice and Zboj.

In the ZOU respondents came from the following villages and towns: Baranyinci, Berehovo, Chop, Drahovo, Koritnyany, Kostryna, Lalovo, Mali Slements, Mali Bereznyi, Mukachevo, Perechin, Poliana, Ruski Komarivci, Seredne, Storozhnytsya, Surty, Svalava, Synevyr, Turie Remety, Uzhhorod, Velky Bockov and Vynohradiv.

Type of data and method of analysis

For the purpose of measuring perceptions, attitudes and opinions a 7-point multi-item Likert scale (Walker 2010) was used for each group of questions. For evaluating the answers of Slovak and Ukrainian respondents to the given questions a descriptive analysis, including average values and standard deviations, was used. To determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between two independent samples, the T-test was used. The assumption of consistency of variance was verified using Levene's test. In the case of skewed data normality, the differences in the mean values between the two groups (Slovak and Ukrainian respondents) were further analysed using nonparametric alternatives to the T-test – Mann-Whitney U test and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov two-sample Z test (Pacáková 2009).

As it has been assumed that in the majority of cases differences would occur between the replies of Slovak and Ukrainian respondents, statistical testing was used for verification of the most significant differences at the level of significance (p-value) of 0.05.

Furthermore, where possible, Pearson's correlation analysis (Pacáková 2009) was used in order to evaluate the relations between the replies of Slovak and Ukrainian respondents in the case of particular factors in the scope of various groups of questions.

Research findings⁴

The perceptions of respondents in regard to migration and cross-border social interaction during the period of empirical data collection did not indicate concerns regarding significant changes in cross-border migration. The introduction of a visa-free regime with Ukraine had no significant impact on local actors in assessing the overall level of migration of Ukrainians to Slovakia or of Slovaks to Ukraine. Although the level of migration subsequently increased significantly during 2018-2019, it can be deduced from the answers of the respondents that in the perceptions of (mainly Slovak) local actors, however, migration does not raise any significant attention or concerns. There was a significant difference between the answers of Slovak and Ukrainian local actors in the case of a more sensitive perception of migration by Ukrainian respondents, namely in regard to the settlement of Ukrainians in the PSK and KSK and the commuting of Ukrainians to work in Slovakia. However, there is no overload of the labour market in Slovakia by Ukrainians. In terms of social interaction, the perceptions of both groups of respondents indicate a naturally higher rate in border areas compared to interaction with regions more distant from the border.

Visa-free travel and its impact on migration are a positive impetus for the future development of CBC. Also elsewhere respondents (in particular Ukrainian respondents) indicate in their answers a positive perception of the effects of the visa-free regime, which in their opinion will expand the possibilities for legal as well as illegal economic cooperation and support an influx of labour migrants from Ukraine to the Slovak border areas (which has been perceived more

⁴ Due to space reasons we present the summary of research findings here. Detailed results including both descriptive statistics and correlation analysis are available in Lačný, M.-Polačková, A. eds. (2019): *Cross-Border Cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine: Volume IV: Perceptions of local and regional actors*. University of Prešov Publishing, Prešov.

positively by Ukrainian local actors than by Slovak local actors). In summary, even though the introduction of the visa-free regime only partially supported the inclusive functions of the border, the perceptions of local CBC actors point to adequate (not excessive) dynamics of migration and social interaction in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands.

Respondents were asked to identify barriers to CBC, understood as conditions or activities that hinder or restrict the free movement and interaction of people, capital, goods, services, ideas, etc. In individual partial areas (infrastructure, border-crossing, level of CBC support, general and economic-geographic conditions as barriers), the total mean values of responses ranged around the middle of the scale between the “no barriers” situation, which corresponds to the permeability of the border between two regions of the same country, and stating an “insurmountable barrier”. We can summarise the factors perceived by local actors on both sides of the border as the most significant barriers to CBC: *corruption, bureaucratic procedures, treatment and approach of customs officers, lack of support for CBC from national governments, ministries and government agencies, insufficient rail connections as well as low purchasing power in nearby markets across the border*. On the other hand, local actors in the particular sub-dimensions identified the following as relatively low CBC barriers: *telecommunications* (telephoning, postal mail, Internet access), *support for CBC by NGOs, differences in religion, language and culture, proximity/availability of border crossings, the size of nearby markets on the other side of the border*.

Perceptions on the inhabitants from the other side of the border are generally assessed as relatively positive. According to Slovak respondents, Ukrainian citizens are mainly *hardworking, sincere, open and productive*. Ukrainian respondents see Slovaks mainly as *peaceful, hardworking and productive people with a European culture*. The differences between the perceptions of Slovak and Ukrainian respondents are statistically significant in the case of five factors. Ukrainian respondents consider Slovak citizens to be *wealthy, peaceful, disciplined people with a “European” culture* to a greater extent than Slovak respondents consider Ukrainians to be so. Slovak respondents, on the other hand, say that Ukrainian citizens *tend to be more corrupt*, more so than Ukrainian respondents say about Slovaks.

The most significant difference in the perceptions of Ukrainian and Slovak local actors relates to *support from European (international) organisations, especially the EU*. Slovak respondents see this as largest obstacle to CBC among the monitored factors, while for Ukrainian respondents this represents one of the lowest barriers. However, this finding indicates the need to strengthen EU support for the Slovak border regions and to target a communication campaign to support CBC, especially in the direction of Slovak actors and local communities in the districts of the Prešov and Košice Self Governing Regions on the Slovak-Ukrainian border, since Ukrainian CBC actors are at present rather satisfied with the support from the EU.

The responses by local actors to the open question of how to remove barriers for the development of CBC illustrate the above list of barriers fairly consistently – the answers focus on the role of responsible institutions (i.e. central institutions at the national level, followed by regional and local authorities, as well as EU authorities). The recommendations formulated by local CBC actors on both sides of the border include *improvements in border-crossing facilities, infrastructure, roads and higher number of customs officers*, as well as the request to *eliminate corruption*.

In the opinion of local actors on both sides of the border, more intensive cross-border interaction has a rather positive impact on the local economy/society; however, the responses of Slovak and Ukrainian respondents differ statistically significantly across some of the assessed factors. The replies of Slovak respondents are slightly more neutral than those of Ukrainian respondents, while the perception of more intensive cross-border interaction by the Ukrainian respondents is more positive. Slovak respondents rated *completely open borders within the wider Europe and to immigrants from Ukraine working in Slovakia* as the relatively least positive impact of more intense CBC (at the level of a slightly negative evaluation). On the other hand, both Slovak and Ukrainian respondents see a more positive impact of intensified cross-border interaction in

cooperation between universities, research institutes, etc., in cultural interaction and in terms of local exports to the other side of the border.

In addition, it needs to be noted that the opinions also predominate among respondents on both sides of the border that *both countries benefit from mutual cooperation*, and that *both border zones benefit from greater interaction*.

Respondents assess *the effectiveness of particular CBC policies* as largely positive, with the exception of *national CBC policies*, which are perceived significantly more critically than other CBC policies. Local actors on both sides of the border consider as the most effective *the policy of cultural cooperation, education and research cooperation policy, CBC policies of NGOs and the European Union's CBC policy*. They consider as relatively less effective (on the level of neutral evaluation) *cooperation policies on environmental issues and natural disasters, cooperation policies on organised crime, cooperation policies on migration and a trust-building policy*, while we typically find a slightly more critical view among Slovak respondents. The CBC actors consider *minorities and their organisations, cultural associations, NGOs, universities and research centres* as the most active. In their view, *private businesses, local and regional state administration* are the least active (on the level of neutral or moderately critical assessments).

The mutual partnership of Ukraine, Slovakia and the EU is generally perceived by respondents rather neutrally, and the perceptions of Ukrainian respondents sound significantly more positive in the case of the question of whether *the EU is a reliable partner for Ukraine*, or whether *Ukraine is a reliable partner for the EU*, as well as if *Ukraine is a reliable partner for Slovakia*. The slightly positive responses of Slovak and Ukrainian actors do not differ significantly in the question of whether *Slovakia is a reliable partner for Ukraine*. At the same time, perceptions regarding the partnership of Ukraine, Slovakia and the EU are a relatively significant predictor of attitudes regarding the effects of cross-border economic interaction, CBC and the impacts of the implementation of the AA of the EU with Ukraine. In general, it is also true that local actors who consider Ukraine or Slovakia to be a reliable partner express mostly a medium-strong tendency to positively assess the impacts of various forms of cross-border economic interaction and CBC. Slovak and Ukrainian actors who perceive the EU to be a reliable partner for Ukraine do not typically conclude that the implementation of the AA should benefit primarily the EU, but believe that from its implementation should benefit primarily Ukraine and/or Slovakia.

The predominantly positive perception of the EU-Ukraine AA effects also correlates positively with the assessment of the effectiveness of CBC policies. Slovak respondents who positively evaluate the impact of the AA on local, regional, or national CBC policies also show a moderately strong tendency to positively assess both the effectiveness of local and regional CBC policies and the effectiveness of national CBC policies. Ukrainian respondents who positively assess the impact of the EU-Ukraine AA on local, regional and national CBC policies show a moderately strong tendency to positively evaluate the effectiveness of local and regional CBC policies, but only a weak tendency to positively assess the effectiveness of national CBC policies.

In the case of questions about Ukraine's European integration, the slightly sceptical opinions of Slovak local actors contrast with the mostly optimistic answers of Ukrainian respondents. We see here a stronger contrast especially in the opinions on statements such as *Ukraine will sooner or later become an EU Member State*, or *the EU is sufficiently strong and determined to support Ukraine on the path of European integration despite Russian opposition*. We observe minor differences in the predominantly neutral attitudes of Ukrainian and Slovak local actors regarding whether *Slovakia is sufficiently strong and determined to support Ukraine on the path of European integration despite Russian opposition*.

At the same time, both Ukrainian and Slovak respondents indicate that the time has now come to integrate beyond the AA (mainly in regard to the abolition of roaming fees). The eventual opening of talks with Ukraine on entry to the Schengen Area met with a positive response from Ukrainian respondents, while Slovak local actors were largely neutral on this topic. We therefore deduce that topics related to integration beyond the AA are currently seen rather positively, i.e. as possible promoters of CBC and regional development of borderlands.

Conclusion

The conventional aim of CBC is to remove barriers and other factors that contribute to the separation of political entities. However, in terms of the Slovak-Ukrainian border, the openness of the border may well be an admirable objective, but it has to be borne in mind that the co-operation practices at the external border of the EU, characterised by a constant juggle between access and control, have to face a very different reality from the EU's internal borders, where the cooperation aims to build cohesion and blur divides. The present research findings revealed that the local CBC actors on one hand perceive the positive impacts of more intensive cross-border interaction and CBC on the respective borderlands and are interested in that the conditions on the Slovak-Ukrainian border should be gradually approaching the conditions on the EU's internal borders. On the other hand, the CBC actors in Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands face barriers comparable to the situation typical for the border regime during the pre-Schengen era of Slovak borders with Poland, Hungary and/or Austria. The situation at the Slovak-Ukrainian border is recently determined mainly by the gradual implementation of the AA/DCFTA and the subsequently changing nature of the border.

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