

EU policies' impact on cross-border cooperation's institutional frameworks in the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine

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Abstract

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) is a key instrument for advancing local democracy, balanced socio-economic development, regional security, and the integration of candidate countries into the European Union (EU). Although CBC has existed in Europe since the 1950s, its institutional typology remains underdeveloped, especially in candidate countries like Ukraine. This article examines the institutional landscape of CBC in Ukraine, focusing on the Transcarpathian region. It addresses two questions: (1) which institutional forms of CBC are established by Ukrainian legislation for public actors; and (2) how EU policies influence the institutional choices of public and non-profit actors in the region.

The study analyzes Ukrainian legislation, particularly the 2024 Law 'On International Territorial Cooperation,' and empirical data from EU-funded programs such as the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI, 2014–2020) and Interreg NEXT (2021–2027). It identifies institutional forms including bilateral and multilateral agreements, joint projects and programs, Euroregions, Euroregional Cooperation Groupings (ECG), and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). However, implementation is constrained by legal inconsistencies and limited local administrative capacity. The EGTC 'Tisza' is currently the only active example involving Ukraine.

EU policies shape institutional choices by setting eligibility criteria, incentivising formal partnerships, and promoting administrative professionalisation. Key participants include local governments, development agencies, NGOs, and service providers. Nonetheless, disparities in capacity and resource access create uneven participation. While Ukraine has made significant legal progress aligning with EU principles, subnational implementation remains incomplete and uneven.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation, European Union policies, public institutions, Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, multi-level governance

Introduction

One of the key instruments for advancing local democracy, balanced socio-economic development of border regions, regional security, and the integration of candidate and accession states into the European Union (EU) is cross-border cooperation (CBC) as a form of territorial cooperation. This phenomenon originated in the 1950s and exists in relations between nearly every nation on the continent, displaying specific characteristics in different macroregions. In Central Europe, there have been significant efforts to leverage cross-border cooperation as a powerful tool for addressing a range of critical tasks: 1) to reduce negative stereotypes regarding the inhabitants of the neighboring state along the border, stemming from previous historical traumas, and to prevent the emergence of new conflict lines; 2) to accelerate the integration processes into a common European market, customs, and other common spaces of the EU; 3) to disseminate best practices in public administration and economic innovations; 4) to more efficiently attract and utilise funds from EU programs and funds; 5) to make experiences with implementing eurointegration policies, disseminate effective governance models, and attract EU financial resources.

The national legislation in Central European countries, including Ukraine, permits various institutional forms for cross-border cooperation (CBC) among public institutions, which are the primary actors in this collaboration, in accordance with international norms. The institutions and practices of CBC, formed under different historical and political conditions,

take into account the political, legal, socio-economic, and ethnocultural differences among various regions in Europe, including personal (ideological, technocratic, and mental) characteristics of the political leaders involved in these processes, and therefore can be perceived as unique. On the other hand, the international legal norms developed primarily by the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU) aim to facilitate integration into the European market and other related areas and policies. This, in turn, could lead to a degree of unification among the various types of institutions involved in CBC. The interplay between internal and external factors affecting the institutional choices of the CBC can be illustrated by the example of Ukraine. The country is rapidly adopting various European policies in anticipation of its potential mid-term accession to the European Union.

State of art and the methodology for the study of the cross-border cooperation institutional forms

Without concentrating research efforts on analysing and systematising the diverse concepts of CBC, we will use the methodology only as a tool for analysing its institutional aspects. Researchers and practitioners commonly define *cross-border cooperation*, based on the CoE's definition of the '*transfronier co-opetation*' as the process of fostering and developing positive relationships between "communities, authorities or bodies exercising local and regional functions" from the different parts of the shared border (Council of Europe. European Treaty Series - No. 106., 1980). This cooperation aims to address

and prevent common challenges while promoting harmonious development in neighbouring communities, districts, and regions. Our research focuses exclusively on cooperation between regions and communities in Ukraine and its neighboring states. Thus, our focus will not be on analyzing theories or data concerning other forms of territorial cooperation within the EU or its borders, such as interregional or transnational collaboration, though these forms of interaction were proposed later by both the Council of Europe and the EU.

The methodology of *Borderland studies* proposed in this research focuses on cross-border areas that require analytical exploration across four spheres. 1) economic and trade interaction; 2) political activities of various levels of government in territories adjacent to borders; 3) political influences exerted on the inhabitants of cross-border regions by various political actors; 4) the local political culture of the residents (Brunet-Jailly, 2005). In particular, from an academic perspective, a holistic view of cross-border development has been put forward by promoting the concept of “bordering,” which emphasises the socio-political aspects of borders. Bordering is a daily practice of constructing various kinds of borders between communities/groups, using ideologies, discourses, political institutions, relationships, and other political phenomena. Recognizing this reality, EU institutions consider the socio-political significance of reducing border effects in the formulation of Cohesion, Neighbourhood, and Enlargement policies (Scott, 2015).

The introduction of the four freedoms of the EU, the formation of the Schengen Union, and the Common Market resulted in the so-called *dissolution of borders, debordering*, in other words, a reduction in the functional weight of national states and, conversely, an increase in the role of regions that directly gained the opportunity to implement joint initiatives through cross-border cooperation. This phenomenon is defined as *transboundary regionalism*, which refers to the willingness of regional elites to engage in cross-border cooperation in order to bypass national restrictions on interactions between neighbouring territories. At the same time, regions’ desire to independently manage matters of cooperation and their paradiplomacy is not viewed as a threat to state sovereignty (Baral, 2024; Nadalutti & Rüländ, 2024; Perkmann & Sum, 2002; Scott & Collins, 1997).

Taking into account that starting from 1980s cross-border cooperation is perceived as the part of the Regional (Cohesion) policy and from the beginning of 2000th of the European Neighbourhood policy, it can be also regarded as an element of the *Europeanization*. This phenomenon is understood as a process of developing, institutionalizing, and disseminating both formal and informal rules, practices, political paradigms, styles of political behavior, as well as shared ideals and values. These elements are initially formulated within the context of political processes in the EU and subsequently integrated into national political institutions (Jones & Clark, 2024; Radaelli, 2000).

To conceptualise the phenomenon of Europeanisation, in addition to the aforementioned approach, we can adopt

the position that it has several dimensions, including the following: 1) the process of the EU's expansion; 2) the development of European supranational governance structures; 3) the incorporation of European processes into national political systems; 4) the export of forms of political organisation; 5) the project of political unification of Europe (Olsen, 2002).

In close connection with the previously mentioned approach, the concept of *multilevel governance* can also be applied to the study of the institutional system of cross-border cooperation, which is the focus of our attention. According to this concept, it is a governance network that operates outside the jurisdiction of national states in order to implement cross-border initiatives, taking into account the interests of various actors, as well as other informal vertical and horizontal networks and institutions (Hooghe & Marks, 2021; Hooper & Kramsch, 2004; Marks, 1993).

Although institutional analysis of the CBC gained attention in the early 1970s, a clear theoretical framework and methodological clarity have still not been achieved. Most studies focused on one or a few cases, or cross-border processes were analysed in isolation from European integration processes. Therefore, there is a significant theoretical gap regarding the generalisation of models of cross-border cooperation, particularly across all EU member states and/or participants in the CoE countries.

Between 2014 and 2017, empirical research focused on organizing data for 61 active Euroregions and proposed a

set of key institutional forms for cross-border cooperation at EU borders. The list is as follows:

1. *official contacts* between the governing institutions of communities/districts/regions as the subnational levels of governance;
2. *informal contacts* between the aforementioned governing institutions and other actors of cross-border cooperation;
3. *common events* for the actors of cross-border cooperation: conferences, seminars, round tables, fairs, and other promotional events;
4. *bilateral or multilateral agreements* on key areas of cooperation between the governing institutions of border territories of neighbouring countries and/or the establishment of joint management structures;
5. institutionalised forms – *organisations* – of cross-border cooperation between *public institutions*: Euroregions, European groupings of territorial cooperation (EGTC), Euroregional Cooperation Grouping (ECG);
6. institutionalised forms of cross-border cooperation (*organisations*) between *private actors or public-private partnerships*: cross-border clusters, industrial parks, hubs, cross-border functional areas, special economic zones, priority development areas (Durà et al. 2018; Noferini et al. 2019).

As it is evident from the above-mentioned list, public institutions of European countries (mainly governments of regions, counties, communes)

apply or could apply the following advanced institutional cross-border cooperation formats:

1. *Euroregions* as associations of subnational authorities, sometimes with the participation of national governments. Euroregions are not a single legal entity but associations of legal entities – community/district/regional public authorities – that operate under the «umbrella» of the national part of the particular euroregion. These CBC institutions do not possess political authority but instead deal with the practical facilitation of cross-border activities and projects, including providing consulting services to the public authorities that are their founders. Euroregions function as cross-border organisations, equipped with a permanent secretariat and a technical and management team that has the capacity to secure its own resources. Cooperation within Euroregions occurs both vertically, with European institutions as well as regional and local authorities, and horizontally, among the organization's participants and similar structures.

Given the broad approach to understanding the essence of euroregions, there is a research perspective that this term encompasses both classic Euroregions and also includes Eurodistricts and Eurocities (Noferini et al. 2019; Rodil-Marzábal, 2022). The

major international legal act that regulates the activity of Euroregions is already mentioned European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities, the so called Madrid Convention, concluded on 21 May 1980 (ratified by Ukraine on 14 July 1993) and two additional Protocols (Council of Europe. European Treaty Series - No. 159., 1995; Council of Europe. European Treaty Series - No. 169., 1998).

2. *European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)* as a single legal entity with full legal responsibility established by public institutions (communal, county and regional self-governments, regional/local development agencies, public enterprises, universities and other public law entities) from different states. EGTC has to be registered on the territory of the EU member state. The rules for setting up and operating an EGTC were laid down by Regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council in 2006-2013 (EUR-Lex, 2006a; Council of Europe. European Treaty Series - No. 106., 1980; Official Journal of the European Union, 2013).
3. *Euroregional Co-operation Grouping (ECG)*, similar to EGTC, is a type of cross-border cooperation institutional format; however, ECG is a CoE tool operating on the basis of the already mentioned European Outline Convention

on Transfrontier Co-operation, mainly its additional Protocol No. 3 (Council of Europe. European Treaty Series - No. 206., 1998). Like EGTC, ECG is a legally recognised organisation and is subject to the national law of the state in which it is registered as a nonprofit. ECG must be registered on the CoE member state's territory. As of yet, no working ECG is present.

In addition, institutionalised forms of CBC in the European Union can include *Local Cross-Border Cooperation Groupings (LCCGs)*, *European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG)*, *European Companies (SE)*, *Eurodistricts*, *Eurocities*, *Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI)*, *Community-led Local Development (CLLD)* and *Joint Action Plans (JAP, others*. None of these forms, however, has become universal, nor are they tailor-made solutions for dealing with the particular challenges specific to different spheres of cross-border cooperation.

Following the initiation of the INTERREG programme in the late 1980s, the conclusion is made that the use of its resources is one of the a primary function of Euroregions, particularly regarding the initiation, promotion, and implementation of cross-border projects, thereby engaging a large number of people in this activity (Chilla & Lambracht, 2022; Martín-Uceda & Rufí, 2021; Scott, 2000).

Based on the criterion of activity priorities, it should be noted that both Euroregions and EGTC's typically focus their activities in one or several of the defined areas: 1) local (regional) economic development; 2) transport and accessibility of the area; 3) environment; 4) education

and culture; 5) social cohesion; 6) health; 7) spatial planning; 8) research and innovation; 9) governance; 10) various aspects of security.

At the same time, these descriptive criteria for typology are not sufficient for understanding the motivations of the founders of Euroregions and EGTC's, as well as all factors affecting their effectiveness or ineffectiveness at different chronological periods. It should be acknowledged that in some cases, these organisations may have been established primarily to attract funding from EU programs and funds. Therefore, another criterion for the effectiveness of euroregions can be considered the ability to formulate medium- or long-term activity strategies and joint policies for all national territories involved.

In the 2000s, a research position also gained popularity, suggesting that institutions created in border regions, where residents share or have a similar identity (ethnic, cultural, shared state-building history), are more effective. However, this factor alone is insufficient to ensure the sustainability of cross-border cooperation development (Boman & Berg, 2007; Fortuna & Andersen, 2025). At the same time, the update of EU priorities for the 2021-2027 programming period contributed to the spread of a functional approach to analyzing the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation. Interaction is considered effective in cross-border areas where more connections have formed that promote the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people across international borders. The institutional reflection of this approach has been the formation of cross-border functional areas,

which can be defined as specific territorial complexes that cover areas on both sides of the state border with intensive functional connections. These areas do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries of administrative-territorial units and, as a rule, they do not. At the same time, to support cooperation, these areas create joint management structures, so they can be considered a new type of Euroregion (Jakubowski et al. 2021).

A preliminary analysis of the current state of institutional forms of cross-border cooperation in Europe reveals a strong emphasis on evaluating the effects and efficiency of Euroregions and EGTC's as tools for collaboration. However, the specific characteristics and unique aspects of the cross-border processes in various regions of Europe, which are influenced by historical, cultural, and ethnic factors. Central Europe, including the borderland with Ukraine, can be considered a region additionally influenced by the geopolitical factor of integration and preparation for EU accession.

In one of the previous publications, it was argued that the primary political factor influencing the design of institutions and the politico-administrative practices of cross-border cooperation in Central European countries—both during their preparations to join the EU and after they became part of the single European space—is the conditions for obtaining and managing funding from European Union programs and funds. This is especially relevant within the framework of the EU's Cohesion policy. This support is considered by local actors of cross-border cooperation as perhaps the main opportunity to reduce

the effects of peripheral status in relation to national centres, which receive more public investments from the budget and are more attractive to private investors. Consequently, in some cases, local actors are more interested in collaborating with partners on the other side of the border rather than with national governments, which in turn raises concerns among the latter, especially in the context of Central Europe. Meanwhile, the conditions for obtaining European funding (10-20-40% of the cost of a cross-border project must be co-financed by the grant recipient or their local/regional/national partners or beneficiaries) result in the formation of *local*, and less often *regional*, *partnerships*. At the community level, this is one of the only institutional forms that can provide co-financing, especially when businesses or institutions engaged in economic activities are involved. At the same time, the institutional dependence of organisations created to promote the development of border areas—regional and local development agencies, entrepreneurship support centres, innovation and business/innovation centres—on funding from EU programmes and/or funds leads to the niche nature of their activities, necessitating a shift in priorities depending on changes in the policies of European institutions. Thus, the functioning of local/regional partnerships, whose main priority is to attract grant and technical support from the EU, represents a social process of adaptation to European priorities, aiming to secure resources to mitigate the effects of peripheral status in European cross-border areas (Lendel, 2024).

The topic of cross-border cooperation between the western regions of Ukraine and their counterparts in Central Europe has attracted considerable interest from researchers since the 1990s. Following the liberalization of political regimes and the introduction of a market economy, it became possible to establish beneficial connections between both sides of the border. It is not our main to analyse the whole state of the art in the study of CBC of the western regions of Ukraine, we intend to mention only the results of the study.

This article does not aim to list the names and publications of the numerous scholars who have studied different aspects of cross-border cooperation between Ukraine and EU states over the past 20 years. Rather, our focus is on analyzing the research interests of those examining the types of institutions involved in CBC in this region, as well as the factors that influence these institutional choices. Starting in the second half of the 1990s, there was a growing interest in the functioning of Euroregions as an institutionalized form of cooperation. This interest was largely driven by the establishment of the first Euroregion involving Ukrainian regions—the Carpathian Euroregion—created in 1993.

At the beginning of the 2000s, it was noted that some of the Carpathian Euroregion's most significant achievements included a reduction in mistrust among nations and ethnic groups, as well as advancements in mobility and connections between public institutions, including universities. However, despite these positive developments, challenges related to the Euroregion's size, financial

condition, and institutional structure began to emerge during this time, coinciding with the introduction of the Schengen Acquis Communautaire. (Hiroshi, 2006). A decade later, the experiences and outcomes of the operational institutional frameworks within the Carpathian Euroregion were summarised and recommended for optimisation. (Prykhodko, 2018). During this period Ukrainian researchers rated Euroregions as the most effective institutionalized form of cross-border cooperation. However, there are many unresolved issues stemming from a lack of clear understanding regarding their role, which in turn leads to inadequate support for their functioning. This situation calls for the creation and establishment of new forms of cross-border cooperation that could yield the desired results (Prytula, 2019). Recently, an analysis was conducted on the institutional forms of the CBC in the borderland of Ukraine during the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies also included recommendations for subnational authorities in Ukraine aimed at improving the efficiency of the Carpathian Euroregion in light of changing global challenges. (Khusainov et al. 2023).

Recent research indicates that the Carpathian Euroregion effectively functions as a platform for cross-border partners to collaborate on joint initiatives and projects. This collaboration enables participants to achieve better results collectively than they would independently, while also facilitating the exchange of experiences regarding efficient public management practices. However, some factors that hinder the development of cross-border

cooperation within the CE include its large territorial scale and the varying scopes of competencies (Khimynets et al. 2021).

In recent years, research on the processes occurring in the borderlands of Ukraine and its Central European neighbors has increasingly focused on the application of new institutional instruments. This primarily concerns the development of European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), which are the public institutional forms emphasized in our study. This is in contrast to private clusters, public-private clusters, cross-border hubs, and industrial parks, which have also emerged and are not in the focus of this research.

The only successful example of territorial groupings in Ukraine is the EGTC ‘Tisza’ founded in 2015. This grouping includes Kisvarda City, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county council, and the Transcarpathian regional council (EGTC Monitor, 2015). The legal regulation of this institutional form, particularly within the context of Ukraine, as well as its potential to facilitate Europeanization and attract EU funds for developing the western Ukrainian borderlands, has been a focal point of contemporary research (Fetko, 2023; Ocskay, 2021; Ocskay & Scott, 2023).

Despite the fact that research on the existence and legal frameworks of different public institutional formats for cross-border cooperation in the borderlands of Ukraine and Central Europe is a popular area of study among researchers, there is a lack of systematic categorization of the types of institutions involved in this process. Considering that modern cross-border cooperation in addressing

various spatial issues—such as effective governance, economic development, health, transportation, environment, education, and culture—at the borders of the EU is supported by its Cohesion Policy, particularly through the financial incentives provided by the INTERREG program, the lack of relevant research on EU policies influencing cross-border cooperation development in Western Ukraine is increasingly apparent.

This study addresses two key *research questions* arising from the current state of knowledge and practice. Firstly, it investigates *which institutional forms of cross-border cooperation are established by Ukrainian legislation for public institutions?*

Secondly, it is crucial *to examine how EU policies affect the institutional decisions of those involved in cross-border cooperation in Ukraine’s Transcarpathian region.*

The empirical research will concentrate on the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, specifically examining its cross-border relations with public actors from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. This focus is warranted for several reasons. First, limiting the research area enables a more nuanced analysis of the various types of cross-border interactions. Moreover, as previously noted, this Ukrainian region is distinctive because it is home to the only present in Ukraine EGTC. As previously mentioned, the research aim does not connect with the study of other forms of territorial cooperation (interregional and transnational) present in this area.

Our hypothesis suggests that, alongside internal factors—such as historical, cultural, social, and spatial considerations—the selection of institutional formats for

cross-border cooperation among public entities is significantly impacted by external influences. In the European context, particularly for countries aspiring to join the EU as candidate states (like Ukraine, which initiated this journey in 2022), the policies of the EU and the overarching process of European integration are pivotal.

Results of empirical research on institutional forms of cross-border cooperation between public institutions in the transcarpathian region of Ukraine and neighboring regions

1. Which institutional forms of cross-border cooperation are established by Ukrainian legislation for public actors?

Current institutional frameworks for cross-border cooperation among subnational authorities, alongside the established mutual initiatives and actions, are outlined in the Law of Ukraine ‘On International Territorial Cooperation’ which was adopted in April 2024 as part of the effort to harmonize Ukrainian legislation with EU law (Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady, 2024a). This law replaces the previous legislation from 2004 governing cross-border cooperation (Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady, 2024b) and outlines that this type of territorial cooperation can be carried out through:

1. Implementation of joint projects and programs.
2. Conclusion of agreements on cross-border cooperation.

3. Establishment or joining of Euroregional Co-operation Grouping (ECG).
4. Joining a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).
5. Establishment of a Euroregion.

According to the Ukrainian legislature, the public entities engaged in CBC (so-called subjects of the territorial cooperation) consist of local state executive authorities and local self-government bodies, along with their associations. These entities collaborate with relevant public institutions and/or their associations in neighbouring countries, functioning within the scope of their competencies and in alignment with agreements on international territorial cooperation.

The aforementioned law specifies particular *legal entities* involved in international territorial cooperation, including *Euroregional Co-operation Groupings (ECGs)*, *European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs)*, *Euroregions*, and others. Notably, Article 13 provides a comprehensive outline regarding the legal structure (non-profit society), the founders, and the processes for establishing ECGs, particularly in light of Ukraine’s membership in the CoE and its potential to pursue this pathway. Article 14 delineates the regulations governing the participation of Ukrainian public institutions in EGTCs, emphasizing that such participation must align with Ukrainian legislation and be conducted under an agreement for the establishment of the EGTC proposed by a legal entity from an EU member state.

It is essential to highlight that the law on territorial cooperation, in contrast to Ukraine's law on cross-border cooperation from 2004, was enacted in response to the implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which was signed on June 27, 2014. This law also aligns with Ukraine's path to accession that began in 2022. Furthermore, Ukraine's ratification of Protocol No. 3 to the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities on May 11, 2012, thereby establishing the framework for the creation of the ECGs (Council of Europe. European Treaty Series - No. 206., 1998). Considering the potential to join EGTCs established within EU member states, and with the precedent set by the EGTC 'Tisza' with the participation of Transcarpathian region, relevant provisions regarding this entity were included in the previous law and have been described in greater detail in the new legislation.

Speaking of the Euroregion, as a classic form of cross-border cooperation, according to the analyzed legislature, it is established in accordance with a bilateral or multilateral agreement on cooperation with the aim of establishing and deepening relations between the entities and participants of cross-border cooperation in Ukraine and foreign states. The Euroregion may be reorganized into another body of international territorial cooperation, for example, ECG or EGTC.

The western and southwestern regions of Ukraine, specifically Transcarpathian, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Chernivtsi, Volyn, and Odessa, are currently at least *de-jure* involved in five Euroregions established

in collaboration with EU or accession countries, including Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova. These Euroregions are: the Carpathian Euroregion (established in 1993), the Bug Euroregion (1995), the Lower Danube Euroregion (1998), the Upper Prut Euroregion (2000), and Dniester (2012) (Pro zatverdzhennia Derzhavnoi prohramy rozvytku transkordonneho spivrobitnytstva na 2021-2027 roky, n.d.). The foundation for utilizing the structures of these Euroregions was established by the aforementioned CoE's European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation.

The Carpathian Euroregion (CE), encompassing the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, was established in 1993 as a pioneering initiative in partnership with their Hungarian and Polish counterparts. Romania and Slovakia joined this initiative in 1997, solidifying the Euroregion's significance. CE is acting as the international association that comprises 17 administrative subnational (regional level) units from the adjacent areas of Poland, Slovak Republic, Ukraine, Hungary and Romania. The reason to create Euroregion, besides establishing neighbourhood relations in a multiethnic area, was to bring European methods of governance and expertise in the Carpathian region (Oltean, 2013).

Without delving into the issues surrounding the functioning of the CE that became apparent beginning in the 2000s, and the reasons behind their emergence—which are not the focus of our study—we observe that their accumulation has resulted in a transformation of the organizational structure governing the the association

in Ukraine. On October 2, 2007, the Association of Local Self-Government Bodies 'Euroregion Carpathians-Ukraine' was registered in Ukraine. It brings together 72 local self-governments and their associations – from Transcarpathian, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Chernivtsi region. In November 2008, the Interregional Association of the Carpathian Euroregion recognized this organization as the official representation of Ukraine in the CE (Yevrorehion Karpaty – Ukraina, n.d.).

Starting from the second decade of the 21st century, increasing interest was shown in Ukraine for the modern institution of cooperation between public institutions, proposed by the European Commission, which is the EGTC. In Ukraine, the establishment of the EGTC was introduced by the Law of Ukraine 2515-VIII, titled 'On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Cross-Border Cooperation,' which was enacted on September 4, 2018 (Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady, 2018). This framework is currently governed by the effective law on international territorial cooperation mentioned earlier.

The EGTC 'Tisza' established in 2015 under an agreement between the Transcarpathian region and the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg region and Kisvarda city from Hungary represents the only example of the practical implementation of such an organizational form of cross-border in Ukraine. Moreover, it is the first EGTC involving a non-EU country member. Considering the incomplete legal framework as of 2015, the management of the grouping has become one of the main drivers of the Europeanisation of the relevant Ukrainian legislation,

resulting in already analysed law on international territorial cooperation (Benczi & Ocskay, 2021).

It is necessary to mention that the most commonly used form of CBC between the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine and neighbouring regions, districts, and communities in EU countries is through bilateral agreements. In some cases, there are also trilateral or multilateral agreements. While analysing the institutional forms of CBC between Presov and Kosice regions of Slovakia and the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, respective districts and communities, the conclusion was made that can be regarded as valid for relations with other central European neighbours. After Slovakia's accession to the EU, which provided broader access to European Structural and Investment Funds and a wide variety of other programs, bi- or multilateral agreements between Ukrainian and Slovak subnational and local government tiers were primarily motivated by the goal of establishing a legal framework for collaborating on the development and implementation of cross-border cooperation projects. Despite this, research indicates that representatives of public institutions—such as local self-governments, local state executive bodies, regional development agencies (RDAs), local development agencies (LDAs), public cultural institutions, and universities—often rely on ad hoc project partnerships as the most common institutional form of cross-border cooperation (CBC). This happens even though not all opportunities provided by the EU, other multilateral mechanisms, and individual states are fully utilized. This is due to a stated lack of knowledge, human and financial capacity,

information, and partnership connections, despite a consistent motivation to engage in such activities (Cirner et al. 2023).

In this context, it is important to note that despite the challenges mentioned, the legal capacity of local self-governments has improved since the initiation of the decentralization reform in 2014-2015. Alongside the transfer of nearly 60 per cent of public revenues to local budgets, the capacity of local communities has increased with the unification of adjacent villages, towns, and other settlements into what are termed unified territorial communities and larger districts (Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady, 2015). However, due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the decentralization process remains incomplete. This situation has imposed certain constraints on the powers and financial resources of local self-governments, making it challenging to assess the overall impact of these developments on cross-border cooperation (CBC).

2. In what ways do EU policies influence the institutional choices of cross-border cooperation (CBC) public and non-government non-profit institutions in the Transcarpathian region regarding collaboration with partners from neighboring countries?

Starting from the beginning of 2000 in the context of the accession of Central European countries to the EU, in particular Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, and the launching of the European

Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) institutions in the western regions of Ukraine became able to receive funding for the implementation of their cross-border initiatives from two European funds, namely EFRD (for European partners) and TACIS (for Ukrainian partners). We are talking about the Programme Hungary-Slovakia-Ukraine INTERREG IIIA / TACIS cross-border cooperation (CBC) (2000-2004), Neighbourhood Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine INTERREG IIIA / TACIS cross-border cooperation (CBC) (2004-2006).

According the Action Plan developed in 2005 between the EU and Ukraine in the framework of the ENP the significant support has to be provided to local authorities for the participation in this policy including cross-border cooperation programs and projects. To effectively implement the main provisions of the ENP in the realm of cross-border cooperation, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) was established and became operational from 2007 to 2013. It offered co-funding for promoting good governance and equitable social and economic development processes, supported cross-border and transregional cooperation, and gradual economic integration of neighbouring countries with the EU. Within this instrument three cross-border cooperation programs (Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, Romania-Ukraine, 2007-2013) were focused besides others on the territory of Transcarpathian region of Ukraine (EUR-Lex, 2006b).

The European Neighbourhood Instrument (2014-2020) replaced its predecessor with the goal of promoting regional integration, including cross-border cooperation. The ENI addresses the new challenges of a changing neighborhood and is grounded in principles of differentiation, joint ownership, and flexibility. This financial instrument aims to strengthen relationships with beneficiaries through bilateral, multi-country, and cross-border cooperation programs (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014). In 2020 and 2022, the European Commission adopted new regulations on ENI, taking into account logistical, financial and institutional challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the start of full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine (EUR-Lex, 2020; EUR-Lex, 2022).

As a result of the signing of the Association Agreement with EU in 2014 Ukraine took the obligations to implement European standards in all areas, including cross-border and regional cooperation. The Agreement has a separate Chapter 27 'Cross-border and regional cooperation' / The provisions of Articles 446-448 of the Agreement confirm the authorities' role in ensuring cross-border and regional cooperation, including the development of appropriate legislation (EUR-Lex, 2023).

In 2021-2027, the cross-border and other dimensions of European territorial cooperation with neighbouring countries started to be governed by the EU Cohesion policy and became the field of the Interreg program intervention. To highlight the external dimension of Cohesion policy the new programmes are called Interreg NEXT (European Commission, n.d.). They are

aimed at promoting economic, social, and territorial development within the EU, aligning with the cohesion policy objectives, and their rules cover effective programming, including technical assistance, monitoring, evaluation, communication, eligibility, management, control, and financial management supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (EUR-Lex, 2021).

The inclusion of communities and regions of Ukraine in the programme areas funded by the European Neighbourhood Policy instruments (ENPI (2007-2013), ENI (2014-2020), Interreg NEXT (2021-2027)) created an opportunity to assess the potential of types of institutions that demonstrated readiness and capacity to develop cross-border cooperation with partners in neighbouring countries.

According to information provided by the Department of Euroregional Cooperation of the Zakarpats'ka Regional Military Administration and corroborated by the official websites of the ENI and Interreg NEXT programs, there has been a consistent level of support for cross-border collaboration projects between local institutions and their counterparts in the bordering regions of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. This support has been facilitated through EU funding mechanisms within the framework of Neighbourhood policies, specifically the Cohesion Policy since 2021.

Considering the incomplete information about the projects won by communities and other public institutions in the Transcarpathian region from 2007 to 2013 under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, our empirical study

conducted a dynamic analysis of projects funded by the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI, 2014-2020) and the Interreg NEXT program (2021-2024, ongoing) (Table 1-5).

It is essential to emphasize that data analysis from this period holds greater significance for us than data prior to

2014. This is largely due to the fact that 2014 was the year the Association Agreement was signed between the EU and Ukraine, which resulted in heightened focus from the Ukrainian governance system on the motivations driving cross-border cooperation.

Table 1. Number of the supported cross-border cooperation projects prepared in partnerships with institutions from the Transcarpathian region, Ukraine, by the EU financial instruments and programmes (2014-2025 - ongoing).

Name of the cross-border cooperation programme	Number of the CBC projects supported within European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI, 2014-2020)	Number of the CBC projects supported within Interreg NEXT program (2021-2027, ongoing)
Hungary – Slovakia – Romania – Ukraine	67	39
Poland – Belarus – Ukraine (from 2021– Poland – Ukraine)	16	12
Romania – Ukraine	16	12

Source: Table 1-5 was formed based on data sourced from the Transcarpathian Regional State Administration and the official websites of programs funded by the European Neighbourhood Instrument from 2014 to 2020¹, as well as the Interreg NEXT program beginning in 2021².

- 1 We included the following programmes:
 - Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine ENI Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020: <https://huskroua-cbc.eu/>;
 - Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020: <https://www.pbu2020.eu/en/projects2020>;
 - Romania-Ukraine 2014-2020: <https://ro-ua.net/en/>.
- 2 We included the following Interreg programmes:
 - Interreg NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine: <https://next.huskroua-cbc.eu/>;
 - Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine: <https://pl-ua.eu/en/news/>;
 - Romania-Ukraine 2021-2027, <https://ro-ua.net/en/>.

Table 1 demonstrates the total number of cross-border projects that were supported by EU programs during the periods of 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, involving public and non-governmental not-for-profit institutions from the

Transcarpathian region. It should be noted that the INTERREG NEXT program has only conducted its first competition for project initiatives (2023-2024); therefore, the dynamics of the projects will change.

Table 2. Names and the types of institutions from the Transcarpathian region, Ukraine, that were participants in the projects supported by ENI instrument projects (2014-2020).

Name of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme	Number of CBC Projects Supported	Number of Participations of Local Self-Governments/Associations, Local Self-Government Establishments	Number of Participations of Local Executive Authorities, State Establishments	Number of Participations of Regional/Local Development Agencies and Funds	Number of Participations of Educational Institutions	Number of Participations of Non-Governmental Organisations
Hungary – Slovakia – Romania – Ukraine	67 projects	Uzhhorod City Council (4 projects), Vynohradiv City Council, Khust City Council (2 projects), Velykij Berezhnyi Village Council (3 projects), Solotvyno Village Council, Khyzha Village Council, Vyskovo Village Council (2 projects), Nyzhnya Apsha Village Council, Serednje Vodvane Village Council, Onokivsi Village Council, Velykij Bychkiv Village Council, Perechyn Village Council, Velykoluchkivska Village Council, Regional Children's Hospital (3 projects), Transcarpathian Regional Clinical Hospital, Regional Clinical Infectious Hospital, Uzhgorod District Clinical Hospital, Uzhgorod City Maternity Hospital, Uzhhorod Children's Hospital, Rachiv District Hospital, Mizhirya District Hospital, Vynohradiv District Hospital, Transcarpathian Museum of Folk Architecture and Life, Mukachevo Historical Museum, Transcarpathian Regional Centre for Social and Labour Rehabilitation and Professional Orientation "Vybir", EGTC "Tisza" (2 projects)	The Main Department of State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Transcarpathian region, 6th State Fire and Rescue Unit of the Department of State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Transcarpathian Region, Zakarpattia Regional State Laboratory of "Derzhprodsposhyvslyzha", Tisza River Basin Water Resources Directorate (3 projects), Vynohradiv Interdistrict Water Management Department, Uzhhorod Interdistrict Water Management Department, Berehovo Interrayon Department of Water Management, Road Service in Transcarpathian Region (3 projects), Uzhhorod Forest enterprise, State Ecological Inspectorate in Zakarpattia Oblast, Uzhansky National Nature Park	Agency for Regional Development and Cross-border Cooperation 'Transcarpathia' (3 projects), Association of Project Managers YADRO (2 projects), Communal Enterprise 'Centre of Investments and Development' (Vynohradiv), FORZA – Agency for Sustainable Development (2 projects), International Association of the Regional Development Institutions (IARD), Agency of Local Development and Information Resources 'Europolis' (2 projects), European Initiatives Centre (3 projects), Ukrainian-Hungarian Regional Development Centre, Informational Centre for Innovation and Development 'NOVUM' (2 projects), Charitable Fund for the Development of Cross-Border Cooperation and Special Economic Zones (3 projects), Interregional Centre of Cross-Border Cooperation	Uzhhorod National University (6 projects)	NGO "Ecosphera" (2 projects), NGO "Institute of the Development of the Carpathian Region" (2 projects), Centre for Civic Initiatives, RachivEcoTur, Council for Protection of Rights of Patients and Medical Professionals, NGO "Institute of Environmental and Religious Studies", Pro Cultura Subcarpathica, Hungarian Tourism Council of Zakarpattia (2 projects), Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Sub-Carpathia, Beherove District Organisation of Ukrainian Red Cross, Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo, Transcarpathian Reformed Church (2 projects), Maltese Charity Organization in Berehove, Religious Community of Berehovo Roman Catholic Church, ADVANCE Transcarpathian Advocacy and Development Center
	Total: 98 participations	Total: 37 participations	Total: 15 participations	Total: 21 participations	Total: 6 participations	Total: 19 participations

Name of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme	Number of CBC Projects Supported	Number of Participations of Local Self-Governments/Associations, Local Self-Government Establishments	Number of Participations of Local Executive Authorities, State Establishments	Number of Participations of Regional/Local Development Agencies and Funds	Number of Participations of Educational Institutions	Number of Participations of Non-Governmental Organisations
Poland – Ukraine	16 projects	Vynohradiv District Council, Perechyn City Council, Uzhhorod City Council (3 projects), Vynohradiv City Council, Kolochoava Village Council, Khust City Council, Regional Clinical Phthisiopulmonology Center, Transcarpathian Regional Theatre, Local Ethnomuseum of Perechyn City	Transcarpathian Regional State Administration.	FORZA – Agency for Sustainable Development, Communal Enterprise 'Uzhhorod Rayon Agency of Development', Agency for Regional Development and Cross-border Cooperation 'Transcarpathia' (2 projects), Fund for the Transborder Cooperation Development, Interregional Centre of Cross-Border Cooperation (2 projects), Communal Enterprise 'Center of Investments and Development' (Vynohradiv)		NGO 'Institute of the Development of the Carpathian Region', NGO 'Transcarpa-thian Film Commission'
Romania – Ukraine	Total: 22 participations	Total: 11 participations	Total: 1 participation	Total: 8 participations	Total: 0 participations	Total: 2 participations
	16 projects	Rachiv City Council (2 projects), Berehovo City Council, Solotvyno Village Council (4 projects), Velukyj Bychkiv Village Council (2 projects), Uzhhorod City Council (2 projects), Transcarpathian Regional Theatre	Tyvachiv District State Administration, Border Guard Unit	Agency for Regional Development of Transcarpathian Region, International Association of the Regional Development Institutions (IARDI)	Uzhhorod National University (2 projects), Solotvyno Gymnasium	NGO 'Eco-sphera'
	Total: 20 participations	Total: 12 participations	Total: 2 participations	Total: 2 participations	Total: 3 participations	Total: 1 participation

Table 3. Summary Table: Number of Projects and Participations by Institution Type (ENI instrument (2014-2020)).

Programme	Total Projects	Number of Participations of Local Self-Governments/Associations, Local Self-Government Establishments	Number of Participations of Local Executive Authorities, State Establishments	Number of Participations of Regional/Local Development Agencies and Funds	Number of Participations of Educational Institutions	Number of Participations of Non-Governmental Organisations
Hungary – Slovakia – Romania – Ukraine	67	37	15	21	6	19
Poland – Ukraine	16	11	1	8	0	2
Romania – Ukraine	16	12	2	2	3	1

Table 4. Names and the types of institutions from the Transcarpathian region, Ukraine, that are participants in the supported by Interreg NEXT cross-border projects (2021-2027: ongoing).

Name of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme	Number of CBC Projects Supported	Number of Participations of Local Self-Governments/Associations, Local Self-Government Establishments	Number of Participations of Local Executive Authorities, State Establishments	Number of Participations of Regional/Local Development Agencies and Funds	Number of Participations of Educational Institutions	Number of Participations of Non-Governmental Organisations
Hungary – Slovakia – Romania – Ukraine	39 projects	Uzhhorod City Council, Beerehovo City Council, Velykyj Berezhnyj Village Council (2 projects), Perechyn City Council, Solotvyno Village Council, Tyachiv City Council, Serezhne Village Council, Transcarpathian Frontier Local Governments Association, Transcarpathian Museum of Folk Architecture and Life (2 projects), Mukachevo Historical Museum, Uzhhorod City Multi-Profile Clinical Hospital (2 projects), Regional Children's Hospital, Nyzhnya Apsha Hospital EGTC "Tisza" (3 projects)	Main Directorate of the State Emergency Service in Transcarpathian Region, Vynohradiv Interdistrict Department, Department of Infrastructure of Transcarpathian Regional State Administration, Infrastructure Restoration and Development Service (3 projects), Mukachevo Border Guard Unit (2 projects), National Park 'Synevyr'	Civil Organisation of the Regional Development 'Velyka Dobron', Communal Enterprise 'Center of Investments and Development' of Vynohradiv City Council, Agency of Regional Development of Transcarpathian Region (3 projects), Regional Fund of Entrepreneurship Support 'TES Fund', International Association of Regional Development Institutions (ARDI), Association of Project Managers YADRO (2 projects)	Uzhhorod National University (3 projects), Solotvyno High School, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education	Council for Protection of Rights of Patients and Medical Professionals, NGO 'Institute of Carpathian Region Development', Charity 'Everybody Has Second Chance', NGO 'Institute of Environmental and Religious Studies', RachivEcoTur, NGO 'Better Life' (2 projects), Charity 'About the Agriculture Carpathica', Regional Charity 'Edelweis', NGO 'Happy Children', Transcarpathian Hungarian speaking Pedagogical Society, Pro Cultura Subcarpathica, Charity of the Regional Hungarian College, Volunteer Fire Department of Dercen Parish
	Total: 56 participations	Total: 19 participations	Total: 9 participations	Total: 9 participations	Total: 5 participations	Total: 14 participations
Poland – Ukraine	12 projects	Sval'yava City Council, Kolochava Village Council, Khust City Council, Velykyj Berezhnyj Village Council, Uzhhorod City Council, Khust City Central Hospital, Regional Children's Hospital, Transcarpathian Regional Clinical Hospital	Main Directorate of the State Emergency Service in Transcarpathian Region, Uzhans'kyi National Park (2 projects)	Agency of Regional Development of Transcarpathian Region	Uzhhorod National University (2 projects)	NGO 'Institute for the Development of the Carpathian Region'
	Total: 15 participations	Total: 8 participations	Total: 3 participations	Total: 1 participation	Total: 2 participations	Total: 1 participation

Name of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme	Number of CBC Projects Supported	Number of Participations of Local Self-Governments/Associations, Local Self-Government Establishments	Number of Participations of Local Executive Authorities, State Establishments	Number of Participations of Regional/Local Development Agencies and Funds	Number of Participations of Educational Institutions	Number of Participations of Non-Governmental Organisations
Romania – Ukraine	12 projects	Korolevo Village Council, Vysjkovo Village Council (2 projects), Teresva Village Council, Dubove Village Council, Transcarpathian Regional Clinical Hospital	Mukachevo Border Guard Unit (3 projects)	Association of Project Managers YADRO, Agency of Regional Development of Transcarpathian Region, International Association of the Regional Development Institutions (IARDI)	Uzhhorod National University	NGO 'Institute of the Environmental and Religious Studies', NGO 'Center of European Initiatives'
	Total: 15 participations	Total: 6 participations	Total: 3 participations	Total: 3 participations	Total: 1 participations	Total: 2 participations

Table 5. Summary Table: Number of Projects and Participations by Institution Type (Interreg NEXT cross-border projects (2021-2027 - outgoing)).

Programme	Total Projects	Number of Participations of Local Self-Governments/Associations, Local Self-Government Establishments	Number of Participations of Local Executive Authorities, State Establishments	Number of Participations of Regional/Local Development Agencies and Funds	Number of Participations of Educational Institutions	Number of Participations of Non-Governmental Organisations
Hungary – Slovakia – Romania – Ukraine	39	19	9	9	5	14
Poland – Ukraine	12	8	3	1	2	1
Romania – Ukraine	12	6	3	3	1	2

Table 2 and 4 present comprehensive information regarding the names and types of institutions within the Transcarpathian region, along with project initiatives that were deemed successful between 2014 and 2020 and 2021 – ongoing. The classification of these institutions was developed independently, yet grounded in the methodology outlined earlier in this article, as well as in accordance with the rules governing the EU programs analyzed. Notably, these funding instruments explicitly exclude profit-making organizations and entrepreneurial entities. Recipients of financial assistance from the EU for the implementation of cross-border projects can generally be categorized into two main groups: public institutions, which include self-governing and executive bodies at the sub-national level, as well as communal or state-owned entities such as schools, hospitals, museums, theaters, nature reserves, and universities; and non-governmental non-profit organizations, which encompass community groups, charitable foundations, and religious organizations. Additionally, regional or local development agencies, sustainable development centers, and centers for cross-border cooperation operate in both capacities—as communal institutions and non-governmental organizations. However, we distinguish them as a separate group because their statutory objectives focus specifically on project management.

Also, it is important to note that in Tables 2 and 4, we present the number of instances of participation in CBC projects supported by the INTERREG programs, rather than the number of successful projects involving public institutions. That is why these numbers are higher than the

number of successful projects won with the participation of the institutions from the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine indicated in the first and third tables.

At the same time, Tables 3 and 5 summarize successful projects and participation of public and non-governmental institutions from the Transcarpathian region, cross-border projects that were supported in the years 2014-2020 and 2021-2024, by the types that have already been described.

It is important to note that the INTERREG NEXT cooperation programmes for 2021-2027, which include Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine and Poland-Ukraine, Romania-Ukraine programmes, currently have an outgoing status. New project calls will not be launched until at least 2025. Therefore, the actual number of projects and participations indicated in Tables 4 and 5 is expected to increase.

Conclusions

1. Which institutional forms of cross-border cooperation are established by Ukrainian legislation for public actors?

Ukraine is among the few European states that possess separate legislation concerning cross-border cooperation. The transition from the 2004 Law ‘On Cross-Border Cooperation’ to the 2024 Law ‘On International Territorial Cooperation’ is not merely a technical update; it signifies a fundamental shift in how Ukraine approaches and implements territorial cooperation.

The new law incorporates concepts introduced by the legislative frameworks of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU), such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and the European Cooperation Grouping (ECG) besides joint projects and programs, agreements about cross-border cooperation, Euroregions, previously outlined in the old law. However, some contradictory formulations in this legislation pose obstacles to the establishment of the new EGTCs as modern institutional forms. Additionally, the law does not identify non-governmental, non-profit entities as participants in cross-border cooperation (CBC), despite their effectiveness as active institutions, as evidenced by statistical data from the Transcarpathian region, which will be analyzed later.

This legal transformation in general reflects Ukraine's strategic alignment with the EU's *acquis communautaire* and the multi-level governance model that the EU advocates. Consequently, the law serves not only a regulatory function but also a geopolitical purpose. But despite recognizing a variety of institutional forms, the actual utilization of these instruments remains uneven. Most CBC initiatives still rely on ad hoc projects and bilateral agreements, while more complex and integrated formats like the EGTCs are not fully utilized. This institutional asymmetry indicates that, although the legislation has evolved, the capacity for implementation remains limited. There is a noticeable gap between what the legal framework permits and what institutions can effectively execute.

The EGTC 'Tisza' serves as a model for how local initiatives can influence national legislative reforms, highlighting the bottom-up potential of local actors in shaping state-level frameworks. Conversely, Euroregions persist as a resilient legacy structure, particularly in western Ukraine. Despite criticisms regarding their limited effectiveness, Euroregions continue to provide a familiar and politically acceptable format for cooperation, especially in areas with established transnational ties, such as the Carpathian Euroregion. It appears that Ukraine is not abandoning Euroregions but rather layering new institutional forms onto existing ones, suggesting a path-dependent evolution rather than a complete institutional rupture.

The decentralization process initiated in 2014–2015 was anticipated to significantly enhance the institutional capacity of local actors to engage in CBC. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian full-scale invasion disrupted this progression, limiting the capacity of local governments for proactive involvement in CBC structures. Persistent challenges—such as inadequate financial and human resources, weak inter-institutional networks, and insufficient access to information—demonstrate that legal provisions alone do not guarantee effective institutional uptake. This underscores the structural barriers to CBC in Ukraine.

In conclusion, Ukrainian legislation now provides a comprehensive legal framework for various institutional forms of cross-border cooperation. However, the quality and depth of implementation differ significantly. The legal framework exceeds the realities of administration,

which are hampered by internal systemic weaknesses and external geopolitical shocks. While Ukraine has adopted the European terminology of territorial cooperation, the ability to effectively implement this framework at the local level is still developing.

2. In what ways do EU policies influence the institutional choices of cross-border cooperation (CBC) public and non-government non-profit institutions in the Transcarpathian region regarding collaboration with partners from neighboring countries?

Cross-border cooperation policy—through mechanisms such as the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI, 2007–2013), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI, 2014–2020), and Interreg NEXT (2021–2027)—has served not only as a funding source but also as a significant institutional filter. These frameworks have actively shaped which types of institutions in the Transcarpathian region engage in cross-border cooperation and in what manner. By prioritizing administrative capacity, project management expertise, and legal clarity, EU policies have encouraged the formalization and professionalization of the participating actors.

The signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, particularly Chapter 27, which focuses on cross-border and regional cooperation, has further integrated cross-border cooperation (CBC) into the strategic priorities of Ukrainian governance. This policy shift has reinforced the necessity of aligning with EU norms

and has obligated national and subnational authorities to support and institutionalize CBC as part of Ukraine's broader path toward integration.

Empirical evidence from the ENI (2014–2020) and Interreg NEXT programs (2021–2027) shows a diversification in the types of institutions involved in cross-border initiatives. These include local self-government bodies and their associations, local executive authorities, regional and local development agencies, educational institutions, and a variety of non-governmental non-profit organizations. Among these, local governments remain the most active, followed by NGOs and development agencies, which often act as intermediaries or facilitators. The consistent presence of institutions such as the Uzhhorod City Council, the Agency for Regional Development of Transcarpathia, and Uzhhorod National University indicates a process of institutional consolidation and specialization. This reflects not only enhanced administrative capacity but also a strategic pursuit of CBC opportunities.

The design of EU programs has also influenced institutional behavior. With each funding period, the EU has raised expectations regarding project sustainability, multi-stakeholder engagement, and result orientation. This has led to more structured and cooperative practices among institutions, often requiring formalized networks and cross-sectoral partnerships. Development agencies and experienced NGOs have become particularly vital in navigating and coordinating these partnerships,

often bridging the gap between local governments and the EU's administrative and financial requirements.

Over time, a learning effect has emerged. Institutions that frequently participate in projects demonstrate increased competence in EU procedures, budget management, and cross-border strategy development. These actors benefit from accumulated experience, existing partnerships, and an enhanced ability to align with programmatic priorities, giving them a competitive advantage in securing future funding. However, participation data reveals an uneven distribution across the region: while some municipalities and organizations are highly active, others remain largely absent. This disparity reflects differences in institutional capacity, awareness, and access to technical support. Moreover, despite being eligible, some executive authorities and smaller NGOs face persistent barriers to participation due to resource constraints and the technical complexity of EU funding programs.

In conclusion, EU policies significantly influence the institutional landscape of cross-border cooperation in the Transcarpathian region. They do this not only by providing financial incentives but also by establishing structural expectations, promoting institutional learning, and shaping collaborative practices. The outcome is a dynamic and increasingly mature ecosystem of public and non-governmental actors engaged in cross-border cooperation, though it is still marked by asymmetries that require targeted support to ensure inclusivity and sustainability.

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