

# TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE BALKANS IN THE LIGHT OF CROSS-BORDER CO-FINANCED PROGRAMMES

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## Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the contribution of cross-border programmes to tourism development in the Balkans, through an analysis of the preparation, planning, approval, and implementation processes of these programmes—particularly through the study of indicators used to monitor the implementation of related actions.

Venturing to gain a general overview of the implementation of co-financed programmes, the article analyses the political significance and necessity of cross-border cooperation, as well as the mutual influence between tourism and such co-operation. The analysis of indicators per programme and per partnership scheme is crucial for forming a comprehensive picture of European Union's funding in tourism-related matters in Balkan countries.

Additionally, the comparative study of indicators by programme and partnership scheme contributes towards drawing more accurate conclusions. The paper concludes with presenting several proposals to improve monitoring and evaluating actions within cross-border programmes.

**Keywords:** Cross-border cooperation, European Territorial Cooperation, European Funding Programmes, Indicators, INTERREG, Instrument Pre-Accession Assistance

**JEL Classification:** R10, R11

The present paper is based on the thesis I conducted, as part of my MSc degree in Tourism & Regional Development in Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), supervised by Professor Grigoris Zarotiadis (School of Economics, AUTH).

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## 1. Introduction

Interest in and study of borders, and in particular cross-border cooperation, have only recently begun to develop. Globalisation and the enlargement of the European Union (EU), resulting from political and social upheavals, have contributed towards highlighting the importance of developing inter-state relations (A. James, L. O'Dowd, and T. M. Wilson, 2004).

European Territorial Cooperation is one of the main objectives of EU cohesion policy, which was designed to address issues that go beyond the narrow geographic boundaries of member states. The policy also aimed to highlight, through coordinated actions, the potential and opportunities of the regions involved. European Territorial Cooperation is divided into three main forms: a) cross-border cooperation, which takes place between administrative regions of two neighbouring countries; b) transnational cooperation, which takes place between two or more neighbouring countries with the entire territory eligible; and c) interregional cooperation, aimed at creating pan-European cooperation networks including countries that may not share borders but are facing common challenges and exchange experience & knowledge they have acquired.

Tourism, as a key sector that can contribute to regional development, is a priority for the EU. For this reason, it has been observed that in many Territorial Cooperation Programmes, Tourism constitutes a Thematic Objective, a Priority Axis, or, at least, an Investment Priority. Regardless of the form in which the theme appears, it is certainly an issue the European Union invests in, the objective being to develop and expand cooperation between regions/states, to ultimately achieve smooth relations.

Tourism can be a development driver. At the same time, it contributes to the development of cross-border cooperation between two countries/regions and is also influenced by it. However, for tourism to develop comprehensively, certain factors must be secured to enable a region to achieve the tourism growth desired.

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to highlight how cross-border Programmes contribute to the development of tourism between two or more regions located on the borders of two neighbouring countries in the Balkans. Research is developed both horizontally and vertically. On the one hand, it examines how co-funded Programmes are implemented; on the other hand, research focuses on how this implementation differs in various pairs of regions/countries. More specifically, the study aimed not only to investigate and evaluate the implementation of Programmes funding tourism-related projects, but also to analyse whether and how implementation varies according to the nature of the partnership (i.e., between two EU member states, between an EU member state and a candidate country, and between two candidate countries). Equally important is the research on how regions/countries benefit from cross-border Programmes and the Cohesion Policy, but also on how such benefit differs depending on the level at which the participating countries stand.

With respect to the methodology, analysis is based on a qualitative approach, utilising secondary data, such as annual reports, EU regulatory documents, and material already published on Programme websites. To investigate effectiveness, output and outcome indicators were recorded and compared.

A qualitative methodology was applied through the analysis of secondary data (reports, Programme documents, regulations). Additionally, a comparative quantitative approach was applied based on indicators from Annual Implementation Reports.

Given that the archival material studied for the purposes of this paper, and in particular the Annual Implementation Reports, results from processing and analysing respective Programmes implemented during the 2014–2020 programming period, the accuracy of the information contained therein is not guaranteed, since these are data already processed by project beneficiaries and the Programme monitoring and evaluation Authorities. As a result, some of the data analysed may not be accurate or valid.

## 2. Political Significance and Necessity of Cross-Border Cooperation

Cross-border cooperation has been a fundamental aspect of the European Union (EU) since its inception and has both influenced and been shaped by political decisions over time. The EU has been consistently making political choices to strengthen ties among member states and, in time, with non-member countries, as well.

The Treaty of Rome (1957)<sup>1</sup> marked the beginning of harmonised political and economic relations, aiming to reduce disparities between member states. It established common policies in agriculture, trade, and transport and introduced shared institutional frameworks.

Despite its importance, the expansion of cross-border cooperation was not always uniformly welcomed. For example, Greece threatened to veto the entry of Spain and Portugal into the EU unless measures were taken to protect agricultural production (Brunazzo, 2016). As a response, "Mediterranean Programmes" were launched, shifting decision-making power to regional authorities rather than central governments (Schakel, 2020).

Over time, regions gained more political influence and autonomy, participating in funding decisions and policy making. Citizens also began to engage more actively through public consultations. This democratisation of EU processes was especially impactful for countries with traditionally centralised systems (Getimis and Demetropoulou, 2007).

Historical events, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Wars led to the development of cross-border programmes aimed at supporting vulner-

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1. **Treaty of Rome (EEC)**: European Economic Community. (1957). Treaty establishing the European Economic Community. Found at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EL/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Axy0023>

able and less-developed areas near EU borders. However, wealthier member states often resisted funding these efforts, leading to public scepticism—exemplified by the UK's decision to leave the EU (Gross and Debus, 2018).

Research indicates that EU regional policy can influence national politics and electoral outcomes (Gross and Debus, 2018). Regions receiving more EU funding with minimal national co-financing tend to favour pro-EU parties. Thus, cross-border cooperation is not just a technical or economic matter — it is deeply political, especially for politically active or less-developed regions.

In conclusion, political dynamics both drive and are shaped by cross-border cooperation. The way EU Cohesion Policy is implemented nationally and how member states react to cross-border initiatives reflect the broader political agenda of both the EU and individual countries. These dynamics are crucial for shaping the future of EU policy.

### **3. How Tourism Affects Cross-Border Cooperation – What Is Its Importance for Tourism?**

Tourism plays a crucial role in cross-border cooperation, which is a key aspect of the EU Cohesion Policy aimed at fostering development among neighbouring countries. Border regions often share geographical, historical, and cultural similarities, but are governed separately, leading to different approaches to the same issues (Kropinova, 2021). Coordinated tourism development in these areas can promote mutual benefits and regional growth.

In cases where there are significant differences between neighbouring border areas, cross-border programmes can still foster cooperation and economic development through tourism (Hardi et al., 2021). Proper funding and joint promotion can enhance the visibility of local attractions, making the region more appealing to visitors (Gashi et al., 2020).

Some border areas are historically or culturally unified but have been divided by political boundaries. Cross-border tourism initiatives can reconnect people with their heritage and encourage reconciliation between nations (Kropinova, 2021). Conversely, cultural diversity across borders can also serve as a tourism attraction, provided there is cooperation to improve access and infrastructure (Gashi et al., 2020).

Border regions are often depopulated, with young people moving away in search of better opportunities. Tourism, supported by cross-border funding programmes, can offer economic prospects for youth, and contribute towards revitalising these areas (Badulescu et al., 2014).

However, administrative differences and governance challenges between countries can hinder cooperation<sup>2</sup>. It is, therefore, essential for both public and private

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2. **European Commission: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy**, Analysis of cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and enlargement countries – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/164787>

sector actors at local and national levels to collaborate effectively. Overcoming bureaucratic obstacles and engaging multiple stakeholders is vital to the successful development of tourism in cross-border areas (Badulescu et al., 2014).

Furthermore, border areas deserve more attention, since metropolitan areas are usually already developed. Tourism can act as a catalyst for broader economic development, especially when infrastructure and services – such as transport, healthcare, accommodation, and catering – are enhanced through co-funded projects. These initiatives contribute to sustainable tourism and long-term regional growth (Badulescu et al., 2014).

In conclusion, tourism and cross-border cooperation enhance each other. Investment in border regions improves tourism potential, while tourism projects can foster deeper cooperation between countries. Success, however, depends on the active collaboration of local authorities, public institutions, and private stakeholders.

#### **4. Analysis of the Process of Programming, Monitoring and Evaluating**

Thorough examination of how these Programmes are designed and implemented it becomes apparent that there are many challenges that must be addressed to ensure better management and successful execution of such programmes. As evidenced by Programming documents and EU Regulations, the authorities responsible for Programmes differ from country to country. Governance structures vary among states, resulting in inequalities between countries that collaborate in a partnership or a Programme. Some countries are already developed, with well-structured organisations and extensive experience in project management & implementation, while others are still in a phase of development, receiving recommendations from the EU and gradually organising their administrative and management systems.

Specifically, Western Balkans countries were forced to reorganise their governance systems after the economic and political crisis of the 1980s and, most certainly, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>.

However, important elements such as culture, language, and work ethic cannot be ignored since they influence the structure of a country's organisations and, consequently, the relationships and cooperation between two countries, as well as the sustainability of actions implemented<sup>4</sup>. These factors impact both Programme-level management and project-level implementation by beneficiaries. Cooperation

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3. **European Court of Auditors**, Special Report 01/2022: EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist. Luxembourg: European Court of Auditors, 2022. doi:10.2865/834534. p.9 found at: [https://www.eca.europa.eu/el/publications/SR22\\_01](https://www.eca.europa.eu/el/publications/SR22_01)
  4. **European Commission**: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Analysis of cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and enlargement countries – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, p.10 found at <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/164787>

between different countries and partners does not follow a clear or smooth path and needs to address several issues beyond the usual difficulties involved in project implementation.

Starting with the initial Programme design documents, and more specifically the Partnership Agreement<sup>5</sup> or the Strategy Document, it becomes evident that Territorial Cooperation Programmes (INTERREG, IPA CROSS-BORDER) are only a very brief section within the overall strategic planning of each state for its programming period. These programmes usually occupy one or two paragraphs, without a detailed analysis, indicating the level of importance attributed to them by each country.

In this context, the absence of a clear and specialised analysis concerning cross-border Programmes may lead to double funding of identical projects through Sectoral Operational Programmes, which means not only losing the added value of projects but also further developing corruption. It would, therefore, be advisable to have cross-border cooperation strategies with specialised themes, specifically tailored to the regions involved.

On the other hand, it is clear, and widely accepted, that addressing many problems in cross-border regions – for example, construction projects, railway or road infrastructure – requires significant funding, which is not allocated to such Programmes. Consequently, it is understood that cross-border cooperation Programmes are not being treated with the seriousness and significance they deserve<sup>6</sup>, and are not given the necessary resources to address the prevailing issues in eligible areas.

Likewise, analysing the programming documents – particularly the section concerning regional needs – makes it evident that the ex-ante evaluation is conducted on a national basis, as each country is required to submit its own needs and evaluation (Regulation [EU] No 1303/2013, CHAPTER II, Article 15). However, given the cross-border cooperation between two countries, a joint evaluation using an identical methodology (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, etc.) on both sides of the border would provide a clearer picture of the cross-border nature of regional needs and potentially offer more benefits regarding regional weaknesses.

Additionally, from the Interim Evaluation of the nine IPA CBC cross-border Programmes, conducted by the EU, for the 2014- 2019 period<sup>7</sup>, it is evident that many

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5. **Ministry of Development and Investments** (2014). *Partnership Agreement 2014–2020*. Found at [https://2014-2020.espa.gr/elibrary/PA\\_ESPA\\_2014\\_2020.pdf](https://2014-2020.espa.gr/elibrary/PA_ESPA_2014_2020.pdf)

6. **European Court of Auditors**. (2021). *Special Report 14/2021: Interreg cooperation: The potential of the European Union's cross-border regions has not yet been fully unlocked*. p.27, Found at [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21\\_14/SR\\_cross-border\\_EL.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21_14/SR_cross-border_EL.pdf)

7. **European Commission**. (2021). *Mid-term evaluation of cross border cooperation programmes between IPA II beneficiaries*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. p.29. Found at <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/IPA%20CBC%20mid-term%20evaluation%20final.pdf>

beneficiaries faced considerable difficulties in preparing and submitting funding proposals. According to this evaluation report, many beneficiaries in these countries require additional support and guidance. There are still deficiencies in the capacity and skills of partnership structures, which, in turn, cast doubt on the management and implementation of projects and the data submitted to Programme Authorities (MA/JTS). Thus, the choice of indicators and the method of their measurement may not be appropriate, and the data submitted by beneficiaries may not reflect the actual state of project implementation.

Similarly, as mentioned in the interim report on cross-border cooperation Programmes between EU candidate countries<sup>8</sup> (2021), the fact that staff from the JTS or the National Authority were not involved in the evaluation process – but only external evaluators who were not from the eligible area – highlights how local factors may have been overlooked. Another issue proving the lack of capacity in cross-border regions is that most NGO partners do not come from the area of interest but from other regions. Consequently, the proposals and projects submitted and approved are not strong initiatives from stakeholders who know and experience the region's problems and aim to address them. Many proposals may thus be questioned regarding their cross-border nature and relevance to a Programme's purpose. According to the European Court of Auditors<sup>9</sup>, due to lack of sufficient information and training, lack of experience, or non-local origin (and thus poor knowledge of local issues), cooperation in the proposals submitted for funding was often limited to the act of submitting a joint proposal, without entailing any real cross-border character.

Another critical issue is that of Project Evaluation. According to a report by the European Court of Auditors<sup>10</sup>, there are no clear guidelines in EU regulations regarding the Evaluation System for projects seeking funding. Specifically, it has been noted that one country may evaluate proposals using qualitative criteria, which are more subjective, while others use a scoring system, which simplifies the work of the Monitoring Committee that makes the final decision and ensures a more transparent process. Therefore, in some cases, due to the lack of clear instructions and uniform

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8. **European Commission.** (2021). *Mid-term evaluation of cross border cooperation programmes between IPA II beneficiaries*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. p.39. Found at <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/IPA%20CBC%20mid-term%20evaluation%20final.pdf>

9. **European Commission.** (2021). *Mid-term evaluation of cross border cooperation programmes between IPA II beneficiaries*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. p.54. Found at <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/IPA%20CBC%20mid-term%20evaluation%20final.pdf>

10. **European Court of Auditors.** (2021). *Special Report 14/2021: Interreg cooperation: The potential of the European Union's cross-border regions has not yet been fully unlocked*, p.39, found at <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=58917>



specifications across all participating countries, the responsible authorities may not select the best proposals for implementation, which casts doubt on their results.

From all the above, it becomes evident that, while there are specific Thematic Objectives for Cross-border Cooperation Programmes – some of which the beneficiaries are obliged to choose – there is also excessive freedom in the final selection of the actions to be implemented. Based on a single Thematic Objective, partners can create a mountain tourism trail or restore a monument. This results in a less visible financial impact of the funding provided. The implementation of numerous small and varied actions – considering the modest budgets of these Programmes – weakens the focus that could be achieved by targeting a smaller number of initiatives to support tourism development.

By funding a specific category of actions (e.g., hiking trails or monument restoration), the Programme's contribution could be more visible, and addressing certain needs of the eligible area could become more effective. Current flexibility in funding a variety of actions dilutes the financial support into small interventions that are unlikely to meet all needs or significantly address an area's weaknesses.

Another factor, worth noting in terms of planning, is the limitations of statistical data in some countries – for example, in IPA II “Serbia – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014–2020” the lack of a clear and complete picture of the cross-border area's needs, weaknesses, and opportunities initially affected the ex-ante evaluation and, subsequently, the target setting and the definition of appropriate indicators and actions for beneficiaries. This is something that should be seriously considered by the EC and the EU when monitoring and evaluating the information included in the Annual Reports of respective Programmes.

At the same time, analysis of programming documents reveals that not only is there wide freedom in selecting actions – as mentioned above – but also in selecting target groups for projects to be funded. This practice weakens the focus of Programmes. On the one hand, funding is limited, and on the other, the Programme does not seem to concentrate on a limited number of target groups, which would allow for greater impact and achieving better results.

Furthermore, when analysing regulations concerning cross-border cooperation, it has been noted that, although the primary purpose of these Programmes is cooperation between at least two countries, there are exceptions – when the impacts and benefits of a project are significant – where a single-country entity may receive funding. While such actions are subject to evaluation by the EC/Monitoring Committee, the exceptions are not clearly defined, nor is there a strict framework for their assessment. Given the existence of Sectoral Operational Programmes for funding, perhaps this provision should not be included in cross-border Programme regulations.

In conclusion, it should be noted that additional safeguards and tools are necessary to address these risks – such as absence of evaluators from the eligible area, lack



of common management mechanisms, and local residents' involvement in identifying regional needs. This way, projects approved for funding will not be subject to doubt, and their results will be accurate and reflective of the actual situation.

## 5. Indicators

One of the main obligations of cross-border Programmes is the submission of an ex-ante evaluation. This is an important stage both for the approval and the implementation of Programmes, since it allows countries, based on the data collected, to set appropriate and clear indicators for measuring the results or the contribution of funded actions in interventions within the eligible area that respond to the actual needs of the region. For the 2014-2020 programming period, the EU decided for the first time to use common indicators for all Operational Programmes of Member States (Annex I of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, 24 June 2021).

Indicators are divided into two categories for Programmes EU Member States participate in, namely result indicators and output indicators. Furthermore, in the case of cross-border projects implemented between two countries in the process of joining the EU, impact indicators are also considered. Result indicators provide information about the immediate effects of a Programme's actions on beneficiaries and individuals directly affected. Output indicators are distinguished into "common" and "specific" (where this is deemed necessary) for each Programme and refer to deliverables produced by projects.

In summary, one could argue that a result indicator reflects the change brought about by a Programme in a region (e.g., accessibility to a remote tourist area, percentage of beneficiaries involved in tourism-related activities), while an output indicator describes the product generated as a consequence of funding (e.g., number of people trained, number of people hired, number of training seminars held, etc.). On the other hand, impact indicators measure the long-term effect of the Programme (e.g., improvement of the economy, society, the environment, etc.).

All Programmes set some desired results, which are linked to a region's wish or need for change through funded actions. It is in this context that respective result indicators are selected. The clearer the result indicators, the easier it is to understand the problem or need the region is facing, and consequently, the easier it is to measure and determine whether the objective has been achieved. On the other hand, output indicators reflect the actions and activities of a Programme rather than its goals.

Cross-border Programmes implemented by EU Member States select from the list of common indicators (Regulation 1299/2013, 17.12.2013 Annex) and may also establish additional specific indicators, if necessary, based on needs. Specific indicators do not replace common ones but complement them and contribute to further measurements to ensure better monitoring and evaluation of specific actions.

As for cross-border Programmes implemented by countries under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, participating countries set specific indicators based on the needs of an eligible area. The Programme document includes, for each Thematic Objective and Result, the indicators used to measure the achievement of the Programme's goals. This list of common indicators is not mandatory for countries implementing projects under this framework of cross-border cooperation.

In the case where one of the participating countries is an EU Member State and the other a candidate for accession, the Programme may, if necessary, choose indicators from the list in Regulation 1299/2013, 17.12.2013.

In the field of Tourism, the common indicator clearly mentioned in this area and included in the list of Regulation 1299/2013 mentioned above:

- **“Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions (unit of measurement: visits per year).”**

### **5.1 Selection of Indicators in Cross-Border Programmes in the Balkans**

It has been noted that, depending on the stage of development of the partnership of countries participating in the cross-border Programmes, indicators are selected accordingly. Member States are required to follow EU policies; therefore, any issue must be addressed in a standardised manner. For this reason, member states are obliged to select common indicators from a specific list. However, when deemed necessary, programme-specific indicators may also be included to contribute more effectively towards achieving Programme objectives and desired outcomes.

On the other hand, since countries candidate for EU accession need to meet certain conditions for joining the union, they are required to collect information on various elements that directly or indirectly concern tourism. As a result, the indicators selected are greater in number and more specialised.

This practice, however, may involve risks, since it may lead to confusion or loss of focus. It would be preferable for indicators to be fewer in number and better targeted to avoid the possibility of data overlap, which could lead to questionable-quality results. It would also be advisable for the European Commission to consider such specific indicators – particularly in the case of candidate countries – so that a set of common indicators can be developed. This would establish a shared framework and a common point of reference, making monitoring easier and more effective for the Commission.

One notable issue regarding indicators in cross-border Programmes is the lack of qualitative measurement of actions and their results. Specifically, almost all Programmes place little emphasis on assessing the quality of interventions. While there is interest in creating new tourism products (new offers) and new types of tourism in an eligible area, qualitative evaluation of such actions is often overlooked. Even though the quality of tourism services contributes towards sustainable tourism devel-

opment, analysis of Programme documents reveals that this aspect is not given the attention it deserves. It should, however, be understood that for better development, promotion, and preservation of a tourism product, its quality must be an integral part of the indicators measured by participating countries.

Moreover, considering that these cross-border Programmes often fund many small-scale projects aimed at implementing local-level actions involving regional stakeholders, it might be even more beneficial to allocate funding for one large-scale, strategically important project. Specifically, a Programme could issue a tourism call approving, for example, 20 projects instead of 40, and the remaining funds may be used to launch a call for a strategic project with a larger budget and “stronger” stakeholders – such as ministries or research centres – that, albeit not located in the eligible area, could collaborate to target the development of that area and leave behind lasting benefits. Although many small projects can offer important benefits and development opportunities, the small-scale funding typical of Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes generally limits the impact that could otherwise be achieved more effectively under different circumstances.

Additionally, two serious issues must also be considered: the lack of data for certain regions, particularly in countries preparing for EU accession, which means that the target setting and corresponding indicators might not be appropriately chosen and be subject to challenge. Similarly, there are regions within EU Member States that are significantly underdeveloped—such as the cross-border region of Greece–Bulgaria (particularly in the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace)—where working with common indicators is particularly challenging. Although both countries are EU members, the cross-border region struggles to fully align with European policies. That said, the practice of using indicators facilitates drawing conclusions and evaluating the Programmes on the part of the EU. Even the difficulty in achieving a common indicator can yield insights that Member States and the EU can use accordingly.

Finally, another important point concerning the selection of indicators is that, in some cases, they do not clearly reflect the cross-border impact, which creates confusion in relation to the goals and the foundational principles of cross-border Programmes. Furthermore, in other instances, an indicator cannot be considered as the sole consequence of a Programme’s actions. For example, for Programmes that use the “increase in overnight stays in hotels”, as a result indicator, it must be understood that this indicator depends on a variety of socio-economic factors. The cross-border Programme contributes to this result only to a certain extent – something which is not clearly stated in the Programme documentation.

## **6. Comments on Indicators’ Achievement**

The Annual Implementation Report is a key monitoring tool for Programmes, used both by the Managing Authority and, more importantly, by the European Commis-

sion, since it reflects the current status of the co-financed projects being implemented. Specifically, it provides information on both financial data and output & result indicators.

The values reported in the Annual Report are cumulative, i.e. each year's report includes the achievements of all previous years. Two values are declared at any given time: one for selected projects and one for fully implemented projects. In the case of selected projects, the values reflect the estimates of project partners based on the progress of activities. It is self-evident that during the initial years of project implementation, estimates of beneficiaries regarding work progress are particularly important, since collecting concrete results is a time-consuming process and cannot provide meaningful data at the beginning of the Programming Period.

For output indicators, whether common or programme-specific, a baseline value is defined, and a target value is set for the year marking the end of the Programming Period. As for result indicators, which are linked to investment priorities, the baseline value is derived from recent data collected through evaluations or the need analysis of the Programme.

Before analysing the data per partnership scheme, it should be noted that Annual Implementation Reports were found for 18 of the 19 projects, with considerable difficulty in most cases. Few Programme websites are functional and user-friendly, although, under Regulation 1303/2013, transparency and publication of Programme data is a legal obligation.

Moreover, in many cases, the latest available Annual Implementation Report was for the year 2022, while in others, the report reflects the 2021 Programme status.

### **6.1 Programmes Implemented Between Two EU Member States**

Analysing the values presented in the Annual Implementation Reports makes it evident that the figures are completed based on the calls for proposals launched by the Programmes and the approval of the projects. For this reason, while in the INTERREG V-A "Romania–Bulgaria 2014–2020" Programme the indicator values start being reported in 2015, in the INTERREG V-A "Slovenia–Croatia 2014–2020" Programme they start in 2016, and in the INTERREG V-A "Greece–Bulgaria 2014–2020" Programme in 2017.

It should also be mentioned that in the Annual Report of the INTERREG V-A "Romania–Bulgaria 2014–2020" Programme, there is no reference to the result indicator value for any year. In fact, remarks note that this value will only be recorded in the final report, according to the methodology outlined in the Programme document. Similarly, in the INTERREG V-A "Slovenia–Croatia 2014–2020" Programme, result indicator values are only provided for three years (2018, 2020, and 2023).

Additionally, across all Programmes, it is noted that estimated values provided by beneficiaries differ from those representing the actual achievement of targets. In two

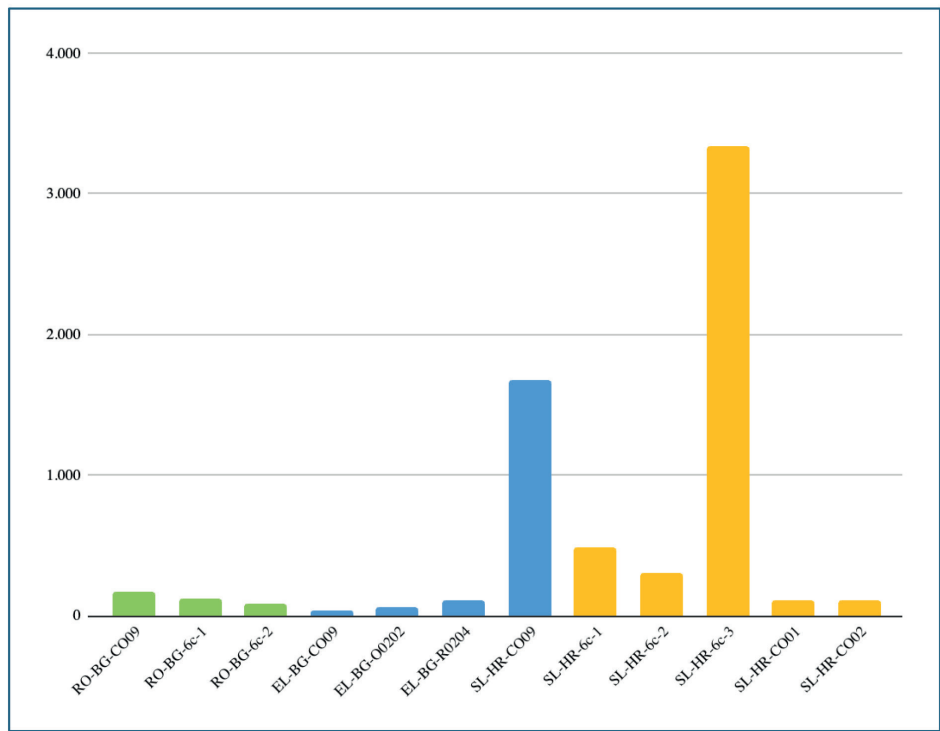
of the three Programmes in this category, the discrepancy is quite large, indicating that some beneficiaries may lack the knowledge and experience necessary to make accurate estimations, which can result in conclusions that do not reflect reality.

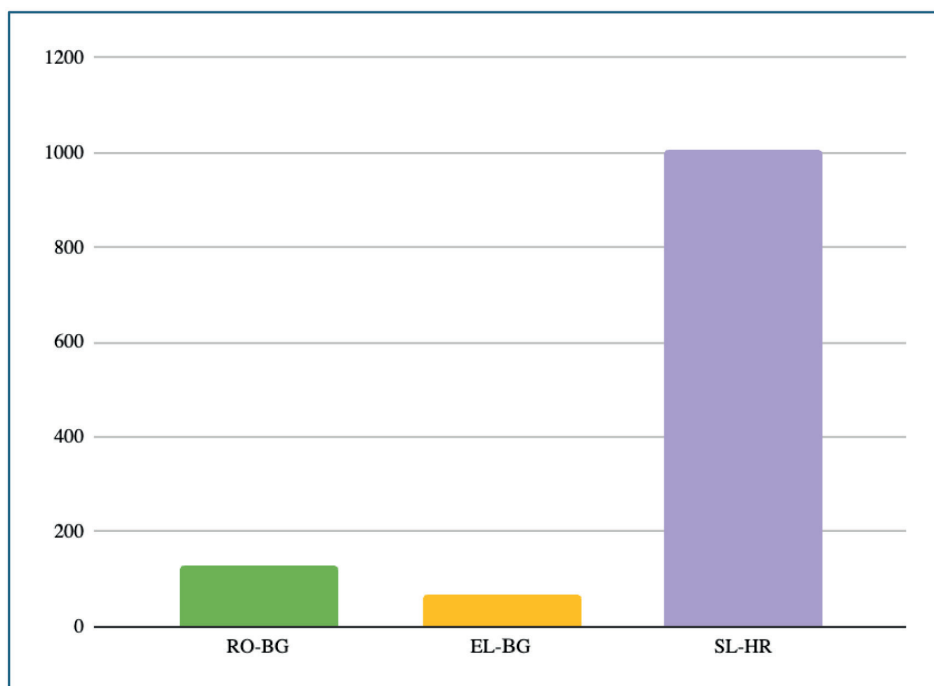
Nevertheless, when analysing output indicator values, it becomes clear that, in two of the three Programmes, some indicators did not reach their target values. More specifically, in the INTERREG V-A “Romania–Bulgaria 2014–2020” Programme, the projects managed to achieve two of the three output indicators. According to the Annual Report, this is justified by the fact that eleven projects under this Specific Objective were still under implementation and were to be concluded by the end of 2022.

On the other hand, the INTERREG V-A “Greece–Bulgaria 2014–2020” Programme did not manage to meet any of its output indicators. According to the Annual Report, this is because eleven projects under this Specific Objective were still being implemented and were also to be completed by the end of 2022.

In contrast, the INTERREG V-A “Slovenia–Croatia 2014–2020” Programme not only achieved its target values for all six output indicators but significantly exceeded them.

**Chart 1:** % Target Achievement Rate by Indicator by Programme



**Chart 2: % Target Achievement Rate by Programme**

## 6.2 Programmes Implemented Between an EU Member State and a Candidate Country for EU Accession

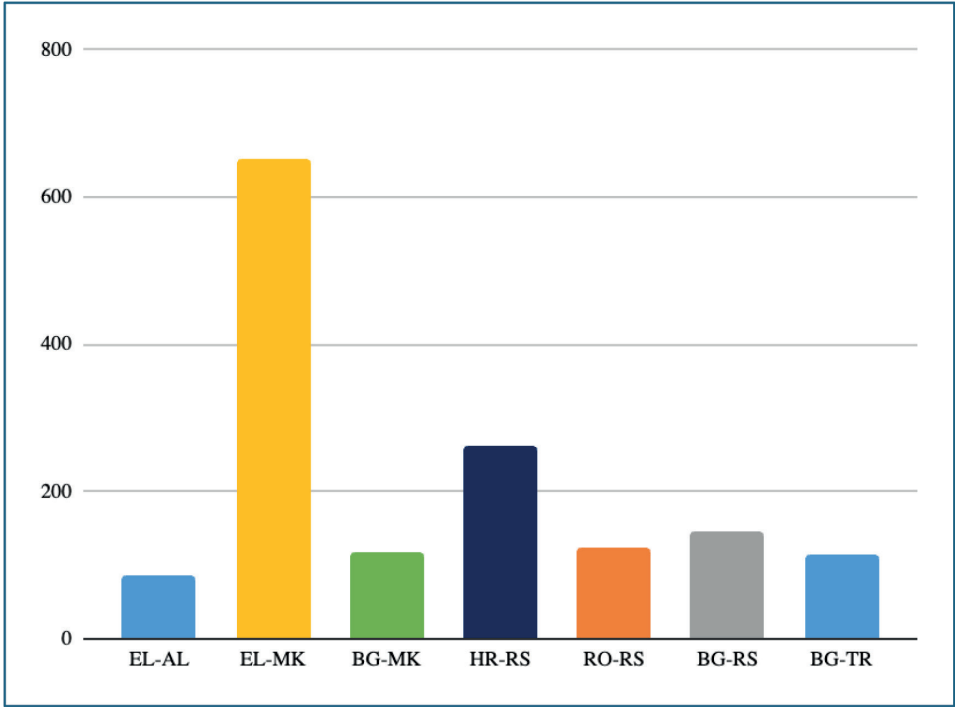
A pattern similar to the case of partnerships between EU Member States is observed here: in many instances, the final indicator value for years 2021 and 2022 significantly exceeds the target value, presenting a gradual and steady increase compared to the previous year. However, for several indicators, there is a sharp spike in values in the last reporting year (2021 or 2022), showing a remarkable increase compared to respective values of the previous year.

In a few cases, the indicator value in the final reporting year is lower than the target value -this is seen, for example, in INTERREG IPA II CBC “Bulgaria – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 2014–2020” and INTERREG IPA II CBC “Bulgaria – Turkey 2014–2020.” This is likely due to project extensions approved by the Managing Authority that were requested due to the COVID-19 pandemic or due to signing new funding contracts and, consequently, launching additional projects in 2021. This occurred in the INTERREG IPA II CBC “Romania – Serbia, 2014–2020” Programme and probably caused delays in data collection.

In another case, such as the INTERREG IPA II CBC “Bulgaria – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 2014–2020” Programme, only the result indicator value for 2018 was reported, and it is noted that the reference years for these indicators are 2018 and 2023. Furthermore, an output indicator of the Programme (2.3.3. Number of Participants in Youth Initiatives) showed a value of zero until 2019. In 2020, however, the indicator aligned with the beneficiary’s estimate (240) and greatly exceeded the Programme’s target value (150).

It has also been observed that the target value sometimes differs from both the actual data and projections. This occurs because, during the mid-term evaluation, indicators are reanalysed. When a different trend is identified (increase or decrease), the Programme is then obliged to redefine the indicator value to reflect reality, based on data collected.

**Chart 3:** % Target Achievement Rate by Programme





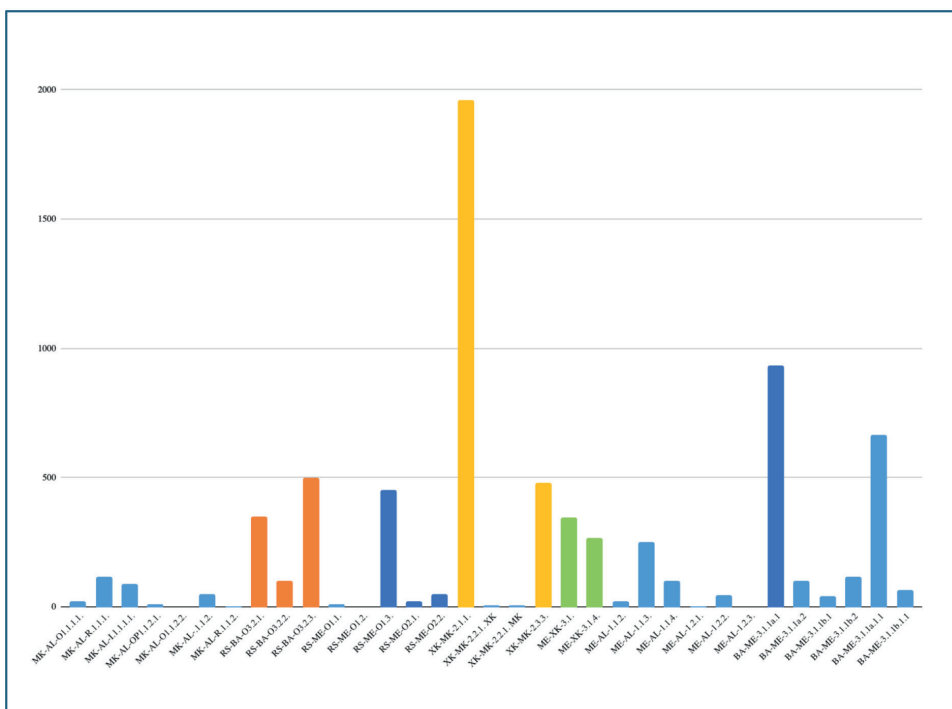
### 6.3 Programmes Implemented Between Two Candidate Countries for EU Accession

There are nine programmes under this partnership model in the Balkan region. In most cases, it was nearly impossible to find material online. However, in response to a request for documentation, nearly all programmes – except for INTERREG IPA II CBC “Serbia – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 2014–2020” – provided the material requested.

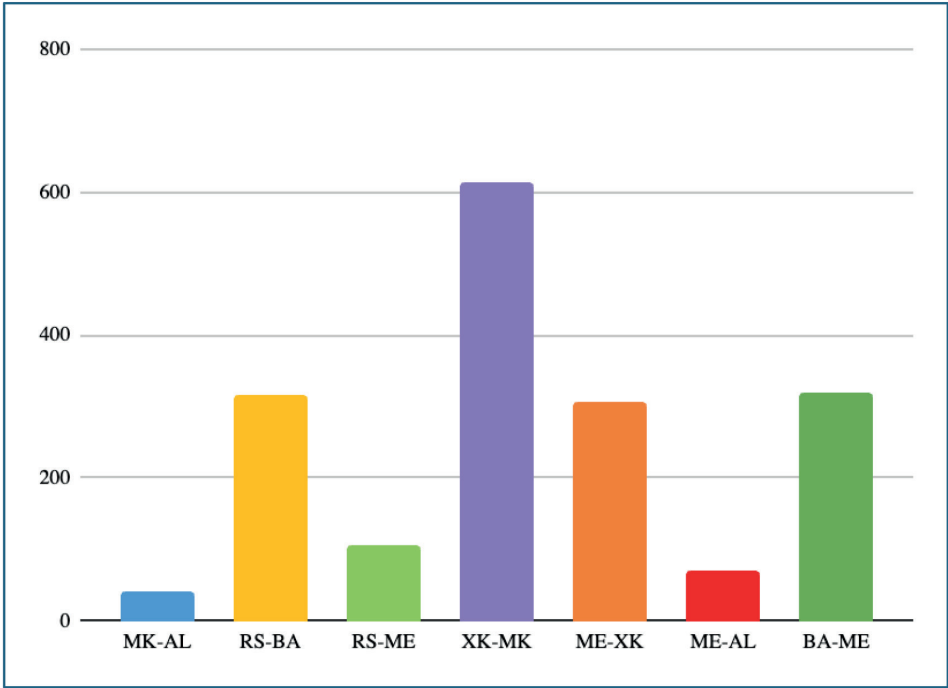
Regarding programmes implemented between two EU candidate countries, indicators are categorised into three types: outputs, results, and impact.

Furthermore, in certain programmes there is no differentiation of indicators by Specific Objective, but rather by Result. The title of the Specific Objective remains the same, while the indicator category is adjusted based on the Result.

**Chart 4: % Target Achievement Rate by Indicator by Programme**



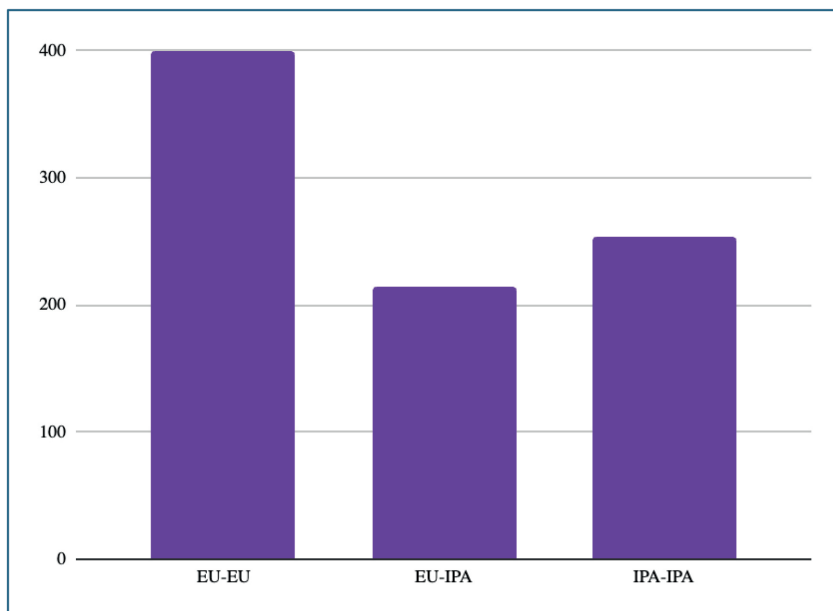
**Chart 5: % Target Achievement Rate by Programme**



**6.4 Comparative Analysis of Target Achievement across Partnership Models**

By comparatively analysing Programmes by partnership model, it becomes evident that Programmes implemented between two EU Member States have achieved their targets to a greater extent than those implemented between the other two country pairings.

It is also clear that, overall, all three partnership models have not only achieved but significantly exceeded their targets, with a success rate of 399.21% for country pairs consisting of two EU Member States, 214.08% for country pairs consisting of one EU Member State and one candidate country, and 252.93% for country pairs consisting of two candidate countries for EU accession.

**Chart 6: % Target Achievement Rate by Partnership**

## 6.5 Conclusions and Evaluation of Indicator Achievement

Regarding indicator values and their achievement, as already mentioned, finding the Programme's Annual Report proved difficult – if not impossible – in several cases. This unavailability of public online data hinders the formation of a comprehensive picture of the contribution of cross-border programmes to tourism development. More specifically, annual reports were found for 18 of the 19 projects. Notably, among the seven Programmes implemented between candidate countries for EU accession, only one report was found, the one concerning the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – Albania, 2014–2020.”

Additionally, it should also be taken into account that, until an on-site inspection is carried out by the competent Authority, measurements included in the Annual Report primarily reflect declarations made by beneficiaries. At this stage, the Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat (MA/JS) is not in a position to verify data authenticity or possess all necessary evidence to validate information. Only after visiting beneficiaries' facilities or conducting thorough research into beneficiaries' records can the authorities obtain a complete and accurate picture of the achievement of indicators. Therefore, a project picture presented in the Annual Report may not fully reflect

reality, and values may differ in the Final Report that Programmes are required to submit at the end of programming period.

In the same context, management efficiency remains questionable for some countries. Consequently, the fact that full freedom and trust are given to a beneficiary to use their preferred methodology for collecting indicator data raises questions about the reliability of the figures submitted in Annual Reports.

It should also be noted that there was a case (INTERREG V-A "Romania – Bulgaria 2014–2020") where no value for the result indicator was reported in any year of the Annual Report. In fact, comments specify that the value will only be reported in the Final Report, as outlined in the Programme's methodology document. This, once again, highlights the extensive discretion granted by the EU to countries for setting and applying specific conditions for implementation. However, this practice may conceal risks related to project monitoring and, consequently, achieving Programme objectives. The competent Authorities may lack time and resources at the end of the programming period to intervene, seek solutions, and take appropriate actions to reverse negative trends and improve outcomes.

Furthermore, Annual Reports clearly show the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on project implementation. The interruption of project activities and the extension of deadlines are factors that affected target achievement. For this reason, in some cases, targets might only be met during the final project implementation period.

There were also Programmes the target value of which was achieved in the early years of implementation. This may have occurred either because the countries set low targets or because more projects were approved than initially planned, leading to a greater volume of data/more measurements. In the first case, this reflects a countries' inability to set ambitious targets based on ex-ante evaluation data, while, in the second, it reflects the Authorities' inability to effectively manage the data of the first call for proposals when designing the second call.

Additionally, the lack of sufficient statistical data in some countries casts doubt on baseline values reported in the Annual Report and, consequently, on the achievement of targets, as well. This is particularly critical in cases where the objective is to increase a value by a certain percentage from the baseline, as incorrect reporting of the baseline can distort the entire picture of the indicator.

Finally, a difficult yet important factor in accurately recording indicators is coordination between countries when defining and capturing the cross-border dimension of certain measurements. More specifically, it requires considerable effort for two countries to translate and record an indicator in a uniform manner. For this purpose, Authorities must ensure that beneficiaries follow a common methodology and code of practice when collecting data, so that analysis is consistent and aligned with EU guidelines.

In conclusion, as shown in the charts depicting target achievement rates by Programme partnership models, success is apparent – with the target value being significantly exceeded. However, these results may be open to challenge. As previously mentioned, the possibility of submitting inaccurate measurements of indicators is a real concern and requires further investigation.

## **7. Conclusions – Discussion – Proposals**

To summarise what has already been analysed, it is evident that Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) Programmes have contributed to the development of eligible areas in the tourism sector. New tourism products have been created, additional people have been trained in the fields of tourism and culture, the number of tourists' overnight stays in the area has increased, jobs have been created, etc. Therefore, these Programmes impact tourism by offering products and services or infrastructure projects in a region. However, the level of development and the degree of contribution of these Programmes remain open to discussion.

In the same context, the objective of developing tourism in a specific area also affects the policy planning of a country, and, consequently, the adoption of Programmes for funding in order to develop that sector. Given that two countries share the goal of developing tourism in a cross-border region, the implementation of joint projects – and, therefore, forging smooth relations and cooperation – is essential. However, for effective cooperation between two countries, establishing a common framework with strong structures and clear governance mechanisms is a prerequisite for proper management, monitoring, and evaluation of Programmes.

Even though policy is influenced by CBC Programmes and tourism, it has been noted that ex-ante analyses of evaluations and needs – the documents a CBC Programme is based on – tend to reflect the central government's policy rather than the actual needs and requirements of the local area being funded. More specifically, each Programme's design study is carried out per country. There is no common study or shared questionnaire for residents of the eligible cross-border region. On the contrary, each country shapes its own policy, and based on that, Priorities for the respective CBC Programmes are developed under the supervision of the EU.

However, this practice may lead to erroneous conclusions about the needs of a region. Consequently, the indicator selected to monitor the Programme, which should reflect the area's needs, might not align with actual needs, and measurements may either be low – due to an inability to implement the project (due to lack of necessary tools or knowledge) – or very high, because the relevant need had already been fully addressed in the past.

At the same time, it should be considered that in several countries, governance structures are still at the early stages of development. This is especially true for the countries formed after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, where governance systems have

only recently been restructured, resulting in lack of a universal approach to Programme management among participating countries. Moreover, the lack of knowledge and available data in some countries further complicates the situation and hampers cooperation between nations in producing accurate measurements and proper monitoring of the Programmes on both sides of the border. As previously mentioned, in certain partnership schemes the absence of baseline data at a given point in time makes it impossible to set a reference value, even though the indicator is supposed to measure the increase from that point onwards due to the Programme's contribution.

Taking all the above into account, it becomes clear that, in some cases, it is possible that measurements are inaccurate and do not reflect reality. Beneficiaries may, due to a lack of knowledge, experience, information, and sufficient data, unknowingly submit incorrect measurements to the Managing Authority overseeing the Programme.

Similarly, the nature and characteristics of some indicators are also called into question. Specifically, there are cases in which the target cannot solely be attributed to the implementation of a CBC Programme but, rather, to results from various other contributing factors not considered in the measurement of an indicator. Therefore, an increase in overnight stays in a cross-border area cannot solely be attributed to the Programme's implementation; other social, economic, and political factors should also be considered.

Furthermore, another issue that becomes evident from the study and analysis of CBC Programmes is that, although cooperation between entities from the two bordering regions exists, the degree and quality of that cooperation is not easily perceived, since it is not measured in qualitative terms. Undoubtedly, two countries have cooperated to implement a project at the border, but the level and quality of cooperation and involvement is neither apparent nor evaluated. However, quality is a key factor in sustainable tourism development, especially when it comes to services and products.

Based on the issues raised in this paper, one proposal to improve the implementation of CBC Programmes is to separate them from central government planning. Differentiating them from large Sectoral Operational Programmes could help shape a specific policy for border areas with clear objectives that truly reflect the needs of the region. This way, regional development could be promoted more systematically.

Additionally, approving and funding fewer but more targeted projects focused on a small number of goals and groups could lead to greater development in a specific area of tourism. Funding many and varied actions significantly diminishes the impact of such Programmes in any given region. The results of the projects are small, as is their contribution to and impact on the local community. On the contrary, focusing on a single area could yield greater development and more clearly measurable outcomes.

Moreover, drafting clear, common guidelines by the EU and training participating countries in CBC Programmes regarding management, monitoring, and evaluation

should be key-prerequisites for funding approval. It must be recognised that coordination and implementation of a common methodology for measuring indicators are fundamental aspects of a Programme and contribute towards producing accurate and valid conclusions about the situation in a cross-border region.

In conclusion, it should be understood that, although there are many challenges and difficulties when two countries – or more specifically, two border regions – collaborate, the benefits of cross-border cooperation for a region can be significant at many levels. Cooperation of two remote areas can lead to improved bilateral relations, regional stability, economic growth, and exchange of cultural elements, opening up new horizons on both sides of the border.

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