

Advantages and Limits of Cross-Border Cooperation of Sub-National Territorial Collectivities within the Euroregions

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Abstract

The Euroregions are a mechanism for external collaboration of local collectivities – territorial structures created to achieve a coherent space for economic, scientific, social and cultural development. The collaboration within the Euroregions consists in creating direct links between the regions and collectivities located on one side and the other of the state borders, by virtue of the competences of the local authorities, as defined in the national legislation. The collaboration model within the Euroregions is supported by the European Union as a preparatory exercise for the accession of the participating countries and as a mechanism for the implementation of community relations between the regions of the candidate states. After the proclamation of independence, the Republic of Moldova made considerable efforts to establish international relations, by joining the most important international political and economic bodies and organizations, as well as by signing bilateral agreements with different countries. Efforts to integrate into the international community were promoted both at the central and local levels by intensifying the cooperation of local collectivities with similar entities from neighbouring countries, Romania and Ukraine. Due to the economic advantages offered by cross-border cooperation, the participation of the Republic of Moldova within the Euroregions should be of interest. The local collectivities from Romania and Ukraine have a much greater economic potential compared to the districts of the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, the interest in deepening the cross-border cooperation relations was permanently overshadowed by pronounced passivity both at the central and local levels.

Keywords: Republic of Moldova, cross-border cooperation, Euroregion

INTRODUCTION

The cross-border cooperation of sub-national territorial collectivities is called to offer solutions to common challenges and problems in border regions and contribute to the unlocking of their potential. As the cross-border collaboration model of the sub-national territorial collectivities within the Euroregions is supported by the European Union as a preparatory exercise for the accession of the candidate states, the subject is very topical for the Republic of Moldova. Due to the economic, social and cultural advantages of cross-border cooperation, the participation of sub-national territorial collectivities within Euroregions should be of interest. However, the efforts to deepen cross-border cooperation relations within the Euroregions were permanently overshadowed by a passivity manifested both at the central and subnational levels.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the paper is to identify the opportunities that can contribute to the development of sub-national territorial collectivities in the Republic of Moldova through sustainable cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions and to elucidate the advantages of this Euro-regional cooperation. In order to collect the data necessary to carry out the research, I studied the documents developed by the specialized entities of the European Union, the Council of Europe, public associations that active in the field of cross-border cooperation. In an attempt to outline the real advantages of the cross-border collaboration within the Euroregions for the sub-national territorial collectivities of the Republic of Moldova, I studied the works of the academic environment dedicated to the researched topic, the experts' reports and practitioners' opinions.

RESULTS

A. The essence of the cross-border cooperation of sub-national territorial collectivities

The European Framework Convention on Cross-border Cooperation of the Territorial Collectivities or Authorities of 21.05.1980 ratified by the Decision of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova no. 596-XIV of 24.09.99 qualifies as cross-border cooperation “any concertation of actions aimed at strengthening and developing the neighbourhood relations between territorial collectivities or authorities that depend on two or more Contracting Parties, as well as the conclusion of agreements and useful arrangements in this purpose”. The Framework Convention stipulates that the cross-border cooperation is exercised within the limits of the competence of territorial collectivities or authorities, “as defined by the domestic law”. Also, the Framework Convention specifies that the expression “territorial collectivities or authorities” shall mean “collectivities, authorities or bodies exercising local and regional functions and regarded as such under the domestic law of each state” (Framework Convention, art. 2).

The objectives of cross-border cooperation consist of:

- the creation of a new quality of borders which become meeting spaces,
- facilitating the interfaces of European spatial development policy,
- overcoming border-related disadvantages and exploiting opportunities to improve infrastructure,
- promotion of common economic development,
- improvement of cross-border protection of the environment and nature,
- promotion of cross-border cultural cooperation,
- making realities of subsidiarity and partnerships. [8]

The concrete areas of activity of cross-border cooperation, by sectors, include the following components:

- Sectors of environment, agriculture and territorial planning: a) environment, b) agriculture, c) territorial planning;
- Sectors of transport, security and telecommunications: a) transports, b) security, c) telecommunications;
- Sectors of the economy and labour force: a) economy, b) jobs and cross-border workforce, c) enterprises or industries, d) technology, e) the tourism sector;
- Sectors of cross-border populations, social protection and health: a) social protection of

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cross-border populations in general, b) border workers, c) health infrastructures;

- Sectors of education, research and culture: a) education and training, b) socio-cultural infrastructures, c) culture and region, d) telecommunications, e) the sports and leisure sector. [10, pp. 34-40]

Considering the multitude of examples from the states of the European Union, where more than a third of the citizens of the European Union live and work in border regions, [13] the guiding principles that ensure the success of cross-border cooperation can be outlined:

- getting closer to citizens: the residents of cross-border areas want to establish cooperation in order to solve the problems they face or improve their perspective of life;

- the involvement of political actors (local, regional, national and European) is essential for a good cross-border cooperation;

- subsidiarity: the local and regional levels have proven to be the best for achieving cross-border cooperation, under the conditions of cooperation with the national governments;

- partnership: the involvement of all actors on one side and the border on the other is essential for the achievement of common objectives;

- common structures: equipped with common resources (technical, administrative, financial and decision-making tools) represent the guarantee of sustainable activity, in continuous evolution; they also guarantee the exercise of certain competences, the management of programs, the achievement of cross-border consensus and the avoidance of national selfishness. [7]

The principles that should be respected to ensure successful cross-border cooperation, according to the Association of European Border Regions, are: a) partnership, b) subsidiarity, c) the existence of a common cross-border development concept/program, d) common structures at regional/local level and independent funding sources. Those principles, generally recognized, are also the basic requirements for the European assistance programs. At the same time, the cross-border cooperation within Euroregions should not only be oriented towards obtaining external funding sources, although access to external funds is an important incentive for cooperation. [1, pp. 13-14]

As a general rule, the positive effects of the cross-border cooperation are largely due to its contribution to:

- European integration;

- economic and social cohesion;

- improving communication, expanding interconnections, developing networks;

- the development of new labour markets and the preparation for joining the EU of new members. [14, p. 292]

B. Euroregion – cross-border cooperation mechanism

In the European political space, the term Euroregion refers to a transnational cooperation structure between two (or more) contiguous territories located in different European countries. [8] The European Economic and Social Committee offers the following definition for Euroregions: “permanent structures of cross-border cooperation between regional and local authorities in direct proximity, located on either side of common state borders”. [7]

The collaboration within the Euroregions consists of direct collaboration of the sub-national territorial collectivities located on one side and the other of the borders. The main

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reasons for the initiation of approaches by the sub-national territorial collectivities regarding the cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions can be summarised as follows:

- the transformation of the border from a line of separation into a place of communication between neighbours,
- overcoming the mutual animosity and prejudices between the peoples of the border regions, which result from the historical heritage,
- consolidation of democracy and the development of some operational regional/local administrative structures,
- overcoming the periphery and national isolation,
- promotion of economic growth and development and improving living standards,
- rapid approach to the European Union. [8]

The Association of European Border Regions establishes the following criteria for identifying the Euroregions: a) an association of local and regional authorities on either side of the national border, b) a cross-border association with a permanent secretariat and a technical and administrative team with its resources, c) an association under private law, based on non-profit associations or foundations on either side of the border, under the national legislation in force, d) an association under public law, based on interstate agreements, which refers, among other things, to the participation of territorial authorities. Euroregions have the following characteristics: a) geographical - the Euroregion is a territory that has a special geographical position, b) political - it is under the legislative authority of some sovereign states, that have a common border, c) administrative - the neighbouring territorial collectivities of the states, that have a common border, create the Euroregion, d) functional - the Euroregion is a cross-border cooperation mechanism. [8]

As associative structures, the Euroregions must be both legitimate and functional. [4, pp. 23-29] In this sense, in their activity, they tend to respect the following objectives:

- promotes strategically oriented development and cooperation, without measures based on individual cases;
- always operates as an entity oriented towards cross-border cooperation and not as a national border region;
- a new administrative level is not created;
- it is a centre of cross-border relations that includes citizens, politicians, institutions, economic agents, social partners, organisers of cultural events, etc.;
- ensures a balance between the different structures and public authorities on both sides of the border in terms of psychological aspects;
- promotes cooperation both vertically (European, governmental, regional, local) and horizontally, abroad;
- implements cross-border cooperation decisions under the applicable procedures on both sides of the border;
- ensures the participation of citizens, institutions and social partners in programs, projects and decision-making processes that take place within the cross-border cooperation;
- take initiative and use own resources to help and support third parties. [1]

According to the *Practical Guide for Cross-border Cooperation* (third edition, 2000) adopted by the European Commission and developed by AEBR (Association of European Border Regions), cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions has the following contents:

- definition of action areas according to common interests (for example, infrastructure, economy, culture);

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- cooperation in all life areas: living, work, leisure, culture, etc.;
- equal emphasis on social-cultural cooperation and economic-infrastructure cooperation;
- implementation of treaties and agreements concluded at the European level between countries for the realization of cross-border practice;
- consultancy, assistance and coordination of cross-border cooperation, especially in the following areas: economic development, transport and traffic, regional development, environmental protection and nature conservation, culture and sports, health, energy, waste disposal, tourism and leisure, agricultural development, innovation and technology transfer, schools and education, social cooperation, emergency services and disaster prevention, communications, public security. [1]

C. The participation of sub-national territorial collectivities from the Republic of Moldova within the Euroregions

The sub-national territorial collectivities in the Republic of Moldova, compared to other post-Soviet states included in the Eastern Partnership, have several competitive advantages in relations with the European Union, due to the direct proximity and the small size of the national territory that allow them to be eligible for the implementation of projects promoted through cross-border partnerships. [12] Currently, approximately 70% of the territory and 80% of the population of the Republic of Moldova participate in cross-border activities within the four Euroregions to which the Moldovan sub-national territorial collectivities are part. The creation of Euroregions with the participation of sub-national territorial collectivities from Romania, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova was a process more akin to a political and economic development strategy at the national level, than to a request of the local population, aimed at overcoming the obstacles created by borders and solving their common problems. For the most part, the contribution of sub-national territorial collectivities to the creation of Euroregions was limited to the reactions expressed regarding the national and supra-national cross-border cooperation policies. [9, p. 429]

The passivity of Moldovan sub-national territorial collectivities in launching and carrying out cross-border cooperation activities within the Euroregions is caused by several factors:

- in the Republic of Moldova there is no administrative entity that would develop the cross-border cooperation policy and promote the interests of the Euroregions;
- the Moldovan sub-national public authorities, established after the counter-reform of 2003, do not have the administrative capacity to independently promote cooperation policies;
- the participation of the Moldovan sub-national territorial collectivities is more an inertial character, being mainly driven by external factors; [5, p. 206]
- both at the national level and the sub-national level, there are no regional integration strategies or concrete action plans targeted to highlight the benefits of cross-border cooperation for the Moldovan sub-national territorial collectivities;
- the insufficiency of financial resources in the local budgets of the Moldovan sub-national territorial collectivities for financing cooperation activities, and the reduced access and possibilities to external financial sources. The sub-national public authorities, with a small budget, cannot provide the necessary tools for the development of projects financed by external donors.

D. The benefits of the cross-border cooperation for sub-national territorial collectivities in the Republic of Moldova

The main reasons for the cross-border cooperation of the sub-national territorial collectivities of the Republic of Moldova through the Euroregions can be formulated as follows:

a) transforming the border from a line of separation into a platform for cooperation between neighbouring subnational territorial collectivities, b) overcoming existing animosities and prejudices in relations between peoples resulting from their historical heritage, c) strengthening democratic society and developing subnational administrative structures operational, d) overcoming the peripheral state and national isolation, e) promoting economic development and improving living standards, f) rapid assimilation in an integrated Europe. [1, p. 8]

Among the arguments invoked by the academic environment from the Republic of Moldova in favour of cross-border cooperation, I mention the following:

- the geographical location, the Republic of Moldova has a common border with the European Union;
- the pro-European orientation of the Republic of Moldova;
- the experience gained by national and sub-national public authorities in the field of cross-border cooperation;
- the expertise and experience in the field of project writing and participation in the calls launched by the European Union;
- the experience of four Euroregions covering over 70% of the country's territory. [2, p. 357]

The cross-border cooperation through Euroregions can offer the following benefits to sub-national territorial collectivities in the Republic of Moldova:

- contributes to the promotion of coexistence, security and European integration, representing an effective way of applying the principles of subsidiarity, partnership and economic, social and territorial cohesion and supporting the integration of states within the European Union;
- brings an added value to national public policies due to the additional nature of cross-border programs and projects, mobilised synergies, joint research and innovation, creation of some dynamic and stable networks, exchange of knowledge and good practices, indirect effects of overcoming border obstacles and effective cross-border management of available resources;
- allows the active and sustained involvement of citizens and sub-national public authorities, as well as transnational political and social groups, ensures mutual knowledge and allows the achievement of a vertical and horizontal partnership starting from different national structures, institutions and attributions;
- contributes to the development and management of cross-border programs and projects or the joint administration of funds from various sources (community, state, own or from third parties);
- facilitates the mobilisation of the potential of all interested actors (chambers of commerce, associations, enterprises, unions, social and cultural institutions, ecological organisations or tourism agencies);
- favours the opening of labour markets and the harmonisation of professional qualifications;
- ensures the growth of economic development and the creation of jobs through actions

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in other sectors such as infrastructure, transport, tourism, environment, education, research and cooperation between economic agents;

- contributes to the permanent dissemination of general knowledge, allows the formation of a network of entities that act as multipliers, such as educational institutions, environmental protection institutions, cultural associations, libraries, museums, etc.;

- promotes equal opportunities and extensive knowledge of the neighbouring country's language, including local dialects, which are essential components of cross-border regional development and also, a prerequisite for communication. [7]

As a result of the evaluation of the socio-economic potential of the Euroregions, the following directions of cross-border cooperation can be highlighted, as attractive for the sub-national territorial collectivities of the Republic of Moldova:

- creation of a common cross-border informational space regarding the available potential and the opportunities to elaborate common development projects within the Euroregions;

- establishment of common structures that would contribute to the valorization and development of the economic potential of the actors involved in cross-border collaboration;

- development of the infrastructure that would facilitate the crossing of borders and access to international transport communications by car, rail, river and sea;

- elaboration of a common tourism development strategy using the tourist potential of the Euroregions;

- development of cooperation in the field of research and development, of collaborative relationships between educational institutions, including higher ones, the intensification of the exchange of students and teaching staff from the Euroregions;

- creation of common centres for training, retraining and employment of the labour force, organization of the information exchange within the Euroregions;

- organization of festivals, exhibitions, cultural fairs and regional sports competitions;

- coordination of the environmental protection programs, joint implementation of projects and joint monitoring of pollution factors in the Euroregions. [3, p. 150]

Cross-border cooperation also has a great potential to attract the business environment due to two essential motivations: a) there are opportunities to increase their profits and b) they create opportunities for consultants, experts, and analysts to increase their incomes. Specifically, cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions can offer advantages to the private sector, by ensuring access to:

- new markets for existing products or the creation of new products;

- new customers; together, partners can reach customers they would never have on their own;

- new products; cooperation with a partner can provide the material and financial means necessary for the creation of new products;

- technology transfers from one partner to another, activities that can be very profitable;

- new capitals: cooperation can offer financial opportunities through the possibility of attracting investors who would not otherwise manifest themselves;

- new projects: partners can consider joint investments in projects that they would not have considered on their own. [6]

For the duration, success and type of cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions, the following elements are essential: a) the involvement of the local population on both sides of the border, b) the participation of all political levels (European, national, regional, local), c) the involvement of all authorities, organisations, associations, etc. on both sides of the border, d)

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the cross-border entity's structure and financing that coordinates the activities. [14, p. 292]

CONCLUSIONS

Many sub-national territorial collectivities in border areas usually have poorer economic outcomes than similar collectivities in other regions of the same state. One of the most effective external collaboration mechanisms of sub-national territorial collectivities is represented by the Euroregions. The cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions offers many advantages for the development of border sub-national territorial collectivities, such as: promoting economic, social and cultural cooperation, exchange and transfer of knowledge, and solving everyday problems at the local and sub-national level. Cross-border cooperation within the Euroregions does not refer either to the modification of the borders of the states nor the violation of their sovereignty but aims the acceptance and promotion of effective cooperation in all areas of life with the purpose of improving the living conditions of the population. The more active involvement of the sub-national territorial collectivities in the cross-border cooperation through the existing Euroregions would create premises for the easier and faster accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union.

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