

THE HU-RO CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION PROGRAMME 2007-2013: INSIGHTS RELATED TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING THE EUROPEAN FUNDS

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Abstract: *For decades, researchers and practitioners have ascertained that sustainability and effectiveness of the new European construction relies also on good relations between neighbouring countries. Efficient cross-border cooperation (CBC) between EU Member States is able to achieve one of the main objectives of the European Union: the territorial cohesion. Even the first actions were based on enthusiasm, spontaneous cooperation or diversity, in the present stage, the CBC has to move forward, from theoretical hypothesis and anticipation, to concrete and specific action, to implementing the evaluation results from previous cooperation projects and to design new policies and strategies. This paper addresses a key issue of CBC between Romania and Hungary: the efficient spending of funds allocated through the CBC Programme HU-RO 2007 - 2013, by analysing the data available at the end of 2015. Our research, based on the analysis of the funds allocated and spent within HU-RO CBC program, attempt to assess the fulfilment of the undertaken indicators (individual or at aggregated level), the absorption rate of available funds and future development prospects. Our research revealed that, overall, there is a clear trend of improving the quality of projects selected and implemented both in Romania and in Hungary, put in evidence by the high degree of the funds' absorption and the achievement of the most of the assumed indicators. However, the assessment of the quality of projects submitted and selected has to be completed with the analysis of the sustainability and impact of these cross-border projects. Our article also focuses on revealing various aspects and results of HU-RO CBC 2007-2013 projects, effects and limits or challenges to long-run sustainability. The paper also points out conclusions and provides further recommendations in order to ensure the sustainability and the effectiveness of future CBC programs, particularly for the 2014-2020 programing period.*

Keywords: Romania-Hungary cross-border cooperation; projects assessment; funds.

JEL classification: F15; F36; R58.

1. Introduction

Romania's ability to attract European funds and to use them effectively and efficiently represents a topic which is frequently addressed, both from a theoretical and a practical point of view, given the fact that Romania's economic development depends, to a large extent, on the way these funds are managed by their direct and indirect beneficiaries. The fact that the absorption of EU funds was declared as priority of the Romanian government

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in the last decade, has not solved the real situation: Romania is among the last places in the European Union in terms of absorption of European funds.

The topic addressed in the present research focuses on the importance of harmonious economic and social development, along the entire border area between Romania and Hungary. The efficient use of funds contracted through joint Romanian - Hungarian projects can lead to one of the main objectives of the European Union, namely territorial cohesion. In terms of organization, the achievements from this area are an example of good practice in what the way to access and use EU funds are concerned, for other Romanian regions, sectors and policies, in the current period.

2. Territorial cooperation: from concepts to practical application in EU

The concept of territorial cohesion (EU Treaty, Article 16) was introduced by member countries at the Council of Ministers held in Potsdam in May 1999, where the territorial dimension was added to the other two, i.e. economic and social (European Commission, 1999). The idea referred to a concerted action aimed at correcting identified territorial disparities. The European Commission's view is that the goal of territorial cohesion is to provide support for a more harmonious development, by reducing disparities between regions, preventing territorial imbalances and achieving an increased coherence between the regional and the sectoral policies that have a territorial impact. The concept was defined by the Assembly of European Regions, as the harmonious development of the regions, in synergy with each other, having joint objectives and priorities, by implementing strategies with instruments and means of action tailored to their territorial capital, offering all Europeans equal access to services and opportunities (European Union, 2008; Böhme, et al, 2011). The innovations brought by the cohesion policy about for the 2007-2013 period, compared to the previous period (2000-2006), consisted in a more strategic approach, an increased confidence in the member states, and regulations simplifying the cohesion policy (European Union, 2007; European Union, 2008).

Cross-border co-operation (CBC) is a phenomenon that has raised great interest in the past 30 years in different fields of activity: geography, history, economics, international relations, politics etc. The topic of CBC was approached both theoretically and practically, from multiple perspectives. Perkmann (2003: 159) believes that there are three important dimensions in analysing cross-border regions: geography, the intensity of cooperation between regions, and the type of actors involved in cooperation. According to Perkmann, these three dimensions are sufficient to build a CBC region.

Historically, European territorial cooperation started off back in the '50s. In that time, at the initiative of public and private institutions, CBC activities were organized, especially in the Rhine region. Since 1990, the first structures of cross-border cooperation were created at the external borders of the European Union, and financial assistance had been enabled through a long line of cooperation programmes: cross-border, transnational and interregional (PHARE, CADCES, ENPI, MEDA, INTERREG, TACIS, CARDS) (AEBR, 2000).

3. Romania, euroregions and cross-border cooperation

Romania is partner in thirteen border cooperation, i.e.: "Carpathian/Carpatica" Euroregion, "Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza" (DKMT) Euroregion, "Lower Danube" Euroregion, "Upper Prut" Euroregion, "Danube South" Euroregion, Euroregion Rousse-Giurgiu, "Danube 21" Euroregion, Euroregion Danube East, "Danubius" Euroregion, "Siret-Prut-Nistru" Euroregion, „Dunărea de Mijloc – Porțile de Fier” Euroregion, Bihor – Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion, Black Sea Euroregion. According to Gasparini and Del Bianco (2011), Deica (2006) or Badulescu

et al. (2013, 2015), each border area is defined by specific features: physical, geographical, economic, institutional and socio-cultural (see Table 1).

Table 1: Administrative and demographic features of Romania's border areas and the propensity to cross-border cooperation

The cross-border area	Border length (km)	Population	Economic development factors	Socio-cultural factors	Institutional level
Romania – Hungary	450	4,024,000	High	High	Medium-high
Romania – Moldova	450	4,119,000	Low	Medium	Low
Romania – Serbia	476	2,980,000	High	High	Medium-low
Romania – Bulgaria	608	4,695,000	Medium-low	Medium	Medium
Romania – Ukraine	618	4,089,000	Medium-low	Medium	Low

Source: Gasparini and Del Bianco (2011), Deica P. (2006) and Badulescu et al. (2015)

Thus, the Romania-Hungary border area seems to be, in many aspects, the area best prepared for the development and expanding CBC programs (Badulescu et al, 2015); it belongs to two EU Member States, and therefore it is susceptible to be financially and organizationally supported by European CBC actions (see also Table 2).

Table 2: The level of readiness and organization of local and national actors planning and coordination of the cross-border cooperation

The cross-border area	The readiness of local actors	Coordination between different local or national administrative structures	Coordination between local administrative structures and socio-cultural partners	Coordination between central governments
Romania - Hungary	Medium	Medium-high	Medium-high	Low
Romania - Moldova	Low	Low	Medium-low	Low
Romania - Serbia	Medium-low	Medium-low	Medium-low	Medium-high
Romania - Bulgaria	Medium	Medium-low	Medium	Medium-low
Romania - Ukraine	Low	Low	Medium-low	Low

Source: Gasparini and Del Bianco (2011) and Badulescu et al (2015)

Beyond cooperation in the above mentioned euroregion, the border area between Romania and Hungary has received significant attention from CBC funds managed at EU level.

4. The Hungary-Romania cross-border cooperation: a brief history

Cross-border cooperation started off in Romania in 1996, when a pilot programme of cooperation with Hungary was implemented. After a two-year break (1997 and 1998), the cross-border cooperation programme was resumed in 1999, and continued uninterruptedly ever since, both on the border with Hungary and the border with Bulgaria. In 2003, the implementation of PHARE CBC EBI, a cooperation programme between Romania and Serbia and Montenegro began. Since the 2004 - 2006 programming period, Romania has implemented joint PHARE CBC programs with Hungary, Bulgaria, Moldova, Serbia and Montenegro, and Ukraine.

The PHARE CBC programme between Romania and Hungary started off in 1999, when the European Commission extended its programme - for the first time in its history - to a

border region between two candidate countries. The experimental programme proved to be successful, thus, between 1996 and 2003, a total of 34 million euros were allocated from EU PHARE CBC funds for projects on the Hungarian side, and 28 million for the Romanian side (Regional Office for Cross-border Cooperation for Romanian-Hungarian Border BRECO, 2015).

In this period, two main types of projects were supported: a) large scale physical infrastructure projects, and b) small projects that included a wide variety of people-to-people actions. The PHARE CBC programmes played an important role in establishing key facilities in the border area, including the modernization of border crossings and roads, business infrastructure development projects, environment protection (especially water management). Thus, the initial PHARE CBC programmes have succeeded in laying the foundations and improving the primary conditions for long-term collaboration.

The next stage of cooperation regarded the implementation of HU-RO Cross-Border Cooperation (Trilateral) Programme for 2004-2006. The program had a budget of nearly 32 million euros for Hungary (INTERREG) and nearly 20 million for Romania (PHARE CBC), including national co-financing (BRECO, 2015).

Since 2007, both Romania and Hungary, as member states of the European Union, receive financial support for development through structural funds. At community level, these funds pursue three objectives: convergence, regional competitiveness and employment, as well as European territorial cooperation. A series of operational programs were developed under the "European territorial cooperation" objective, which were financed through structural funds. These operational programs aim at giving a unitary response, based on partnership, to common situations or problems faced by participating countries.

Regarding the 2007-2013 period, a few major new elements were introduced within the Hungary - Romania 2007-2013 CBC Operational Programme, such as: the financing instrument became a structural fund – the European Regional Development Fund; cooperation was possible within one of the EU objectives, i.e. "European Territorial Cooperation"; the Romanian - Hungarian border became an internal EU border, while only the implementation of joint projects was permitted, on a "lead partner" basis.

The overall objective of HU-RO CBC 2007-2013 remained unchanged: tightening contacts among communities, economic factors, people from the border area belonging to the two neighbouring countries, aiming at facilitating the common development of the border area, while making the most out of the area's comparative advantages to the benefit of both countries. The strategy for 2007-2013 was built on two priority axes: Priority 1: Improve the key conditions of joint, sustainable development of the cooperation area and Priority 2: Strengthen social and economic cohesion of the border area. Then, they were broken down to key areas of intervention and actions.

The eligible beneficiaries that could access the programme were: national, regional or local legal entities, which implement policies in the specific fields of the programme, local authorities and their various subordinated units, associations or development agencies, research institutes and universities, chambers of commerce, NGOs etc.

The programme is a complex one, focused on promoting cooperation in the main common tasks from the border area, in the economic sector, in public services and in risk prevention and disaster management. The promotion of cooperation between institutions is a very significant element of the new program. It will be seen that the cumbersome cooperation between the Hungarian and Romanian organisations is considered as one of the greatest problems in the Hungarian - Romanian Cross-Border Partnership (Hoffman, 2015). Romanian - Hungarian CBC has the advantage of capitalizing and continuing the logical trend of strengthening cross-border cooperation, given the historical traditions and the presence of a significant Hungarian minority in the Romanian counties. However, the particular nature of this program is not based on developing the ethnic dimension, thus, the

highly inter-ethnic character of the partnerships should be a prerequisite for ensuring sustainable cooperation in the region.

5. Research insights concerning the use of funding, based on projects' indicators and results

As mentioned, we are addressing a key issue of Romanian - Hungarian cross-border cooperation, namely the effectiveness of spending the cross-border funds allocated through the HU-RO 2007-2013 cross-border programme. Our research is based on an extended analysis of the utilization of funds within the mentioned CBC programme, by using the data available from the Regional Office for HU-RO CBC (BRECO), which was gathered until the end of 2015.

For a better understanding of the context and methodology of the research, some clarifications ought to be made. First, the analysis was mainly conducted on Romanian beneficiaries, without making a thorough ex-post assessment. Secondly, although the program is generically named the 2007-2013 programme, the actual start of the call for proposals began in 2009, followed by the evaluation and implementation of projects. The first payments within the programme were made in 2008, but they consisted in advances for technical assistance (TA) projects. TA projects rely on funds allocated by the European Commission for the operation of all structures involved in Programme activities: programming, evaluation, contracting, implementation, monitoring, control and management. Following this timeframe logic, the program will be ending in 2015, benefiting from the $n+3$ rule, proposed by the European Commission for those countries that fail to finish their projects within the originally proposed timeframe (European Commission, 2013). There are a number of projects, mostly infrastructure projects, which have extended their implementation period until 2015.

There are 455 projects in the CBC HU-RO 2007-2013, out of which 410 were completed (reimbursed), 40 completed their implementation while their final reporting is in progress, and 5 projects are not yet completed. Overall, a total of 1,176 applications were registered, out of which 528 are actual beneficiaries.

Depending on the priorities and the areas and fields of intervention within they were implemented, the projects can be structured as follows (Table 3):

Table 3: The number and value of projects financed by the measures and areas of deployment

Measures and areas	Number of projects	Projects value (mil. euros)
People to people co-operation	53	5.5
Road infrastructure	46	69.6
Communications	37	10.2
Environment	72	39.9
Businesses	46	24.2
Tourism	29	2.4
Research & Development	75	21.2
Labour and education	60	7.4
Health	37	27.8
Total	455	208.2

Source: authors' calculation based on BRECO database

Thus, it can be noticed that - in terms of number of projects - environmental, research and development, employment and education projects dominate (from 16% to 12%) and, in

terms of funding, the largest share (over 33% of the total) was granted to infrastructure projects (a chronic problem of the cross-border region, especially on Romanian side), followed by environmental, research and development projects (between 10% and 12%) at a considerable distance.

According to data available up to present, there were 5 calls for projects within the HU-RO CBC (coded HURO 0801, HURO 0802, HURO 0901, HURO 1001, HURO 1101). These calls for proposals were launched gradually, depending on the area of intervention and priorities. Table 4 shows the situation of the available, requested and, respectively, contracted amounts within the five calls for proposals:

Table 4: Calls for proposals under the HU-RO 2007-2013 program (mil. euros)

Project code	Launched projects	Requested amounts	Signed projects
801	17	31	13
901	21	50	16
802	105	233	98
1001	21	60	18
1101	51	248	75

Source: authors' calculation based on BRECO database

The explanation for the unusually high value of the amounts requested (but also launched and contracted) in the HURO 0802 and HURO 1101 calls for proposals is that the two calls for projects were related to the infrastructure priority axes.

The amounts requested as financial support in the first round of applications exceeded the available funds by 2.5 times, in average. This clearly demonstrates that there is a high demand for financing interventions aimed at enhancing cross-border cooperation, although the actual rate seems obviously higher than the optimal rate. In order to achieve a more reasonable relationship between requests and approvals, an increased focus on goals and a clearer definition of eligible activities is needed. Moreover, the improvement of actions which generate projects, a better understanding of the eligibility criteria and a more precise definition of the need for support from potential beneficiaries should also be taken into account.

Each implemented project has to fulfil a set of indicators, which, in turn, refer to the set of indicators set at Cooperation Programme level. In this way, the level of fulfilment of the priorities that have been funded through this program can be assessed.

Individual and general analyses at project level, based on the centralized data provided by the HU-RO CBC databases, show that, at the end of 2015, there is a good degree of compliance in assumed indicators within the Romania - Hungary CBC Programme (Table 5):

As revealed by data in the table below, most of the Program's indicators were reached at the time of this analysis (end of the year 2015). Expectations at the end of last year of implementation (2016) show that other indicators will also reach the 100% degree of fulfilment, while some of the indicators will unfortunately not be reached. Overall, it can be considered that the Programme has achieved its main objective, namely to bring together the various actors from both sides of the border and to achieve economic growth at regional level.

Table 5: Indicators' achievement on HU-RO CBC Program 2007-2013

Priority Axis	Indicator	Unit	Target value	Achievement at the end of 2015 (%)	Anticipated achievement at the end of 2016 (%)
1	Improved cross-border accessibility	people	1,000,000	15	66
	Improved environmental situation	ha	500,000	100	100
	Improved cross-border communication	people	150,000	100	100
	Joint environment and nature protection	projects	81	70	89
	Reducing isolation (transport)	projects	22	55	91
	Reducing isolation (ICT network)	projects	57	58	61
1.2	Degree of co-operation - joint development	projects	400	99	100
	Degree of co-operation - joint implementation	projects	350	100	100
	Degree of co-operation - joint staffing	projects	250	100	100
	Degree of co-operation - joint financing	projects	200	100	100
	Joint use of infrastructure	projects	210	100	100
2	Level of business cooperation	businesses	800	100	100
	Joint research results	results	30	100	100
	Increase of visitors	visitors	30%	30	30
	Participation in joint education (women)	people	400	100	100
	Participation in joint education (men)	people	300	100	100
	Participation in joint education (joint participation)	people	70	100	100
	Level of people to people co-operation	people	2,500,000	100	100
	Joint RTD activity	projects	48	100	100
	Cross-border business cooperation	projects	80	51	58
	Tourism co-operation	projects	26	81	100
	Joint education and training	projects	50	100	100
	People to people actions	events	65	100	100

Source: authors' calculation based on BRECO database and Programme Joint Secretariat VATI (2015).

Largely, the final results of the HU-RO CBC Programme can be summarized as follows:

- In the area of road infrastructure: 48.1 kilometres of new roads, 79.4 km of upgraded roads, 155.9 km cycle paths;
- In the area of environmental infrastructure: 30,000 km² with an improved environmental situation;

- In the area of business infrastructure: 29,922 m² of constructions were created to make the business environment more dynamic;
- In tourism: 131 tourist attractions developed / modernized;
- In research and development: 25 new research centres, 236 studies developed, 19,300 participants who took part in joint trainings or employed the newly created infrastructure ;
- In healthcare services: 37 medical centres were developed / modernized;
- In People to People projects: 525 joint events were organized, with 156,900 participants.

From a financial perspective, the amounts were distributed on the Priority Axes of the Program (and also on the necessary Technical Assistance) according to data presented in Table 6, showed below:

Table 6: Distribution of the amounts within HU-RO CBC program, by priority axes

Priority axes	ERDF contribution (mil. euros)	National co-financing (mil. euros)	Total financing (mil. euros)	ERDF share in total financing (%)
1: Improve the key conditions of joint, sustainable development of the cooperation area	114.48	20.20	134.68	85.00%
2: Strengthen social and economic cohesion of the border area (Cooperation in the fields of business, RTD, education, labour market, health care and risk management)	96.52	17.03	113.56	85.00%
3: Technical assistance (TA)	13.47	13.47	26.94	50,00%
Total	224.47	50.70	275.18	100.00%

Source: authors' calculation based on BRECO database.

Note: EDRF – European Regional Development Fund

In terms of payments made within the Program, there is an upward evolution, with two maximal levels reached in 2013 and 2014. From the total sum of 211,006,439 euros contracted through European funds, both countries have accessed almost equal amounts: Romanian beneficiaries contracted amounts with a total value of 104,249,803.75 euros, while Hungarian partners, 106,756,635.25 euros (HU-RO CBC Programme 2007-2013, 2015).

Thus, starting from the amounts allocated for each call for proposals, and linking the payments within the program with the data available on the 2007-2013 HU-RO CBC Programme official website, an absorption rate around 86.16% (out of which 88.01% actually implemented projects and 57.16% TA projects), until November 2015, can be reported. Until the closing of the programme (in 2016), the absorption rate is predicted to reach around 96% (Table 7).

Table 7: Estimated absorption rate until completion (2016) in the implementation of HU-RO CBC Programme 2007-2013 implementation (mil. euros)

Projects	Disbursed amounts (mil. euros)	Amounts to be requested (mil. euros)	Total (mil. euros)	Estimated final absorption rate (%)
Implemented projects (455)	185.70	21.60	207.30	98.25%
Technical assistance projects	7.70	1.10	8.80	65.33
Total	193.40	22.70	216.10	96.27

Source: authors' calculation based on BRECO and HU-RO CBC 2007-2014 Program database.

Based on the data presented, and correlated with the data of the 2007-2013 HU-RO CBC Programme provided by BRECO, on 30 November 2015, the use of funds was 50.46% in Hungary and 49.56% in Romania (BRECO, 2015 and HU-RO CBC 2007-2015). In evolution, it can be noticed that Romania has recovered much of the gap which existed in the early years of the CBC Programs 2004-2006, respectively 2007-2013, even if, overall, the two countries were unable to access a significant percentage of allocated funds.

The situation of the funds absorption at Romanian partner level, in December 2015, according to calculations based on BRECO data, reveals a percentage of 78.81%, compared to 94.8% in the partner country, Hungary (BRECO, 2015) and (HU-RO CBC 2007-2015). This indicator was calculated for each country separately, depending on the number of projects or existing partners on both sides of the border. It should be noted that there was an equal distribution of the budget to project leaders and partners, which leads us to consider that the absorption between the two countries is a rather good indicator of the real situation.

All data presented in this analysis regarding reaching result indicators as well as the existing absorption at both program and partner level in each country, lead to the conclusion that the 2007-2013 HU-RO CBC was overall a successful program, and the use of funds was made so that its primary objective - strengthening economic cohesion between the two countries in the border area - was fully achieved. Consequently, it can be concluded that the principle of the program, i.e. "Two Countries, one goal, joint success!", was really fulfilled.

6. Conclusions and further recommendations

In the first part of the cross-border cooperation, the use of EU funds was influenced by the fact that each country applied different programs and procedures at the same time: INTERREG in Hungary and PHARE CBC in Romania. As a result, there were serious difficulties and delays in implementation, testifying that an effective implementation is conditioned by the existence and application of common procedures.

Overall, it appears that the evaluation and selection of projects were well-founded, as long as projects were successfully carried out and the assumed indicators were met. However, in some cases, the definition of the evaluation criteria was not clear enough, which led to difficulties and misunderstandings. Consequently, for future stages of cross-border cooperation it is of utmost importance to better define evaluation criteria and to prepare evaluators, as well as to differentiate selection procedures by the specific interventions which will be implemented.

The long duration of the programming and contracting process, together with other delays in implementation have reduced, in some cases, reaching the assistance objectives and impact and sustainability goals. Therefore, it seems to be necessary to apply stricter criteria to justify the viability of projects, to better understand the critical process of contracting and implementation, to make deadlines for document processing stricter, to improve communication between the beneficiary, the implementing agencies and national authorities, and to encourage beneficiaries to predict the future steps by preparing the conditions and documents from the earliest stages.

Another weakness revealed by the analysis was that the implementation indicators, where they existed, have not been used properly in the management of investments. For example, cost-efficiency indicators should have been used to assist investment, by defining them before approving assistance on infrastructure and, implicitly, by their monitoring after project completion. Measuring success only by the fact that the project has been completed is not an appropriate indicator for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of spending the EU and national funds.

The existence of a stable and consistent regulatory system and of a strict set of procedures applicable in the implementation and reporting process are of major importance. During the implementation of the HU-RO CBC program, important laws were changed (such as legislation on public procurement in Romania) which dramatically affected the implementation process. It was found that, while material and financial resources are, in most cases, appropriate, more sensitive problems have emerged in human resources, which were often insufficient and in many cases, partially qualified for implementing European projects. In this regard, the recommendations and conditions that may be required for future calls for proposals aim to improve assistance: the project team must include at least one project manager / coordinator, one financial manager and a sufficient number of technically qualified personnel; all members of the management team should be carefully evaluated when assessing the project, based on requirements; increased attention should be given to correlating management, legislation, the financial and technical dimensions with staffing and time constraints of the project.

The impact of CBC is not an abstract concept, it can be measured both quantitatively (though the number of partnerships at institutional level, the number of kilometres of new or rehabilitated infrastructure, of new publications or the number of participants at cross-border events) and qualitatively. As a final conclusion, the quality overall of the projects selected and implemented both in Romania and in Hungary has improved significantly in the last years, as shown by the high rate of absorbing funds at program level, which is estimated to reach about 96% at the end of 2016. On the long run, however, the assessment on the quality of projects submitted and selected for funding has to be completed with the sustainability and cross-border impact of these projects.

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