

ROMANIAN-HUNGARIAN CROSS BORDER COOPERATION AND THE IMPACT ON TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTION BUILDING AND EU FUND ABSORPTION

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Abstract. *The border region is the collision point of cultures, religions, languages, administrations, legislations and economic influences. All these factors have substantial contribution to the development of the phenomenon called cross-border cooperation.*

The issue of cross-border cooperation in general goes beyond geographical, economic and legal approaches. If we intend to treat the phenomenon from a specific point of view, we will find ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the role and functioning of some institutions in the process of cross-border cooperation and partnerships. In the process of EU-integration the Hungarian-Romanian state border is becoming even more permeable.

The growing permeability of the European borders contributes to the unification of the economic potentials of the neighbouring areas supplying benefits on regional and local level. The efficiency of cross-border cooperation depends on the coordination of all actors involved in this process, but also on the cooperation implemented at all levels, doubled by the existence of an adequate legal framework.

The study aims to realize an inventory of the cooperation activities with had an impact on transnational institution building amongst the local governance apparatus in Bihor County in the process of cross-border cooperation in the development period 2014-2020.

Keywords: *cross border, region, cooperation, governance, European*

Several times during the last century in Europe, state borders became real insurmountable barriers not only for enemies, but also for their own citizens. This character of the borders created rather the role of elements that prevented the emergence of common activities and values. Although from a strategic point of view, strictly from the perspective of border regions, they were directly interested in developing a strategy based on cooperation with neighboring regions. Nevertheless, the specificity of Europe is given not only by the diversity of cultural and historical realities, but also by the existence of numerous borders between states (Ricq, 2000: 8-15).

The Romanian-Hungarian border, drawn at the end of the peace process that followed the First World War, constituted from the beginning, and continues to this day, a controversial subject in the historical research of the two neighboring countries.

The frontier has gone through allot of changes in terms of understanding the space of a culture, race, religion, city or nation. Growing from physical walls, intense militarized areas to a formal understanding of regions with no physical boundaries or restrictions of any kind, the frontier or the border, has been an area of the utmost importance to the

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different branches of science. The border region is the collision point of cultures, religions, languages, administrations, legislations and economic influences. All these factors have substantial contribution to the development of the phenomenon called cross-border cooperation. The hard frontier, which in the view of the European institutions would ensure the protection of its citizens, has thus become primarily the responsibility of the new members of the European Union (Bărbulescu, Brie, Toderas, 2016: 22-26). Nowadays almost a third of EU citizens live and work in Europe's border regions. The management and perception of these borders have both a direct and an indirect impact on their lives. People living in border regions often face specific challenges, either in finding a job or having access to healthcare and other public services, or in terms of daily commuting and overcoming administrative problems (European Committee of the Regions, 2021: 3/11).

Cooperation processes from border regions nowadays are considered as a separate transnational policy field. It is because its constitutive characteristics and functionalities in addition to its property as a sub-system of national and regional governance are more and more also determined by the European level. If we check the European integration process implemented in the past 20 years, we can observe that cross border cooperation and cross border governance became an important objective of European Policies (Beck 2011:2).

In the process of EU-integration the Hungarian-Romanian state border is becoming even more permeable as well. Despite the fact, that Romania is not member of the Schengen Agreement, crossing the borderline between the two neighbouring countries is much easier than a few years earlier. The growing permeability of the European borders contributes to the unification of the economic potentials of the neighbouring areas supplying benefits on regional and local level.

Even if Hungary joined the European Union on 1 May 2004 and Romania on 1 January 2007, by the common European destiny of the two states, they are obliged to achieve a strengthened partnership focused on increasing their welfare and harmonious economic development (Popoviciu, 2013:25-27).

The border between Romania and Hungary has a total length of 448 km, of which 415.9 km land and 32.1 km river, the Mures, Cris, Someş rivers (National Institute of Statistics, 2011;11). On the Romanian side there are four counties, Satu Mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiș, and on the Hungarian side there are Szabolcs-Szatmár Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád. All the 8 counties are classified as NUTS III and are integrated in 4 regions of level NUTS II¹. The Romanian Hungarian Border covers the South-Eastern and Eastern part of Hungary and the North-Western and Western part of Romania. The eight counties have a total surface of 50,454 km², of which 43.7% Hungarian and 56.3% Romanian area. The Hungarian territory is 23.7% of the total surface of Hungary, and the Romanian part is 11.9% of Romania. The total population in 2004 was more than 4 million, of which slightly less than half lives in Hungary, and slightly more than half lives in Romania (HURO-CBC Programme, 2022).

¹ The counties Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Hajdú-Bihar belong to Észak-Alföld Region; the counties Békés and Csongrád are part of Dél-Alföld Region; counties Arad and Timiș belong to West Region; counties Satu Mare and Bihor are part of the North-West Region. For further details it can be seen Eurostat, Regions in the European Union, Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics, NUTS 2006 /EU-27, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-RA-07-020/EN/KS-RA-07-020-EN.PDF, accessed in December 19, 2022



Map no. 1: The eligible area of the Romanian-Hungarian Cross Border Cooperation Programme

Source: <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/eligible-area/>

Cross-border cooperation. Conceptual and legal background

European cross-border cooperation aims to approach challenges, which are jointly identified and solved in border regions. Also, it proposes to exploit untapped growth potential of border areas, through the cooperation process, for a harmonious development of the whole European Union.

Cross-border cooperation agreements and partnerships have recently become increasingly important in the context of the European Union's cooperation policies for Member States or for the European Neighborhood Policy.

Cross-border cooperation can be defined in relation with direct collaboration between neighboring regions, found along a border, regardless of the level at which this partnership is achieved.

Cooperation can be achieved in all areas, between all national, regional and local authorities, involving all actors. Moreover, in the European Treaties the need to ensure a harmonious development, reducing the development gap between different European regions or states it is described as a priority.

Regional and cross-border cooperation operates with the principle of subsidiarity, of "reallocation of authority" from the state level to the administrative-territorial units situated in the border areas having the main goal to balance regional imbalances. Thus, cross-border cooperation agreements are a way to promote good neighborliness, stimulate balanced economic development and social stability by capitalizing on local and regional resources in joint projects (Dicharry, Hamm, 2019:3-5).

The efficiency, reliability, authenticity and legitimacy of the European construction process and of the European integration process is also linked to the success of cross-border cooperation.

The basic principle of cross-border cooperation is the creation of a contractual space in border areas in order to find common solutions to similar problems. It is important that state entities must not ignore the needs of their peripheral communities, the particularity and specificity of the neighborhood problems (Ricq, 2000: 19-23).

Cross-border cooperation is like a classic type of mutual cooperation between two neighboring border regions. It involves states, regions, administrative units at different levels and social groups, covering all areas of daily life and participating in the development of common programs, priorities and actions. Usually cross-border cooperation is favored by the cultural, ethno-linguistic and the historical heritage of the area, and by the presence of the national minorities. For example, we can mention the Hungarian community from Romania, the common ethno-linguistic heritage of the population, are favorable elements in the process of cross-border cooperation.

It should also be noted that cross-border cooperation between administrative-territorial units from Romania's border areas depended and depends on the degree of openness allowed by the political regime, the standard of living and the cultural, historical and ethnic affinities of the neighboring countries.

Over the time, cooperation at the European borders passed through a process of change from the perspective of the European policies. For the internal borders of the EU the Cohesion Policy was developed and for the external borders, the European Neighborhood Policy was responsible (Bărbulescu, 2015:305-310). The Cohesion Policy was meant to reduce the gaps between the more developed and less developed regions from the Member States. While the European Neighborhood Policy it is supposed to bring a new approach to the relations between the European Union and its neighbors. These relations should be better and superior to the traditional relations, based on simple cooperation (Bărbulescu, 2015:311-320).

Cross-border cooperation in Europe is getting more and more important. The disappearance of most of the internal borders and the creation of the European internal market pushed the European border regions to a central role in the European integration process (Wassenber/Beck, 2011:7-8).

The efficiency of cross-border cooperation depends on the coordination of all actors involved in this process, but also on the cooperation implemented at all levels, doubled by the existence of an adequate legal framework. Malfunction at one of the levels can lead to the failure of the whole process.

Analyzing the specialty literature, we can find several descriptions and explanations about the functional task-focus, practical cross-border cooperation approaches in Europe. We choose the explanation of Prof. Beck, who explains that these are covering a wide range of material fields of action. Depending on the respective territorial context, these cover classical fields of regional development, such as spatial - and urban development planning, economic development, research and development, transport etc., specific approaches of cooperation in sectoral policy areas health, social security, education and training, science and research, environment, conservation and tourism, etc. or areas of public services of general interest (Beck, 2017:3-4)

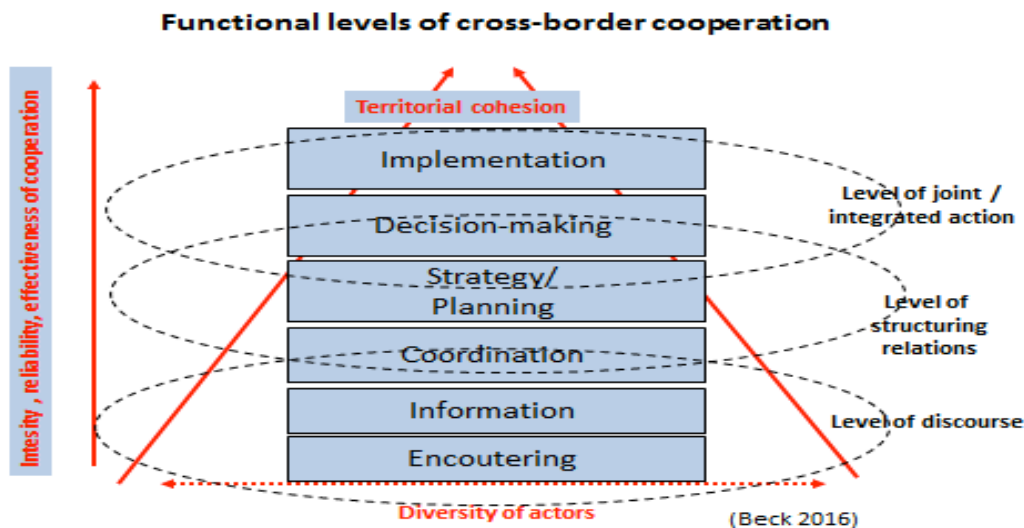


Figure 1. *Functional levels of cross-border cooperation*

Source: Joachim Beck, Cross-border cooperation and the challenge of transnational institution-building – the example of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, in RECERC no.1 Spécial, 2017, p. 3, available at <http://recerc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/R9beck.pdf>

Therefore, cross-border cooperation is no longer the strict prerogative of the member states as international actors. An important role in this process is attributed to the local and regional administrative structures from the border areas. These structures can create development associations or transnational corporations which are able to answer the specific challenges and these can promote a proper economic and political environment (Săraaru, 2011:88).

To realize a successful cross-border partnership, it is necessary to find the right partner on the other side of the border and to cooperate with it on an equal basis. Also, it is important that cooperation must respect the interests of each party involved. The European Union encourages and stimulates the development of partnerships for cross-border cooperation (Polgár, 2021: 393-395).

In Europe the reality shows that the cross-border cooperation process is dominated by public actors, private actors or societal actors are so present. This can be understandable since cross border cooperation is considered as a public affair which is managed by state and local actors.

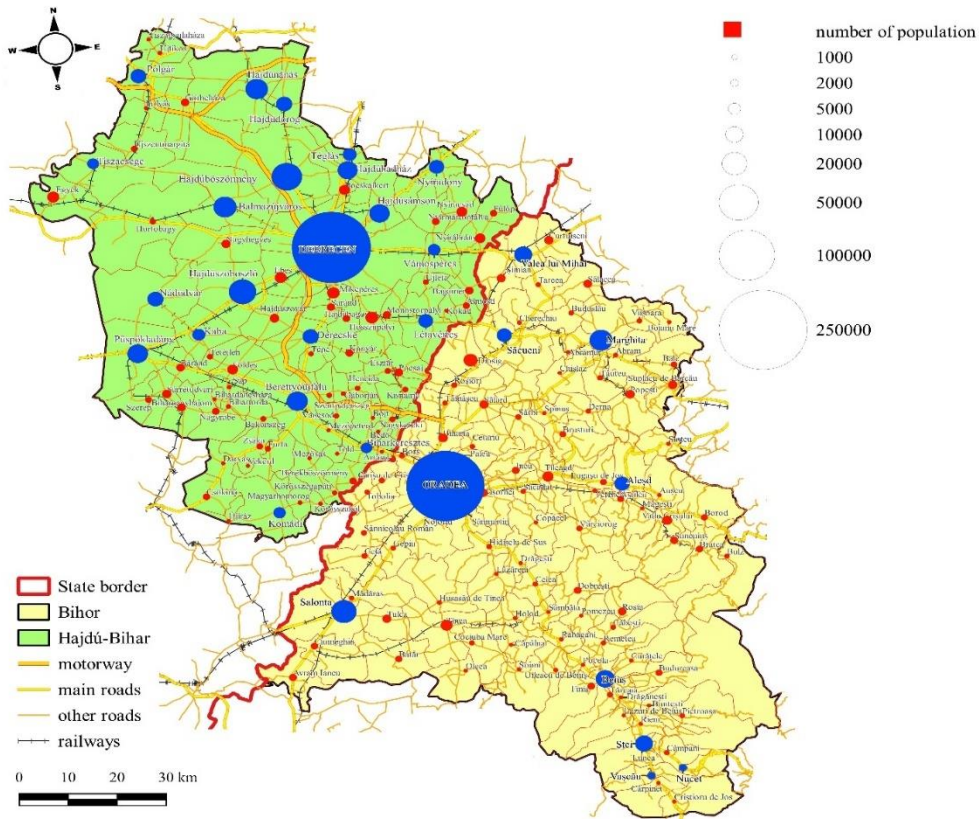
On the other hand, cross-border cooperation classically is focusing on policy-areas which are typically allocated to the core competence of public tasks in the participating countries: For the development of cross border approaches in policy-fields such as spatial planning, environmental protection, public transport, education, research and innovation, or the public safety and order, first of all public, and to a large extent even only State actors are responsible. In addition, cross border projects often require substantial financial investments in the form of national and regional financing (Beck, 2017:3-4).

At present, cross-border cooperation has proven to be the most effective tool for overcoming the barrier effect and the role of border separation and for strengthening the territorial cohesion of border regions.

Particularities and areas of cross-border cooperation in the field of territorial governance structures

Governance is today one of the central concepts being discussed in the practical and theoretical field of cross border cooperation too. However, the definition of the term governance is quite often not clear in its use. If we would like to define governance, first we should focus on a more generic definition. In this context governance refers simply to the different mechanisms which generate order within a given population of actors in a specific policy field (Mayntz 2009: 9). This definition is valid if it is focusing on a unilateral adaption, like a market, command and obedience which create the hierarchy, negotiation and functional interaction, what will create the networks or through a common orientation of behavior based on generalized practices of a society, which include the so-called norms and values (Beck, 2017:6-7).

The fall of communism brings into broad day light, for the first time in decades, the concept of diversifying the one 's offer and possibilities in obtaining the usual necessities. In the case of Bihor county (north-western part of Romania) and its neighbouring Hungarian county Hajdú-Bihar, the frontiers begin to lose their attribute as impenetrable and dangerous physical barriers towards a somewhat better living and a more liberal society (Brie, 2010:265-280).



Map no. 2. The border area and the Bihor - Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion

Source: Mircea Brie, Mirela Marcu, Polgar Istvan, *Ghid pentru Dezvoltarea Cooperarilor Internationale al Judetului Bihor*, Oradea, 2022, p. 31

In the 2014-2020 programming period, the INTERREG program made step forward from the status of a “mainstream program”, held in the previous programming period, in the

framework of the European structural policy. In this period, the program is characterized by a stronger thematic focus in programming as well as a more intensive impact orientation when choosing and implementing new cross-border projects (Beck, 2011:121-148).

If we analyze the objectives of the program from the functional task-focus point of view, we can observe that the practical cross-border cooperation approaches in Europe are focusing on a wide range of domains and fields of action. Depending on the respective territorial context, these cover classical fields of regional development, specific approaches of cooperation in sectorial policy areas or areas of public services of general interest (Beck, 2017: 8-9).

In the last 15 years, in Central and Eastern Europe there has been a significant development regarding the management of problem solving, which appear and target the cross-border cooperation areas.

Although there is an institutional framework at Community level, which is present in the Member States through different implemented EU policies and programs, the level and the forms of cooperation between territorial governance structures differ from state to state (D. Badulescu, A. Badulescu, Bucur, 2015: p. 559 – 578).

There are Member States that built and developed relations for a stable cross-border cooperation at institutional level. On the other side, there are states, which are still guided by a general skepticism regarding cross-border cooperation between territorial governance structures. Another factor, which makes cooperation difficult, is the lack of communication between the actors (Polgár, 2021: 398-400).

The cross-border cooperation process will generate significant and effective results only if the actors involved set common goals and allocate the necessary resources.

In the following, we propose a synthesis of all contracted projects by public institutions from Romania, Bihor County, from the eligibility area of the Romania-Hungary cross-border cooperation program, in the period 2014-2020. The source of the presented data is the web archive of the INTERREG, Romania-Hungary Cross border cooperation program and a research article published by the author in the Journal of Romanian Literary Studies nr. 25/2021.

Nr. crt.	eMS code	Project title	Acronym	Lead beneficiary	Partners	Total budget euro	Total ERDF euro
1.	ROHU68	Creating a joint tourist destination in the crossborder area of Lugașu de Jos and Komádi, through cross-border protection of natural heritage values along the Crișul Repede Valley	PRO-CRV	Comuna Lugașu de Jos	Komádi Városi Önkormányzat Asociația "Pro Valea Crișului Repede – Pro Sebes Koros Volgy"	904,905.47	769,169.64
2.	ROHU126	Nature preservation, protection and promotion on both sides of the Romainian-	PRONATURE	Consiliul Județean Bihor	Primaria Vadu Crișului Asociația Centrul pentru arii protejate și dezvoltare durabilă Bihor	2,500,000.00	2,125,000.00

Nr. crt.	eMS code	Project title	Acronym	Lead beneficiary	Partners	Total budget euro	Total ERDF euro
		Hungarian border			Kőrösszegapáti Nagyközségi Önkormányzat		
3.	ROHU48	Development of an integrated response capacity to cross-border emergency situations	DIRCCES	Town of Alesd	Sinteu Comune Szarvas Town Self Government	485,400.00	399,532.74
4.	ROHU14	Conservation, protection and promotion of the natural values from the Salonta-Békéscsaba crossborder area	The nature corner	Municipiul Salonta	Körösök Völgye Natúrpark Egyesület Asociația Milvus Transilvania Vest Békés Város Önkormányzata	2,997,387.86	2,547,779.68
5.	ROHU53	Conservation and protection of the cross border natural heritage of Bihor - Hajdú-Bihar counties	Na-Tu-Re	Comuna Sinmartin	Asociația Pescarilor Sportivi Aqua Crisius Fundatia pentru cultura si educatie ecologista Ecotop Zold Kor -a Fold Baratai Magyarország Tagja	2,835,216.60	2,409,934.10
6.	ROHU115	From One Bridge to another - De la un pod la altul – Hidtől hídig	FOBTA	Comuna Sălacea	Hortobágy Község Önkormányzata	1,611,547.26	1,369,815.16

Chart no. 1: List of contracted projects by Romanian territorial governance structures from Bihor County as Lead Partner, First Open Call - December 2019

Source: <https://interreg-rohu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Contracted-projects-12.12.2019.pdf>

Based on the information obtained from the Interreg RO-HU date base, after the first open call in December 2019 a total number of 21 projects were contracted. From the 21 contracted projects, there are 6 projects contracted as Lead Partner, by Romanian territorial governance structures from Bihor County.

Nr. crt.	eMS code	Project title	Acronym	Lead beneficiary	Partners	Total budget euro	Total ERDF euro
1.	ROHU179	Administrative bridge between towns in the Romania - Hungary cross border region	ABBTROHU	Orasul Alesd	Comuna Sinteu Orasul Marghita Szarvas Varos Onkormanyzata Szarvas Town Self-Government Berettyoujfalu Varos Onkormanyzata/Berettyoujfalu Town Self-Government	362,500.00	308,125.00

Nr. crt.	eMS code	Project title	Acronym	Lead beneficiary	Partners	Total budget euro	Total ERDF euro
2.	ROHU183	SAFE BORDER, SAFER LIFE SAFEBOR	SAFEBOR	Institutia Prefectului-judetul Bihor	Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Rendőrfőkapitányság/Hajdú-Bihar County police	287,904.85	244,719.12
					Inspectoratul Teritorial al Politiei de Frontiera Oradea		
					Inspectoratul de Politie Judetean Bihor		
3.	ROHU200	Crossborder events for crossborder citizens	CCC	Toboliu Commune	Körösnagyharsány Local Self Government	77,000.00	65,450.00
					Girisu de Cris Commune		
					Nojorid Commune		
4.	ROHU265	Let's Celebrate our Traditions Together	TOGETHER	COMUNA CETARIU	KABA Város Önkormányzat - KABA City Local Government	70,400.00	59,840.00
5.	ROHU271	The Minority Question in the ROHU crossborder area: Slovak Culture, Tradition and History without Borders	SCTH	Comuna Sinteu	Csabai Szlovákok Szervezete/Organization of Slovaks from Csaba	71,500.00	60,775.00
6.	ROHU280	Cultural Cooperation among Citizens from the Salonta-Gyula Cross-border Area Co-cultured	Co-cultured	The Municipality of Salonta	Gyula town	80,000.00	68,000.00
7.	ROHU283	Sustainable cross-border cooperation for citizens between Marghita and Berettyóújfalu municipalities	CCC_MB	Municipiul Marghita	Berettyó Cultural Center	80,000.00	68,000.00
8.	ROHU289	Connecting the traditions of the Crisul Repede Valley	CCRV	Comuna Vadu Crişului	Körösszegapáti Nagyközségi Önkormányzat - Körösszegapáti Local Government	79,999.00	67,999.15
9.	ROHU198	Open Doors for Culture and Tradition in Europe	ODCTEU	Town of Alesd	Kaba Town Self-Government	74,055.00	62,946.75
10.	ROHU319	Joint program for cross - border cooperation between young people	4 YOUTH	Paleu Commune	Hosszúpályi Commune	200,600.00	170,510.00
					Cetaiu Commune Kaba town		

Chart no. 2: List of contracted projects by Romanian territorial governance structures from Bihor County as Lead Partner, Second Open Call – March 2021

Source: <https://interreg-rohu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Signed-contracts-2nd-open-call-website-19.03.2021.pdf>

In the second open call a total of 37 projects were contracted. There was a number of 10 projects contracted as Lead Partner, by Romanian territorial governance structures from Bihor County.

Nr. crt.	eMS code	Project title	Acronym	Lead beneficiary	Partners	Total budget euro	Total ERDF euro
1.	ROHU425	Joint Development of Human Resources in CrossBorder AreaJoint Development of Human Resources in Cross-Border Area	HRArea UAT	UAT Comuna Paleu	Derecske Város Önkormányzata	1,337,577.8	1,136,941.13
					Asociatia Pro Cariere		
					Asociatia de Dezvoltare Intercomunitara Zona Metropolitana Oradea		
2.	ROHU-421	Improve employment in Bihor County, Oradea and Hajduboszormeny through the development of the local potential infrastructures	CBC-EMPLOYMENT	Municipality of Oradea	Development Agency of Bihor County	7,507,873.22	2,549,531.04
					Local Government of Hajduboszormeny City		
					County Agency for Employment Bihor		
3.	ROHU-426	Support to the local economy by encouraging alternative use of agricultural products	ALTERAGRI	Directia pentru Agricultura Judeteana Bihor	Asociatia „TRANSILVANIA TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER”	1,679,320.00	1,427,422.00
					Oficiul de Studii Pedologice si Agrochimice Bihor		
					Science for Environment Public Foundation		
4.	ROHU-359	Promoting an integrated approach regarding the improving of the employment rate and business environment at the level of Marghita and Beretyoujfalu microregions	CROSSLLOCALDEV	Marghita Municipality	Municipality of Berettyóújfalu	2,615,165.66	2,222,890.81

Chart no. 3: List of contracted projects by Romanian territorial governance structures from Bihor County as Lead Partner, Third Open Call – June 2021

Source: <https://interreg-rohu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Signed-contracts-Open-call-3-23.06.2021.pdf>

In the third open call a total of 31 projects were contracted. There was a number of 4 projects contracted as Lead Partner, by Romanian territorial governance structures from Bihor County.

Based on the data presented in the three charts, we can affirm that even though the number of territorial government structures present in the list of beneficiary/lead partners is

fluctuating, still these are playing a very important role in the implementation of the cross-border programs.

Conclusions

The border region is the collision point of cultures, religions, languages, administrations, legislations and economic influences. All these factors have substantial contribution to the development of the phenomenon called cross-border cooperation.

The issue of cross-border cooperation in general goes beyond geographical, economic and legal approaches. If we intend to treat the phenomenon from a specific point of view, we will find ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the role and functioning of some institutions in the process of cross-border cooperation and partnerships.

Therefore, the full analysis of the cross-border cooperation process cannot be done only if we also evaluate the effects produced by the institutions in the local governance sector and their political dimension.

At present, cross-border cooperation has proven to be the most effective tool for overcoming the barrier effect and the role of border separation and for strengthening the territorial cohesion of border regions.

Cross-border cooperation can be defined in relation with direct collaboration between neighboring regions, found along a border, regardless of the level at which this partnership is achieved. Cooperation can be achieved in all areas, between all national, regional and local authorities, involving all actors.

Cross-border cooperation is no longer the strict prerogative of the member states as international actors. An important role in this process is attributed to the local and regional administrative structures from the border areas. These structures can create development associations or transnational corporations which are able to answer the specific challenges and these can promote a proper economic and political environment.

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