

## LESSONS FROM ROMANIAN - HUNGARIAN CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION FOR EU MEMBERSHIP CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

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**Abstract.** *The European Union, through its policies, programmes and instruments specific to cross-border cooperation provides member and candidate states funding aimed at supporting neighbouring border areas to implement projects that, through their results, would help underdeveloped areas achieve results that would improve their economic and social status. All these results should help balance out the level of development of the various regions of the European Union, while also increasing their quality of life.*

*The Romania - Hungarian border is a rich source of good practice examples, covering three long budget funding time frames. Some of these showed remarkable results, reflected through improved social, economic, educational, infrastructural indicators, to name a few. Out of the projects implemented at the Romanian – Hungarian border, funded through the European Regional Development Fund, we are focusing on a small group of projects that stand out through representativity and impact within this geographical area.*

*The objective of this paper is to offer expertise in the field of cross-border cooperation projects, reflected through relevant examples of good practice and lessons learned. This should provide a useful source of ideas and practices to be implemented in the near future in relevant border areas.*

**Keywords:** *CBC, cross-border cooperation projects, lessons learned, EU candidacy*

### INTRODUCTION

European integration represents a complex and multidimensional process, that aims not only to harmonize the legislative and economic dimensions between the member states, but also to promote territorial and social cohesion at the level of the European Union (EU). In this context, cross-border cooperation serves as an essential strategic tool, helping balance out regional disparities and promoting sustainable development (Țoca et al., 2017a; Țoca et al., 2017b). The EU, through its history, has developed a series of specific mechanisms, that target national border areas, often characterized by lower levels of economic development, underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to public services. Cross-border cooperation is sustained by the EU mainly through the INTERREG programme, funded through the European Development Fund (ERDF) budget allocations. At the same time, the EU encourages direct partnerships between local authorities, public institutions, NGOs and the

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academic environment from neighbouring states, with the aim of generating joint projects that respond to local needs.

The Romanian - Hungarian border serves as a relevant example for the application of the principles of cross-border cooperation, through the mechanisms and funding of the European Union, manifested in various forms, such as through Euroregions or through the European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC). Some of the relevant Euroregions for this border area are the Carpathian Euroregion (Oltean et al., 2022) and the Dunăre-Mureș, Criș-Tisa and Bihor-Hajdu Bihar Euroregions (Țoca et al., 2021; Dogot, 2007, Chiriac et al., 2022). Relevant EGTCs for this border region are: the Bănăt – Triplex Confinium Limited Liability EGTC, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation “Gateway Europe” – limited liability (EGTC "Gateway Europe") (EGTC Gate to Europe Ltd.), European Common Future Building European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation with Limited Liability (European Common Future Building EGTC) and the European Border Cities European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Limited Liability (European Border Cities EGTC) (Țoca et al., 2012; Țoca, 2013).

Cross-border cooperation is a heavily studied topic, as the European Union already has a consistent history in developing policies to promote collaboration at multiple hierarchical levels, and cooperation programmes were created to enact these policies (Fogarasi, 2025). Cross-border cooperation at the Romanian – Hungarian border was also under the focus of academia, from various perspectives, however, the research efforts that focus on the results of CBC are limited.

The projects implemented through the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 emphasized certain internal or external weaknesses such as unclear evaluation criteria for the assumed indicators, legislation changes, unprepared project staff, nevertheless, the quality of the implemented projects increased (Feier et al., 2016), most probably due to previously acquired experience. On another note, cross-border cooperation is not necessarily identified as the main driver for the evolution of the two neighbouring border areas, with limited coordination and also limited involvement of minorities (Istenes-Benczi, 2024). Nevertheless, they are not fruitless, and their contribution is important.

There are papers that focus on the effects of CBC projects for very specific fields of intervention. In projects targeting rural tourism, the outcomes reflect a narrow approach, concentrating on individual attractions, without considering the integration into larger promotion strategies, which could have a limited effect in attracting foreign tourists, nevertheless, proving successful considering their resilience after the funding ended (Bădulescu et al., 2018: 202). There were also efforts that focused on the improvement of workforce competence, those the effects of such endeavours aren't observable in the short term, especially if funding is limited (Chirodea et al., 2013: 79).

These initiatives, based on European funds, have contributed to a common regional identity, to increased mobility, and to the consolidation of mutual trust between neighbouring communities, sitting on both sides of the Romanian - Hungarian border. Such initiatives can serve as examples, lessons, or models for EU candidate countries, in several aspects: efficient administrative organization, obtaining and managing EU funds, community involvement and sustainable partnerships. Furthermore, these lessons can also serve as bridges for dialogue and collaboration between member state and candidate country institutions, facilitating the transfer of expertise and accelerating the process of European integration.

The Romanian - Hungarian border serves as an appropriate case study due to its dynamism, making it one of the most relevant cross-border cooperation areas in Central and Eastern Europe from this perspective, but also due its position as a space where historic, cultural, economic, and geopolitical interests converge.

To be more specific, the aspects listed below justify our choice:

- As an area of transition between Central Europe and the Balkans, and due to the shifting role of this border area, between two former candidate countries, one candidate and one member country, and, finally, two member countries, the geographical position and its recent history, this area served as a perfect laboratory for testing the efficiency of European cohesion policies.

- The cooperation expertise was consolidated through several successive EU budgeting timeframes: 2004-2007, 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and 2021-2027 (Merce et al., 2025; Chirodea et al. 2022; Chirodea et al. 2021).

- The results of cross-border cooperation within the area are well documented through clear performance indicators and independent evaluations, available in public databases, and monitorization, visibility and dissemination reports.

- Cultural diversity with reconciliation potential: the border area is characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, composed of communities that learned to collaborate in a constructive and sustainable manner. Through this, cross-border cooperation contributed to reducing historic tensions and consolidating a common regional identity.

- Replicability for candidate countries represents one final argument in favour of this area, as partnership models, implementation mechanisms and community engagement strategies tested in this area in various cooperation instances can be adapted by current candidate countries.

To sum up, the main objective of this research is to contribute to the in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of cross-border cooperation in the context of the cohesion policies of the EU, by providing a valuable analytical and practical framework for EU candidate countries, with a focus on the Romanian-Hungarian border, with the purpose of identifying good practices, lessons learned and replicable models of cooperation, especially through the results of implemented projects.

To this end, our analysis focuses on two EU budget timeframes: 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. The main instrument for territorial cooperation is the European Regional Development Fund (Chirodea et al., 2022; Chirodea et al., 2021). Two programmes served this purpose at the Romanian Hungarian border: Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 (Țoca et al., 2016; Polgár et al. 2025: 191-202).

By analysing the outcomes of the projects developed in this timeframe at the Romanian-Hungarian border, we will uncover lessons for EU candidate countries, that will help in better coordinating future efforts targeted towards cross-border cooperation, an essential pillar of the cohesion policies of the EU, aiming to alleviate regional disparities, promote sustainable development and consolidate good neighbourhood between candidate and member states.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As already stated, our objective for this study is to gain meaningful insights from the experience of the Romanian - Hungarian border area in the development of

cross-border cooperation partnerships and the resulting projects. Our analysis relies on data regarding the outcomes of the projects implemented under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 programmes, funded through ERDF.

We relied on a mix method approach, including quantitative and qualitative methods. More specifically, the process implied collecting data regarding the results of all projects implemented under the specified programmes, extracting relevant information from this data through content analysis, and analysing the existing and extracted quantitative data.

The data was collected from the official websites of the two programmes (Results - Interreg). In the instance of the 2007-2013 cooperation programme, a short R script was used, which relies on the *rvest* and *tidyverse* libraries for gathering and cleaning up the collected data. In the case of the 2014-2020 cooperation programme, the data was available in spreadsheet format, so the cleanup process was performed in Microsoft Excel. General project related data, data related to project partners and project results were converted into csv files and were further processed in Python through Exploratory Data Analysis, to gain insights regarding the projects implemented in the two timeframes. Further, projects with large budgets were also analysed to gain further insights regarding their outcome.

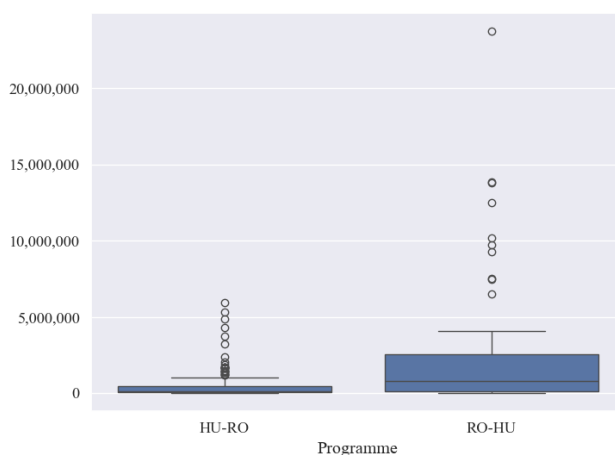
The geographical area covered by the two ERDF funded programmes includes four counties on each side of the Romanian - Hungarian border. They are: Satu mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiș on the Romanian side, and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád-Csanád on the Hungarian side.

Though institution building is extremely important in creating an environment which promotes collaboration in border areas, analysing the success of such objectives requires an overarching effort (Polgár, 2022: 11).

## **DATA ANALYSIS. DISCUSSION**

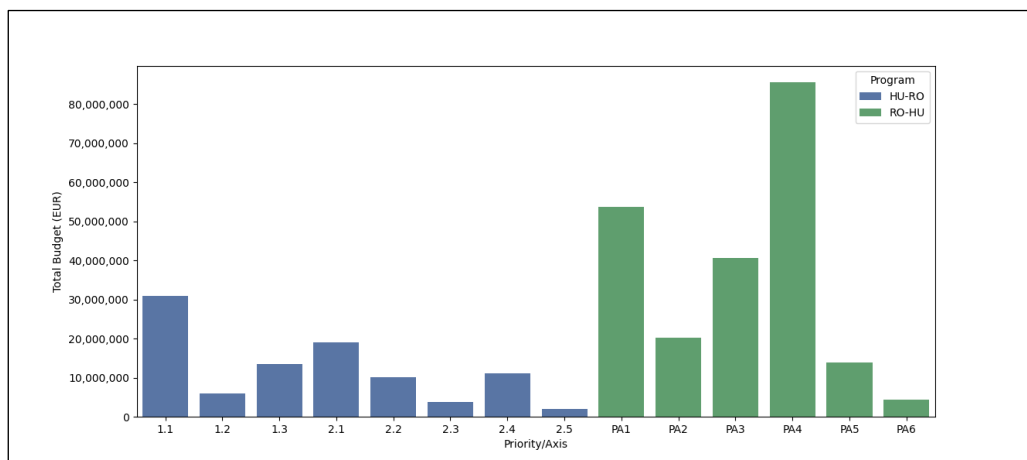
The total number of projects implemented through the two programmes included in this research is 301. Out of these projects, 193 were implemented in the first timeframe, under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013, and 108 in the second timeframe, under the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020. Even though significantly fewer projects were implemented in the second timeframe, the total budget allocated to these projects was more than double than the total budget allocated to the projects from the first timeframe. Consequently, individual projects received larger funding in the second time frame (Figure 1), which could be interpreted in various ways: more generous funding per project in the more recent programme, improved abilities of attracting and managing large budget projects, perhaps a more strategic distribution of efforts to implement cross-border cooperation projects, but it also means that there is less space for the implementation of smaller projects by actors that do not require large budgets.

**Figure 1.** Boxplot presenting the distribution of project budgets, by programme. (HU-RO: Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013, RO-HU: Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020) (Own elaboration based on data from [http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed\\_projects/](http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/) and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).



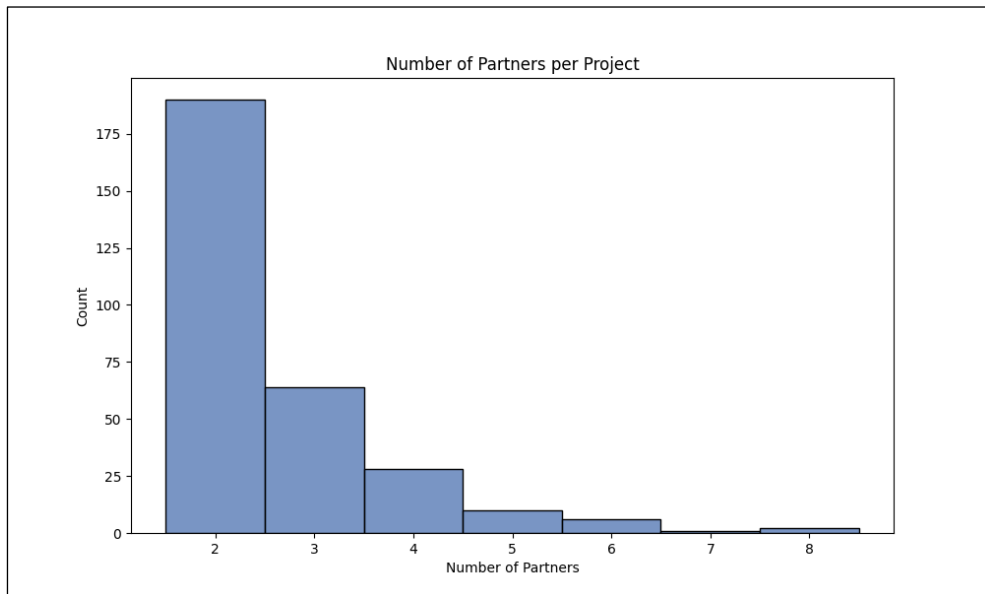
As shown in Figure 2 below, in the first timeframe, the largest budget went in the direction of transport infrastructure (1.1), followed by projects dedicated to cross-border cooperation in the business sector (2.1), environment protection (1.3) and health care (2.4). In the second timeframe, the projects targeting the improvement of health-care service totalled the largest budget by far, amounting to more than 80 million euro (PA4), followed by projects dedicated to the protection of common values and services (PA1) and by projects dedicated to improved employment and cross-border labour mobility (PA3).

**Figure 2.** Total budget allocation for projects implemented under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020, aggregated by Key Area of Intervention and Priority Axis, respectively (Own elaboration based on data from [http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed\\_projects/](http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/) and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).



More on the organizational side, the vast majority of projects were implemented by two or three partners, projects with large number of partners being the exception in most cases. In fact, there is a low positive correlation between the number of partners in a project and the allocated budget in each of the two timeframes (around 0.2 in both time frames), and a little higher for the entire data set, which includes the projects of both time frames, together (around 0.27).

**Figure 2.** Frequency of number of partners per project under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020 (Own elaboration based on data from [http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed\\_projects/](http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/) and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).



In the 2007-2013 cross-border cooperation programme, most participants and project leaders are public administration institutions, Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) and Non-governmental organizations. However, in the 2014-2020 cross-border cooperation programme, this classification changed to some extent. Thus, public administration institutions are still the most frequent participants and project leaders, by far. They are followed by NGOs, IDAs and public health institutions as the most frequent project members, and by IDAs, public health institutions and NGO as project leaders.

By analysing the outcomes of the projects, we have identified multiple fields of interventions they have touched. Even though the field of intervention is decided mainly by the Key Area of Intervention or Priority Axis, the outcomes may have a more diverse impact, and that is true for quite a few of the projects developed through the two programmes at the Romanian – Hungarian border. For each project, we have identified up to 3 fields of intervention. One important finding from this research is that a significant part of the projects had an educational component (more than half in the first timeframe and two thirds in the second timeframe), regardless of the implication of educational

institutions or not. This component is important from many points of view, whether we are talking about transfer of know-how in various fields such as the protection of the environment, healthcare, administration, combating unemployment by requalification, improving the employability of minority groups, enhancing the educational offer for the preuniversity and university students, amongst others.

Further insights regarding the results of cross-border cooperation projects, and the lessons they bring, are identified by analysing the results of selected projects, mainly those with the highest budgets.

### OUTCOMES OF INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS

Looking at the top three projects by budget in each programme, a few aspects become evident (Table 1). First, the individual sums by project are greater in the RO-HU programme (2014-2020), compared to the HU-RO programme (2007-2013), aspect revealed by the fact that more projects were financed in the first timeframe, even though the total budget by programme was larger in the second timeframe. Second, some of the biggest efforts went towards improving essential infrastructure in the second timeframe, while in the first one, they went more towards enhancing the economic, cultural and tourism sectors.

Even though the EU funds are available for various types of organizations, as we have seen, local public administration entities are, in most cases, leaders or members in cross-border cooperation projects. More specifically, 168 out of the 301 projects implemented in this time frame include at least one public administration entity amongst its members. The outcomes of the selected projects is also a reflection of the presence of public administration entities, as they are partners with strategic interests. This is reflected also by the outcomes of the projects we have analysed. Improving essential public services, developing the road infrastructure, developing industrial parks, promoting and enhancing tourist objectives and activities, are elements that are an integral part of the development strategies of territorial administrative units.

**Table 1.** Top three projects by budget, in each programme (Own elaboration based on data from [http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed\\_projects/](http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/) and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).

Project code	Fields of intervention	Target groups	Total budget (EUR)	Achieved, measurable indexes
ROHU-457	Public safety, risk management	Emergency services, public authorities, population in risk areas	23,746,994.18	- 2 centres of intervention for emergency situations built - 10 specialty vehicles acquired - 150 people trained in risk management
ROHU-444	Health, medical research	Medical personnel, researchers, patients, health institutions	13,836,221.00	- 1 medical research centre modernized - 3 laboratories equipped - 5 institutional partnerships created

ROHU-443	Road infrastructure, urban mobility	Inhabitants from cross-border areas, local authorities, carriers	13,813,965.84	- 2 border roads rehabilitated (over 20 km) - 1 new bridge built - 4 public transportation stations modernized
HURO/1101/037/1.1.1	Economic development, support for small and medium enterprises	Small and medium enterprises, Entrepreneurs, Local investors	5,949,018.33	- 1 industrial park extended - support for 25 enterprises - 100 jobs created
HURO/0802/091_AF	Culture, cross-border cooperation	Local communities, Cultural organizations, young people, NGOs	5,311,316.49	- 3 cultural centres renovated - 12 cross-border events organized - 500 participants to joint activities
HURO/0802/103_AF	Tourism, Regional promotion	Tourists, Tourism agencies, Local authorities, Rural population	4,890,320.47	- 2 tourist routes created - 1 mobile app launched - 8 promotional materials distributed

These programmes usually cover various areas of intervention, which offer the possibility to the relevant eligible applicants from the targeted geographical areas, to direct efforts towards aspects that need improvement. Once again, between the two programmes, there is an evident difference between the financed budgets. Furthermore, certain target areas naturally require larger budgets, while others don't. Cooperation between local authorities or other relevant actors from the border areas is an important aspect in building trust, partnerships, protocols and creating strategies for the future, however, they don't require the same amount of spending as infrastructure development or other similar objectives.

**Table 2.** Top project by budget, in each Priority Axis/Key Area of Intervention (Own elaboration based on data from [http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed\\_projects/](http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/) and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).

Axis/ KAI	Project code	Fields of intervention	Target group	Total budget (€)	Achieved, measurable indexes
1.1	HURO/1101/037/1.1.1	Economic development, support for SMEs	SMEs, local entrepreneurs	5,949,018.33	- 1 industrial park extended - 25 supported enterprises - 100 jobs created
1.2	HURO/1101/002/1.2.1	Research and innovation	Research institutions, universities	886,145.40	- 3 joint projects - 2 equipped laboratories
1.3	HURO/0802/072_AF	Environment and energy	Local authorities, rural population	1,700,000.00	- 5 rehabilitated public buildings

					- 20% energy consumption reduction - 3 information sessions for local communities
2.1	HURO/1101/043/2.1.1	Education and vocational training	Students, teachers, educational institutions	3,770,186.57	- 2 schools renovated - 300 students involved
2.2	HURO/0802/092_AF	Public health	Patients, medical staff	1,205,495.05	- 1 equipped medical centre - 5.000 consultations/year
2.3	HURO/1001/278/2.3.2	Social inclusion	Vulnerable people, NGOs	170,000.00	- 50 people advised - 10 social workshops
2.4	HURO/1101/036/2.4.1	Tourism and heritage	Tourists, local communities	1,886,989.03	- 3 tourist routes - 1 mobile app
2.5	HURO/0801/101	Institutional cooperation	Local administrations, NGOs	322,449.44	- 4 bilateral meetings - 2 signed agreements
PA1	ROHU-456	Research and innovation	Universities, research institutes	12,504,461.95	- 1 research centre - 10 pilot projects
PA2	ROHU-444	Health	Hospitals, patients, medical staff	13,836,221.00	- 3 hospitals renovated - 15.000 patients/year
PA3	ROHU-421	Employment and mobility	Unemployed, employers, local authorities	7,507,873.22	- 2 training centres - 500 trained people
PA4	ROHU-457	Public safety	Emergency services, population	23,746,994.18	- 2 Inspectorate for Emergency Situations centres - 10 specialty vehicles - 150 people trained in risk management
PA5	ROHU-11	Environment and natural resources	Rural population, authorities	2,685,559.00	- 3 areas protected - 5 awareness campaigns
PA6	ROHU-297	Culture and tourism	Cultural managers, tourists	390,775.00	- 6 cultural partners - 1 cross-border festival

The individual projects listed above reveal important insights into relevant factors for cross-border cooperation, in various fields of interest, that similar potential beneficiaries from current candidate countries such as the West Balkans can learn from:

- Support for SMEs is paramount for any economy, as they represent the “backbone” of any economy (World Bank SME Finance, 2025), thus local authorities should identify ways to help them evolve and create opportunities for new SMEs to be created.

- In the field of health services, coordination between local authorities and medical entities on both sides of the border, to either complement each other or develop similar services, can lead to increased access to public services for the inhabitants of cross-border areas.

- Natural resources and the environment do not follow administrative separation. Thus, coordination in this field is extremely important as local actions can have both positive and negative effects in neighbouring areas. Furthermore, protecting the environment helps in improving sustainability of the targeted geographical areas.

- Education is also extremely important, and as mentioned, it goes beyond the standard institutional approach, as it can help in combatting unemployment through reconversions, integrating young adults, transfer of know-how and in many other ways, all relevant for countries that want to improve their level of development, such as EU candidate countries.

- Governance can also improve significantly from such experiences. Collaboration through cross-border cooperation projects can be beneficial not only from the point of view of collaboration between similar institutions from neighbouring countries, but also by nurturing collaboration between institutions from the same country, distributed on various levels in the administrative hierarchy, and by creating a space for collaboration with NGOs, or private entities.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the context of EU enlargement and the recent geopolitical challenges, consolidating cross-border cooperation becomes a priority, especially for candidate countries that can benefit from expertise and models validated in other border areas within the EU.

Even though the cross-border cooperation policies, and the instruments through which they are enacted, generated important results in border areas, they are not without challenges, such as delays in programme initiation, difficulties in coordination between partners, reduced complementarity with other European initiatives, to name a few. Nevertheless, these should not become insurmountable blockers.

As strategic recommendations with the purpose of maximising impact at the level of the West Balkans, the following aspects should be considered:

- Developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes.
- Collaborating with various stakeholders (NGOs, private entities) from the area.

- Including, as much as possible, educational activities, as it is a factor that drives development.

- Learning from previous cooperation programmes such as the Romanian – Hungarian model.

- Supporting an economic environment in which the local economy can develop in a sustainable manner.

- Applying multidimensional evaluation mechanisms with the purpose of selecting the projects with the most transformative potential within the region.
- Enhancing the administrative capacity of local administrations to efficiently absorb European funds.
- Promoting pilot projects, with multiplication power and replication potential in various fields of interest such as health, education, environment, infrastructure and others.

The Romanian – Hungarian border area is a rich source of inspiration and learning opportunities for cross-border cooperation for candidate countries, emphasizing consistency, collaboration, openness, strategy, education, all aspects that any candidate country should rely on to foster success and drive development.

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