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TWENTY YEARS OF POLAND–UKRAINE CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION: REFLECTIONS AND RESPONSES IN THE WAKE OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION

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ABSTRACT: This paper marks the 20th anniversary of Poland–Ukraine cross-border cooperation (CBC), emphasising the impacts of the recent Russian military aggression. The study explores how these geopolitical tensions have influenced CBC initiatives, particularly highlighting the challenges and responses within the existing frameworks. By documenting the resilience and adaptability of CBC in the face of military conflict, this paper offers insights into the crucial role of regional collaborations in maintaining cross-border interactions and mitigating crisis impacts.

KEYWORDS: cross-border cooperation, sustainable development, quality of life, regional development, conflict, Russian aggression, Ukraine

DWADZIEŚCIA LAT WSPÓŁPRACY TRANSGRANICZNEJ POLSKA–UKRAINA: REFLEKSJE I REAKCJE W OBLICZU ROSYJSKIEJ AGRESJI WOJSKOWEJ

ZARYS TREŚCI: Niniejszy artykuł analizuje dwudziestoletnią współpracę transgraniczną pomiędzy Polską a Ukrainą, skupiając się na jej dynamice w obliczu rosyjskiej agresji na Ukrainę. Przedstawia, jak współpraca ta odzwierciedla i odpowiada na wyzwania wynikające z konfliktu zbrojnego, oraz podkreśla rolę projektów transgranicznych w utrzymaniu regionalnego rozwoju i stabilności pomimo geopolitycznych napięć. Praca ta dostarcza przeglądu adaptacyjnych strategii CBC, które pozwoliły na kontynuację współpracy w nowym kontekście, a także zwraca uwagę na potrzebę dalszych badań nad długoterminowym wpływem konfliktu na struktury i efektywność współpracy transgranicznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: współpraca transgraniczna, zrównoważony rozwój, jakość życia, rozwój regionalny, konflikt, agresja rosyjska, Ukraina

3.1. Introduction

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Polish–Ukrainian cross-border cooperation within the EU’s territorial cooperation model.

Much has been accomplished over these two decades, and the original aim of this publication was to highlight how “small-scale efforts” – as cross-border projects are often characterised – have substantially influenced the development of the border regions. However, the significant shift in circumstances brought about by Russia’s full scale military aggression against Ukraine, supported by Belarus in 2022, has compelled us to revise our focus.¹

¹ Despite the onset of military conflict in 2014 following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, these activities did not directly influence the Polish–Ukraine CBC cooperation under the Interreg framework. This observation is substantiated by various evaluation reports of

Instead, we offer an analysis of the impact of this war on cross-border cooperation and invite a broader discussion on this issue.

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) emerged as a crucial outcome of the socioeconomic and political integration that followed World War II. This approach was predicated on a seemingly straightforward hypothesis: if neighbouring countries foster deeper mutual understanding, intertwine their economies, nurture social and cultural connections, and work together on shared projects, the likelihood of armed conflict in Europe can be dramatically reduced.

Indeed, a substantial body of research indicates that countries with robust trade and cultural ties are less prone to conflict (Polachek 1980; Oneal, Russett 1997). By encouraging economic interdependence, CBC can deter military aggression by rendering conflict prohibitively costly for all parties (Mansfield, Pollins 2001). Additionally, fostering cultural and social exchanges among neighbouring countries can enhance mutual understanding, dispel stereotypes, and prevent misunderstandings that could lead to hostilities (Rapoport 2013).

The role of CBC in advancing sustainable development is fundamental. Sustainable development – conceptualised as the balanced pursuit of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental stewardship (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) – inherently demands cooperative approaches. By transcending national borders and leveraging shared interests, CBC provides a pathway to sustainable growth that is both inclusive and integrated.

From the economic standpoint, CBC fosters synergies by aligning regional development strategies, creating economies of scale, and enhancing competitiveness in border areas (Nelles, Walther 2011). By working collaboratively, regions can maximise their resources, spurring innovation and efficiency that ultimately translate into sustainable economic growth (Kramsch, Hooper 2004).

This issue is paramount for the EU, where local cooperation is one of the main pillars of European integration and development.

In this paper, our focus will be on cross-border cooperation, which significantly affects sustainable development by stimulating economic growth in borderlands, preserving the natural and cultural heritage of border regions, enhancing cross-border accessibility, improving the quality of roads and border-crossing points, and supporting health care, security, and other infrastructure investments.

Given these considerations, the central research question of this paper is:
How has the Russian aggression influenced the dynamics and outcomes of Poland–Ukraine CBC, particularly in terms of sustainable development in the region?

the programme, in which beneficiaries have not identified military conflict implications as a significant risk to CBC projects. This can be attributed to the fact that the Ukrainian portion of the CBC programme area encompasses the country's western regions, which had not been significantly affected by military conflict prior to February 2022.

This inquiry is pivotal for understanding the broader implications of military conflicts on regional cooperation frameworks and their ability to contribute to sustainable development under crisis conditions. This introduction will lead into a detailed review of the existing literature on CBC under conflict conditions, providing a theoretical framework for analysing the ongoing situation between Poland and Ukraine. It will also set the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the specific impacts of the conflict, aiming to contribute to the discourse on the resilience of cross-border cooperation in the face of geopolitical challenges.

3.2. Materials and methods

Today, sustainable development goals are at the forefront of socioeconomic discourse, as scholars and policymakers alike seek solutions to achieve these objectives without degrading our ecosystems or diminishing the quality of life. However, the existing body of research – as exemplified by works by Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Mazzucato, Fonseca, Moyer, and Hedden – predominantly focuses on strategies at the supra-national, national, and sub-national levels, often overlooking regional and individual considerations. Recognising that achieving regional sustainability requires effective collaboration between local stakeholders is vital.

The concept of sustainable development (SD) has seen considerable evolution since its inception. Initially centred on mitigating the adverse effects of human activity on the natural environment, the notion of sustainability has expanded to encompass three core dimensions: environmental conservation, social progress, and economic growth. The holistic integration of these elements aims to promote development that satisfies the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, as highlighted by the Brundtland Commission in 1987.

CBC has emerged as a critical component of sustainable development. It enables the exchange of knowledge, resources, and best practices across regions, advancing the three dimensions of sustainable development (Perkmann 2003). Initiatives such as the European Union's Interreg programme encourage CBC to address shared challenges in border regions, including environmental degradation, socioeconomic disparities, and infrastructure deficiencies, thereby advancing sustainable development (European Commission 2020).

From the theoretical perspective, CBC exerts a significant influence on sustainable development, as, for instance, CBC initiatives stimulate economic growth by facilitating trade, investment, and infrastructure development across borders (Scott 2015). Moreover, CBC enhances social progress by promoting cultural exchanges, reducing regional disparities, and fostering peace and stability in border areas (Newman, Paasi 1998). CBC also plays a vital role in environmental

conservation, enabling coordinated efforts to manage shared natural resources, mitigate pollution, and tackle climate change (Kramsch 2010). Numerous examples illustrate how cross-border cooperation initiatives can be effectively implemented across various sectors to enhance sustainable development. These initiatives range from enhancing local tourism through the creation of joint promotional brands (Taylor, Lee 2018), to strengthening the capacities of health care facilities in cross-border regions (Hernandez, Gomez 2020). Additionally, CBC programmes have successfully facilitated infrastructural improvements such as road development and environmental conservation projects that have significantly impacted local economies and ecosystems (Chang 2021). Such diverse applications of CBC not only promote economic growth but also facilitate regional collaboration, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding between neighbouring communities.

The impact of military aggression on sustainable development is a substantial concern. Military conflict disrupts economic growth, hinders social progress, and exacerbates environmental degradation – all central pillars of sustainable development. Although cross-border cooperation (CBC) alone cannot resolve all conflicts, it serves as an indispensable component of European peace-building strategies.

Scholars such as Anderson and O’Dowd (1999) argue that borders traditionally seen as barriers can transform into bridges when state and non-state actors engage in cooperative ventures that foster mutual benefits and understanding. This view aligns with European integration theories which suggest that increased connectivity diminishes the chances of conflict resurgence (McCall 2013).

Historical evidence from the post-World-War-II period demonstrates CBC’s effectiveness in diminishing the likelihood of conflicts and fostering dialogue and negotiation instead of armed confrontations (Petersen, Schmidt 2017). The European Union has effectively utilised CBC to facilitate post-conflict reconciliation across various settings. Notably, during the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) – a tumultuous period marked by ethnic conflicts and wars of independence in the Balkans – the EU underscored the role of CBC in promoting stability, reconciliation, and the path towards European integration (Brown, Jones 2018). Following the conflicts, the EU initiated the Stabilisation and Association Process in 1999, specifically designed for the Western Balkan countries. This initiative aimed to stabilise the region, establish bilateral cooperation, and prepare the groundwork for their future integration into the EU. Numerous EU-funded CBC programmes, such as those under the Instrument for pre-accession assistance, have been pivotal in fostering regional development, enhancing mutual understanding, and aiding reconciliation by bringing disparate communities closer together (European Commission 2020). Despite these theoretical underpinnings, the practical implementation of CBC in regions experiencing active military conflicts reveals a more complicated reality. For instance, Deiana, Komarova, and McCall (2019) highlight the dichotomy

between the EU's idealistic promotion of CBC as a peace-building instrument and the harsh realities on the ground, especially in areas where military tensions prevail. The situation in Ukraine is an example: with a backdrop of prior CBC programmes with Belarus and Russia, the country represents a departure from the typical sequence in conflict-resolution strategies, where CBC mechanisms are established post-conflict. Despite this, Ukraine can still benefit from strategic insights from other post-conflict scenarios.

In post-conflict settings, CBC can play a crucial role in reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. According to Mac Ginty (2014), post-conflict CBC projects can help rebuild trust and social cohesion by creating shared spaces for economic cooperation and cultural exchange. These initiatives can transform border areas from barriers of separation into active zones of interaction, where communities from both sides can engage in joint ventures that contribute to a sustained peace process.

However, the success of such endeavours heavily relies on the broader geopolitical context and the commitment of both local and international actors to support long-term peace-building objectives. Without this commitment, as Scott and Van Houtum (2009) observe, CBC initiatives risk becoming technocratic exercises that lack the depth to address the underlying issues of conflict and division.

This paper adopts the document analysis approach based on examining various documents outlining the terms and conditions for implementing cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes. In particular, the research sources include the external evaluation of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) from 2014 to mid-2017, the final report on the ex-post assessment of actions co-financed by the CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, the report on the socioeconomic analysis of the programme area Interreg Next Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2021–2027, and the evaluation report assessing the impact of the Interreg IIIA/Tacis CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2004–2006 on economic, social, and territorial cohesion in the supported transboundary area. Moreover, the research draws on relevant project descriptions and reports of projects carried out within the framework of the Poland–Belarus–Ukraine programmes.

According to the United Nations (2015), sustainable development encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions. These interconnected planes interact and require an integrated approach to achieve sustainable development goals.

Considering that the Polish–Ukrainian CBC is concentrating on particular thematic goals, in this article, we will analyse how the CBC impacts the following regional dimensions: health, environment, and socioeconomic cooperation. The analysis also considers the challenges posed by military aggression to sustainable

development and CBC, especially in the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia. The research acknowledges the importance of cross-border initiatives for promoting regional development, fostering social progress, and ensuring environmental conservation, but it also underscores the need to navigate the complexities introduced by regional conflicts and geopolitical tensions.

An overview of cross-border cooperation programmes between Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine

The Background of the EU–Ukraine cross-border cooperation

The history of EU–Ukraine cross-border cooperation dates back to the early 1990s, when Ukraine began actively seeking cooperation and partnership with the European Union after gaining independence from the Soviet Union.

The Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme was one of the first significant initiatives. The TACIS was launched by the European Commission in 1991 to provide technical assistance and support for economic reform and recovery in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. The programme aimed to facilitate the transition to market-oriented economies, promote democracy and the rule of law, and support the development of civil society (EC, 1992). Between 1991 and 2006, the TACIS allocated around 7 billion EUR to various projects, focusing on trade, energy, transport, environment, and regional development.

The cooperation gained momentum after the 2004 EU enlargement, which brought several new member states sharing borders with Ukraine, namely Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. Consequently, cross-border cooperation programmes under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) were launched, supporting joint initiatives in infrastructure development, environmental protection, and people-to-people contacts (EC 2014).

The first Cross-border Cooperation Programme, Poland–Belarus–Ukraine (hereinafter referred to as the Programme) within the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes, has been implemented since 2004. Preceded by a year of preparations and consultations, the efforts resulted in this Programme continuously operating for over twenty years (UTILA 2020). The implemented actions improve the life quality of the inhabitants of eastern Poland, western Ukraine, and Belarus (Volodin 2021).

The Programme area was determined based on NUTS 3 units (subregions) in Poland and oblast division in Ukraine and Belarus:²

² According to the Programme documents: <https://www.pbu2020.eu/en/pages/287>

- In Poland, it covered the following subregions: Białostocki, Łomżyński, Suwalski, Ostrołęcki, Siedlecki, Bialski, Lubelski, Puławski, Chełmsko-Zamojski, Przemyski, Rzeszowski, Tarnobrzesci, Krośnieński;
- In Belarus, the Programme areas included Grodno, Brest, Gomel and Minsk oblasts (excluding the city of Minsk);
- In Ukraine, the Programme area included the following Oblasts: Volyn, Lviv, Zakarpattya, Rivne, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast.

The Programme's objective was to support and promote integrated regional development in neighbouring border regions, including regions at the external borders of the European Union.³

From 2004, when the PL–BY–UA cooperation started, 554 Polish, 155 Belarusian, and 335 Ukrainian institutions were involved in implementing projects.

In terms of finance, as much as 414.1 million EUR has been allocated from the EU funds for the support in three editions of the Poland–Belarus–Ukraine cross-border cooperation (Table 1). Approximately 10% of all EU funds were allocated to the technical assistance budget; therefore, 372 million EUR has been dedicated to particular project activities.

Table 1. Allocated financial resources (three Programme periods)

2004–2006	2007–2013	2014–2020
<i>Total budget:</i>		
58.4 million EUR	203.6 million EUR	201.4 million EUR
(44.8 million EUR from the EU)	(186.2 million EUR from the EU)	(183.1 million EUR from the EU)

Source: Data from the Programme implementation report.

In total, 284 cross-border projects have been implemented (editions 2004–2006 and 2007–2013) and 130 projects (including 65 micro-projects) in 2014–2020 Programme editions.

Below, the main effects of the Programmes on sustainable development dimensions are presented:

The health dimension

In the first Programme period (2004–2006), no particular priority was directly related to the health sector.⁴ Nevertheless, all Programme priorities have been

³ The goal of the Programme, according to the Programme document.

⁴ Only one project (directly related to the healthcare sector) has been implemented – Orthopaedics without borders – the first Polish-Ukrainian workshop in spine diseases treatment.

linked to health care indirectly, mainly through strengthening institutional cross-border cooperation and increasing the quality of human capital.

It should be noted that the next Programme had a particular objective directly related to health care; namely, within the CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2007–2013, 13 medical-related projects were financed (with total budgets of more than 26.5 million EUR). Covered activities concerned equipped hospitals and health facilities with modern medical and preventive care equipment, so it is easier now to detect the early stages of cancer, tuberculosis, or cardiovascular disease among the locals. The results of these projects are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of the health projects within the CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2007–2013

Results	Value
Modernised or new hospital or outpatient departments	8
Created diagnostic laboratories	3
Created hospices	2
Medical equipment purchased	1,061
Ambulances purchased	7
Number of patients included in the medical studies	15,049
Tools to facilitate diagnostic cooperation	5

Source: Final Report on the evaluation study titled “Ex-post evaluation of actions co-financed by the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2007–2013.”

Programme 2014–2020 has particular priority related to health: Priority 3.1 Support for developing health care and social services. Support in this area concerned 12 projects of infrastructure and soft nature (research, health promotion) with a total budget of more than 18.5 million EUR, and 16 independent public health care facilities took part in this Programme edition. According to current data, the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The results of the health projects within the CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020

Indicator	Target value	Achieved (as of 1st February, 2022 – according to project reports)
the population covered by improved health services as a direct consequence of the support	10,583,993 [persons]	320,426
the number of medical/prevention research/treatment programmes organised	28	7
the number of events supporting the development of public health	133	6
the number of the participants of the events supporting the development of public health	11,393,094 [persons]	2,014,346
the number of new or improved healthcare services	28	4
several modernised/improved medical facilities (e.g. hospitals, hospices, etc.)	22	2
the number of newly built medical facilities (e.g. hospitals, hospices, etc.)	1	0
the number of purchased medical vehicles	16	7
the number of purchased specialised medical equipment	948	102
the number of initiatives aimed at the prevention of spreading human/animal/plant diseases across the border	3	0

Source: data from projects interim reports.

It should be noted that before the war started, the coronavirus pandemic had significantly accelerated cross-border cooperation in health care. For example, in 2020–2021, around 3 million EUR of existing Programme savings was dedicated to 12 health projects for further contribution to the COVID-19 crisis response (Volodin 2021). The Russian aggression has only strengthened this cooperation, enhancing contacts between health-sector institutions that serve refugees and victims of the conflict.

The environmental dimension

All three editions of the Programme included the protection of the natural environment as their primary objective. According to the PL–BY–UA programme documentation, environmental sustainability is an essential cross-sectional issue in the implementation of the Programme, and it should be visible at every stage of its implementation. Therefore, projects directly impacting the environment could not be financed under the Programme. From 2004–2006, 70 projects (without micro-projects) in environmental protection were implemented. In general, projects supported nearly 25,500 inhabitants; due to the projects, over three thousand households were connected to municipal sewage systems (more than 100 km of sewage systems were built, five sewage treatment plants have been constructed/upgraded, and regional fire protection system for counteracting threats to the natural environment has been improved; e.g. more than 300 modern police, fire brigade, rescue vehicles have been purchased).

Table 4. The results within the CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020 – the environmental dimension

Indicator	Target value	Achieved (as of 1st February, 2022 – according to project reports)
the number of promoted and/or preserved natural sites as a direct consequence of Programme support	69	5
the number of persons participating in actions and awareness-raising activities promoting the preservation of natural heritage	23,091 [persons]	584
the number of campaigns promoting the preservation of natural heritage	27	2

the number of publications on the natural heritage of the region	98	10
the length of constructed sewage systems aiming at preserving and protecting natural heritage [km]	1,247	7,311
the length of modernised/improved sewage system aimed at preserving natural heritage [km]	12,832	5,350
the number of modernised/improved wastewater treatment/purification plants aimed at preserving natural heritage	4	1
the population benefiting from fire protection measures services as a direct consequence of the support	11,393,094 [persons]	8,408,128 [persons]
increased number of visitors to the natural heritage sites	13,1%	7,61%

Source: data from projects interim reports.

The socioeconomic cooperation

According to the Programmes' documents and grant contracts, the total amount allocated for socioeconomic cooperation was 8,237,792.96 EUR. In the territorial aspect, the Polish part of the Programme received 4,627,872.91 EUR (56.19% of the whole amount), the Belarusian part – 422,743.13 EUR (5.13%), and the Ukrainian part – 3,187,176.92 EUR (38.68%). These projects improved SMEs' conditions and cooperation within the cross-border region as well as cooperation between scientific centres and business organisations, tourism, and modern information facilities for further economic development (Galko, Volodin, Nakonechna 2015)

The central part of the socioeconomic cooperation is tourism development, which has a straightforward impact on sustainable development. As the Programme and project reports read, many activities in the Programme area promoted various branches of tourism – health, cultural, military, religious, and historical. The total number of projects linked to the tourism sector has been estimated as 66, and the total allocation that can be connected to the tourism sector was more than 60 million EUR. The following Programmes results are linked (directly or indirectly) to tourism development: 52 cultural and historical sites were improved; 31 tourism information centres/points were created; 1,875 km of touristic bicycle/water routes were constructed or labelled/marked.

The socioeconomic cooperation also covers improved border infrastructure – among the existing twenty-nine Polish–Ukrainian–Belarus cross-boundary

points, four (Budomierz-Hruszów; Dołhobyczów-Uhrynów; Połowce-Pieszczatka; Kuźnica Białostocka-Bruzgi) have been created/modernised due to Programmes' financial support. As a result, the average waiting time has been reduced by 35% in Korczowa, 25% in Medyka, and 10% in Kroscienko. Moreover, due to the projects' realisation, vehicle border crossing capacity has been increased by 29,865 cars and 48,800 people per day, significantly impacting the economic cooperation between border regions.⁵

The cultural and historical cooperation

Cultural heritage is a particular aspect of all three editions of the Programme, as its area is characterised by a great cultural diversity – with many objects included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Buller 2018). In the Programme 2004–2006, the support of the sociocultural sphere was reflected in the implementation of 25 initiatives promoting and protecting cultural heritage and 127 micro-projects in this scope. Support for the sociocultural sphere in 2007–2013 was manifested in the 26 projects and 56 micro-projects (within umbrella projects). This support is continued in the Programme's third edition, within thematic objective HERITAGE, where 17 regular and 65 micro-projects have been implemented so far.

Implementing all these projects improved the region's opportunities for promotion, the preservation of traditions of border areas and cultural diversity, and cooperation between local communities.

Table 5. The results within the CBC Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020 – the social dimension

Indicator	Target value	Achieved (as of 1st February, 2022 – according to project reports)
increased number of visitors to the historical heritage and cultural sites	16,60%	11,80%
the number of improved cultural and historical sites as a direct consequence of the Programme support	55	3
the number of cross-border cultural events organised using the ENI support	340	28

⁵ Data from the beginning of 2022, before the full-scale aggression started.

the number of the participants in cross-border cultural events organised with the support of the ENI funding	86,845 [persons]	12,050
the number of newly created tourist services increasing the use of cultural heritage in tourism	24	1
the population benefiting from the newly created or improved social services [persons]	100,548	27,960
the number of newly created infrastructures serving the local community to preserve the local culture and/or historical heritage	13	2

Source: data from projects interim reports.

The projects related to cultural diversity have an impact not only due to the infrastructural and investment works carried out, but also through the organisation of cross-border events. They enable the establishment of cooperation with people from abroad, which, in turn, allows mutual learning of cultural and linguistic codes as well as the sharing of knowledge about cultures, traditions, and customs.

The beneficiaries implementing projects observed a high degree of sociocultural activation. At the same time, it should be noted that support in the first edition of the Programme related mainly to greater integration at the institutional level; subsequent editions of the Programme aimed at the integration at the level of the members of local communities.

The consequences of the Russian aggression – the regional dimension

Up to February 2022, the European landscape of cross-border cooperation symbolised one of the remaining realms of collaboration between the EU, Russia, and Belarus. Against growing tensions in the EU–Russia and EU–Belarus relationships, these cross-border dialogues acted as a beacon of cooperation.

This landscape, however, was drastically altered in the aftermath of Russia's military aggression into Ukraine on 24th February, 2022, further complicated by Belarus's evident involvement. This aggression precipitated a decisive response

from the European Commission, which opted to definitively halt collaboration with both Russia and Belarus in the context of cross-border cooperation Programmes for the financial perspective 2021–2027. Consequently, a communication was issued to formally exclude Belarus from these initiatives, leading to a strategic pivot where Poland and Ukraine endorsed a bilateral format under the INTERREG NEXT Poland–Ukraine 2021–2027 framework.

Particularly, the European Commission (EC) took the following actions:

- By March 2022, the Commission moved to suspend the 2014–2020 financing deals and the 2021–2027 programming process with Russia and Belarus due to their explicit support for military aggression.
- In March 2022, the “Cohesion’s Action for Refugees in Europe” (CARE) initiative was rolled out. This legislative proposal focused on reallocating EU cohesion funds to aid Ukrainian refugees.
- By mid-2022, the Commission proposed adjustments to the European Neighbourhood Instrument Cross-Border Cooperation (ENI CBC) rules, intending to channel the ENI CBC funds towards Ukrainian refugees and aid EU programme beneficiaries affected by the suspended financing agreements.
- By August 2023, an additional allocation of 48.5 million EUR was officially directed to the Interreg NEXT Poland–Ukraine Programme. This fund was reallocated from the discontinued European Territorial Cooperation programmes that had previously involved Russia and Belarus.

The Russian aggression questioned the viability of nine of the seventeen proposed Interreg NEXT programmes. These nine initiatives accounted for nearly 304 million EUR or almost 30% of the projected total allocation (The EC special report 2022).

Ukraine’s socioeconomic fabric was severely disrupted by the invasion, leading to devastating consequences. Analysing the direct impact of the war on the Programme area is challenging due to the lack of comprehensive regional statistical data. The available materials are fragmented, complicating efforts to gain a clear and thorough understanding of the situation. This scarcity of detailed data means any evaluations must be viewed as tentative and subject to updates as more complete information becomes available. Due to scope and space limitations, a more detailed analysis will be pursued in our next academic endeavour.

Poland’s role in this crisis cannot be overstated. Following the onset of the conflict, Poland’s eastern voivodeships – owing to their geographical adjacency to the epicentre of displacement – transformed into critical humanitarian and logistical epicentres, sheltering a significant number of displaced Ukrainians. As of August 2023, official Polish data reveals that approximately 1.6 million Ukrainian refugees sought and registered for temporary protection within its borders. It is intriguing to note a discrepancy wherein only 968,390 of these refugees were officially present in Poland by 1st August, 2023 (UNHCR, 2023).

This considerable migration propelled Poland to the status of the sixth largest refugee host globally and the foremost European haven for displaced Ukrainians.

A granular look at the demographic constitution of these refugees unearths some revealing trends: children constitute over 40% of the Ukrainian refugee populace in Poland, and females represent a staggering 65%. While the overall refugee influx into Poland seems to have plateaued recently, assessments by globally-recognised organisations highlight a worrisome profile for recent arrivals. These refugees, bearing the scars of prolonged exposure to conflict, are arriving with dwindled resources and amplified protection concerns (UNOCHA 2023; UNHCR 2022). Such observations underscore the imperative need for harnessing the Programme's outcomes to not only address immediate refugee necessities but also foster their long-term socioeconomic integration.

In a proactive response, the Programme's authorities have rolled out several pivotal activities:

- the modification of the existing protocols to enable non-lead beneficiaries from both Poland and Ukraine to function independently, distancing them from affiliated institutions in Belarus;
- permitting the allocation of all project savings towards essential supplies and services, anchored to the previously approved budgetary guidelines, with a focus on augmenting aid for Ukrainian refugees;
- post-February 2022, expenditures associated with Belarusian beneficiaries were rendered ineligible;
- the refugees were granted access to vital project outcomes, including infrastructural facilities and equipment;
- CBC projects underwent revisions to better cater to refugee needs through integration programmes, linguistic assistance, and special initiatives for children;
- the introduction of seven additional direct award projects, amounting to 4,673,936.4 EUR, aimed at addressing the escalating migration crisis;
- Following the Commission's unveiling of the EU–Ukraine Solidarity Lanes action plan, designed to revitalise Ukrainian agricultural exports and bolster EU–Ukraine trade, the Programme reaffirms its commitment to both the Ukrainian economic rejuvenation and the broader objective of stabilising global food markets.

The Programme has also focused on enhancing the region's logistical resilience, particularly in the light of intensified military activities. Adjustments in cargo and passenger routes by Ukrainian and Polish railways have reinforced Lviv and Rzeszów as central logistics hubs within the Programme.

However, these adjustments have not been without their difficulties. Notable bottlenecks have emerged at crucial border crossings such as Medyka and Dorohusk, exacerbated by limited track development. Furthermore, the

transshipment capacities at key Polish frontiers, especially at the Rava–Ruska–Hrebenne crossing, have struggled due to discrepancies with the EU-standard track gauge. In response to these logistical hurdles, new measures such as the inauguration of a new route at the Rava–Ruska checkpoint have been initiated, highlighting the ongoing efforts to mitigate these challenges and improve cross-border transport efficiency. The resilience of Poland–Ukraine CBC projects has been distinctly showcased.

These logistical enhancements, alongside the robust adaptability of Poland–Ukraine CBC projects, have been crucial in responding to the emergent humanitarian crisis following the Russian aggression. Originally designed to foster regional development, these projects have quickly adapted to support the influx of refugees and displaced individuals, demonstrating remarkable resilience. The infrastructure and resources initially allocated for developmental purposes have been effectively repurposed to provide essential support to IDPs. For instance, through the L4U project,⁶ crucial medical assistance was provided in the western regions of Ukraine. This included the delivery of four ambulances, four power generators, 320 clip ties, and 320 multi-bandage dressings to medical facilities across Lviv, Volyn, Rivne, and Zakarpattia. The project ensured that local health services were equipped to handle emergencies more effectively.

Another poignant example of adaptability is the “Borderland of equal chances” project, initially aimed at supporting individuals with disabilities in Zamość, Poland, and Kremenets, western Ukraine. With the onset of the conflict, the project’s focus expanded to assist refugees directly. The team facilitated the safe transfer of over a hundred Ukrainian families with children with disabilities to Poland, providing them with long-term shelter and continued social care and rehabilitation.

Similarly, the SOS Rescue project, which was established to enhance the effectiveness of trans-border mountain rescue operations, transformed its training centre into an Emergency Centre for Ukraine. This centre not only continued its training programmes but also provided refuge for approximately fifty refugees as well as organised housing in Poland and abroad.

Moreover, the project “Rzeszów and Vynohradiv – animal-friendly cities” (CBC4animals) adjusted its goals in response to the crisis. Originally focused on animal sterilisation and vaccination, it expanded its scope to relocate and care for pets from the conflict zones, ensuring the welfare of animals displaced by the war.

These examples underscore the dynamic nature of the CBC projects, which have not only managed to continue their original missions but also significantly expanded their scope in response to the crisis. This flexibility highlights the

⁶ The example, along with all examples from the project mentioned above, are the result of analysis conducted on the webpage <https://www.pl-ua.eu>.

projects' profound impact on providing critical support during emergencies and underscores the strategic importance of cross-border cooperation in fostering resilience and adaptive responses to geopolitical challenges. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of such collaborations to both address immediate needs and contribute to long-term stability and recovery in the face of adversity.

3.3. Conclusions

Within the multifaceted domain of global geopolitics, the recent Russian aggression in Ukraine has underscored the inherent resilience and adaptability of CBC initiatives, specifically along the Polish-Ukrainian frontier. These programmes, originally crafted for regional advancement, emerged as vital tools, adeptly pivoting in response to the region's intensified humanitarian and socioeconomic needs.

The tangible outcomes of these programmes – spanning improved infrastructure, boosted economic activities, and enhanced human ties – tell only a part of their story. They have acted as pivotal catalysts, bolstering the geopolitical importance of affected regions in this intricate conflict landscape. The existing collaborative foundations, as laid out by these initiatives, undoubtedly hastened the region's ability to confront and navigate the multifarious challenges posed by the conflict.

However, it is crucial to approach our understanding of these programmes with an acknowledgment of certain limitations. The most pressing of these is the temporal nature of our study. The rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics means that our insights, though detailed, provide a snapshot in a continually evolving scenario. The tangible long-term repercussions of these initiatives, especially if the conflict persists, remain, to some extent, conjectural. This analysis, rooted in overarching Programme outcomes, might benefit from a deeper, project-specific exploration that could offer a richer texture of insights.

The Ukrainian crisis has thrown into sharp relief our collective interdependencies, underscoring the immense promise and potential of coordinated action in challenging times. As these programmes stand testament to the might of proactive cross-border collaborations, their adaptability and forward-thinking approach underline the crucial role they play in sculpting resilient and cohesive futures. Such insights, drawn from real-time challenges, are imperative for policymakers and global stakeholders as they navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

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