FROM CALARASI TO VIDIN: COMMON BORDERS, COMMON SOLUTIONS

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FROM CALARASI TO VIDIN: COMMON BORDERS, COMMON SOLUTIONS

From Calarasi to Ruse, from Costanza to Veliko Tarnovo, EU Cohesion Policy has supported hundreds of actions and infrastructure investment in the fields of transport, science, education, youth employment, environment and support for small and medium-sized enterprises in Romania and Bulgaria.

Cross-border cooperation (Interreg V-A) in specific, represents one of the main goals of the policy, aiming at tackling common issues and challenges identified from border regions, at enhancing the growth dynamics of those areas, while promoting the values of solidarity and shared mentality.

Despite the occasional shadows and delays in the project planning, the difficulties in the implementation and the bureaucratic obstacles, the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border cooperation has transformed the economy and the relations between the two countries, improving significantly the quality of life of their citizens.

In this special report, EURACTIV focuses on some of the most important aspects of this shared socioeconomic ecosystem, capturing its core characteristics and added value.
Contents

Less money, a new legal framework—what future for the Interreg post-2020?

Business representative: ‘Cross-border cooperation is a broader European integration exercise’

Deputy mayor: A second bridge at Ruse-Giurgiu is a priority

EU cross-border cooperation: working on both sides of the river

Better regional cooperation for higher EU absorption rate: the Bulgaria-Romania case
While Brexit and the new EU priorities threaten to reduce the funds allocated for cross-border cooperation after 25 years, the Commission wants to improve Interreg with a new legal framework for cooperation between regions.

According to the European Commission, over 150 million people live in cross-border areas in Europe. Interreg was introduced in the framework of the Cohesion Policy as a funding tool to help local and regional authorities tackle common challenges with shared solutions in the fields of health, research, education, transport and the environment.

Since 2014, the European Regional Development Fund allows supporting projects enhancing efficient public administration “by promoting legal and administrative cooperation and cooperation between citizens and institutions” under Interreg programmes. But it has not been enough.

Legal problems and barriers linked to different administrative cultures are still an obstacle for cross-border cooperation. The EU executive proposed in May that the rules of one member state may voluntarily be applied in a neighbouring country.

“The Mechanism consists in concluding a European Cross-border Commitment, which is self-executing, or a European Cross-border Statement which requires a further legislative procedure in the Member State,” the text says.

The Commission proposal, currently under scrutiny at the European Parliament, aims to introduce a legal mechanism to regulate cooperation in cross-border areas.

**INTERREG POST-2020 IN DANGER**

In the next months, the Parliament, the Council and the Commission will have to negotiate a new long-term EU
As a result of the UK leaving the EU and due to the introduction of new priorities – security, migration, climate change – the budget allocation for Cohesion Policy is likely to be reduced up to 10%. This, of course, also affects Interreg.

“These programs are creating links between regions and members states of the European Union,” Dimitris Papadimoulis said during a debate with Commissioner for Regional Policy, Corina Cretu.

“The Commission’s decision to reduce the Interreg budget is very concerning, as it is a unique and indispensable source of funding for cooperation across borders,” said Vasco Cordeiro, president of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR).

“It is essential to have Interreg programmes based on territorial needs and with the strong involvement of regions,” CPMR Secretary General Eleni Marianou stressed.

Romania will hold the next rotating presidency of the EU from January.

Bucharest will have to mediate among member states to try to find a compromise before the European elections in May.

Romania will then play the mediator role and might also have to deal with the negotiation of a new legal framework for cross-border cooperation, while it has a lot of interest in Cohesion Policy properly functioning, as it benefits from it.

**ROMANIA AND BULGARIA, AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD COOPERATION**

Despite the occasional shadows and delays in the project planning, the difficulties in the implementation and the bureaucratic obstacles, the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border cooperation has transformed the economy and the relations between the two countries, improving significantly the quality of life of citizens.

Over the past programming period (2007-2013), Interreg boosted cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria with €262 million, which main objectives were to bring together people and strengthening the ties of both communities while supporting the economic development of the area.

In 2014, the Commission awarded further €258 million through the European Regional Development Fund to invest in programs of cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria, until 2020.

The aim, in this case, was to ensure a well connected, green, safe, inclusive and efficient region in the counties of Mehedinti, Dolj, Olt, Teleorman, Giurgiu, Calarasi and Constanta in Romania and the districts of Vidin, Vratsa, Montana, Pleven, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse, Silistra and Dobrich in Bulgaria.

EU Interreg funds have served to finance the conservation and promotion of historical and cultural sites, promoted hot air balloons in the cross-border area, as a new tourist product and created a network of electric bicycles which people can use to cycle freely within 32 cities along the area.

According to the European Commission, the programme’s selection rate has already reached over 93%, which places it among the best performing programmes.
INTERVIEW

Business representative: ‘Cross-border cooperation is a broader European integration exercise’

By Manuela Preoteasa | EURACTIV Romania

Since 2014, the Romania-Bulgaria Interreg programme has helped to boost the economy on both sides of the border by promoting cross-border trade and boosting cooperation in tourism, agriculture and industry. EURACTIV spoke to a business representative of companies operating in the area.

Ion Dănuț Jugănaru is the director of the Chamber of Commerce of Constanța, Romania. He spoke to EURACTIV.ro’s Manuela Preoteasa.

Two centres of economic cooperation were established eight years ago through the joint actions of the Chamber of Commerce in Constanta, Romania, and Dobrich, Bulgaria, in a project financed with European funds. What has this cooperation meant for the development of the region, the business environment and the community?

The Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Naval Engineering and Agriculture (CCINA) of Constanța launched in 1998 the first Romania-Bulgaria cross-border cooperation project with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) of Dobrich. It was the first call for applications aimed at increasing the Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation.

A number of cross-border projects for business communities have been implemented since then. The ‘Chamber of Commerce of Bulgaria and Romania for cross-border cooperation’ project, as well

Continued on Page 7
Continued from Page 6

as other projects, have kept the business environment in the two regions informed and supported the entrepreneurs to launch businesses and cooperates, providing them with the necessary tools: business events, entrepreneurial courses, specialized literature, databases etc., practically an environment dedicated to Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation.

The situation changed significantly during the 2014-2020 period when there were no pre-accession funds. The economic relations have been developing cross-border cooperation, and the results from the previous years were no longer reached so intensively. This was on one hand, due to the impossibility of maintaining a relevant pace for cross-border activities and, on the other, due to the constant renewal of the business environment. The newly set-up companies did not have the chance to free and centralised access to information and specialized tools for either at CCINA Constanța or at CCI Dobrich.

What are the results of the project?

Two business and economic cooperation centres were set up in Constanța (Romania) and Dobrich (Bulgaria), to provide information, assistance, counselling and support services to companies interested in developing cross-border cooperation. The economic relations have been stimulated. According to statistical data by the National Institute of Statistics of Constanța (as of July 2018), Bulgaria ranks eighth among the top investors in Constanța county, where 87 companies with Bulgarian capital are registered. The volume of trade between the two countries increased in both 2016 and 2017.

The business partnership resulted in joint participation of Romanian and Bulgarian companies at fairs in Sofia and Plovdiv, business-to-business fairs in both Dobrich and Constanța; professional training for companies interested in cross-border activities; marketing studies on economic potential of the districts of Constanța and Dobrich, macroeconomic statistics about Romania and Bulgaria, foreign trade of Romania and Bulgaria, import-export guidelines Bulgaria Romania, European Union, United States of America, Russia, Asian countries, financial and regulatory regulations in trade, in Romania and Bulgaria, six sector profiles, of which three for Constanța and three for Dobrich; and a Romanian-Bulgarian association for business cooperation was set up.

Specifically, what are the most representative activities of CCINA Constanța regarding the cross-border cooperation with the Southern neighbours?

CCINA Constanța has supported the trade between the two regions (the county of Constanța and the district of Dobrich) through business partnerships, brokerage events, fairs, exhibitions, company presentations, assistance for the setting up companies. Other activities consisted of promoting labour mobility and capitalising the potential cultural tourism in the Romanian-Bulgarian border region.

In practical terms, what are the most representative actions the Chamber of Commerce of Constanța has carried out in terms of cross-border cooperation?

A number of projects have been funded through the CBC Romania-Bulgaria programme, including with pre-accession funds.

Euro Dobrogea, a resource centre for business and innovation, has modern facilities for conferences, documentation and helpdesk services, promotion actions.

Furthermore, three cross-border clusters were set up in Constanța and Dobrich in sectors like tourism, agriculture-food industry, innovation and creative industries; and the project financed sectorial studies and analysis and training for increasing the institutional capacity.

In the context of the Trans-Tour-Net, five pilot-projects were developed, and there were 50 tourist attractions in the Dobrogea region identified and promoted, and also virtual tours for tour operators and training for Romanian and Bulgarian students, from Constanța and Dobrich.

Among the projects funded under the INTERREG V Romania-Bulgaria programme is a strategy for a sustainable economy, aimed at protecting the natural and cultural resources in Romania and Bulgaria. Within the framework of that project, the cross-border strategy and a multi-annual plan for its dissemination were realised, a strategy implementation framework was established by building a network by the CCI in the Romanian-Bulgarian border area, and pilot activities were set up to implement the strategy.

Interreg also allowed us to develop and promote an integrated cultural tourism product, the route of the Roman border in the Romania-Bulgaria border region.

Another project, Mowe Up, helps to promote labour force mobility among, by creating a bilingual web platform for self-evaluation of knowledge, skills and abilities, career opportunities and mobility improvement.

As to create a sustainable model and a network of partners to support employment and mobility, the project ELMO, an online platform for the promotion of labour mobility in the cross-border region with an

Continued on Page 8
Why are those results important in the European framework?

Such projects shed some light on the European dimension and they have allowed the introduction of EU principles and values, practices and disciplinary rules. We think it is reasonable to assume that without these programmes and projects, the peripheral areas of the two countries, Romania and Bulgaria, as well as our business environments, would have developed more slowly.

In an interview for local media eight years ago, you said that ‘nothing will stop from implementing projects of cooperation, not even the bureaucracy’. What would you say now, looking back?

The red tape, in its various forms, has remained almost the same, sometimes even increased in Romania (probably similarly in Bulgaria), even though the forms have changed. However, some specific steps have been taken, in order to reduce it. For instance, for the current project, we don’t need to sign each page, and send five copies of each document, as for the previous activities.

The projects are currently managed in an online platform; although recently modified, the regulations governing the programme are still too large, too detailed and sometimes lead to overwhelming bureaucracy for the implementation team, which sometimes exceeds the effort of the implementation. We still waste too much time and paper on detailed reports instead of spending effort on more useful activities and actions within the projects. I am convinced that there is still enough room for simplification in this area.

However, compared to the way other programmes are implemented in Romania, we believe that Interreg Romania-Bulgaria programmes are more approachable, including the bureaucracy, based on a constructive cooperation with programme management authorities.

But, since our regions are not very advanced in economic terms, any such funding initiatives can contribute to a sustainable development of the region. Projects funded through cross-border programmes have contributed to better economic relations between the two regions, and even to long-lasting friendships between the inhabitants of the border areas, which also had a positive impact on the touristic and cultural activities. We sincerely hope that during the next financial framework, we will benefit from increased amounts, which can be used to reduce the economic gap between less developed and well-developed member states.

If you could summarise what the cross-border cooperation means for Constanta region, what would you say?

Cross-border cooperation is a broader European integration exercise, of mutual understanding and cohabitation with neighbors and a sample of unique, non-replicable societal and economic development, which results are present in every locality of the Constanta County, keeping alive the collective consciousness of the neighbourhood, which is a part of both the Balkans region and the European area.

Is there anything else significantly relevant, concerning cross-border Romania – Bulgaria cooperation?

The cross-border cooperation activities from our projects helped solve problems of mutual interest that required joint action. Moreover, they have developed and strengthened collaborative relationships, partnerships between different bodies and institutions implementing projects in order to ensure consistency in attracting funds under cross-border cooperation programmes, leading to improved neighbourly relations.
Strahil Karapchanski, the deputy mayor of Ruse, the largest Bulgarian city on the Danube, told EURACTIV about the history, the present and his hopes for the future of cross-border regional cooperation with Romania, which he has helped to oversee.

Born in 1983, Strahil Karapchanski was appointed deputy mayor for European development of Ruse municipality. He is fluent in English and German and has a working knowledge of French and Romanian.

He spoke to EURACTIV’s senior editor Georgi Gotev.

You have an interesting professional biography. Obviously, since your student days, you chose regional cooperation as your profession. How did you make this decision and wasn’t this topic uncharted waters at that time?

I chose European Studies at Ruse University in the years when Bulgaria was actively preparing for joining the European family. It was a period rich in challenges and opportunities for a young person dedicated to European issues. I am delighted that during my...
Continued from Page 9

studies I had the chance to plunge into the deep waters of regional and international cooperation and to start career development in the public administration.

The practical experience I got prompted me to continue my higher education in the same field and in 2014 I defended a PhD dissertation on Integrated Management in the Bulgarian-Romanian Cross-Border Region: State of affairs, Potential and Perspectives ".

At present, as part of the management team of the municipality of Ruse, I can confirm that the good positioning and leadership position of Ruse in a cross-border context are prerequisites for very active cooperation and seeking solutions to shared problems, together with the opposite Romanian city of Giurgiu. Since 2010, Ruse has been actively involved in debates on the definition, and later in the actual implementation of the Danube Strategy, which has opened new horizons and has expanded the range of partnerships and potential projects.

Bulgaria and Romania seem in the same boat, viewed from Brussels. They joined the EU in 2007, they are still under the same monitoring mechanism, and both are trying to join Schengen. But the countries are quite different, they do not really know each other well, and the Danube has “successfully” divided them for a long time. Moreover, for many years, there have been mutual accusations of cross-border air pollution. Regional cooperation is probably a big challenge in such circumstances?

The fact is undeniable that for decades, both Bulgarians and Romanians felt the River Danube as a barrier that divides states, peoples, cultures, languages. I also remember the euphoria that occurred on 1 January 2007, when citizens on both sides of the Danube literally jammed the bridge in their desire to go “on the other side” [all controls and restrictions for crossing the border were lifted on the day Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU, except a fee for crossing the bridge by car].

It cannot be denied that 10 years later, Bulgarians and Romanians are still learning to work together and to speak in a “common” language. However, the experience has so far demonstrated in a very categorical way to both sides that cross-border co-operation brings together success stories and brings long-term benefits to the local communities.

What are the big projects you think could contribute to the regional cooperation between Bulgaria and Romania? Are more bridges needed?

Facilitating cooperation requires a purely physical opportunity to get to the other side. In this sense, the presence of only two bridges along the 450-kilometre border is certainly an important barrier to more intensive exchanges between Bulgarian and Romanian regions. This gap is recognized by both Bulgarian and Romanian authorities and overcoming it is also a priority for the EU transport and regional policies. Indeed, the realisation of such large-scale projects for the construction of new bridges over the Danube or other connecting infrastructure will improve cross-border cooperation and will also serve as a showcase of such cooperation.

The Danube Bridge in Ruse [opened in 1954, with only one track in each direction for road transport] is the first facility [it’s the only bridge on the 450-km Danube border until the “New Europe” Vidin-Kalafat bridge opened in 2013], and its capacity does not correspond to the ever more increasing flow of light and heavy vehicles in both directions. Its proximity to Bucharest, a capital with 2 million citizens, as well as its role as a crossing point of two trans-European corridors (N.7 and N.9), puts the construction of a second bridge between Ruse and Giurgiu on the agenda.

Do you speak Romanian? Or is the language of the experts English? Who are your main interlocutors in Romania? How do you come up with joint proposals, how do you defend them in front of Brussels?

My training under the Master programme in European studies at the Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center (BRIE) in Ruse included a compulsory study of the Romanian language, which helps me communicate better with the Romanian partners. English is universal in terms of joint project formulation and management, but the fluency in colleagues’ mother tongue creates additional trust and shortens the distance.

We work with colleagues from the Municipality and the District Council of Giurgiu in a constructive spirit and with common priorities. We haven’t had controversy over the choice of joint projects as we often meet, discuss and have a preliminary list of ideas on what we can do together. Here I have to point out that the municipalities of Ruse and Giurgiu are the only ones in the region that have a common long-term cross-border master plan for development by 2027.

In addition to representatives of the local and regional government in Romania, we often communicate with ministry officials in our northern neighbour who have competences on cross-border cooperation issues. As you know, in the past and in the current programming period, the Interreg Romania-Bulgaria Cross-Border Cooperation Program is managed by Bucharest, and the Joint Secretariat, which directly connects Continued on Page 11
Continued from Page 10

with the beneficiaries, is located in [the Romanian city of] Calarasi.

Which authorities are easier to work with, the ministries in Sofia and Bucharest or the European Commission in Brussels? How many years ahead are the projects being planned, to what extent do they depend on national priorities, national funding?

It is of the utmost importance for a well-functioning institution to ensure long-term planning and adequate formulation of strategic goals, and this is what the Ruse Municipality aims for. The preparation of the Municipal Development Plan, which timing coincides with the duration of the 7-year EU Financial Framework, is the result of careful consultations with different communities, of weighing alternatives, prioritizing and exploring, to the extent possible, the potential sources of funding.

This is a laborious process which requires competence and dedication, but it leads to a practical and publicly agreed strategic document that defines the direction of development of the municipality, and the administration follows it. There are projects that have been a dream for generations of citizens of Ruse, and we have been able to implement them, thanks to the European structural and investment funds and the good interaction with the state authorities.

Tell us about specific projects that you think are successful and have the potential to be replicated elsewhere?

At present, Ruse Municipality manages a wide portfolio of projects funded under the Operational Programs, the Interreg V-A Cross-Border Cooperation Program with Romania and the Horizon 2020 Program. The network of partnerships we have built over the last years helps us to be on the same page, but also to promote good practices with a Ruse address.

The administrations of the Ruse and Giurgiu municipalities have successfully developed a joint project “Development of the Danube River Basin for Better Connectivity of the Euroregion Ruse – Giurgiu with Pan-European Transport Corridor No.7”, which is a complex of activities aimed at ensuring safe transport by improving the inland waterways of the Danube. The rehabilitation of the quay walls of the passenger terminal “Ruse – Center” is underway in the territory of the Municipality of Ruse, aiming to improve the navigation conditions and allowing the mooring of large passenger ships, the number of which increases steadily every year.

With this project, Ruse Municipality completes the activities for the complete transformation of the Ruse wharf and accentuating the river in the life of the town. Under the “Regions for Growth” Operational Program 2014-2020, we are also implementing two major projects in parallel, aimed at modernising the coastal zone and integrating it into the central city area.

Due to the systematic efforts of the entire team of Mayor Plamen Stoilov, we have managed in the last seven years to attract European funding worth more than €13 million, which will make it possible to fulfil a decade-long dream of the citizens of Ruse – turning the city so it would face the Danube.

There is an ongoing about the new long-term EU budget. What place do you think regional policy and cross-border cooperation should have in the budget’s priorities?

The EU’s economic, social and territorial cohesion policy aims at overcoming regional disparities and, as such, is a key element in the member states’ agenda. Since Bulgaria became an EU member, the Union has been allocating about one-third of its budget for Cohesion Policy. Funding on this line in Bulgaria over the past programming period accounts for 80% of public investment, of which about 20% is dedicated to local and regional development and transport infrastructure.

The effect of the invested funds on people’s lives cannot currently be matched by alternative sources of funding. I believe the interest of countries like Bulgaria, but also of the countries of the so-called net donors, is to maintain the weight of Cohesion Policy and regional cooperation in the overall mix of EU policies, certainly ensuring transparency and accountability, efficiency and clear definition of priorities, based on bottom-up approach.
A head of the European Week of Regions and Cities, the debate on Cohesion policy continues to spark tension inside the Brussels bubble as well as among stakeholders and networks of regions and cities across Europe.

European cross-border cooperation is at the centre of this talk as the Commission’s new EU budget proposal threatens to reduce the budget for cross-border cooperation, while at the same time suggests a new, better regulated INTERREG scheme that could enhance co-operation between regions.

In Romania and Bulgaria, Cohesion Policy and European cross-border cooperation since 2007 – the year when both countries joined the EU – have contributed significantly throughout the last two programming periods to dialogue between the two nations, giving regions and stakeholders the possibility to unlock the growth potential in border areas, while enhancing their common culture.

“Such projects shed some light on the European dimension and they have allowed the introduction of EU principles and values, practices and disciplinary rules. We think it is reasonable to assume that without these programmes and projects, the peripheral areas of the two countries, Romania and Bulgaria, as well as our business environments, would have developed more slowly,” Ion Dănuț Jugănaru, Director of the Chamber of Commerce of Constanța (RO), told EURACTIV in an interview.

The main aim is to ensure that Cohesion policy beyond 2020 will maintain its regional perspective, in terms of investment priorities and funding allocations. Regions and cities in both Member States are asking for transparency in the process and more flexibility for the projects, which often fall victims to bureaucracy and delays.

“I believe the interest of countries like Bulgaria, but also the so-called net donors, is to maintain the weight of Cohesion Policy and regional cooperation in the overall mix of EU policies, certainly ensuring transparency and accountability, efficiency and clear definition of priorities, based on a bottom-up approach”, Strahil Karapchanski, Deputy Mayor of Ruse, also told EURACTIV in an interview.

Continued on Page 13
The Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria Program, like all European Territorial Cooperation programs, finances joint projects based on key priority axes, including a well-connected, green and safe region, as well as an efficient, skilled and inclusive one.

A typical example is ‘INCOLAB – Innovative and collaborative management of Natura 2000 sites in the Danube border region’, a joint effort of the National Environmental Guard (RO) and the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water (BG), implemented in Bucharest, Olt, Teleorman and Veliko Tarnovo. The project, which ran from February 2016 until July 2018, focused on the development of a common management plan on the Natura 2000 sites in the area and the enhancing of cross-border investments and infrastructure.

“The goal was not only to identify the areas that needed protection but to ensure a proper development of those areas while conducting a series of conservation activities. We could only do this by creating a common strategy that crossed all borders in order to have a proper functioning eco-network”, Delia Fodor, Project manager of INCOLAB told EURACTIV.

The two partners managed to improve the current status of more than 27,000 ha of habitats from border regions, including Confluenţa Olt-Dunare, Suhaia, Ostrov Vardim, and Ribarnitsi Hadzhi Dimitrovo. These four areas were exposed to illegal exploitation but were also difficult to manage because of their special transnational characteristics.

Another important achievement of the project is the implementation of an information system, “a real-time intelligent database” which enabled both partners to monitor and optimize their activities as fast and efficiently as possible.

“We are very proud of our work. We feel like we have done more than a legislative framework or an information system. We have created a network that does not stumble upon borders in order to protect one of the most valuable things in life, Nature”, Fodor added.

The system manages a great quantity of information, from names of protected natural sites, geographical positioning, map and alphanumeric attributes, custodians, identified species of the area, economic operators registered in protected sites, to the operating permits and a database of incidents reported and sanctions issued. The system also manages the reports and notes issued by the National Environmental Guard or the Bulgarian partner following planned or unplanned inspection activities and allows citizens to report incidents through the public portal or the smartphone application.

“The amount of work was extraordinary, everybody working in the project was involved in so many other activities, but this was something we all believed in. This is why the interaction with the Bulgarian partners was so smooth”, she underlined.

“We are now confident that our work is useful to a lot of people, not only to the employees of the National Environmental Guard but for the general public, as well. To protect nature and to develop our society in a sustainable way should be on everybody’s list of priorities”.

“Plums For Junk” or how to restore a once forgotten area

Another good example is the ‘Plums for Junk’ project, a joint initiative by ‘Phoenix – 21 century’ Foundation (BG), the ‘Regional partnerships for sustainable development – Vidin”Association (BG) and the Mehedinti Association (RO).

The main aim of the project – which started in February 2016 and was concluded in August 2017 – was to explore wildlife in Natura 2000 protected zones along the Danube River, to reduce environmental pollution and to ‘spread the word’ in both societies.

By the end of the project, the management team also produced an extended documentary on the current status of the area, along with a catalogue, two studies and a joint project strategy of the protected areas and wetlands from Vidin to Oryahovo and the Mehedinti county.

The project continues the work today, through organized repetitive activities, like the cleaning of a total of 12,500 ha of Natura 2000 sites in the border region, with the last activity having been concluded in September 2018.

“During the implementation of the project, we have realized the importance of the co-operation between all three project beneficiaries. The project provides a flexible approach for funding actions, which are defined on the basis of local/regional needs, have a cross-border impact and encourages the development of linkages between the communities, organizations and institutions on both sides of the border”, Lazarinka Andreeva, Chairperson of the “Phoenix – 21 century” Foundation stressed to EURACTIV.

Throughout its lifespan, this project managed to mobilize 800 volunteers from Mehedinti and Vidin, supported by 20 scout and 600 students from the entire area. In addition to them, 210 local authorities, institutions and stakeholders from Romania and Bulgaria were engaged in the whole process.
Better regional cooperation for higher EU absorption rate: the Bulgaria-Romania case

By Beatriz Rios and Sofia Elanidou | EURACTIV.com

When it comes to European structural funds, one of the main concerns is the capacity of the member states to attract them. Cooperation between public authorities has proven to be a driving factor.

On the European map, the situation differs from country to country. While Romania is considered to be a net receiver in terms of Cohesion funding, the country has one of the lowest absorption rates in the EU (90, 44%), with only Croatia doing worse.

Still, when it comes to cross-border cooperation with Bulgaria, that figure overcomes 94% (almost equal to the EU28 average), according to the European Commission.

Indeed, since 2007, when both countries joined the Union, cross-border cooperation has played a vital role in the countries’ financial and social growth.

Supported by the European Regional Development Fund, European cross-border cooperation provides regions and stakeholders in Romania and Bulgaria with the possibility to boost the growth potential in their respective border areas through shared management and a common strategy.

Public authorities in the region say that the fine performance is the fruit of the strong cooperation established between bodies on both sides of the border, in the framework of the INTERREG programme, whose
Continued from Page 14

management they share.

Explaining the actual success behind one of these cross-border cooperations, the so-called ‘INCOLAB – Innovative and collaborative management of Natura 2000 sites in the Danube border region’, project manager Delia Fodor told EURACTIV that the key was common belief between both partners.

“The amount of work was extraordinary, everybody working in the project was involved in so many other activities, but this was something we all believed in,” Fodor said.

COMMON BORDERS, COMMON ACTIONS

An actual example of an organisation that helps Romanians and Bulgarians overcome the obstacles and improve their use of EU funding is the Cross-Border Cooperation Regional Office Călărași for Romania-Bulgaria Border [see ‘Further reading’ below].

Established in 2005, it aims to promote cooperation between public authorities on both sides of the Danube River and strengthen the relationship of both communities, by designing and implementing shared cross-border strategies which help the communities unlock their potential growth through cultural and economic collaboration.

The intensive cooperation has enhanced business and social renaissance in Bulgaria and Romania, as well as trade, brokerage events, fairs, exhibitions, promotion of labour mobility and capitalisation of the potential cultural tourism in the Romanian-Bulgarian border region.

“Bulgarians and Romanians are still learning to work together and to speak in a ‘common’ language,” Strahil Karapchanski, deputy mayor for European development of Ruse municipality, admitted to EURACTIV. “However, the experience has so far demonstrated in a very categorical way to both sides that cross-border co-operation brings together success stories and brings long-term benefits to the local communities,” he underlined.

SHADOWS IN THE WATERS

Making the best of EU funding still remains a headache for businesses, managing authorities and project beneficiaries in Romania and Bulgaria. Red tape, delays in the adoption of legislative frameworks and constant regulation changes build ‘walls’ instead of ‘bridges’ between the two countries.

“Although recently modified, the regulations governing the programme are still too large, too detailed and sometimes lead to overwhelming bureaucracy for the implementation team, which sometimes exceeds the effort of the implementation,” Ion Dănuţ Jugăanaru, director of the Constanţa Chamber of Commerce, told EURACTIV.

“However, compared to the way other programs are implemented in Romania, we believe that INTERREG Romania-Bulgaria programs are more approachable, including the bureaucracy, based on a constructive cooperation with programme management authorities”, Jugăanaru underlined.

For the 2014-2020 period, Romania has been allocated €30.84 billion from ESI Funds, together with a national contribution of €5.63 billion. The country has focused on investments to boost jobs and growth, innovation, infrastructure, environment and social inclusion.

For the business representative, though, in the current programming period, the results will not be as good because no measures have been specifically dedicated to boosting business and economic cooperation.

BULGARIA-ROMANIA COOPERATION POST-2020

The preparation of the Municipal Development Plans coincides with the 7-year EU budget, which makes easier for authorities to draft projects that might be funded by the EU.

In the following months, negotiations will begin over the next long-term EU budget and EU Cohesion Policy is a candidate for funding cuts because of the United Kingdom leaving the EU.

From now on, the goal is to ensure that Cohesion policy beyond 2020 will maintain its regional perspective, in terms of investment priorities and action pillars. Regions and cities in Romania and Bulgaria are asking for more transparency and flexibility in the process.

“The effect of the invested funds on people’s lives cannot currently be matched by alternative sources of funding,” Strahil Karapchanski warned.

Countries like Bulgaria or Romania, which strongly benefit from them, but also net donors, the Ruse mayor stressed, should “maintain the weight of Cohesion Policy and regional cooperation in the overall mix of EU policies, ensuring transparency and accountability, efficiency and a clear definition of priorities, based on bottom-up approach.”

Cross-border cooperation projects “generate high European added value and therefore it is important to ensure continuity beyond 2020,” said Călin Chira, in charge of Cohesion Policy at the Permanent Representation of Romania for the EU.
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