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Cross-border Slovak-Ukrainian Cooperation at the Time of Crisis

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Abstract

The events in Ukraine were an impulse for Slovak foreign policy, media, and non-governmental organisations to focus their attention on the eastern neighbour. There was hope that the crises in Ukraine would intensify cross-border cooperation between both countries, especially after pressure from the non-governmental sector. One of the reasons for focusing more attention on Ukraine was a potential threat for Slovakia in terms of the increasing amount of illegal migration and asylum-seeking as a consequence of the military conflict. Despite the modest growth in immigration, the numbers of migrants remain small. On the other hand, bilateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine faced obstacles regarding energy security issues and so-called "big reverse flow" of natural gas. Regardless of the declared support for the intensification of mutual relations and cross-border cooperation, just a few things have changed. Because of decreasing media interest in the situation in Ukraine, there is also a threat that future (cross-border) cooperation projects will encounter trouble with securing support and financing. However, the visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens may be a turning point, boosting regional collaboration and changes in migration patterns.

Key words: Slovakia, Ukraine, cross-border cooperation, visa regime, migration

Abstrakt

Wydarzenia na Ukrainie dały impuls słowackiej polityce zagranicznej, mediom i organizacjom pozarządowym do skoncentrowania uwagi na wschodnim sąsiedzie. Szła za tym nadzieja, że kryzys na Ukrainie doprowadzi, pod presją sektora pozarządowego, zwłaszcza do zacieśnienia współpracy transgraniczną pomiędzy obydwoma krajami. Jednym z powodów zwracania większej uwagi na Ukrainie było potencjalne zagrożenie dla Słowacji w związku z nielegalną imigracją i uchodźstwem jako konsekwencją konfliktu zbrojnego. Pomimo niewielkiego wzrostu imigracji, liczba imigrantów pozostaje znikoma. Z drugiej strony dwustronne relacje pomiędzy Słowacją i Ukrainą doświadczyły przeszkód w tematyce bezpieczeństwa energetycznego i tak zwanego "wielkiego odwrócenia kierunku przepływu" gazu. Niezależnie od zadeklarowanego poparcia dla intensyfikacji relacji dwustronnych i współpracy transgranicznej, jedynie kilka kwestii uległo zmianie. Przez zmniejszające się zainteresowanie mediów sytuacją na Ukrainie, istnieje zagrożenie, że przyszła współpraca transgraniczna pozbawiona będzie wsparcia, w tym finansowego. Jednakże ruch bezwizowy dla obywateli Ukrainy może okazać się punktem zwrotnym, który ożywi regionalną współpracę i wprowadzi zmiany we wzorach migracyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Słowacja, Ukraina, współpraca transgraniczna, reżim wizowy, migracje

Table of content

Introduction	5
Interstate level	6
Interregional level	12
Conclusions	18
References	19

Introduction¹

During a visit to Kiev in April 2014, I spent an evening in a small pub next to Maidan square. One of the TV channels reported that the Czech Republic was providing health care to Ukrainian soldiers and their families, including their transport. The news received a very positive response from the gathered audience. I think that this is one of the best examples of building close ties between two states at a time of crisis. However, the position of Slovakia has been a little different. Although Slovakia is a direct neighbour of Ukraine, its reaction was somewhat slower, not so visible and did not attract such media attention as in the case of other neighbouring countries.

Ukraine was for a long time the “forgotten” neighbour for the majority of the Slovak population. Slovakia fought for the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2013, and several politicians eventually came to support people during the Euromaidan events. For Slovak governments, it is a problematic partner mainly due to two gas crises in 2006 and 2009, energy security and political development and conflict in recent years. The military conflict in the neighbouring country was a shock for a part of society and the political elite. Slovakia is also experiencing an “information war” for the first time in modern history. “Alternative” media sources are providing an “unconventional” point of view not only of events in Ukraine but also of the situation in the world. Successive Slovakian governments are struggling to balance good relations with Ukraine with good relations with the Russian Federation. The issue of reverse flow of gas to Ukraine is the best example of this situation, combining the economic interest of Slovakia, the interest of Ukraine and Russia and pressure from other countries of the European Union.

Ukraine received more attention in the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic as well as the other Visegrad countries because of these factors. For instance, the Visegrad countries agreed to provide sponsorship and assistance to Ukraine with reforms. Slovakia is responsible for energy security and reform of the security sector, the Czech Republic assists with civil society, media and education, Poland covers decentralisation and public finance reform, and Hungary helps in supporting small and medium enterprises as well as DCFTA implementation (Visegradgroup.eu 2014).

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Non-governmental organisations, regional institutions and towns/villages on both sides of the border are the main engine of the cross-border cooperation. They identified and proposed various solutions regarding the visa regime, closer coordination of partial activities, projects, etc. However, these proposals are not always implemented. They are also facing structural, administrative and financial barriers. From this point of view, the situation is not dramatically different from that before the start of the conflict in Ukraine. As highlighted during several regional and local forums, the visa-free regime for Ukraine is one of the essential preconditions for improvement of (not only) cross-border cooperation. In spite of the fact that events in Ukraine were in several areas a catalyst for improvement in mutual relations (conferences, meetings, new plans, and strategies), many issues remain unresolved, or rather “untouched”. This situation raises the crucial question of whether there is any significant change in mutual relations, migration flows or border regime, and if yes, what kind of changes we are witnessing.

This article analyses the most important aspects of mutual relations between Slovakia and Ukraine on the bilateral level as well as cross-border cooperation in 2014-2016. On a bilateral level, I will concentrate on topics such as public opinion in Slovakia regarding events in Ukraine, migration and energy relations between the two countries. On the level of cross-border cooperation, I will focus on the visa regime, obstacles for closer cooperation and recent projects in this area. These factors play a significant role in mutual relations, and it was possible to expect the biggest changes in the previous three years. Although there is not a strict division between the “interstate” and “regional” levels (on the contrary, these levels are interconnected), I made such a division for the sake of greater clarity.

There is practically no academic literature on the topic of changes in relations between Ukraine and Slovakia concerning bilateral and cross-border levels. Several non-governmental organisations and think-tanks have prepared analyses or reports from their projects, or provided recommendations (for the central and local governments), although often only in specific areas. We can also add to this discussion on regional forums, but if we turn our attention to the most current topics, hardly any academic texts are available. This situation represents a substantial limitation for this study, which focuses on reflection and critical analysis of the available materials.

Interstate level

The Slovak Republic repeatedly supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine and peaceful solution of the conflict. The country has several activities in Ukraine connected with the current crisis, such as help for military personnel from Crimea resettled to other parts of Ukraine, secondment of Slovak surgeons, provision of medical supplies and rehabilitation help for people injured during the events of Euromaidan (Karpatská nadácia 2014: 1). Additionally to this, former Slovak minister of finance Ivan Mikloš is one of the leading advisors to the Ukrainian government, and was also considered as Ukrainian vice prime minister and minister of finance (Tóda 2016).

The situation in Ukraine has an immediate effect on bilateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine due to the possibility of migration/refugee flows, issues of reverse flow of gas from Slovakia to Ukraine, which should help Ukraine improve its energy independence, as well as the attitude of the Slovak public toward the crisis and fear of its potential consequences. The public opinion regarding the “Ukrainian events” is still divided (even more today than in 2014), and this situation has an impact on Slovak foreign as well as domestic politics. One of the consequences of the “Ukrainian events” in Slovakia is an “information war”. Several Slovak online media sources provide alternative (conspiracy or pro-Russian information) information. Even Slovak President Andrej Kiska noticed that we are witnessing such a war regarding the situation in Ukraine: “It is evident that this is not just democratic spreading of one’s own opinions, but a paid information campaign” (Aktuality.sk 2015).

The Ukrainian crisis has become – not only in Slovakia – part of a discussion about the character of European states. There is no other discussion in the history of Slovakia – except perhaps membership in the NATO and the EU – with such importance for the country’s domestic policy as well as foreign policy interests (Duleba 2014: 6). This factor is also highlighted by the high sensitivity of the previous and current Slovak government towards public opinion. Two public opinion polls were conducted in June and October 2014. According to these surveys, the general public did not accept the Russian explanation of events, and according to 83% of respondents, Ukrainians have the right to choose their future democratically without the intervention of the Russian Federation. Also, 64% of respondents from Slovakia did not agree that Ukraine should be in the “Russian sphere of influence” (Duleba 2014: 8-9).

The motivation for the steps taken by Slovakia was mainly security and economic interests such as fear of the influx of refugees and the possibility that Slovakia would no longer be a transit country for gas flow from Russia via the territory of Ukraine. The situation

changed in 2014, due to the continuation of the conflict between the Ukrainian and Russian governments regarding gas prices. When Ukraine turned to the European Union and its member states, they offered several solutions. One of these was an interconnection between Slovakia and Ukraine – a so-called small reverse flow. The Slovak prime minister said in 2014 that the pipeline with the reverse flow would increase the energy security of Ukraine and was the “best possible solution from the technical and legal points of view” (SITA 2014). In reality, it was also a political decision after pressure from the European Union. The “small reverse flow” via the Vojany-Uzhgorod pipeline with a capacity of 10 bcm per year started commercial operation in September 2014. However, this solution did not satisfy the Ukrainian government, which asked for a so-called “big reverse flow” with higher capacity to be opened.

Although the mutual relations seemed better than ever before after the presidents’ meeting in May 2015, so-called “big reverse flow” became an issue in 2015. The Ukrainian government suddenly cancelled a meeting about energy security with V4 countries in Ivano-Frankivsk, which the Slovak side had been preparing for several months. After this, the Ukrainian government condemned Slovakia, stating that its agreement with Gazprom violated EU law (Tóda 2015). According to the Ukrainian government, the agreement between Slovak gas transmitter company Eustream and Gazprom hinders “big reverse gas flow” from Slovakia to Ukraine.

Eustream denied these complaints. Slovak energy and policy experts rejected the Ukrainian criticism as well. One of the reasons for this was that reverse flow of gas within the Vojany-Uzhgorod pipeline was used only for half of capacity, due to an increase in Ukrainian gas imports from Russia (Tóda 2015). Nevertheless, other sources stated that Ukraine is using these new connections more often. For instance, Ukraine imported 10.3 billion cubic metres, and the majority of imported gas came through Slovakia (9.7 bcm, 0.5 bcm from Hungary and 0.1 bcm from Poland). The increase in imports from Europe compensated for a drop in the level of gas imported from Russia, which amounted to 6.1 bcm in 2015 (naturalgaseurope.com 2016). This issue not only had a negative impact on the bilateral level, but also influenced the activities of one of the most active non-governmental organisations in the area of cross-border cooperation. It also helps to strengthen the image of the Ukrainian government as a problematic partner. However, a new government came to power in spring 2016, and this affair was subsequently forgotten.

Probably the biggest concern regarding the military conflict in Ukraine was fear of possible Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers. Slovakia was prepared to accept around 10,000 people. Yet this did not happen. There are two possible explanations for this situation: “Firstly, the forced migrants from the Donbas do not have developed migration networks within the EU (as opposed to Russia). Secondly, they still hold out the hope that the conflict is temporary, and that they will be able to return to their places of residence” (Europe without barriers civic initiative 2015: 1).

During previous years, the conflict in Ukraine had little impact on the migration and refugee situation in Slovakia as well as in the European Union in general. Given the enormous scale of internal displacement, the number of Ukrainians who have applied for refugee status in the EU countries (around 10,000 people in 2014, mainly in Poland, Germany, and Sweden) is quite modest (Europe without barriers civic initiative 2015: 1). According to Benč (2015b: 8-9), according to some analyses the majority of Ukrainians applying for refugee status in EU countries have had their applications refused. For example, in the first half of 2015, 74% of requests from Ukrainians were rejected, and only 5% of applicants received refugee status in the EU. Ukrainians do not apply for asylum in Slovakia in high numbers, and only a slight increase is notable. In 2014, they represented only 7.3% of asylum applicants, while the share increased to 12.8% in the first half of 2015 (14 applications) and 19.3% in the first half of 2016 (11 applications) (Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície 2016b: 53). The Slovak Republic granted zero asylum requests from the start of the Ukrainian crisis to Ukrainian citizens, and for the first time, Slovakia granted 12 subsidiary protections to Ukrainians from eastern Ukraine in 2015. However, applicants from Crimea were refused (Hudecová 2016: 67).

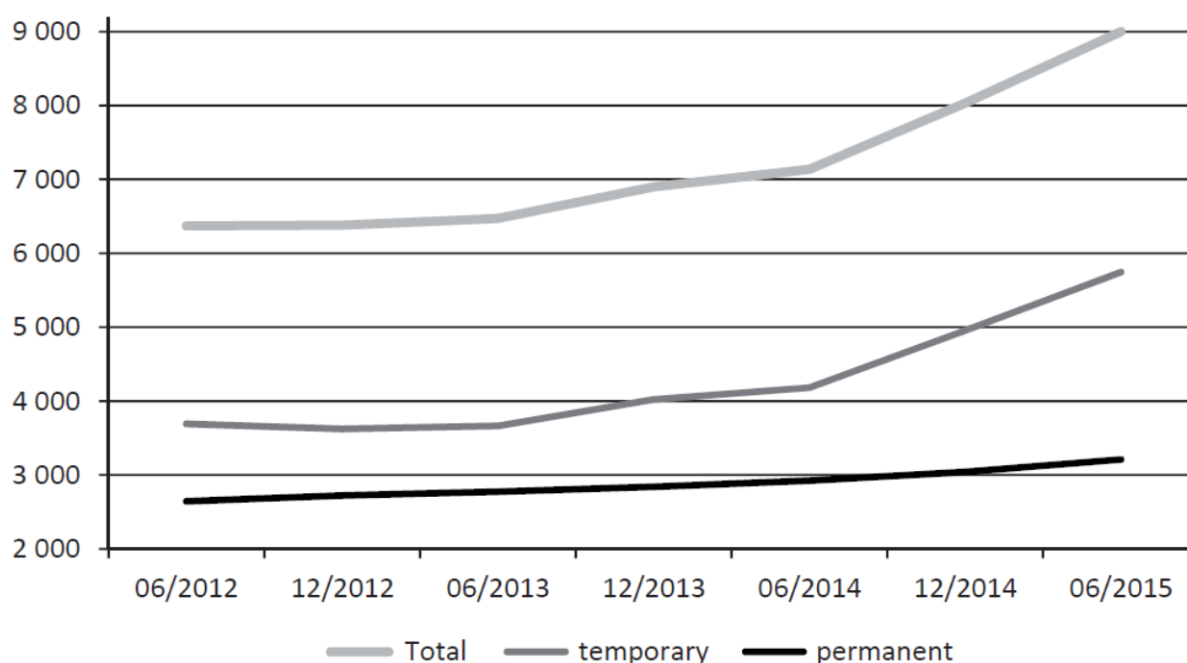
Cooperation with Ukraine, as the only “third country” on the external border of the Slovak Republic and the most important country of origin of migrants, is crucial for Slovakia. The relations in this area are shaped by two external factors: 1. Slovakia as part of the Schengen area, and 2. The visa regime for Ukrainian citizens. Protection of the eastern border dramatically reduced the number of illegal migrants coming to Slovakia from Ukraine, as a bigger issue was Ukrainian citizens’ illegal stay on the territory of Slovakia.

The events in Ukraine had only a minimal impact on the Slovak Republic in the area of labour migrants. Poland (14.3%), Italy (13.2%), Czech Republic (12.9%), Spain (4.5%), Germany (2.4%) and Hungary (1.9%) are the main destination countries for Ukrainians in the European Union (Lendel 2015: 12). According to expert estimates compiled by a Delphi survey, in 2014 there were about 240,000 workers from Ukraine in Poland, about 112,000 in

the Czech Republic, 18,000 in Hungary but only 16,000 in Slovakia. The V4 countries account for approximately 386,000 of them altogether (Lendel 2015: 16). The general attitude towards Ukrainians in the host country was identified by the majority of informants as “more good than bad”, while around 20% considered it to be very good. Such attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants were often reported by people who worked in Slovakia. Overall, the informants assessed the attitudes as better in Visegrad countries than in other EU countries (Sushko, Kulchytska, Koriagina & Pozniak, 2016: 42). The number of Ukrainians living in Slovakia is small when we compare it to other V4 and Central European countries. The number of issued residence permits to Ukrainians is growing, and since the end of 2013, the growth rate is 23.4%. This situation may be a consequence of the crisis in Ukraine (Benč 2015a: 1). More than 11,500 Ukrainians had a valid residence permit in Slovakia in the first half of 2016 (Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície 2016b: 10).

Figure 1.

Valid residence permits for Ukrainian citizens



Source: Benč 2015b: 51

As indicated by Benč (2015a: 2), an unusual situation can be observed in visa applications. Slovakia liberalised (in line with the EU) its visa policy towards Ukraine in 2013, resulting in a high growth in visa applications, reaching 88,095 applications and 87,206

granted visas in 2013 – the highest number ever. In 2014 there was a sharp decrease in the number of visa applications and issued visas, and the same trend continued in 2015 as well as 2016. For instance, in the first half of 2016 more than 18,000 Ukrainians applied for a visa – mostly for the C type – which marks an enormous decrease when we compare it to the first half of 2015 and more than 24,000 applications (Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície 2016b: 19). For many years, Ukrainians have comprised the majority of applicants for Schengen visas at Slovak consulates, representing approximately 50% of the applications and granted visas.

There was a slight decrease in irregular migration between 2013 and 2014, probably caused by the security situation in the territory of Ukraine. A more remarkable decrease (17 percent) has arisen in the field of truck transport (haulage), which was probably caused by the suspension of the transport routes through East Ukraine leading to the Russian Federation (Benč 2014b: 48). We can observe a considerable drop in irregular “green” border crossing when comparing irregular migration in the first half of 2013 with the first half of 2014. This decrease is probably connected to the development of the security situation in the east of Ukraine, where irregular migration routes from the Russian Federation have been disrupted.

According to the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, in 2014 a total of 1.8 million persons legally crossed the Slovak-Ukrainian border. Compared to 2009, this number had decreased by 38.6%. The majority of travellers are currently citizens of the EU, including citizens of Slovakia: EU citizens constituted 71% of all persons who legally crossed the border (Carpathian Euroregion & Authors 2015: 30). Despite the recent annexation of Crimea and armed conflict in the Eastern Ukraine, there are no marked changes in irregular migration movements towards the EU as well as the Slovak Republic. For example, in the first quarter of 2015, 32% fewer Ukrainians illegally staying in the EU were detected compared to the previous quarter (Europe without barriers civic initiative 2015: 3).

Ukrainians constitute a substantial proportion of irregular migrants in Slovakia, mostly overstaying the granted period and being caught on their way back home at the border crossing point, leaving the Schengen area. Looking at the number for 2015 as a whole, we can see that the numbers continue in the previously mentioned trend. At the end of 2015, in Slovakia, more than 10,000 resident permits were granted for citizens of Ukraine. However, just 3365 of these were permanent residence permits. Ukrainians made 46,148 visa applications, with 44,894 being successful (2.72% was rejected). Regarding illegal migration, 867 Ukrainians were caught, as well as 775 with an illegal stay on the territory of the Slovak Republic (Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície 2015).

The crisis in Ukraine had only a limited impact on the flow of persons via the Slovak-Ukrainian border. The number of individuals crossing the border fell by 126,000 between 2012 and 2014. However, there is a much longer-term trend of a decrease in the number of persons crossing the border, the main reason being a decline in those who travel to do shopping on the other side of the border. Major causes of this are equalisation of prices, as well as customs procedures that limit the purchase of “sensitive” goods like cigarettes, alcohol, etc. (Benč 2015b: 54). The rate at which students and both qualified and unqualified Ukrainian workers started officially coming to Slovakia has also increased, with probably more involvement in irregular economic activities there (the “legal stay along with irregular work” model). However, many other migratory patterns related to Ukrainian migration to Slovakia have shown no significant changes over time (Drbohlav & Jaroszewicz 2016: 171).

Interregional level

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) can play a vital role in mutual relations of states as well as any regional initiative. According to Strážay (2010: 1), the shared values and common interests of participating countries enable them to cooperate in a number of areas, while the borders as such are considered to be a linking point, not a divisive one. Cross-border cooperation is therefore aimed at overcoming natural borders, such as rivers or mountain ranges and also political/administrative borders between the countries.

On the other hand, CBC is also likely to develop between regions that are sharply divided by state borders. The Schengen border is one such situation that complicates traditional ties between Eastern Slovakia and Transcarpathia. Cross-border cooperation concerns first of all border areas of individual states, and therefore it has a significant local dimension. Most naturally, the collaboration develops between the regions that are closely connected to each other and are parts of states belonging to the same integration structures.

The socio-economic status of the border areas is a significant factor affecting cross-border cooperation. Eastern Slovakia is one of the most backward regions of Slovakia and the European Union regarding social and economic aspects, lacking infrastructure and with a high share of small villages and settlements. The Transcarpathia region has similar problems. If we look more closely at the situation in the border areas between Slovakia and Ukraine (as well as Hungary), we can find a lot of common signs regarding economic conditions, poor infrastructure, social problems, etc. Using per capita Gross Regional Product (GRP) as the

most comprehensive indicator of economic performance, Transcarpathia seems to be the second least successful Western region of Ukraine. Compared to Ukraine in general, this is the region with the second lowest rate of per capita GRP, and except at the turn of the century, there has been continuous decline between 2003 and 2009 and only a very mild increase since then (Sik & Surányi 2015: 38).

Table 1. Characteristics and data on border region

Fundamental data on border region						
Characteristics	Prešov region	Košice region	Eastern Slovakia	Slovakia	Transcarpathia	Ukraine
Area (km ²)	8,973	6,755	15,728	49,035	12,777	603,628
Population	818,916	794,756	1,613,672	5,415,949	1,256,903	45,426,249
Population density	91.1	117.6	102.5	110.5	97.0	75.5
Number of districts	13	11	24	79	13	490
Number of urban areas	23	17	40	138	30	1,344
Number of villages	665	440	1,105	2,890	579	28,457
Balance of movement	-1.35	-0.58	-0.97	0.44	-0.10	0.07
Natural growth increment	3.23	1.5	2.38	0.51	2.9	-3.5
Unemployment rate	19.35	17.23	18.32	13.5	10.5	8.8
Average monthly income in €	636	758	-	824	209	279

Source: The Strategy for Slovak-Ukrainian Cross-Border Cooperation Development 2020, 2014: 14.

Out of all the neighbouring countries, the least efficient is the cooperation between the Slovak local governments and Ukraine. One of the problems is the reluctant attitude of the local authorities to cooperation with Ukrainian partners due to issues arising in the relations with Ukraine (Mrinska, Smetkowski & Wronka 2012: 181). We can include among these problems also a short border between both countries, with a limited number of crossing points. A further serious issue is the missing support for cross-border cooperation development as a result of inefficient coordination of policies and actors. The fundamental institutional conditions of cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine, including the rules of the border mode functioning for persons, goods, services and capital movement across the common border, are categorically dependent on contractual relations between the EU and Ukraine. Unless the level of relations between the EU and Ukraine changes, no major developments in the institutional terms for Slovakia and Ukraine cross-border cooperation development on bilateral and regional levels can occur (The Strategy for Slovak-Ukrainian Cross-Border Cooperation Development 2014: 14).

At the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014, more than 200 institutions handled with cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine were interviewed regarding the most serious problems and obstacles in mutual cooperation. On the basis of this, a list of the ten most serious problems in this area was drawn up (Benč, 2014a):

- 1) Migration procedures related to Schengen border and visa
- 2) Legal Schengen border crossing: long waiting times, procedures (esp. custom), absence of services at border crossing points
- 3) Absence of joint development and territorial planning in the CBC area
- 4) Poor infrastructure, esp. transport, border crossings
- 5) Different state and administrative systems in the two countries (e.g. big differences in competences of regional and local authorities)
- 6) Different access to external funds for development of CBC area, esp. nonexistence of regional development funds in Ukraine
- 7) Weak or absent harmonisation of Ukrainian legislative with the EU (norms, standards), especially in areas that could help CBC trade and business cooperation
- 8) Weak and non-effective regional institutions that should support CBC (esp. Euroregions, regional governments)
- 9) Absence of regional/local tools for supporting of CBC
- 10) Absence of statistics and information on CBC and on the development of the CBC area.

The current situation directs cross-border cooperation financing to external sources, either the EU budget, Norwegian Financial Mechanism, International Visegrad Fund or other donors subsidising cross-border cooperation. On the other hand, there is a need to create an environment and conditions for countries to originate their own regional and local instruments to support cross-border cooperation (The Strategy for Slovak-Ukrainian Cross-Border Cooperation Development 2014: 43). For instance, from Norway, a financial mechanism has supported 33 projects of cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine totalling 10.8 million euro (Úrad vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2016).

We can find several examples of increased cooperation between different Slovak and Ukrainian institutions after events in East Ukraine. Probably one of the most visible examples of the Slovak Republic's assistance to Ukraine was the provision of recreation for Ukrainian children, and recovery and rehabilitation stays for wounded soldiers (Hudecová 2016: 75). In

2015, for instance, 20 children whose families had been influenced by the situation in East Ukraine spent one week in the town of Šaľa, western Slovakia.

Geographical position is one of the biggest advantages of the Ukrainian region of Transcarpathia, bordering with three Visegrad countries: Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The positive reflections are often connected to the perception that, on the one hand, as the most western part of Ukraine Transcarpathia has always belonged to Europe; on the other hand, that it is a region which has borders with four countries, and therefore has a very good potential to become the infrastructural gate between East and West (Sik & Surányi 2015: 151). Nevertheless, one of the biggest issues is the lack of a framework to put together all neighbouring European Union countries, which significantly reduce and influence cooperation, on the regional level.

A good example is local border traffic, where the uniform specification of the authorised area within a range of 30 or 50 kilometres from the border does not respect the specifics of border regions. In the case of Slovakia and Ukraine, especially, for the reason that it is more convenient for Ukrainians to obtain a visa than a permit for local border traffic, and also because there is only one sizable town (Michalovce) in the defined area on the Slovak side, i.e. such permits are not attractive (Benč 2014b: 107). Another important factor hindering cooperation is the region's poor accessibility and language problems, as a result of which communication issues of various types constitute a serious barrier to territorial cooperation (Mrinska, Smetkowski & Wronka 2012: 196).

Ukraine is one of Slovakia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) project countries as part of the Eastern Partnership programmes, which focuses on support of the democratic and reform process in Ukraine. Slovakia provides its experience with political and economic transformation through financial support of projects prepared by Slovak organisations and implemented in Ukraine (Hudecová 2016: 74). There were several research projects, activities and conferences regarding cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine as well. However, there is a lack of an institution carrying out regular and independent research on Slovak-Ukrainian relations with a focus on cross-border cooperation and issues. Current research activities are carried out on the basis of individual research, with varying quality of outcomes and with a limited application in practice and policy making (SFPA 2016). Cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine is currently primarily determined by external factors and, to a far lesser extent, by local and regional initiatives, opportunities and partnerships. Certain cross-border initiatives have survived in bad as well as good times

through their personal commitment and long-term cross-border partnerships at the local level, but there are just a few examples of these (Benč 2014b: 102).

In recent years there have been only a few larger research projects. One of these was SUREC – the Slovak-Ukrainian Research and Educational Centre. This project focused on six critical dimensions in mutual relations: a) Changing relations between the European Union and Ukraine; b) Issues in relations between Slovakia and Ukraine; c) Underdeveloped cross-border cooperation and regional developments in border regions; d) Insufficient research and scientific capacities; e) Quality of education in border regions; f) Insufficient institutional capacities of think-tanks (SFPA 2016). Within the project, several research activities were carried out, handling topics such as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement; public reform and fiscal decentralisation; tax reform, energy security, civilian-military relations, small border movement. Among other activities are 53 research stays and fellowships for Slovak and Ukrainian experts and students as well as six young researchers training as well as a Summer University for 40 students, and lectures for Slovak and Ukrainian universities and high schools (Benč, 2014a).

Another important project was “Really together – support for the comprehensive development of the Ukrainian countryside”, supported by the Carpathian Foundation. The project focused on non-profit organisations, local institutions, and business activities in countryside communities in the Transcarpathia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Chernivtsi and Cherkasy regions (Karpatská nadácia 2014: 5-6). One of the examples of the more systematic approach towards CBC is the “Slovak-Ukrainian Cross-border Cooperation Strategy before the year 2020” created as a result of the project labelled “Slovak-Ukrainian Cultural Centre – establishment and strengthening of the Presov self-governing region and Transcarpathia region”, supported by the EU and ENPI Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Cross-border Cooperation Programme. The aim of the Strategy proposal is to form the basis for further planning of the development of cross-border cooperation between Transcarpathia and the regional, local governments of Slovakia – i.e. the Prešov and Košice self-governing regions (Strategy for Slovak-Ukrainian Cross-Border Cooperation Development 2014: 4).

There are several reasons for the limited number of mutual projects dealing with cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine. According to Benč (2014b: 102), one of these is the basic institutional conditions for the development of cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine, including rules for a common border regime, movement of persons, goods, services and capital. To a considerable extent, they depend on agreements

between the EU and Ukraine. Without any changes in relations between the EU and Ukraine, no fundamental changes in the institutional conditions for the development of Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border cooperation at bilateral and regional levels may be induced. Another serious complication is the absence of any financial resources on the Ukrainian side (Karpatská nadácia 2014: 6). Due to these reasons, development projects depend on external funds, mainly European cross-border projects.

The visa regime is one of the key factors in the development of cross-border cooperation between Ukraine and the neighbouring Schengen states. It has been asymmetric for the past ten years – the Schengen visa regime for Ukrainian citizens on the one hand and the Ukrainian visa-free regime for citizens of EU states on the other hand. The migration policy and the Schengen border in the currently operating regime are the greatest barriers to cross-border cooperation. This is also emphasised by the dominance of the safety aspect and related investment in border controls that Slovakia implemented before and after its accession to the Schengen area. The result was positive development in the area of illegal migration when the number of illegal migrants caught significantly dropped. At the same time, the crime rate in the border region dropped, along with the number of illegally employed foreigners in Slovakia. However, such successes are not only linked to the Schengen border, but also to other adopted policies (e.g. higher penalties for illegal employment, etc.) (Benč 2014b: 107).

Research within the SUREC regarding border crossing points brings several interesting results. For instance, 45% of all travellers at the Vyšné Nemecké/ Uzhgorod crossing point cross the border once a week and more often, 86% are travelling only to Uzhgorod and bordering villages, 51% of travellers live no more than 50 kilometres from the border and an additional 28% no more than 100 kilometres from the border. At the second crossing point, Slemence/Selmenci (sometimes called the “cigarettes Eden”), 98% of Slovaks stay on the Ukrainian side for an average of 2.5 hours, and 54% visit once per week and more often. The main reason for visits is shopping. Some 94% of travellers live no more than 50 kilometres from the border (Benc, 2014a).

Local border traffic (LBT) was initiated by the border EU/Schengen states as the first tool for the visa regime liberalisation for the inhabitants of Ukrainian border areas. LBT is a special regime for systematic border crossing by residents of border regions crossing borders for social, cultural or family reasons, as well as justified economic reasons (migrant.info.pl 2016). A significant portion of the movements across the border consist of frequent trips made by the local population: visits to relatives and friends, petty trade, shopping, study

programmes of the Ukrainian minority in Slovakia, movements of third-country nationals working/residing in other EU countries returning for the holidays, etc. (Carpathian Euroregion & Authors 2015: 29-30). During the previous six years, radical differences are evident in the number of LBT permits issued by the consulates of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia for Ukrainian inhabitants of border areas. For Slovakia, the number of issued LBT permits is insignificant (Benč 2014b: 41).

According to Benč (2014b: 104), the removal of the visa regime and economic integration of Ukraine with the European Union would cause a significant change in the character of the border between Slovakia and Ukraine as well as the EU's external border. Visa-free travel and trade without tariff and non-tariff measures will encourage the economic growth of the border regions on both sides of the Slovak-Ukrainian border. The implementation of the association agreement will contribute to the harmonisation of the legislative, administrative and business environments between Slovakia and Ukraine, and last but not least, it will encourage reviving the economic development of the regions on both sides of the border. Such expectations are justified by the experience gained from the impact of association agreements with the V4 countries on the economic development of their neighbouring regions lying along the border with Germany and Austria in the last twenty-five years.

Conclusions

The primary goal of this article was to provide an overview of the most significant changes since the start of the “events” in Ukraine in the area of bilateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine, regional cooperation as well as migration and projects. The crises in Ukraine bring the country closer to Slovakia, which provided help in various forms to its neighbour. The media focused more on the Ukrainian events; politicians were mobilised to declare support to their Ukrainian colleagues. Several think-tanks and non-governmental organisations received support for developing their research as well as cross-border cooperation with Ukraine. The most visible support was the opening of the reverse gas flow from Slovakia/European Union to Ukraine, which significantly decreased the latter's dependence on import from the Russian Federation. On the other hand, this area also created tensions between Slovakia and Ukraine (as well as other countries).

(Im)migration was one of the biggest fears connected with the situation in Ukraine. Slovakia was prepared to handle 10,000 refugees, and also used this as an excuse to deny

immigrants/refugees coming from other regions around the world. However, the situation appeared to be different – without any wave of refugees from Ukraine and with just minimal changes regarding asylum or labour, legal and illegal migration.

Despite initial support and attention, the position regarding cross-border cooperation is changing slowly. Liberalisation of the visa regime with Ukraine would remove one of the most significant obstacles to mutual collaboration. The collaboration between “natural” partners from areas close to the border is going to continue in similar ways to before the crisis, with a positive view due to the possibility of cancellation of the visa regime for Ukrainian citizens. Nevertheless, wider regional initiatives will still depend on external funds of finance, and implementation of their recommendations continues to be very limited. The situation in eastern Ukraine became relatively calmer in 2015 and 2016. As a consequence, Slovak authorities, media, and society are gradually losing interest, and the situation is returning “back to normal.” We can see changes regarding more active approaches towards Ukraine and its future. However, the most important aspects are security of the eastern border and risk of migration from Ukraine. Without the direct threats for the Slovak security, we could not expect such attention, financial support and pro-active approach as in the 2013-2014 period.

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