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EU Cohesion Policy and Cross-border Cooperation: Strategies for Sustainable Development of the Carpathian Region

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ABSTRACT

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The study presents the results of an analysis of the conceptual and applied foundations of European cohesion policy, which can be successfully tested in the context of Ukraine, particularly in the Carpathian Euroregion. It has been established that cohesion, interpreted as unity and solidarity, is not a natural process or an objective qualitative characteristic of society. On the contrary, according to the evolutionary theory of development or the dialectical approach, development is the result of struggle and contradictions. The Carpathian Euroregion holds significant importance in the context of sustainable development and cross-border cooperation, as highlighted through the examination of the European Union's cohesion policy. A comprehensive methodological framework was utilized to analyze this policy and its impact on fostering sustainable progress for both the EU and the Carpathian Euroregion. This framework incorporated general scientific and logical methods, including the historical method, analytical method, synthesis, induction, systemic method, generalization, and comparative analysis, which together provided a robust basis for analyzing the development, implementation, and broader context of EU regional policies and their application to the Carpathian Euroregion. In the face of growing environmental and social challenges at national and global levels, the strategic priority must be ensuring sustainable development through the integration and consolidation of efforts. Strengthening all forms of cohesion is crucial for addressing these issues effectively. For the Carpathian Euroregion, this means aligning with the EU's cohesion policy priorities, which include innovation, environmental sustainability, unity, social inclusivity, and proximity to citizens. These principles should serve as strategic imperatives for regional policy in Ukraine, ensuring that the Carpathian Euroregion becomes a model of sustainable and integrated development.

The objective of the EU's "cohesion policy" is to achieve convergence in the socio-economic development of its territories. This policy has been implemented since 1975 with the establishment of the European Regional Development Fund. However, during its initial phase, this fund accounted for only a small percentage of the Community's overall budget (Council of Europe, 1980).

The European Commission, within the framework of the EU's long-term financial plan for 2021–2027, aims to implement a fundamental transformation of the cohesion policy. As a cornerstone of the Union's investment strategy and a clear manifestation of interstate solidarity, this policy is designed to achieve multi-level progress by concentrating efforts on five strategic investment vectors: enhancing Europe's intellectual potential through the stimulation of innovation processes, digital transformation, economic diversification, and the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises (65–85% of the ERDF and CF budget); implementing an extensive environmental policy focused on the decarbonization of the economy and the fulfillment of the Paris Climate Agreement through investments in renewable energy sources and climate adaptation (65–85% of the ERDF and CF budget); establishing an integrated infrastructure network to enhance the interconnectivity of transport and digital systems; advancing the social dimension through the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, with a focus on quality employment, education, inclusion, and healthcare; fostering local strategies and sustainable urban development, bringing citizens closer to the processes of European integration (Crucitti et al., 2023).

Cohesion policy contributes to reaching the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with initiatives such as high-speed internet networks in France, food waste conversion in Italy, eco-villages in the Netherlands, and a homeless shelter in Poland. In the 2021–2027 programming period, the cohesion policy directly supports the attainment of 12 of the objectives, up from 11 in 2014–2020. The policy currently has a direct influence on SDG 5 (gender equality) and provides indirect assistance for others, most notably SDG 10 (reduced inequality). Furthermore, 94% of cohesion policy resources directly help to achieve the SDGs. In 2021–2027, the cohesion policy will provide the majority of its SDG-related resources to SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure): 28%, or EUR 105 billion, which is comparable to the amount allocated for 2014–2020. Research and innovation in SMEs and clean urban transport infrastructure are two of the primary intervention areas; these two sectors get 8% of funds connected to SDG 9 (Cohesion policy promotes progress towards sustainable development goals, 2024).

Cohesion policy will continue to provide investment in all regions, which will still be classified into three categories (less developed, transition, and more developed) (Bachtler et al., 2016). The method for allocating funds remains largely based on GDP per capita, but new criteria have been added (youth unemployment, low education levels, climate change, and reception and integration of migrants) to better reflect local realities. Moreover, the cohesion policy not only directly but also indirectly supports the achievement of other SDGs, particularly SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). By adopting an integrated approach to financing various projects across European regions, the policy fosters social, economic, and territorial

convergence. This emphasizes its significant role in promoting not only economic growth but also the creation of a more equitable society at all levels (European Commission, 2024a).

Cross-border cooperation within the European framework constitutes a fundamental pillar of the European Union's cohesion policy to reduce regional disparities and foster harmonious territorial development. Within the internal European context, it facilitates integration processes by bridging regional divides, while at external borders, it operates as a mechanism for strengthening good neighborly relations, simultaneously addressing strategic objectives related to defense, security, and stability. The financing of both internal and external initiatives is ensured through European Union resources (Bălan, 2022). For instance, it is worth noting that the Carpathian Euroregion, despite its potential as a transnational integrative platform, exhibits a deficit of institutional efficiency in leveraging opportunities for cross-border cooperation to catalyze socio-economic progress in border regions. The absence of a systematic implementation of synergistic interactions results in low effectiveness in enhancing competitiveness, optimizing living standards, and creating prerequisites for endogenous development. Initiatives focused on sectoral integration, including the economy, ecology, cultural studies, and other fields, face challenges due to resource fragmentation and the lack of a coherent strategy. The latest macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region, serving as a coordinating instrument, should emphasize the development of infrastructure projects, the implementation of innovative models for utilizing renewable energy sources, and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, which constitutes the quintessence of the identity of this area (Sytyk et al., 2020).

Literature Review

A significant foundation for the implementation of cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation can be provided by studies conducted within the European Union throughout its existence. Given the multifaceted nature of these concepts, research across various disciplinary fields is of particular interest. For instance, Medeiros et al. (2023) as well as Rauhut et al. (2021) have explored the evolution of approaches to understanding cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation in the EU based on scholarly works and legislative acts in this domain. Soloviova and Fomin (2025) have dedicated their studies to innovative directions in EU cohesion policy after 2020. They highlight that, since 2006, its integration with the Lisbon Strategy, the “Europe 2030” strategy, and the Sustainable Development Strategy has aimed at fostering large-scale structural reforms. Stańczuk-Olejniki and Szacawa (2024a, 2024b) emphasize that despite the unique conditions of the Carpathian macro-region and efforts to establish EUSCARP, the initiative faces geopolitical challenges and has not yet received support from the European Commission. The “Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region” (2018) highlights the importance of cross-border cooperation, which aligns with the objectives of the Carpathian Euroregion in terms of socio-economic development and regional integration.

Sytyk et al. (2020) analyze the formative process and strategic priorities for the development of the Carpathian Euroregion, emphasizing the need for strategies to address unemployment, promote entrepreneurship, and enhance regional development through innovative approaches and support from European Union policies. Natorski (2023), Cotella and Dąbrowski (2021), and Dotti et al. (2024) have substantiated the concept of spatial justice and territorial cohesion in the EU, which has been further developed through a critical analysis of social justice.

Research on territorial cohesion and its implications for regional disparities has enabled scholars to elucidate the essence of spatial justice. Considerable attention has been given to the impact of EU cohesion policy on the Carpathian region by scholars such as Mitrofanenko et al. (2024), Opanashchuk (2024), and Marukhlenko and Kuzmenko (2024). Their studies demonstrate a positive correlation between attitudes toward cohesion policy, European identity, and cross-border cooperation: the anticipated benefits of cohesion policy for citizens and regional development contribute to the formation of both Ukrainian and European identities. At the same time, these studies highlight the value of surveys in assessing the effectiveness of communication strategies in this domain. Overall, the analysis of existing research indicates significant scholarly interest in the issues surrounding EU cohesion policy.

The aim of the study is to identify the impact of the EU cohesion policy on cross-border cooperation mechanisms and strategies for the polycentric, inclusive, and environmentally determined development of the Carpathian region.

Method

The analytical component of the study relies on statistical monitoring using aggregated data from Eurostat and Statista, ensuring the validity of quantitative assessments of regional dynamics. Throughout the research process, various methods were employed, including general scientific and logical methods. The historical method was used to analyze the development and transformation of cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation within the European Union, the establishment of various regional development programs, and the periodization of regional development. The analytical method was applied to work with documents and articles that constitute the legal and documentary framework of EU regional policy research. Synthesis was used to process information sources related to the study's topic. Induction and the systemic method were employed to formulate an overall assessment of cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation in the European Union, particularly in the Carpathian region. Generalization was utilized to establish the broader context of cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation in the EU. Additionally, comparative analysis was applied to examine specific aspects of cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation within the European Union.

Results

Cohesion policy additionally supports local development strategies and provides local authorities with the opportunity to manage funds. Building on the successful pilot activities of 2020–2027, the Commission proposes the creation of interregional innovation investments. Greater emphasis is placed on the need for better communication about the positive results of cohesion policy. Member States and regions have strengthened communication requirements, such as organizing events to inaugurate major EU-funded projects and developing social media plans. The new cohesion policy introduces an annual review (performance assessment) in the form of a political dialogue between authorities and the Commission (Bachtrögler-Unger et al., 2023; Downes & Bachtler, 2019). To evaluate the results of cohesion policy, the European Commission has developed over 40 common indicators covering the following areas: Productive investments; ICT; Transport; Environment; Research and innovation; Energy and climate change; Social infrastructure; Urban development; European territorial cooperation (Keryan et al., 2025).

In this context, it is worth noting that the methodological principles for implementing cohesion policy and establishing cross-border cooperation are based on the following foundations: a robust legislative framework legislation should be complemented by detailed working directives; consistency and transparency are crucial; a long-term approach it is more appropriate to provide assistance to regions undergoing structural changes rather than subsidizing affected economic sectors or industries; supporting investments rather than long-term subsidies; market orientation of regional policy regional policy initiatives are generally aimed at improving the structure of market relations and do not contradict them; spatial orientation the quality and justification of criteria for selecting problem regions; a coordinated political approach, involving national ministries and agencies, regional-level organizations, the private sector, and European Commission structures in addressing regional issues (Coca et al., 2023; Likarchuk et al., 2022a, 2022b; Shyrokykh et al., 2023). For example, throughout 2020, the Committee of the Regions persistently urged EU institutions to be closer to the regions, granting them more powers than before, including direct program management without the participation of national authorities (Medeiros, 2023).

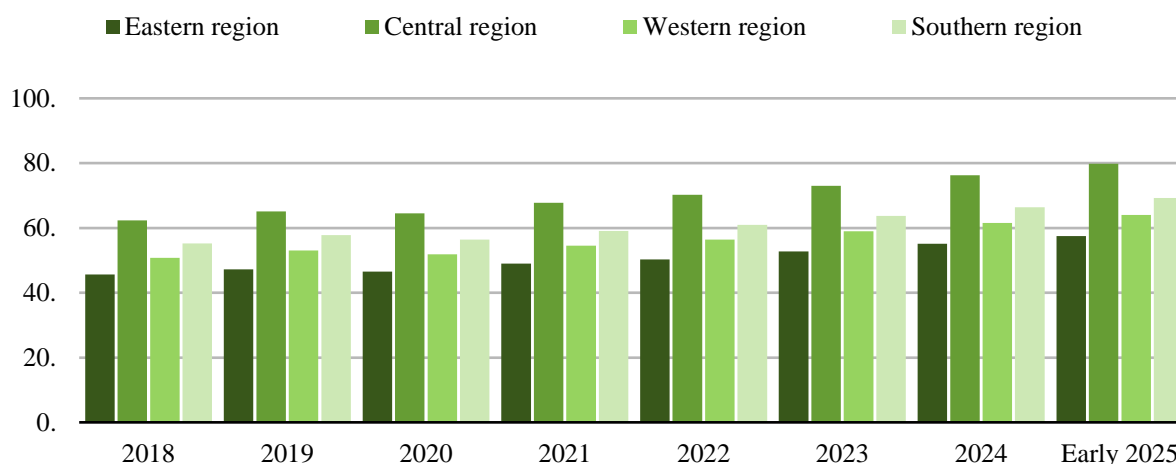
In this context, the Carpathian region, for instance, is presented with opportunities for sustainable development, infrastructure modernization, and effective use of natural potential. The Committee, therefore, aims to eliminate excessive centralization of projects when it comes to funding from the newly created Just Transition Fund and Social Climate Fund. In 2024, Elisa Ferreira, the European Commissioner responsible for implementing “cohesion policy”, stated her intent to “ensure the maximum possible support for regional and local authorities, citizens, and companies...”. She noted that “the spirit of partnership was key in developing this package and will be crucial for its successful implementation” (Molica, 2025; Vdovichen et al., 2023).

It is worth noting that the cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation initiatives have focused on reducing regional development disparities and strengthening economic, social, and territorial unity, taking into account the interests of Ukraine as well (Buriachenko & Logvinov, 2014; 2015). Within the framework of cohesion policy, significant attention is devoted to cross-border cooperation, exemplified through various programs and initiatives such as Interreg. Accordingly, for the period 2021–2027, six Interreg programs will receive nearly €665 million to support cross-border and transnational cooperation among EU member states, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova. Notably, the Interreg NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine program allocates over €66 million for cross-border cooperation with Ukraine, positively contributing to the development of the Carpathian region (Analytical Document, 2023).

For instance, the dynamics of gross regional product (GRP) serve as an indicator of the economic development of each EU region (European Commission, 2025b). The European Parliament has presented GRP data for the Eastern, Central, Western, and Southern regions for the period from 2018 to early 2025, highlighting an increase in economic activity despite a temporary slowdown in 2020 due to the global economic crisis (European Parliament, 2025) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Dynamics of Gross Regional Product (GRP) by Region (2018–2025). Invented indicators (in billion euros)

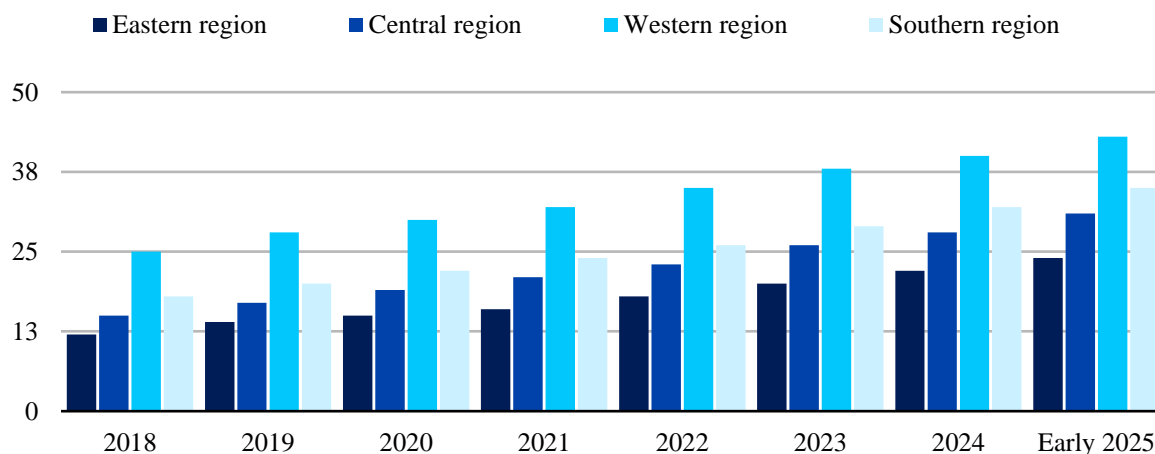


Source: Statistics EU Cohesion Policy (2025)

The presented data indicate active regional participation in such programs, particularly by the Western region (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands), due to its geographical proximity to EU countries (European Commission, 2025b) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Level of Regional Participation in EU Cross-Border Cooperation Programs (2018–2025). Invented indicators (number of projects implemented with EU support)



Source: Statistics EU Cohesion Policy (2025)

The projects of cohesive integration engaged by the European Investment Bank (EIB) aim to eliminate socio-economic disparities by intensifying employment opportunities and educational dispositions, as well as ensuring access to municipal infrastructure, social services, and fostering a healthy, environmentally sustainable Anthropocene (Havlík, 2023a, 2023b). These initiatives contribute to economic expansion, driving balanced regional progress. The priority cohesion areas encompass less developed regions (with a gross domestic product per capita below 75% of the EU average) and transitional regions (with GDP per capita ranging from 75% to 100% of the EU average) (Statistics EU Cohesion Policy, 2025). In its cohesion strategy for 2021–2027, the EIB has committed to accelerating support for these regions. The

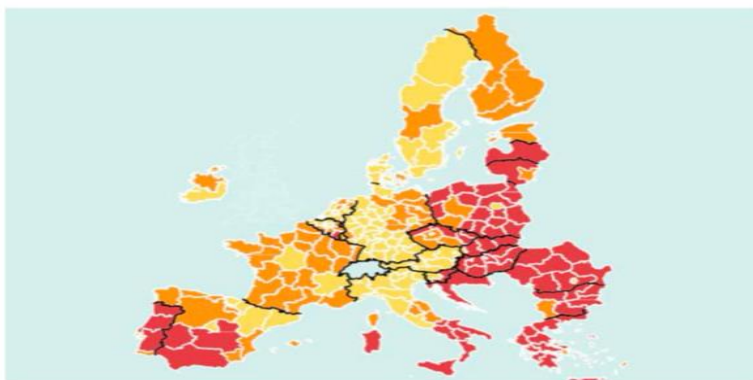
institution plans to allocate at least 40% of its financial portfolio within the EU to projects in cohesion areas during 2023–2024, increasing this share to a minimum of 45% from 2025 onward (European Commission, 2025a; Statistics EU Cohesion Policy, 2025).

The EIB ambitiously aims to scale up the volume of loan financing directed at combating climate change and preserving the natural environment in transitional and less developed regions. Within the first two years of the current seven-year programming period of the European Union, the EIB mobilized financial resources amounting to €44.7 billion for projects in cohesion areas, including €24.8 billion in 2022. In both 2021 and 2022, the share of financial interventions targeting climate and objectives was higher within the framework of cohesion lending than in the EIB's overall financial portfolio (Figure 3) (Statistics EU Cohesion Policy, 2025).

Figure 3

Map for the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy in 2021–2027

- Less developed regions (GDP per capita – less than 75% of the EU-27 average)
- Transition regions (GDP per capita – from 75% to 100% of the EU-27 average)
- More developed regions (GDP per capita – above 100% of the EU-27 average)



Source: Commission Staff Working Document (2023)

Today, the question arises as to what further changes will take place in the “cohesion policy” during 2021–2027 compared to the previous period. EU institutions have pledged fewer inspections and greater flexibility in the application of rules. The reallocation of resources between funds is possible, and even the transfer of project applications from other expenditure categories of the General Budget to the “cohesion” rubric is not excluded. For instance, projects not selected under the Horizon Europe program for scientific and technological development due to their relatively limited financial capacity receive the Seal of Excellence and may be supported under cohesion funding. Unused funds allocated during 2014–2020 are permitted to be “written off” and used during the 2021–2027 period. Allocated but unutilized funds are returned to the budget and may be redirected to other programs. Commitments can be reinstated when the recipient is ready to take them on again.

The European Social Fund has been allocated €99.3 billion for 2021–2027, with its share of the EU's total cohesion policy expenditures increasing from 23% to 27%. These funds are intended to invest in projects aimed at job creation and promoting social inclusion. The fund now focuses not only on EU citizens but also on individuals without European citizenship, such

as those with a migrant background (Regional Economic Accounts, 2025; Statistics EU Cohesion Policy, 2025).

The European Structural and Investment Funds for regional support are allocated through the participation of supranational pan-European, national, regional, and local authorities, as well as social partners and civil society organizations. Each EU Member State prepares a draft Partnership Agreement and an action program (roadmap), which contains information about its regional strategy and a list of proposals. These programs undergo approval at each level (with the European Commission, national and regional authorities). Following this, projects are selected and evaluated. The European Commission then allocates funds, enabling the region's managing authorities to begin spending on the approved programs. Payments are made based on verified expenditures and a series of reports (European Commission, 2025b).

The latest generation of programs for interregional and cross-border cooperation, "Interreg: Removing Cross-Border Barriers and Supporting Interregional Innovative Projects", will help Member States overcome cross-border obstacles and develop joint services (INTERREG, 2025). A new tool is proposed for border regions and Member States to harmonize their legal frameworks the European Cross-Border Mechanism, specifically aimed at creating interregional innovative investments. Under such programs, regions with relevant smart specialisation assets will receive greater support in establishing pan-European clusters in priority sectors such as big data processing, the circular economy, new manufacturing technologies, and cybersecurity (Stańczuk-Olejniki & Szacawa, 2024a).

The geospatial analysis of the implementation area of the Carpathian Strategy encompasses a comprehensive inclusion of administrative-territorial entities characterized by multinational sociopolitical attributes. Within the framework of this study, the subjects of political geography - namely, the Czech Republic, the Republic of Moldova, the Republic of Poland, Romania, the Republic of Serbia, the Slovak Republic, Hungary, and Ukraine – represent a conglomerate of states exhibiting differentiated levels of geoeconomic integration. Territorial differentiation is evident in the variability of institutional engagement across specific regions. In the case of the Czech Republic, the analytical focus incorporates the Moravian-Silesian, Central Moravian, North-Eastern, and South-Eastern macro-regions. Poland, in turn, is represented by the inclusion of the Podkarpackie, Małopolskie, Lubelskie, Świętokrzyskie, and Silesian administrative units, which exhibit deep historical correlations with the Carpathian macro-region. Romania, the Slovak Republic, and Hungary are encompassed in their entirety, reflecting a holistic approach to strategic planning within national borders. In the case of the Republic of Serbia, the study integrates Belgrade, the autonomous province of Vojvodina, as well as the southern and eastern administrative regions, thereby constituting a polycentric developmental structure. Ukraine, for its part, is represented by the Lviv, Zakarpattia, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Chernivtsi regions, which are distinguished by a high degree of cross-border interactions. Collectively, the aforementioned territorial selection aligns with the principles of polycentric development, ecological sustainability, and socio-economic synergy within the Carpathian macro-region (Figure 4).

Figure 4*Carpathian Euroregion map*

It is worth noting that macro-regional strategies represent a key instrument within the system of political mechanisms aimed at shaping strategic approaches to development management. Their significance becomes particularly evident in the context of escalating interregional synergy and integrative processes, which necessitate the development of a unified long-term paradigm for macro-regional cohesion. The foundation of such strategies lies in a multi-level governance system that incorporates a three-stage toolkit: ranging from comprehensive programming to the adaptive implementation of development policies, as well as the integration of preventive and institutional mechanisms to enhance macro-regional agency.

Within the Carpathian Euroregion, collaborative dynamics have been cultivated through transborder initiatives institutionalized within the region's framework, alongside political and economic amalgamation under the aegis of the Visegrád Group and the Three Seas Initiative (Buriachenko et al., 2022). The latter, orchestrated under the auspices of the President of Poland, encompasses a consortium of twelve Central and Eastern European states. Beyond intergovernmental endeavours, regional administrative entities wield significant influence in these processes, notably those embedded within the Carpathian Group of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). This consortium, founded at the behest of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship's leadership, has exhibited pronounced efficacy in championing regional prerogatives. A meticulous appraisal of cooperative prospects underscores the profound potential and practicability of integrating the Carpathian Euroregion into the European Union's macro-regional strategy architecture. This analytical foundation catalysed the ratification of two seminal resolutions by the Committee of the Regions. In December 2019, an endorsement materialized for the conceptualization of a strategy for the European Union Strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCARP), followed in 2020 by the formal delineation of strategic vectors to steer the region's integrative development (Stańczuk-Olejnik & Szacawa, 2024b).

The Carpathian Euroregion, functioning within the framework of the European Union's cohesion policy, emerges as a platform for multi-level governance, where the synergy of institutional mechanisms and interstate cooperation determines the trajectory of sustainable development. The discourse of regional convergence growth necessitates the implementation of polysyllogistic strategies that align with the EU's regulatory framework on territorial

cooperation. The instrumentalization of Eurostructural funds as a catalyst for innovative transformation facilitates the decentralized integration of peripheral loci into a polycentric spatial framework, simultaneously actualizing the issue of anti-regional divergence (Krüger et al., 2024). At the same time, sustainable development, as a strategic paradigm, presupposes a balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and social cohesion, serving as a key determinant for long-term regional stability.

The dynamics of socio-ecological-economic resilience in the Carpathian macro-region are conditioned by a set of politico-administrative measures integrated into the transboundary discourse of cognitive renovation. The conceptualization of ecosystem equilibrium and institutional parity serves as a determinant for the extrapolation of European standards into the sphere of endogenous development, thereby intensifying post-conventional mechanisms for the harmonization of intersectoral cooperation. In this context, sustainable development emerges not merely as a normative benchmark but as a fundamental prerequisite for mitigating negative externalities caused by economic polarization and uneven resource allocation. Trends in the clustering of innovative potential contribute to the multi-vector adaptation of structural initiatives, which, in turn, modify the polyfunctionality of local economic agents within the framework of the co-evolution of regional policies (Krüger et al., 2024). However, the effectiveness of institutional integration processes is significantly correlated with the level of cognitive-legal synchronization of regulatory paradigms at supranational and subnational levels. Emergent challenges, driven by global transformational processes, exogenously implant new algorithms of territorial stratification, often provoking phenomena of imbalanced urbanization and asymmetric resource allocation. In this regard, the necessity arises to rethink established paradigms of spatial planning through the lens of polycentric morphodynamics, integrating adaptive cohesion policies into the metanarrative of regional resilience. The strategic implementation of the concept of sustainable development enables the harmonization of ecological, social, and economic dimensions of regional policy, fostering long-term mechanisms of territorial integration and economic synergy (Matúš, 2020).

The project conceptualization of the macro-regional strategy aimed at the poly-aspectual integration of structural and functional parameters governing the development of the Carpathian Euroregion is grounded in a systemic, multi-vectoral analysis of the socioeconomic, infrastructural, communicational, and ecological-resource attributes of this geospatial formation. The methodological framework of this paradigm is premised upon the synergy of interdisciplinary strategic management, the concept of sustainable development, and the adaptive institutional regulation of cross-border integration processes.

The enhancement of the Carpathian Euroregion's competitiveness is grounded in the comprehensive modernization of its economic structure. Key directions of this process include the expansion of production capacities, the adoption of innovative technologies, and the establishment of multi-level clusters fostering intersectoral cooperation. Core objectives encompass the transformation of traditional economic sectors into advanced high-tech systems, the development of platforms for scientific research, and the integration of agri-industrial networks into efficient value-added chains. The rational utilization of the region's endogenous resources will contribute to reducing socio-economic disparities and strengthening the Carpathian Euroregion's position within global economic dynamics (Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, 2018).

The geo-ecological imperative for the development of the Carpathian Euroregion is aligned with the necessity for a strategic restructuring of natural resource management through the implementation of adaptive eco-regulatory mechanisms aimed at minimizing anthropogenic impacts and incorporating the principles of a circular economy. The global entropy of climatic processes, the accelerated anthropogenic degradation of ecosystems, and the excessive extractive pressures on natural resources necessitate the integration of predictive-analytical models of eco-stabilization grounded in a transdisciplinary symbiosis of natural sciences, socio-humanitarian approaches, and eco-economic paradigms. A comprehensive revitalization of biogeocenoses, large-scale eco-educational initiatives, and cultural-landscape conservation will establish a unique regional identity for the Carpathian Euroregion, serving as a catalyst for eco-touristic attractiveness and ensuring its long-term ecological resilience (Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, 2018).

The transformational discourse on the spatial-economic architecture of the Carpathian Euroregion necessitates an intensification of innovative infrastructure development, facilitating heterogeneous connectivity between structurally-functional nodes of economic activity. Critical dimensions of this process include the progressive reorganization of the transport-logistics complex, the expansion of intellectualized communication arteries, the deployment of technologically adaptive smart infrastructure platforms, and the formation of a unified digital space, integrating multi-vector administrative, economic, and socio-communicative parameters. The digital transgression of public services, the acceleration of technological convergence within entrepreneurial entities, and the formation of a regional IT hub will enhance the mobility of economic agents and attract long-term investment flows into the Carpathian Euroregion (Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, 2018).

The institutional consolidation and poly-institutional coordination of the Carpathian Euroregion are determined by the imperative for harmonization of interregional governance mechanisms, oriented toward the implementation of polycentric strategic planning models and the multi-component integration of administrative-economic regulators. The intensification of poly-institutional dialogue, the decentralization-driven restructuring of governance functions, and the harmonization of regulatory frameworks will facilitate the formation of adaptive urbanistic strategies capable of resiliently responding to socioeconomic and geopolitical fluctuations. A comprehensive modernization of governance paradigms will ensure stability, security extrapolation, and economic dynamism for the Carpathian Euroregion in a long-term perspective (Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, 2018).

For the progressive enhancement of cooperation within the framework of Euroregional formats, Ukraine must anchor its efforts in the national strategy for the development of cross-border cooperation for the 2025–2030 planning horizon. This strategic document is aimed at reducing socio-economic imbalances among Ukraine's regions, elevating the standard of living of its populace, intensifying external economic transactions, innovatively upgrading border-crossing checkpoints in accordance with the regulatory canons of the EU (Gavkalova et al., 2023), implementing infrastructural modernization, fostering the growth of small- and medium-scale enterprises, and activating tourism as well as environmental conservation activities. The SWOT analysis was conducted to perform a multifactorial examination of the potentials and latent threats of the Carpathian Euroregion within the context of its integrative socio-economic, infrastructural, and ecological development. This methodological construct is aimed at

extrapolating the key endogenous and exogenous determinants shaping its transformational potential, as well as identifying structural imbalances that hinder the implementation of sustainable development strategies and adaptive governance. The results of this analysis provide the paradigm for devising strategic guidelines aimed at ensuring the region's synergistic growth and resilience.

The analysis revealed a substantial potential driven by multifaceted biodiversity, an archaic cultural-ethnic matrix, and prospects for the development of ecological tourism, which, under conditions of rational management, can act as a multiplier for sustainable development. At the same time, systemic threats were identified, including the degradation of infrastructural components, progressive depopulation correlated with migration flows, and inefficiencies in governance mechanisms, particularly in the integration of digital technologies. Strategic programs must place particular emphasis on the modernization of transport and logistics infrastructure, the development of eco-centric policies for preserving natural capital, and the stimulation of inclusive civic participation in regional governance processes. [Table 1](#) presents a SWOT-analysis for these programs' landscape.

Table 1

SWOT Analysis – Assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats for the Sustainable Development of the Carpathian Euroregion

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – significant natural potential, including a rich biodiversity fund that encompasses endemic species of flora and fauna with high ecological and scientific value; – centuries-old cultural matrix, represented by ethnic diversity, traditional crafts, and intangible cultural heritage; – availability of EU financial instruments and programs (Interreg, ENI CBC) aimed at integrating infrastructural, environmental, and social initiatives; – ecotourism potential, driven by the presence of protected areas, landscape parks, and resources for active recreation; – a developed agritourism sector, rooted in local gastronomic traditions and sustainable agriculture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – infrastructural inversion caused by the unsatisfactory state of the transport and logistics network; – intensive ecosystem degradation due to illegal exploitation of natural resources, particularly deforestation; – high emigration rates among the working-age population, negatively affecting human capital and demographic structure; – limited integration of digital technologies in governance and service delivery, hindering modernization processes; – high levels of social inertia, obstructing active civic participation in environmental and infrastructural initiatives.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – encouragement of investments in sustainable infrastructure development, including the expansion of railway connectivity and digital networks; – establishment of cross-border educational clusters, focused on training specialists in environmental and social sciences; – promotion of ecotourism routes, engaging local populations in preserving cultural and natural capital; – facilitation of integration processes by concluding new cross-border cooperation agreements within EU programs; – expansion of international grant opportunities to finance long-term initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – escalation of political risks due to the intensification of geopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe; – high competition among regions in Central and Eastern Europe, reducing the attractiveness of the Carpathian region for investors; – insufficient funding at the local level, complicating the implementation of sustainable development strategies; – potential loss of regional landscape uniqueness due to urbanization and unregulated construction.

Thus, the conceptualization of strategic cooperation within the Carpathian Euroregion is acquiring a new paradigmatic morphology, determined by the necessity of polycentric integration and polyfunctional synergy of institutions across a multiscale governance spectrum. The evolution of interregional cooperative mechanisms has initiated the consolidation of administrative-territorial clusters in the format of syncretic declarative acts and

consolidated resolute manifestations, representing the systemic imperative of formulating a macroregional development doctrine.

The articulated vector orientations, institutionalized through the intensification of discursive communication platforms, correlate with the pragmatic implications of the European Union's inclusive integration policy, which determines the formation of a multilateral financial instrumentarium for mobilizing the resource potential of subnational entities. The manifest joint declarations of administrative-territorial entities from Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, explicated within chronologically stratified appeals, illustrate a high level of normative-programmatic regulation of strategic initiatives that determine the further institutionalization of the macroregional strategy of the Carpathian Euroregion and the exponential expansion of financial-investment opportunities in the context of pan-European integration imperatives. The systemic-structural transgression of cooperative paradigms necessitates a transdisciplinary approach to modeling regional policy, prompting the expansion of normative-legal constructs aimed at forming a polycentric configuration of integrative linkages. The polyinstitutional dynamics within the Carpathian Euroregion presuppose adaptive-evolutionary structuring of the financial-economic landscape in accordance with the vectors of continental geoeconomic stratification, crystallizing mechanisms of sustainable inclusive convergence as an ontological prerequisite for macroregional cohesion (Stańczuk-Olejek & Szacawa, 2024b).

Discussion

The practical implementation of Eurointegration initiatives at the subnational level is oriented towards the operationalization of explanatory and informational state policies among the populace and the integration of relevant regulations into the functionality of executive and representative institutions of regional governance. European territorial cooperation represents a pivotal goal of cohesion policy, aimed at the elimination of transboundary conflicts and the synergistic capitalization of the potentials of geospatial entities. Transnational cooperation fosters multifaceted project investments associated with innovative prerogatives and adaptation to “green” and digital transformations.

The European External Action Service states: “During the period 2021–2027, it is expected that coordination between regional policy and the stimulation of investment and innovation activities at the level of the integration group will be strengthened. This is evidenced by the adoption of the State Strategy for Regional Development for 2021–2027, which aims to address the consequences of the war, promote recovery, and facilitate closer integration with the EU” (European External Action Service, 2024). As before, “cohesion policy” will be financed through three main funds – the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the Cohesion Fund. Notably, however, in the scheme on “Regional Development and Cohesion” published by the European Commission, only the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund are included, while support for the Turkish Cypriot community has been added as a separate subject of assistance. At the same time, the activities of the ESF within the framework of regional policy have been combined with migrant integration and placed on an equal footing with the EU's education policy and policies aimed at ensuring human rights and protecting European values.

The Carpathian Euroregion functions as a complex conglomerate of territorial units whose development is characterized by multifaceted dynamics and regional specificity. The economic

potential of the region is shaped by its unique natural resources, rich cultural traditions, and the growing importance of cross-border cooperation. The Polish Carpathian regions exhibit high life expectancy and a significant level of motorization, reflecting gradual alignment with European standards. Hungarian regions stand out for their active development of the tourism sector and investments in innovative technologies, contributing to economic modernization. Slovakia and Romania demonstrate stability in development, relying on the enhancement of infrastructure and cultural exchange. Meanwhile, the mountainous territories of Ukraine are actively integrating into broader European processes through increased tourism appeal and the utilization of their unique natural potential (Sytyk et al., 2020).

To illustrate, the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy of the Republic of Poland, adhering to paradigmatic integration of analytical and expert frameworks, has initiated deeply structured studies. Among these, a prominent project is dedicated to the explication of consolidated actions required from the perspective of Carpathian stakeholders. Under the aegis of Professor Maciej Smętkowski and the Regional Studies Association, a meticulous revision of the strategic relevance of the Carpathian Strategy of 2018 was conducted, with particular emphasis on its correlation with exogenous and endogenous determinants. The epistemological foundation of the study rested on a comparative analysis between EUSCARP and the European Strategy for the Alpine Region, further complemented by systematic stakeholder surveys across the macro-regional spectrum. These research efforts culminated in adapting conceptual frameworks to multi-vectorial conditions, with a focus on identifying initiatives of high implementation feasibility (Stańczuk-Olejniki & Szacawa, 2024b). The study engaged 310 stakeholders representing governmental, regional, municipal authorities, and institutional actors, among whom Priority 2: “Green Carpathians” was identified as the paramount direction, receiving 60% of mentions. Special emphasis was placed on ensuring ecological integrity and maintaining a high-quality natural environment. The other strategic objectives, namely “Cohesive Carpathians” and “Competitive Carpathians”, garnered equivalent attention, underscoring their comparable significance. The territorial evaluation highlighted the exceptional developmental potential of the geographic core of the macro-region, encompassing Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Romania. Conceptually, the KARPAT project aims to establish a dialectical balance between preserving the unique natural, cultural, and anthropogenic capital and stimulating socio-economic dynamics in the context of polycentric challenges (Stańczuk-Olejniki & Szacawa, 2024b). For instance, the European Union has allocated €875.5 million to the Sibiu-Pitești motorway project, which aims to eliminate critical infrastructural bottlenecks and facilitate seamless connectivity across the Carpathian Euroregion. Similarly, an additional €578.4 million has been designated to enhance Romania’s disaster-response capacity, enabling the acquisition of advanced equipment and the implementation of specialized training programs. These initiatives are emblematic of the EU’s broader strategy to foster sustainable growth, regional integration, and improved resilience within member states and neighboring regions. The substantial investments in Romania exemplify the European Union’s commitment to addressing regional disparities, enhancing cross-border cooperation, and embedding resilience into the socio-economic fabric of the Carpathian Euroregion. Such actions highlight the EU’s prioritization of strategic cohesion policies that advance both infrastructural development and preparedness for emergent challenges (European Commission, 2024b).

It should be emphasized that the “Carpathian Peace Park” initiative constitutes a visionary endeavor in transboundary environmental diplomacy within the framework of sustainable development and the integration of the Carpathian Euroregion. This ambitious project focuses on the synergistic integration of natural reserves, including Ukraine's Vyzhnytskyi and Cheremoskyi National Parks, with newly established protected areas in Romania. By optimizing multilateral ecosystemic synergy, the initiative addresses climatic transformations and geopolitical turbulence through adaptive and forward-thinking strategies. Rooted in international environmental law, particularly UNESCO standards, and endorsed by the UN Carpathian Convention, this project functions as a dynamic mechanism for ecological integration. Its objectives include reconfiguring the socio-economic landscape of the region, mitigating anthropogenic pressures, and revitalizing cultural-historical authenticity through multidisciplinary collaboration and politically independent governance (Kholiavchuk et al., 2025).

The effective intervention in addressing the challenges of sustainable development and optimizing living standards in the European Union, as well as in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe geographically and politically contiguous to the Carpathian Euroregion, including Ukraine, necessitates the implementation of multifaceted politico-economic and social strategies with a high degree of synergistic coordination. The institutionalization of international collaboration within the Carpathian region demands the establishment of a permanently functioning integrative mechanism, encompassing governmental emissaries and delegates from cross-border administrative entities, with a particular emphasis on the critical involvement of Ukrainian stakeholders. The formation of a multi-level representation system is imperative for uniting national and regional governance actors, encompassing ministerial-level representation and the inclusion of leaders of cross-border administrative units, notably from Ukrainian regions.

Within the framework of supplementary strategic initiatives, it is essential to devise mechanisms for incorporating civil society organizations into governance structures organized along ethnocultural, confessional, gender-based, and other representational principles (Csáfor, 2006), with explicit consideration of the influence of Ukrainians as a prominent sociocultural community in the region. The introduction of a consensual decision-making principle, combined with a rotational leadership model, will facilitate the minimization of conflict potential and the enhancement of intersectoral coordination efficiency. Moreover, the conceptualization of the Carpathian Center for Cross-Border Cooperation is urgently required, envisioned as an educational-administrative hub dedicated to training highly qualified specialists, including Ukrainians, in the domain of adapting managerial and entrepreneurial approaches to the regulatory and technological standards of the European model.

Conclusion

Cohesion policy constitutes the quintessential investment paradigm of the European Union, functioning as a catalytic mechanism for optimizing beneficiary outcomes across all subnational entities and urban conglomerations within the EU. It facilitates macroeconomic expansion, the productive generation of employment, the enhancement of entrepreneurial competitiveness, the implementation of sustainable development paradigms, and ecologically centric protectionism.

Paramount attention is dedicated to geospatial areas with agrarian predominance, territories undergoing transformative determinants of industrial transcendence, and regions burdened by chronic geographical or demographic impediments. These include hypoanthropogenic northern territories with minimal demographic density, insular clusters, liminal perimeters, and orographically complex zones. The strategic cooperation within the Carpathian Euroregion is undergoing an evolution toward a new paradigmatic morphology, determined by the imperatives of polycentric integration and polyfunctional synergy of institutions across a multiscale governance spectrum. The consolidation of administrative-territorial clusters is being realized through syncretic normative-declarative acts and resolute manifestations, correlating with the systemic necessity of formulating a macroregional development doctrine. Institutionalized strategic planning vectors, articulated through the intensification of discursive communication platforms, determine the polyinstitutional dynamics of financial-economic stratification. This establishes the prerequisites for the adaptive-evolutionary restructuring of the geoeconomic landscape in accordance with continental integration imperatives, crystallizing mechanisms of inclusive convergence as an ontological necessity for macroregional cohesion.

The Carpathian subregional area is postulated as a distinctive experimental-evolutionary laboratory for Euroregionalization processes, within which the synergetic consolidation of multi-actor administrative-territorial entities of the Central European macro-region takes place. This process intensifies intergovernmental and subnational multiplex cooperation across multifunctional vectors and implements a political course of pro-European orientation. The Carpathian regional cluster is extraordinary in at least two respects: first, it constitutes a prototypical institutional formation within the structural framework of the Central and Eastern European geopolitical continuum; second, it is distinguished by a unique model of cooperation ensuring flexibility and adaptability to contemporary challenges.

The cross-border interactional discourse has stimulated the genesis of an integrative consensus and mutual perception among the member states of the Carpathian Euroregion, transcending the cumulative consequences of centuries-long historical trauma. This is particularly relevant given that the Euroregional configuration has been established bypassing ethnocultural parameters. Globalization processes and economic convergence within the Euroregion exhibit a correlative dependence on the transformation of the regional innovation ecosystem, which, in turn, propels Ukraine's adaptation to the regulatory standards of the European Union. This multi-aspectual pursuit of socio-cultural and politico-economic transformations, in harmonious symbiosis with the innovative priorities of socio-economic dynamics, is identified as a promising subject for further academic analysis. The Carpathian Euroregion operates as a polyfunctional conglomerate of territorial units whose development is determined by a complex interplay of multivector dynamics and regional specificity. The economic potential of the macro-region is shaped by the synergy of unique natural resources, rich cultural heritage, and the increasing significance of cross-border cooperation. The Polish Carpathian regions exhibit elevated life expectancy rates and intensive motorization, correlating with gradual convergence toward European standards. Hungarian regions stand out due to the active expansion of the tourism sector and the technological innovation of their economies, while the stable development of Slovakia and Romania relies on infrastructure modernization and intensified cultural exchange. The mountainous territories of Ukraine are integrating into

broader European processes by enhancing their touristic appeal and leveraging their unique natural assets. The conceptual framework of the KARPAT project ensures a dialectical balance between the preservation of natural, cultural, and anthropogenic capital and the stimulation of socio-economic dynamics under conditions of polycentric challenges.

Within the framework of the region's strategic initiatives, emphasis is placed on the transparent integration of ecological and anthropogenic domains, particularly through the "Carpathian Peace Park" project, which represents an innovative approach to transnational environmental diplomacy. This initiative, rooted in the norms of international environmental law, including UNESCO standards and the UN Carpathian Convention, aims not only to reduce anthropogenic pressures but also to revive the cultural and historical authenticity of the region. The institutionalization of a permanent integration mechanism involving multilevel governance actors, from intergovernmental emissaries to delegates of cross-border administrative entities, seeks to optimize political and economic synergy. Special attention is given to the establishment of the Carpathian Center for Cross-Border Cooperation as an educational and administrative hub designed to train specialists capable of adapting managerial and entrepreneurial approaches to the regulatory and technological standards of the European model.

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