

Research for REGI Committee – Cooperation between EU cities and regions with their Ukrainian partners



In 2022, Ukrainian cities had more than 1,000 twinning agreements with foreign partners, while authorities at the regional and district levels had signed nearly 350 such agreements. Territorial cooperation was implemented primarily with local and regional authorities (LRA) from EU countries, and their share in the total number of agreements was over 70%. The dynamics of territorial cooperation with the EU was increasing and related to the geopolitical situation, especially the Russian aggression that

began in 2014. The decentralisation reform in Ukraine, as carried out in 2020, reduced the growth of new agreements (which was also compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic) due to the need for new self-governments, especially districts, to solidify. As a result, there is considerable room for new twinning agreements, including at the local level, as more than half of Ukraine's smaller cities have not formalised international cooperation.

The cooperation of Ukrainian cities and regions with European partners is best developed in neighbourly relations, which, in addition to geographical proximity, is influenced, among other things, by cultural proximity. As a result, by far the largest number of agreements that Ukrainian cities and regions have concluded is with Polish partners. In second place, twinning agreements were signed with cities and regions located in other Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), especially with neighbouring countries Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, but the shares of Lithuania, Czechia, Bulgaria, and Germany were also significant. Agreements with other European Union countries were much less frequent, and among them most were concluded with French and Italian LRAs.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on Cooperation between EU cities and regions with their Ukrainian partners. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3F8gu3y>

The territorial cooperation of Ukrainian cities and regions was very strongly differentiated regionally. Significantly more twinning agreements were concluded by LRAs located in the western and central parts of the country, particularly in border regions, as well as in the vicinity of the capital region (albeit with exceptions). In contrast, cities and regions located in the eastern part of the country were much less involved in territorial cooperation, especially at the local level.

The involvement of Ukrainian LRAs in the activities of European organisations comprised of cities and regions in quantitative terms (i.e., the number of Ukrainian members) is relatively low. To a greater extent, Ukrainian cities and regions have participated in Euroregional cooperation, which in general has been relatively well-developed – at least in formal terms – in CEECs. The importance of this is manifested by the establishment of the first European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) on the external border of the European Union between Hungary and Ukraine.

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes have been a stable form of supporting territorial cooperation between EU countries and Ukraine dating back to 2004's EU enlargement. About EUR 370 million were allocated for the CBC programmes that covered Ukraine in the 2014-2020 programming period, which allowed the implementation of about 270 projects with Ukrainian partners worth 240 million EUR. The level of allocation for the CBC Programmes with Ukraine has been maintained in the current financial perspective. The LRAs' participation in the implementation of these programmes was significant and growing, especially at the local level. The allocation of funds to beneficiaries in the EU and neighbouring countries was balanced, but European partners act as project leaders more often (65%).

In contrast, the possibility was limited for Ukrainian partners to participate in transnational cooperation programmes, as only four regions of Ukraine were covered by the Danube Transnational Programme, which included a total of 14 countries covered by the macro-regional strategy. As a result, Ukraine had a small share in this programme both in terms of the number of projects (c.a. 10%) and budget (c.a. 1%). In addition, Ukrainian LRAs were not covered by European interregional cooperation programmes such as Interreg Europe, URBACT, INTERACT, or ESPON.

In addition to territorial cooperation programmes, there are also a number of programmes and initiatives within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy supporting decentralisation processes in Ukraine that promote knowledge transfer and cooperation at different administrative levels (e.g. U-LEAD with Europe). Other initiatives within the Eastern Partnership also involve Ukrainian LRAs in territorial cooperation, as with energy transition (Covenant of Mayors-East) and economic development (Mayors for Economic Growth). Territorial cooperation is also indirectly supported by EU horizontal programmes on scientific cooperation, youth and student exchanges, the cultural sector, as well as environmental protection and climate change.

Despite the evaluations of individual programmes, due to the diversity of territorial cooperation, it is difficult to point to cross-sectional and comprehensive studies on the effects of cooperation between EU cities and regions and their Ukrainian partners. Nevertheless, it can be noted that cooperation brings significant intangible benefits in the form of growing mutual trust, know-how transfer, and improving institutional capacity, among other matters. These intangible effects are the prerequisite for more substantial benefits, e.g. investment projects related i.a. to connectivity, environmental protection, and quality of life.

Territorial cooperation between the European Union and Ukraine faces a number of barriers related to infrastructural, legal and institutional, economic, financial, social, and physical issues, the most important of which – besides financial – seem to be those related to the administrative-legal, institutional, and socio-cultural spheres. Also, the implementation of projects financed by European funds is fraught with problems including the mismatch between the size of funds and the needs,

along with the lack of adequate know-how on procedures and other administrative and legal barriers.

Assessing the prospects for further development of the EU's territorial cooperation with Ukraine, it should be noted that the Russian aggression against Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022 is, on the one hand, a major setback due to the ongoing hostilities – but on the other hand, it creates opportunities to renew previous partnership relations, as well as to establish new ones. Indeed, these ties can be useful not only in providing humanitarian aid, but they can also meaningfully contribute to post-war reconstruction. European organisations of European cities and regions, including those participating in the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, can play an important role in this process.

Territorial cooperation between the EU and the Ukraine can release additional potential for strengthening the administrative capacities of Ukrainian LRAs, especially through peer learning processes, best-practice exchange, and benchmarking. The LRAs from the EU can support their Ukrainian counterparts in the further democratisation of society, with the goal of bringing Ukraine closer to EU standards. There is a potential in new partnerships between local and regional governments for supporting civil society in Ukraine via developing the tools of social participation and direct involvement of the community in projects being implemented.

Based on the research, the following policy recommendations can be proposed at the strategic level: (1) it is necessary to support existing and new twinning agreements between cities and regions of EU countries and Ukraine (2) the development of territorial cooperation with Ukrainian local governments operating in the eastern part should be pursued, also with the involvement of LRAs from more EU countries than hitherto (3) it is necessary to strengthen Ukraine's transnational cooperation and enable Ukrainian stakeholders to participate in European interregional cooperation programmes (4) the coordination of ongoing territorial cooperation should be supported, including the search for synergies between trans-border and horizontal EU programmes (5) it is necessary to continue efforts to break down the various barriers to territorial cooperation, especially those of an administrative and legal nature (e.g. twinning and TAIEX), institutional (e.g. transparency and the rule of law), as well as socio-cultural (e.g. youth exchanges, foreign language skills) (6) it is necessary to adequately address the role of local governments and territorial cooperation in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction programmes.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3F8gu3y>

More information on Policy Department research for REGI:

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