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ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION (ETC) ON POLAND'S EASTERN BORDER

АНАЛІЗ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОГО ТЕРИТОРІАЛЬНОГО СПІВРОБІТНИЦТВА (ЄТС) НА СХІДНОМУ КОРДОНІ ПОЛЬЩІ

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Abstract. *The article provides a comparative and critical analysis of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes implemented along Poland's eastern border in the financial perspectives 2014-2020 and 2021-2027. The study examines three programmes: Poland-Russia CBC 2014-2020, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine CBC 2014-2020, and Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027. It analyses their objectives, institutional design, thematic priorities, financial allocations, implementation mechanisms and achieved results, while situating them within the broader framework of EU cohesion and neighborhood policy.*

The research demonstrates that while thematic continuity across programming periods reflects the structural needs of peripheral border regions, the geopolitical rupture caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally transformed the operational logic of ETC. Cooperation with Russia and Belarus was suspended, funds were reallocated, and Interreg NEXT evolved from a neighborhood policy instrument into a strategic mechanism supporting Ukraine's reconstruction and European integration.

The findings indicate that ETC programmes significantly mitigate socio-economic marginalisation in peripheral regions yet remain structurally vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. The analysis highlights a critical threshold beyond which local cross-border pragmatism becomes subordinate to macro-political decisions. The article concludes that future ETC architecture at the EU's external borders requires enhanced institutional flexibility, geopolitical conditionality clauses, and reinforced infrastructural resilience.

Key words: *European Territorial Cooperation (ETC); Interreg; cross-border cooperation (CBC); EU cohesion policy; European Neighborhood Policy; Poland-Ukraine relations; Poland-Belarus relations; Poland-Russia relations; geopolitical shocks; border security; regional development; Ukraine reconstruction*

Анотація. *У статті подано порівняльний та критичний аналіз програм Європейського територіального співробітництва (ЄТС), що реалізовувалися вздовж східного кордону Польщі у фінансових перспективах 2014–2020 та 2021–2027 років. Дослідження розглядає три програми: ТКС Польща-Росія 2014–2020, ТКС Польща-Білорусь-Україна 2014–2020 та Interreg NEXT Польща-Україна 2021–2027. Аналізуються їхні цілі, інституційний дизайн, тематичні пріоритети, фінансові асигнування, механізми реалізації та досягнуті результати в ширших рамках політики згуртованості та політики сусідства ЄС. Дослідження демонструє, що хоча тематична спадкоємність у різних періодах програмування відображає структурні потреби периферійних прикордонних регіонів, геополітичний розрив, спричинений повномасштабним вторгненням Росії в Україну у 2022 році, фундаментально змінив операційну логіку ЄТС. Співпраця з Росією та Білоруссю була призупинена, кошти перерозподілені, а програма Interreg NEXT еволюціонувала з інструменту політики сусідства*

на стратегічний механізм підтримки відбудови України та її європейської інтеграції. Результати свідчать про те, що програми ЄТС значно пом'якшують соціально-економічну маргіналізацію в периферійних регіонах, проте залишаються структурно вразливими до геополітичних потрясінь. Аналіз висвітлює критичний поріг, за яким місцевий транскордонний прагматизм стає підпорядкованим макрополітичним рішенням. У статті робиться висновок, що майбутня архітектура ЄТС на зовнішніх кордонах ЄС потребує підвищеної інституційної гнучкості, положень щодо геополітичної обумовленості та посиленої інфраструктурної стійкості.

Ключові слова: Європейське територіальне співробітництво (ЄТС); Interreg; транскордонне співробітництво (ТКС); політика згуртованості ЄС; Європейська політика сусідства; українсько-польські відносини; польсько-білоруські відносини; польсько-російські відносини; геополітичні потрясіння; безпека кордонів; регіональний розвиток; відбудова України.

Introduction. European Territorial Cooperation (ETC), implemented under the Interreg framework, constitutes one of the core instruments of the European Union's cohesion policy and a complementary mechanism of its neighborhood policy. At the EU's external borders, ETC has played a dual role: fostering socio-economic development in peripheral regions and simultaneously functioning as a soft-power instrument aimed at stabilising neighboring territories.

Poland's eastern border represents a particularly complex testing ground for this policy architecture. Historically marked by development asymmetries, institutional divergence and geopolitical sensitivity, it has been the site of intensive cross-border programming involving Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. However, the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine - initiated in 2014 and escalated in February 2022 - has radically altered the political and institutional landscape in which these programmes operate.

This article examines how three successive ETC programmes responded to evolving geopolitical realities: Poland-Russia CBC 2014-2020, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine CBC 2014-2020, and Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027. The analysis moves beyond a descriptive comparison to interrogate a broader structural question: to what extent can cross-border cooperation remain effective and resilient under conditions of geopolitical destabilisation?

The study adopts a comparative institutional perspective, assessing thematic continuity, financial structures, partnership models and implementation outcomes. Attention is paid to the transformation of the EU's eastern border from a space of developmental cooperation into a security-oriented frontier, and to the implications of this shift for the long-term viability of ETC as a policy instrument.

Literature Review. The study is based primarily on official programme documentation, legal acts of the European Union and strategic documents regulating European Territorial Cooperation (ETC), including Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 on Interreg (*European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021*), programme documents of the Poland-Russia CBC 2014-2020, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine CBC 2014-2020 and Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027, as well as communications and reports of the European Commission and the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy. These sources provide the formal institutional and financial framework within which the analysed programmes operate.

In addition, the analysis draws on selected thematic evaluations and impact studies concerning cross-border cooperation at Poland's eastern border (*e.g. Belica et al., 2024; Rybkowski et al., 2024a; 2024b*), as well as earlier assessments of CBC effectiveness (*Olejniczak et al., 2007*). Academic contributions addressing the role of cross-border cooperation in peripheral regions (*Studzinska & Bartnik, 2025; Wolodin & Wyporska, 2025*) and contemporary transformations of borders under geopolitical pressure (*Więckowski, 2025; Dybcio & Litvina, 2025*) complement the institutional perspective.

However, the existing literature reveals a significant limitation. Most scholarly works focus either on earlier programming periods or on general theoretical aspects of cross-border cooperation. There is a clear shortage of up-to-date academic analyses examining the structural consequences of

the 2022 geopolitical rupture, including the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus and the transformation of Interreg NEXT into an instrument supporting Ukraine's reconstruction. The rapidly evolving political context has outpaced the production cycle of peer-reviewed research, resulting in a gap between policy developments and academic reflection.

Consequently, this article relies to a considerable extent on programme documentation, evaluation reports and institutional sources, treating them not merely as descriptive materials but as primary empirical evidence for analysing the ongoing transformation of ETC at the EU's eastern border. The scarcity of comprehensive academic studies addressing the post-2022 reality underscores both the originality and the necessity of the present research.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the evolution, effectiveness and institutional resilience of European Territorial Cooperation programmes implemented along Poland's eastern border in the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 programming periods. The study seeks to assess how geopolitical disruption – particularly the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus after 2022 – has transformed the strategic logic, operational mechanisms and developmental impact of these programmes.

Main results of the research. European Territorial Cooperation (ETC), commonly known as Interreg, is a fundamental pillar of the European Union's cohesion policy, aimed at supporting sustainable development and deepening integration in border regions (*European Parliament & Council of the EU, 2021*). At the external borders of the European Union, in the 2014-2020 financial perspective, ETC was implemented through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). In the current programming period (2021-2027), this function has been taken over by the Interreg NEXT instrument. The main objective of these programmes is to reduce disparities in living standards and to jointly address cross-border challenges such as environmental, public health and security issues (*European Parliament & Council of the EU, 2021*).

A characteristic feature of ETC programmes is their partnership model based on the principle of balance. EU Member States and neighbouring countries participating in the programmes have an equal say in the decision-making process, and projects can only receive funding if they are implemented by partners on both sides of the border. This structure, which requires balanced partnership and joint decision-making, naturally promotes mutual trust and stability in an unstable geopolitical environment. In border regions – historically marked by tensions or significant development disparities – this model of governance cooperation goes beyond mere administrative aspects, becoming a key element in creating lasting cross-border ties between local communities. This is particularly important in the face of dynamic geopolitical changes, where the ability to maintain and deepen trust-based relationships becomes a critical factor for regional stability. Although formally a regional policy instrument, these programmes also serve a broader geopolitical function, acting as a tool of soft power and conflict prevention, which is particularly important at the external borders of the European Union. Their significance therefore goes beyond the implementation of projects, building relationships that are intended to have the potential to withstand political tensions (at least to some extent).

The literature on the subject emphasises that CBC in peripheral border areas along the external borders of the European Union is one of the key factors enabling their socio-economic stabilisation. This need for stabilisation is the main motivation for stakeholders to engage in cooperation with partners outside the EU (*Studzińska & Bartnik, 2025*). CBC is also a fundamental element of sustainable development. By stimulating economic growth in border regions, preserving natural and cultural heritage, improving cross-border accessibility and the quality of roads and border crossings, it contributes to the comprehensive development of regions (*Wolodin & Wyporska, 2025*). Interreg programmes actively encourage entities located near national borders to engage in CBC to address common challenges such as environmental degradation, socio-economic disparities and infrastructure deficiencies, thereby supporting sustainable development (*Wolodin & Wyporska, 2025*). The ETC not only implements development projects but fundamentally enables a more holistic and sustainable form of development that transcends national borders, making it more crisis-resistant and effective.

Regarding the external borders of the European Union, where the geopolitical context is often unstable, the EGTC cooperation model suggests that even in the face of tense high-level political

relations, practical benefits and common challenges at the local level can drive cooperation. This observation is a hypothesis that will be tested later in this article, especially in the context of geopolitical escalation after 2022. The transformation of the function of the Polish Belarusian border from an axis of cooperation to a security barrier after 2021 (migration crisis) and 2022 (war) confirms the cyclical nature of borders. This necessitates a redefinition of ETC programmes from development instruments to crisis management tools, e.g. by including geopolitical clauses in programme documentation (Więckowski, 2025).

The main objective of the Poland-Russia CBC Programme 2014-2020 was to support CBC in the social, environmental, economic and institutional spheres in the Polish Russian border area. The programme was formally approved by the European Commission on 21 September 2016 (Poland-Russia Programme, 2014).

The geographical coverage of the programme included the following main subregions on the Polish side: Suwałki, Elk, Olsztyn, Elbląg, Starogard, Gdańsk and the Tri-City. The adjacent area consisted of two subregions: Słupsk and Białystok. On the Russian side, the programme covered the entire Kaliningrad Oblast (Poland-Russia Programme, 2014).

Figure 1.

Coverage of the Poland-Russia CBC Programme 2014-2020 by region



Source: Poland-Russia Programme. (2014).

The thematic structure of the programme was based on four key thematic objectives, selected from a closed list indicated in the programme document for European Neighborhood Instrument programmes. These were (Poland-Russia Programme, 2014):

- Thematic Objective 3: Promotion of local culture and protection of cultural heritage (priority "Heritage").
- Thematic Objective 6: Environmental protection and climate change adaptation (priority "Environment").
- Thematic Objective 7: Improving the accessibility of regions, developing transport and communication networks and systems (priority "Accessibility").
- Thematic Objective 10: Promotion of border management and border security (priority "Borders").

In the context of the implementation of the thematic objectives, an important phenomenon that reveals the existence of hidden barriers is the fact that no projects were submitted for the thematic objective "Borders" (Dybcio & Litvina, 2025). Although the institutions implementing the programme actively promoted border management and security, the lack of interest from potential beneficiaries in this area suggests fundamental discrepancies between the programme priorities and the actual needs or capacities of local partners or indicate existing political sensitivities that discourage cooperation in this specific area. Given the nature of the partners (Poland as an EU member and the Russian Federation), it is likely that cooperation in security-related areas was

perceived as particularly difficult or less attractive for joint initiatives, even if it was formally included as a priority. This phenomenon points to a deeper, unspoken barrier that went beyond typical administrative obstacles. Even when formal opportunities for cooperation existed, certain areas, such as security and border management, were too sensitive for genuine cooperation with Russia, reflecting a deeper, unspoken political barrier that existed even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This earlier political sensitivity was a harbinger of the eventual severing of ties.

The total budget for the Poland-Russia CBC Programme 2014-2020 was EUR 62,298,477. Funding came from three main sources: the European Regional Development Fund (€20,652,617), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (€20,993,243) and the Russian Federation's contribution to the Programme (€20,652,617). The maximum level of co-financing for eligible project costs was up to 90% (*Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2022b*).

The key mechanism for implementing the programme was the partnership principle. Each project had to involve at least two beneficiaries: one from Poland and one from the Russian Federation. One lead beneficiary was designated from among them to represent the entire partnership (*Dybcio & Litvina, 2025*).

The programme provided for the implementation of various types of projects, including integrated projects (each beneficiary implemented part of the activities on its territory), symmetrical projects (similar activities were implemented in parallel in both countries) and single-country projects (implemented mainly or exclusively in one country, but benefiting both parties). Projects were also classified according to the nature of the activities: infrastructure (involving an infrastructure component worth between EUR 50,000 and EUR 2,500,000, or requiring a building permit), investment (involving fixed assets worth more than EUR 50,000) and soft (not defined as infrastructure or investment) (Formular of ENI CBC Poland-Russia Programme, 2014).

This article is being written in 2025, at a time when cooperation with Russia has been suspended for over three years due to the Russian Ukrainian war. The website of the Programme in question also not functioning. This means that the only source of information about the Programme is previous studies on the subject. On this basis, it can be concluded that a total of 31 projects were selected and co-financed under the Poland-Russia CBC Programme 2014-2020. There is no information on the amount allocated to support Russian beneficiaries. Therefore, the rest of this article only considers the value of projects on the Polish side.

Table1.

Selected data on the Poland-Russia Programme 2014-2020

Thematic objective	Value of funds contracted to Polish beneficiaries [in EUR]	Number of projects co-financed
Heritage	13.4 million	16
Environment	10.1 million	10
Accessibility	12.8 million	5
Borders	-	-
TOTAL	36.3 million	31

Source: Own study based on Rybkowski, 2024b.

The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, which began in February 2022, had immediate and far-reaching consequences for ETC programmes. In March 2022, the European Commission decided to suspend CBC with Russia and Belarus in all programmes, including those implemented under the European Neighborhood Instrument 2014-2020 (*Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 202e*). Poland, as the Managing Authority for the Poland-Russia Programme 2014-2020, in response to this decision and in a gesture of condemnation of the aggression, suspended payments to Russian and Belarusian partners (*Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 202e*).

This decision meant the definitive end of cooperation with Russia and Belarus in programmes for the new programming period 2021-2027. The Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy (MFiPR) in Poland made a strategic decision to redirect the funds that were originally earmarked for the programme with Russia for 2021-2027. The European Regional Development Fund contribution of

EUR 43.24 million has been allocated to other Interreg programmes, including: Lithuania-Poland (EUR 30 million), South Baltic (EUR 10 million) and Poland-Slovakia (EUR 3.24 million) (*Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2023*).

The immediate and decisive redirection of funds from the suspended programme with Russia to other Interreg programmes is more than just an administrative change. This action demonstrates the strategic ability of the European Union and Poland to maintain the idea of CBC within EU structures, while completely severing ties with aggressor states. This marks a strategic shift that transforms development funds into a tool for strengthening alliances and isolating adversaries, highlighting the Union's ability to adapt in the face of crisis.

Polish territories along the border with Russia, especially the Warmian-Masurian Voivodship, are among the least developed and are struggling with depopulation and economic decline. Cooperation with Russia was an important factor in their development (*Interreg Europe, 2025*). After 2022, the situation deteriorated as the sudden halt in tourist traffic and "shopping tourism" had serious consequences for many businesses, leading to economic crises and bankruptcies. In addition, there was a decline in investment, disruption of supply chains and a general sense of uncertainty (*Interreg Europe, 2025*). The full-scale invasion in 2022 led to an outright suspension of cooperation, revealing a critical threshold: while local actors can sustain cooperation to a certain degree of geopolitical turbulence, there is a point at which macro-political decisions overwhelmingly dominate local needs and established ties. This points to the inherent fragility of the ETC in its relations with partners with unstable politics. The militarisation of the Polish-Belarusian border (construction of an electronic barrier on the Bug River in 2024) symbolises the transformation of the programme's concept from a neighbourhood policy to a security policy. This confirms the thesis that the ETC only functions in a stable institutional environment (*Więckowski, 2025*).

The CBC Programme of the European Neighborhood Instrument Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020 (PBU 2014-2020) was officially approved by European Commission Decision No C(2015) 9138 on 17 December 2015 (*ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme, 2023*). Its overarching objective was to support cross-border development processes in the border area between Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. The programme aimed to promote economic and social development, address common challenges in the areas of the environment, public health and safety, and improve the conditions for the mobility of people, goods and capital (*ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme, 2023*).

The programme pursued four main thematic objectives that reflected the identified regional needs:

1. HERITAGE (promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage, including promotion and preservation of natural heritage);
2. ACCESSIBILITY (improving the accessibility of regions, developing sustainable and climate-resilient transport and communication networks and systems, including the development of information and communication technology infrastructure).
3. SECURITY (common challenges around security and safety, including support for the development of health and social services and addressing common security challenges).
4. BORDERS (promotion of border management and border security, mobility and migration management, including support for border efficiency and security, and improvement of border management operations, customs and visa procedures) (*ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme, 2023*).

The geographical scope of the programme was broad and covered NUTS3 units on the Polish side and districts in Belarus and Ukraine. On the Polish side, these were the main subregions: Krosno and Przemyśl (Podkarpackie Voivodship), Białystok, Łomża and Suwałki (Podlaskie Voivodship), Biała Podlaska and Chełm-Zamość (Lubelskie Voivodship), Ostrołęka-Siedlce (Mazowieckie Voivodship). The adjacent subregions were Rzeszów and Tarnobrzeg (Podkarpackie Voivodship) and Puławy and Lublin (Lubelskie Voivodship). On the Belarusian side, the main area consisted of the Grodno and Brest regions, and the adjacent area consisted of the Minsk region (including the city of Minsk) and the Gomel region. In Ukraine, the main area covered the Lviv, Volyn and Zakarpattia regions, while the adjacent area covered the Rivne, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk regions.

Figure 1.*Coverage of the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine CBC Programme 2014-2020*

Source: ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, 2023.

The programme's broad geographical scope, covering regions with varying levels of economic development and natural resources, was both an asset and a challenge. Although this breadth was intended to promote comprehensive cross-border development, it also made it difficult to tailor interventions precisely to specific regional needs. For example, an evaluation carried out for the 2004-2006 Programme revealed significant economic gaps between the Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian sides, as well as differences in entrepreneurial activity and the R&D sector (*Olejniczak et al., 2007*). Macroeconomic indicators for the area covered by the support on the Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian sides remain diverse. This diversity, which persists despite the passage of time, suggests that a uniform approach, even within thematic priorities, may not have been optimally effective in such a heterogeneous area, potentially leading to varying outcomes and levels of satisfaction among partners from different countries.

The budget of the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine CBC Programme for 2014-2020 amounted to EUR 183 million, with the possibility of co-financing projects up to 90% of eligible cost (*ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme, 2023*).

The key mechanism for implementing the programme was the Cross-Border Cooperation Strategy (CBCS), adopted in May 2014 at Lublin Castle. This document was innovative, as it was the first of its kind to be developed jointly by three countries, and was an extension of the Lublin Province Development Strategy for 2014-2020 (with a perspective until 2030). The CBCS aimed to promote cooperation between local authorities and socio-economic partners and to assist partners from Ukraine and Belarus in implementing joint cross-border projects (*Onet.pl, 2023*). To effectively implement the CBCS, a cross-border network of Contact Points was established. These points operated in each of the regions covered by the Strategy (Lviv and Volyn Oblast in Ukraine and Brest Oblast in Belarus). Their main task was to ensure the flow of information and the organisation of work within the network, as well as to support the establishment of cross-border partnerships.

The scope of the CBC Strategy indicates a high level of ambition and a progressive approach to the management of CBC, but in practice, significant challenges were encountered. First, the potential offered to the regions by their border location has not been fully exploited. This discrepancy between innovative strategic intentions and practical difficulties in implementation may be due to

barriers such as administrative inefficiency, cognitive distances or political sensitivities. The literature also points to bureaucratic obstacles, complex regulatory frameworks, and differences in legal systems and standards as factors complicating joint projects. Political differences between Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine led to divergent priorities and approaches, particularly in the context of Belarus' political system and its relations with the European Union. Overcoming these barriers required dialogue and diplomacy (*Onet.pl, 2023*). This suggests a gap between strategic planning and operational reality and highlights the limits of ECT's soft power in authoritarian contexts, where its effectiveness is severely limited when one of the partners prioritises political control.

The 2014-2020 Poland-Belarus-Ukraine programme pursued its objectives through a series of projects falling under four priorities. In total, the funds allocated to these projects amounted to EUR 169.9 million, with the largest share (almost one third) going to the priority related to accessibility. However, the largest number of projects was implemented for the purpose of heritage – as many as 93 projects out of 158 implemented. This indicates the significant importance of this issue for the parties receiving support. The number of projects and the value of funds allocated to support beneficiaries are presented in the table below.

Table2.

Selected data on the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme 2014-2020

Thematic objective	Value of funds contracted to beneficiaries [in EUR]	Number of projects co-financed
HERITAGE	38.5	93
ACCESSIBILITY	55.9 million	21
SAFETY	44.3 million	30
BORDERS	31.2 million	14
TOTAL	169.9 million	158

Source: Own study based on Rybkowski, 2024a.

Despite its achievements, the programme faced significant challenges. The border and border regime were the most important barriers to cross-border interaction (*ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Programme, 2023*). This applied to both the physical infrastructure and the procedures at border crossings. The scientific literature further emphasises that the lack of modernisation of road and rail infrastructure on the Ukrainian side limits the capacity of border crossings, which poses a significant challenge to cross-border mobility.

Low satisfaction with institutional cooperation was particularly evident on the Polish Belarusian border, although the potential for expanding cooperation between public authorities and non-governmental organisations was also observed on the Polish Ukrainian border (*Osikowicz, 2017*). Cultural projects in the 2014-2020 PBU programme (e.g. Polish Belarusian borderland culture meetings involving the municipality of Tuczna (Poland) and the villages of Damaczów and Klejniki (Belarus) served as "symbolic bridges" between communities. The neutrality of the cultural issues addressed in the project, such as folklore and folk games, made it possible to avoid Polish Belarusian tensions and build trust between local communities. It is worth mentioning, however, that there were more activities of this type on the Polish Ukrainian border, where they effectively helped to overcome historical grievances. On the other hand, the lack of projects concerning similar "neutral spaces" on the border with Belarus explains the low effectiveness of social cooperation – administrative projects that did not involve local communities prevailed.

Border infrastructure, both physical and procedural, was therefore a critical factor in the success or failure of the programme. Even with significant funding and clearly defined thematic priorities, bottlenecks at the border itself could seriously limit the overall impact and effectiveness of cooperation. The effectiveness of 'soft' projects, such as cultural exchanges or training, could be undermined if fundamental infrastructure challenges were not adequately addressed. Beyond physical barriers, socio-cultural barriers such as historical grievances, stereotypes and language differences could hinder effective communication and trust-building. The combination of these two types of barriers, exacerbated by geopolitical events, creates a complex network of obstacles. Addressing 'soft'

barriers (through trust-building) becomes more difficult, if not impossible, when 'hard' barriers (physical infrastructure, security regimes) are actively reinforced due to political tensions. In such a situation, the physical border becomes a tangible reflection of deep political and social divisions.

As in the case of the Poland-Russia Programme, cooperation with Belarus under the PBU Programme 2014-2020 was suspended in March 2022. This decision was a direct response to the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, in which Belarus played a supporting role. The suspension of payments to Belarusian partners was intended to protect the interests of Polish beneficiaries who were implementing cross-border projects before the outbreak of the war. Poland, in cooperation with the European Commission, actively sought solutions that would allow the planned activities on the Polish side of the border to be completed without the further participation of entities from Belarus.

The immediate and comprehensive suspension of cooperation with Belarus signals a profound and probably irreversible change in European Union policy. Although the 2014-2020 programme was aimed at building ties, the geopolitical reality forced a sudden interruption of these activities. This not only affected the projects being implemented at the time, but also fundamentally redefines future engagement. The redirection of funds and a clear focus on Ukraine in the current programming period (Interreg NEXT) demonstrates a clear strategic choice to consolidate cooperation with democratic partners, effectively isolating Belarus from future EU-funded cross-border initiatives. This has long-term consequences for the development trajectory of the border regions of Poland and Belarus and for the nature of their future interactions.

The Bug River, which forms a natural border between Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, has been the site of growing political tensions and a humanitarian crisis since 2022 (*Dybcio & Litvina, 2025*). In response to the Belarusian government's support for illegal migration, Poland began construction of a 172-kilometre electronic barrier across the river in September 2024, prioritising border security over environmental concerns (*Dybcio & Litvina, 2025*). The construction of the dam on the Bug (2023-2024) violated four Natura 2000 protected areas, fragmenting the migration corridors of animal species (*State Council for Nature Conservation, 2025*). The Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine programme attempts to compensate for these losses through "green infrastructure" projects, but their effectiveness is limited due to a lack of coordination with Belarus. This confirms the thesis that ETC cannot be effective in conditions of unilateral action in the border area. This transformation of the border from an area of cooperation (albeit difficult) to a place of active geopolitical confrontation and militarisation represents a fundamental change in relations, moving from a 'neighbourhood policy' to a 'security border'.

The Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027 Programme is a direct continuation of the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020 Programme. However, the key change in the new perspective is the composition of the partners, which is a direct consequence of the changing geopolitical context. The exclusion of Belarus from the programme reflects the strategic decisions taken after the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The overarching and new programme challenge is to support the reconstruction of Ukraine after the end of Russian aggression (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*). This transformation of the programme from a neighbourhood instrument to a tool for reconstruction and solidarity is more than just an administrative change. It is a profound redefinition of the programme's purpose. Interreg NEXT is transforming from a general cross-border development tool into a direct instrument for responding to crises, supporting post-conflict reconstruction and demonstrating the solidarity of the European Union. This shift in priorities reflects the urgent and unprecedented needs arising from the war, demonstrating the European Union's ability to adapt its funding mechanisms to immediate geopolitical imperatives, moving beyond the traditional framework of regional development towards crisis response and long-term stabilisation. The Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine programme is an example of how the EGTC can act as a flexible crisis response instrument, capable of rapidly reorienting its objectives and resources in response to dramatic geopolitical changes.

Beyond the priority of rebuilding Ukraine, the Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme 2021-2027 continues and develops cooperation in other key areas. These include environmental protection, climate change adaptation, ensuring access to water and nature conservation. The programme also aims to improve access to healthcare, promote the sustainable use of the tourist

attractions of the Polish Ukrainian border region, develop cooperation between administrations and communities at various levels, improve the functioning and protection of the Polish Ukrainian border, and increase cross-border mobility within the so-called Solidarity Corridors between the EU and Ukraine.

The programme focuses on six main thematic priorities (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*):

- **Environment:** including adaptation to climate change, disaster risk prevention, access to water, sustainable water management, nature and biodiversity protection.
- **Health:** ensuring equal access to healthcare, supporting the resilience of healthcare systems.
- **Tourism:** strengthening the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development.
- **Cooperation:** increasing the efficiency of public administration, building mutual trust through people-to-people contacts.
- **Borders:** other actions for a safer and more secure Europe.
- **Accessibility:** developing and improving sustainable, climate-resilient, smart and intermodal mobility.

The geographical coverage of the programme on the Polish side includes the Voivodships of Podlaskie, Mazowieckie (only the subregions of Ostrołęka and Siedlce), Lubelskie and Podkarpackie. On the Ukrainian side, it covers the regions of Volyn, Lviv, Zakarpattia, Rivne, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk.

The total area of the programme is 177,128 km², of which 57% is located in Ukraine. This geographical concentration, in contrast to the broader coverage of the previous PBU programme, is a direct response to new challenges. Focusing exclusively on Poland and Ukraine, combined with the clear objective of rebuilding Ukraine, allows for a more concentrated and potentially more effective allocation of resources and efforts. This reflects a strategic decision to prioritise depth of cooperation and direct support where it is most urgently needed, rather than spreading resources across a wider, currently politically divided border area. Such concentration can lead to more tangible and measurable results in the designated areas.

The budget for the Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027 Programme is EUR 262 million, of which EUR 235.9 million comes from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The maximum level of project co-financing is 90% of eligible costs (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*).

The first call for proposals under the programme took place in mid-2023 and concerned the priorities "Health" and "Environment". The Programme Monitoring Committee, as the key decision-making body, approved the results of the call for proposals under the Health priority in 2023. Out of 115 applications submitted, the Committee decided to fund 20 projects, while creating a reserve list of 28 projects for possible contracting in the future. Due to the very high quality of the applications submitted, the Monitoring Committee decided to transfer EUR 2.55 million from the Cooperation priority (specific objective 6.2) to the Health priority. In addition, to enable the financing of a larger number of projects, the maximum level of co-financing was reduced from 90% to 83%. The total amount of co-financing allocated to the "Health" priority was EUR 39.92 million. The selection of projects under the Environment priority was planned for April 2024, also with a budget increased by EUR 2.55 million (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 3rd Meeting 2023*).

Figure. 2.

Coverage of the Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme 2021-2027



Source: <https://pl-ua.eu/pl/pages/578> (accessed on 29 May 2025).

Work is also underway on the preparation of non-competitive projects.

The Monitoring Committee's decision to reallocate funds between priorities and reduce the co-financing rate (from 90% to 83%) to finance a larger number of high-quality projects demonstrates a significant degree of programme flexibility. This is a key adaptation mechanism, particularly in the context of Ukraine's reconstruction, where needs are enormous and project quality can vary. It allows the programme to maximise its impact by supporting a larger number of viable initiatives, even if this means a slight reduction in the individual grant percentage. This suggests a pragmatic approach to resource allocation, prioritising breadth of impact over depth of funding for individual projects.

Table 3.

Selected data on the Poland-Ukraine Programme 2021-2027

Priority	Value of funds contracted to beneficiaries [in EUR]	Number of projects co-financed
Environment	90.2 million	45
Health	53.3 million	24
Tourism	3.9 million	1
Cooperation	0	0
Borders	0	0
Availability	0	0

Source: Own study (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021).

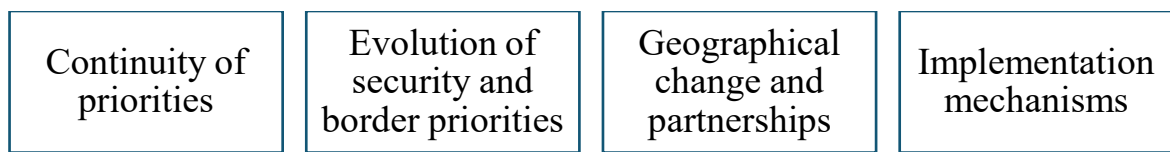
The Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine programme plays a strategic and key role in supporting Ukraine's reconstruction, which is clearly highlighted as one of its main objectives. Its activities go beyond the traditional framework of CBC, becoming an instrument of direct support in the face of the effects of war. Programme activities, such as those covering health protection (e.g. expansion of hospital infrastructure and purchase of medical equipment), environmental protection, as well as improving the functioning and protection of the Polish Ukrainian border and increasing cross-border mobility within the Solidarity Corridors, directly contribute to the stabilisation and long-term development of Ukraine.

An example of a specific project implemented under this programme is "Improving safety in the border area between Poland and Ukraine in the field of rescue services". This project, implemented by the City of Augustów as the main partner and the Main Branch of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in the Volyn Oblast, has a budget of over EUR 1.7 million. It includes the purchase of specialised equipment for fire brigades, the organisation of training courses for firefighters in Poland and Ukraine, as well as conferences and family picnics (*City of Augustów,*

2024). This is a concrete example of how the programme responds to urgent needs around security and infrastructure.

The clear focus on the reconstruction of Ukraine and the inclusion of the "Solidarity Corridors" (Ministry of Finance, 2022) also raises the status of the Interreg NEXT programme beyond that of a typical CBC programme. It positions it as a strategic element and catalyst for Ukraine's broader European integration. By addressing immediate post-conflict needs (health, environment) while improving infrastructure and mobility, the programme lays the fundamental groundwork for future economic and social ties, in line with the long-term vision of Ukraine's potential membership of the European Union. This marks a transition from simple "neighbourly" cooperation to a more deeply integrated, future-oriented partnership.

An analysis of three ETC programmes on the EU's eastern border (Poland-Russia 2014-2020, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020, Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027) reveals both elements of continuity and significant developments, particularly in response to the changing geopolitical context. The following aspects were compared in this section:



All three programmes consistently focused on similar thematic areas, reflecting the fundamental needs of border regions. Socio-economic development, environmental and cultural heritage protection, and improving the accessibility of regions were constant elements. Some of the objectives were present in both the 2014-2020 programmes and the new 2021-2027 perspective. The continuity of thematic priorities across all programmes and periods indicates the enduring, fundamental needs of border regions that transcend political changes. The table below presents the priorities that were present in each of the programmes analysed.

Table 4.

Priorities present in the analysed programmes

Priorities	POLAND-BELARUS-UKRAINE 2014-2020	POLAND-RUSSIA 2014-2020	POLAND-UKRAINE 2021-2027
Security	✓		
Heritage	✓	✓	
Accessibility	✓	✓	✓
Borders	✓	✓	✓
Environment		✓	✓
Tourism			✓
Cooperation			✓
Health			✓

Source: own study based on: Rybkowski et al., 2024a; Rybkowski et al. 2024b.

The 2014-2020 programmes included the priorities of Borders and Security. However, in the case of the Poland-Russia Programme, there was a lack of projects submitted around Borders, which indicated difficulties in achieving this objective. In the Interreg NEXT 2021-2027 programme, the priorities of Borders and Cooperation remain, but with a new, clear emphasis on improving operations and protecting the Polish Ukrainian border, as well as increasing cross-border mobility within the Solidarity Corridors. This change reflects the urgent security and logistical needs in the context of the war in Ukraine.

All programmes are based on the fundamental principle of cross-border partnership, requiring the participation of at least two beneficiaries from different countries. The new Interreg NEXT perspective also introduces a more diversified approach to project types, covering strategic large infrastructure projects, regular projects and small project funds, with the aim of optimising the

allocation of funds.

The most significant evolution is the transition from trilateral cooperation (Poland-Belarus-Ukraine) and bilateral cooperation (Poland-Russia) to exclusively bilateral cooperation between Poland and Ukraine in the new financial perspective. This is a direct consequence of the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus after 2022.

The suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus in 2022 and the subsequent transformation of the Interreg NEXT programme to exclude them reveal the extreme sensitivity of partnerships to geopolitical shocks. This means that while the problems in border regions remain unchanged, the actors involved in solving them are highly dependent on the broader international political climate. This highlights the critical distinction between the stability of regions' development needs and the instability of political alliances. In this context, the border acts as a barometer of geopolitical change, reflecting tensions and reorientations in international politics.

The key parameters of the individual programmes analysed are indicated below.

Table 5.

Comparison of key parameters of the ETC programmes analysed

PARAMETER	POLAND-RUSSIA 2014-2020	POLAND-BELARUS-UKRAINE 2014-2020	POLAND-UKRAINE 2021-2027
Programming period	2014-2020	2014-2020	2021-2027
Total budget (EUR)	62.3 million	183 million	262 million
Geographic coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poland (Pomeranian, Warmian-Masurian, Podlaskie) • Russia (Kaliningrad Oblast) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poland (Podlaskie, Mazowieckie – part, Lubelskie, Podkarpackie) • Ukraine (Lviv, Volyn, Zakarpattia, Rivne, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk) • Belarus (Grodno, Brest, Minsk, Gomel) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poland (Podlaskie, Mazowieckie - part, Lubelskie, Podkarpackie) • Ukraine (Lviv, Volyn, Zakarpattia, Rivne, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk)
Main Thematic Objectives/Priorities	Heritage, Environment, Accessibility, Borders	Heritage, Accessibility, Security, Borders	Environment, Health, Tourism, Cooperation, Borders, Accessibility
Managing Authority	Ministry of Development, then Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy of the Republic of Poland	Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy of the Republic of Poland	Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy of the Republic of Poland
Partnership	At least 1 entity from Russia and 1 entity from Poland	At least 2 entities from different countries: Poland, Belarus and/or Ukraine	At least 1 entity from Ukraine and 1 entity from Poland
Status	Suspended (from March 2022)	Suspended with Belarus (from 03.2022)	In progress

Source: Own work based on: Rybkowski et al., 2024a; Rybkowski et al. 2024b.

Experience gained from the implementation of ETC programmes on the eastern border of the European Union allows for the identification of the main challenges and factors supporting effective CBC.

An assessment of the impact of ETC programmes in the 2014-2020 financial perspective on the development of the regions covered by the support allows us to conclude that, despite the existing barriers, cross-border initiatives have played a significant role in mitigating the social and economic marginalisation of peripheral areas, particularly in the voivodships of Podlaskie, Lubelskie and Warmian-Masurian, through investments in infrastructure, promotion of cultural heritage and the

development of tourism of peripheral areas, particularly in the provinces of Podlaskie, Lubelskie and Warmian-Masurian, through investments in infrastructure, promotion of cultural heritage and stimulation of local entrepreneurship (Belica et al., 2024). This is confirmed by the literature on the subject, which indicates that CBC is considered a key factor in the socio-economic stabilisation of peripheral border areas (Studzińska & Bartnik, 2025). This is despite the existence of several barriers, such as the negative impact of the border itself or, in the case of non-EU partners, the limited decision-making capacity of local authorities. By supporting joint initiatives, ETC programmes contribute to alleviating marginalisation and stimulating local development (Studzińska & Bartnik, 2025).

Among the limitations to CBC are administrative barriers, differences in legal systems between partners, and difficulties arising from the unstable geopolitical context, which have partially hampered the full exploitation of the potential of these programmes (Belica et al., 2024). An analysis of materials available on the website of the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and European Commission reports confirms that investments in the modernisation of border crossings under the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020 programme contributed to shorter clearance times, which had a positive impact on trade and economic exchange, especially in the Lublin and Podkarpackie regions (European Commission, 2022). In the case of the Poland-Russia programme, the impact on regional development was limited by the suspension of cooperation after 2022, which led to the interruption of projects and a decline in economic activity in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodship, where the local economy was largely dependent on tourism and trade with the Kaliningrad Oblast (Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2023). Such sudden changes in funding and partnerships highlighted the fragility of CBC in the face of geopolitical crises, forcing a rapid strategic reorientation to protect the interests of Polish regions (Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2023).

However, the most significant constraint is the border itself, both in physical and procedural terms, where the lack of modernisation of road and rail infrastructure, especially on the Ukrainian side, significantly hinders cross-border mobility, affecting the effectiveness of projects requiring intensive exchange of people and goods (Belica et al., 2024). Significant development disparities between Polish regions and areas of Belarus and Ukraine complicate the harmonisation of activities, leading to uneven benefits for partners, which is particularly evident in the varying levels of entrepreneurial activity and research and development sector development (Belica et al., 2024). Administrative inefficiency, resulting from differences in legal systems and organisational cultures, and cognitive distances, i.e. differences in ways of thinking and approaches to management, constitute structural barriers limiting the long-term effectiveness of cooperation (Belica et al., 2024).

In the case of Belarus, the formal nature of participation, based mainly on administrative activities of regional authorities, reduced the flexibility and depth of cooperation (Belica et al., 2024). Socio-cultural barriers, such as historical grievances, stereotypes and language differences, further hampered trust-building and effective communication, especially in relations with Belarus (Rybkowski et al., 2024b).

On the other hand, a factor conducive to cooperation is the institutionalised form of cross-border partnerships, which facilitates the transfer of knowledge and good practices between regions (Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024). Financial support from the European Union, provided by the European Regional Development Fund and the European Neighbourhood Instrument, is a key motivation for beneficiaries, especially in regions struggling with marginalization (European Commission, 2022). Shared cultural and historical values, especially in Polish Ukrainian relations, support the building of lasting relationships, which in many cases have survived initial geopolitical tensions (Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024). The strong need to counteract the marginalisation of border regions further motivates local actors to engage in cross-border projects, even in the face of administrative or political difficulties (Belica et al., 2024).

The analysis indicates that the success of CBC depends on the balance between pragmatic benefits and the ability to overcome structural and geopolitical barriers, with the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus after 2022 highlighting the boundary beyond which local pragmatism gives way to macro-political decisions (Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2023).

Conclusions. An analysis of ETC programmes on the eastern border of the European Union allows us to formulate key conclusions for the future shaping of these initiatives.

Greater resilience of programmes to geopolitical shocks is essential, which requires the inclusion of precise rapid response mechanisms, such as clauses allowing for the suspension of cooperation with unstable partners, flexible reallocation of funds and redefinition of objectives in response to sudden changes in the international environment (*Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2023*). The decision by the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy to reallocate €43.24 million from the Poland-Russia programme to other Interreg programmes, such as Lithuania-Poland, South Baltic and Poland-Slovakia, is an example of an effective approach that has allowed cross-border activities to continue despite the breakdown of cooperation with Russia (*Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2023*).

Diversifying partnerships, with an emphasis on cooperation with countries with stable politics and shared democratic values, reduces the risk of dependence on partners with unpredictable foreign policies (*European Commission, 2022*).

Continuing investment in the modernisation of border infrastructure, such as border crossings, roads and digital systems, remains the foundation for effective cross-border mobility and the success of soft projects, such as cultural exchanges and training, as confirmed by reports pointing to limitations resulting from inadequate infrastructure on the Polish Ukrainian border (*Belica et al., 2024*).

The Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine 2021-2027 programme opens new opportunities for deepening CBC, particularly in the context of Ukraine's reconstruction after the conflict with Russia. The key direction is to continue supporting Ukraine's reconstruction in strategic areas such as healthcare, critical infrastructure, environmental protection and social development, which is in line with the priorities of the programme (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*). An example is the project "Improving safety in the border area between Poland and Ukraine in the field of rescue services", implemented by the City of Augustów and Ukrainian rescue services, which includes the purchase of equipment and the organisation of training courses, responding to urgent safety needs (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*).

Investments in Solidarity Corridors, including the development of transport infrastructure and the digitisation of border procedures, are essential to increase cross-border mobility and Ukraine's economic integration with the European Union, supporting the long-term vision of Ukraine's potential EU membership (*European Commission, 2022*). Strengthening cooperation between public administration and civil society organisations is key to overcoming socio-cultural barriers and building mutual trust, which can be achieved through projects promoting people-to-people contacts (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*). The programme should also support initiatives related to climate change adaptation and biodiversity protection that respond to both local needs and broader EU policy objectives for sustainable development (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*).

Experience from the implementation of ETC programmes in the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 perspectives shows that the success of these initiatives depends on their ability to adapt to a rapidly changing geopolitical context. Flexibility in the management of funds and priorities, as demonstrated in the case of the Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine programme, is essential to maintain their relevance and effectiveness in the face of global challenges (*Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine Programme, 2024*). In the context of the European Union's eastern border, where geopolitical instability remains a constant challenge, such an approach becomes an indispensable element of effective cohesion and neighbourhood policy, enabling the achievement of development objectives and supporting stabilisation and integration in the region (*European Commission, 2022*).

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