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## ID 1517 | CROSS BORDER COOPERATION IN WESTERN BALKANS- A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CROSS BORDER EXPERIENCES BETWEEN ALBANIA-KOSOVO AND ALBANIA-GREECE

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**ABSTRACT:** The instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) is one of the main supporting tools for countries aspiring to join the EU. IPA II 2014-2020 programme strategy was approved and supports primarily Western-Balkan Countries in cross-cutting areas in order to prepare for EU-accession. As part of the strategy, territorial cooperation is also supported. Cross-border cooperation in the area is one of the main strands of territorial cooperation where different programs between the countries have been set. This paper investigates through a comparative analysis the experience of cross-border cooperation between Albania and Kosovo and Albania-Greece. The analysis spans not only at the analysis of the relative different projects and the ability of countries to make use of the program, but also looks at different and emerging themes in terms of cross border planning and governance. The analysis will delve into the first programming period 2007-2013 as well as the activities that have been held during the new programming period. The choice of the two different programs comes due to their distinctive characteristics, where on the one side one can find an EU member (Greece) cooperating with a non-EU member (Albania) and on the other side two non-EU states which have the same language, as well as Kosovo being a particular case study of state formation. The Albania-Kosovo case study is important to analyze also due to current development and cooperation between the two governments. So far, there have been two inter-governmental meetings between Albania and Kosovo to foster partnerships and greater collaboration between the two countries. Thus, it becomes very interesting to analyze whether the increase in cooperation between the two states is also reflected in the territorial cooperation programs, as well as their performance in terms of cross border cooperation.

**KEYWORDS:** territorial cooperation, cross border cooperation, spatial planning

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In 1991, as many other East-European countries, Albania gave an end to the dictatorial socialist regime. Very soon, the aspiration for joining the European Union and "becoming European" was articulated, forming the longest standing objective of every political party that has come into power in the country (Aliaj, 2008). Nevertheless, the road from a highly centralized and dictatorial regime towards an open and democratic one for sure has been a bumpy one. The "shock therapy" combined with political instability (Aliaj, 2008) (Aliaj, Shutina, & Dharmo, 2010), culminating in 1997, with the fall of "ponzy" pyramidal financial schemes (Aliaj, Janku, Allkja, & Dharmo, 2014) and the civil war in the country, have held the aspiration for joining the European Union back.

It was not until April 2006 in Tirana, when the agreement on Stabilization and Association was signed, which afterwards entered into force in 2009. This agreement marks the intensification of activities between Albania and the EU, culminating in 2014 with the candidate country status (Ministria e Integritet, 2016). Now Albania is awaiting to open the negotiations, process which should begin once the Judiciary reform has started implementation (COM, 2016a).

In 2006, there are also changes in terms of the support that countries aspiring to join the EU receive. As such, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) was created. The latter is a single financial instrument which simplifies and designs the EU support for the period before accession (European Commission, 2014). It is important to notice that IPA substitutes previous instrument such as Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy (PHARE), Sales and Purchase Agreements (SPA), Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD), Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) (European Commission, 2014). The aim of IPA is to increase efficiency of support through a single support framework which increases institutional capacities, cross border cooperation, economic and social development as well as rural development. During the first programming period (2007-2013) IPA was framed into five main components such as: transition assistance and institution building; territorial cooperation under the framework of cross border cooperation; regional development; human resource development and rural development.

Until receiving candidate country status, Albania could benefit only from the first two components, hence as part of IPA it has been engaged in different cross border programs with EU members (i.e Greece) and non-member states (i.e Kosovo, Montenegro, FYROM). These programs continue to be present also for IPA II programming period 2014-2020 (COM, 2016a). Albania-Kosovo CBC and Albania-Greece CBC are quite interesting based on the fact that between the first represents two countries with the similar identities composed of the same language, similar culture, belief, mentality and social norms while the second represent a cooperation between a more developed and experienced member state and a candidate country with less experience. Thus it becomes interesting to see whether there are any distinct changes between the implementation of the two programs based on two main factors such as regional identity and experience.

## 2 TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

The intensification of interrelations at the EU level has had great impacts also on border regions. Firstly, borders have lost their physical meaning and are becoming more and more only symbolic, and secondly they have become the platform for the development of greater territorial cooperation (Kramsch & Hooper., 2004). The EU itself is somewhat a system of cooperation and interdependence between different states and in order to reduce complexity of different bilateral arrangements they have decided to unite into a supranational body (Sousa, 2012). In this sense, integration is seen as “Europeanisation consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies.” (Radaelli, 2004, p. 3)

However, the degree of cooperation across borders varies due to different factors such as political, historical, economic, cultural and geographical. One of the main reasons for the different degrees of cooperation is also the fact that cooperation is based on a voluntary process where states, regions or other subnational units act together to achieve common visions and solve common problems. In addition, there are different EU initiatives which support greater cooperation between member states and especially across border. As such article 2.1 of the 1980 'Madrid Convention' defines trans frontier co-operation as: ... any concerted action designed to reinforce and foster neighborly relations between territorial communities or authorities within the jurisdiction of two or more Contracting Parties and the conclusion of any agreement and arrangement necessary for this purpose (Council of Europe, 1980). Some of the reasons for cooperation include but are not limited to: there is an overlap of interests; There is a shared historical memory; there is a strong interdependence between the two regions due to geographical or economic factors; there is a political objective for future joint action. (Committee of the Regions, 2009)

Borders have usually been underdeveloped areas, usually secluded which currently show high structural differences with other more central, urbanized and developed regions. This is even more true when it

comes to former Eastern Bloc countries such as Albania, where the paranoiac obsession of invasion from the capitalist forces, transformed border into heavily guarded and military areas (Aliaj, Janku, Ailkja, & Dhamo, 2014). Thus the objective is that through cooperation to foster a greater degree of development and allow for structural disadvantages to be reduced.

Although, cross border cooperation has been a process gradually evolving at the European level, sometimes also in parallel to the European Integration process, after the 1990s, the Commission took the lead in supporting different cooperation initiatives spanning from large-scale macro-regions encompassing two or more nation states, the development of inter-regional and transboundary urban networks; and the support of pan-European high-speed transport infrastructure aimed at moving Europeans, as well as cross border cooperation projects (Kramsch & Hooper., 2004)

### 3 CROSS BORDER COOPERATION IN ALBANIA

For the purpose of this paper two main programs of cross border cooperation are taken in consideration such as Albania-Greece and Albania Kosovo.

#### 3.1 ALBANIA- GREECE

The IPA Cross border program between Albania and Greece for the period 2007-2013 was approved by European Commission in 2008 (European Commission, 2008). The eligible area consisted of the region of Epirus, Region of Western Macedonia and the Region of Ionian Islands in Greece, and the districts of Gjirokaster, Vlore and Korçe in Albania. The overall objective of the program was to increase “the standard of living of the population by promoting sustainable local development in the cross border area” (European Commission, 2017).

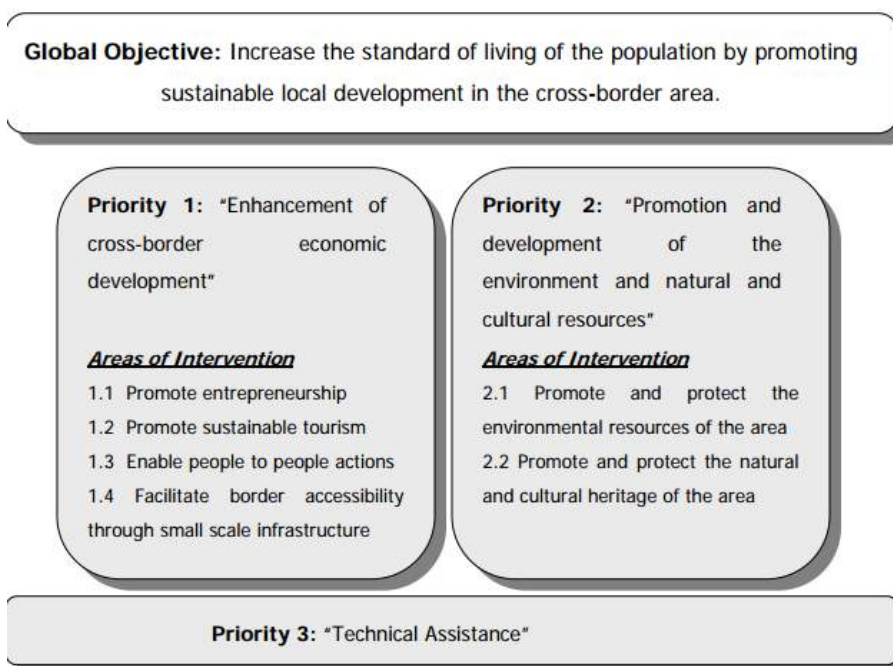


Figure 1 – Objectives and Priorities

In order to achieve the main objective three priority axes were set. Two of them had development concerns (90% of budget share) at their focus while the latter was a cross cutting priority aiming to increase institutional capacities (10% of budget share) (ibid). A common feature of the program, although it has been quite successful is the fact that most of the projects are led by Greek actors. Out of 44 projects in the area, only 4 of them are led by Albanian partners while the rest are all Greek institutions. Meanwhile, out of the 4 Albanian leader none of them are governmental institutions, they are either Higher Education Institutions or NGOs (CBC GREECE/ALBANIA, 2017). On the other hand, across the Greek border there

is a greater balance between the governmental institutions taking Lead and the non-governmental ones. In this sense it shows that Greece, as a member state, having greater institutional capacities and experience with European projects plays a driving role in the program. Projects have primarily focused on tourism development, especially eco-tourism initiatives. Meanwhile, in terms of environmental initiatives most of the projects have focused on waters such as the Prespa lake or the Vjosa river (CBC GREECE/ALBANIA, 2017).

Although several projects have been implemented on both priority axis, they still do not have had any strong impacts in redefining the issues and challenges of the cross border area. The reason is due to the limited amount of available finances which do not allow for large scale investments. Projects usually aim at knowledge and technological transfer and distribution or establishment of partnerships and networks which are actions that needs longer timespans in order to show meaningful results. In addition, most projects need to work in synergy with other, larger, investments projects in order to increase results. Therefore, it becomes imperative to have greater coordination and collaboration between central and local governance levels.

Meanwhile cooperation continues also for the programming period 2014-2020. The program has set three main priority axis such as “Promotion of the environment, sustainable transport and public infrastructure”, “boosting the local economy” and “technical assistance” (CBC GREECE/ALBANIA, 2017). The eligible areas have not changed which show greater stability of the program. However, the administrative reform in Albania has reshaped the borders of local authorities, thus requiring time for the re-establishment of new networks and increasing capacities at the local level again. In addition, it is worth to mention that the program has built on the results and experiences of the first programing period showing greater stability and coherence when compared to the Albania-Kosovo program.

### **3.2 ALBANIA- KOSOVO**

The IPA Cross border cooperation between Albania and Kosovo was planned to be established in 2007 and entered into force in 2010. The initiative took 2 years to start the implementation phase in order to allow for the institutional setting to be set in place. Both countries, and especially Kosovo which only achieved its independence in 2008. The IPA cross border cooperation was seen as a special program established between the two countries also due to the status of Kosovo (Ministry of European Integration; Ministry of Local Governance, 2010). The program area consists of two units in Kosovo, the southern economic Region and the west economic Region, while for Albania is represented by the districts of Kukes, and the two adjacent areas composed by the districts of Shkoder and Diber. The programme area has a contrasted geographic profile. It is rich with mountain ranges, plains, valleys, rivers and lakes. The total population in the programme area was of 1,292,595 composed by 64% of population living in Kosovo and 36% in Albania (Ministry of European Integration; Ministry of Local Governance, 2010). Nevertheless, the majority of the population is composed by inhabitants of Albanian origin, while the rest were ethnic minorities, including Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosnians, Turks, Romas, Ashkaelias and Egyptians (RAE).

From the very beginning the program faced several challenges in implementation such as poor regional and local government organisational structures; no clear division of competencies and tasks between central and regional/local administrations; potential beneficiaries from the private and public sectors in rural areas had limited capacity in project identification and preparation, strategic planning and project implementation. The overall strategic objective of the initiative was the sustainable development in the cross-border region while specific objectives included strengthening of capacities, protection of environment, socio-economic development and increased partnerships and networking. There were two main priority axis such as promotion of sustainable economic, social, cultural and environmental development of the region and technical assistance. The latter was extremely important as both countries show weak institutional structures and capacities for programing and managing the projects.

The program was met with great enthusiasm by actors on both sides of the border. Several projects have been implemented during the period 2010-2013 and some are still in the final stages (CBC ALBANIA/KOSOVO, 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to note some factors such as, projects have been primarily focused on environmental issues and tourism development. In the region there are different non-governmental actors which have shown greater capacity in programming and implementation of such projects. On the other hand, (public) institutions have shown weaknesses in terms of application and

project management, especially at the local level. In most cases, project leaders were from the central government, meanwhile when local authorities were engaged they had a partner role. In few occasions they have managed to successfully lead projects. This is supported by the data on the projects awarded for the period 2014-2015, where there are Project leaders from the “governmental sector”, and mostly the leaders are from Albania (CBC ALBANIA/KOSOVO, 2017).

The cross border programme for Albania-Kosovo continued also in the IPA II programming period 2014-2020. The CBC bodies coordinating the programming and implementation process on the respective sides of the border are the Ministry of European Integration, Directorate for Cross-border Cooperation and Transnational Programmes, Albania and the Ministry for Local Government Administration, Department for Cooperation and Regional Development, Kosovo . In this case, the eligible areas for Albania have changed and are now composed by the district of Kukes and the district of Lezha, while for Kosovo they remain the same. The Programme aims at providing assistance for cross-border cooperation in the following thematic Priorities (TP): protecting the environment, promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management; encouraging tourism and promoting natural and cultural heritage; investing in youth, education and skills; technical Assistance (CBC ALBANIA/KOSOVO, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight some other activities which have occurred outside of the EU umbrella but might have impacts on cross border cooperation. In 2013, the Territorial Administrative reform was carried out in Albania which reshaped local authority boundaries in the country from 373 municipalities and communes towards 61 municipalities. This was considered as a highly necessary reform which would increase local authority capacities in territorial management and development (Kuvendi i Shqiperise, 2014). However, the period when the reform took place, between 2013/14 meant that the local authorities are still focusing on understanding and adapting to the new situation, so no real impacts can be seen as yet in terms of the cross border program. In addition to the territorial reform, in 2015 in Albania, 4 regional development agencies were established (Keshillimi i Ministrave, 2015). The latter are expected to increase coordination between central and local level in terms of development issues. The rationale is also that these institutions will also help in the preparation and increasing capacities for dealing with ERDF in the future. Currently they are also eligible for cross-border cooperation activities. Nevertheless, it is too soon to see any impacts yet on the program.

Other important activities include the opening of the local office of the Albanian development fund in Kosovo in Gjakova in 2015. This office will also support cross-border. Meanwhile, the respective central level governments have established an ambitious platform for bilateral cooperation. Three high-level meetings have been held between the two governments with the aim of developing joint programs and projects. However, results have been very minimalist and the enthusiasm of the early stages has now started to fade away. In addition, it is worth also to mention the cooperation between the Ministry of Urban Development of Albania and the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning in Kosovo. The ministries after several joint technical meetings also opened a call for young architects and urban planners to draft a vision and cross border projects. It is also worth to mention, that as part of different spatial planning activities in Albania and Kosovo, the homologue institutions now are invited as part of the different consultation phases. Nevertheless, although there is a positive increase in institutional activities both at the central and local level and the institutionalization of new channels of communication, the impacts on cross border projects seems relatively low. The latter is also related to the institutional capacities for programming and implementation of projects.

### **3.3 CHALLENGES OF CROSS BORDER COOPERATION**

Several challenges have been observed which have not allowed for an effective attraction of IPA funds during the 2007-2013 programming period and still remain as a challenge also for the 2014-2020 period, although changes have been made to the program. As such it can be mentioned:

1. Covering of VAT expenses. In the agreement between the EU and the Albanian government, specific articles sanctions that the cost of VAT will not be covered by the EU grant, but from the beneficiary institution. Considering that cross border projects reach high values (for Albanian institutions) also the value of the VAT is quite high. Therefore, becomes very difficult to cover these expenses through other financial means.

2. Covering the cost of co-financing. The agreement between the EU and the Albanian Government foresees that no less than 15% of the total value of the project need to be covered by the beneficiary. In many cases, Albanian (public) institutions find it difficult to cover the costs of co-financing, sometimes leading towards the missing of project deadlines.
3. Government priorities change. The process of winning an EU cross border project goes through 2 main phases: Programming and Implementation. The first process is strongly related to government priorities. Hence, in Albania, where there are very often changes in the political priorities, especially after elections, have also an impact in the programing process. The process is that same and there is no difference between national and local level changes in priority. Although, a shift in priority at the national level has greater impacts, it is argued, that also in cases of changes of priorities at the local level, projects are put at risk.
4. Coordination between national and local level. The programing process is an exclusivity of the central governance, while in the implementation phase local authorities are eligible to be part of the process. The main problem of non-coordination between the two different levels regards investments and priorities in infrastructure development. Although Albania has drafted the General National Spatial Plan, approved in June 2016, it is too soon to draw any conclusions on the improvement of the coordination. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the increase of communication between the two different levels are expected to produce better results. However, as previously mentioned, the high differences between the different political parties in charge of different authorities can become an inhibiting factor also in this case.
5. Changes in the modalities of implementation. In the financing contract of the project are also defined the ways of implementation. In many cases these predictions signed in the initial contract are non-appropriate, therefore very often become subject to changes. However, changes in the initial contract require a long time, which bring delays also to the implementation of the project. Thus, due to issues like this, sometimes, authorities find it too time consuming and time wasting to deal with these projects opting for other less bureaucratic opportunities.
6. Delays from the programming phase to the implementation one. From the moment of programing to the moment of implementation, there is a considerable amount of time, in some cases between 6-8 months. During this time, the programed project may have lost credentialed and its problem priority reduced, or even be resolved through other means, as well as cases where the situation has degraded so much that there is little the project can solve.
7. The qualification of the staff working with CBC projects are not appropriate. The institutional capacities at the central and local level in Albania are low, especially at the local level. As IPA regulations are continuously changing, gaps can evolve in the programing and implementation of EU CBC projects. Difficulties can be seen in both phases such as programming and implementation. IPA is an instrument in continuous evolution with regard to the way and regulation of implementation. This usually happens as the EU Commission tries to improve the program, efforts which have not given the desired results. This evolutionary process has implication on the different institutional settings in charge of working with IPA projects, thus, considering also the relatively low capacities, the challenge becomes even bigger.
8. Sustainability of projects. Based on rules, the donor (EU) is present until the finalization of the project, afterwards it is the duty of the Albanian government to guarantee the sustainability of the project as well as continue building on it. In practice, several projects are neglected after implementation, thus the impacts start declining very soon after the implementation.
9. Non- Leader role of the Local Institutions. Local governments in Albania are used to expect "financing" and investment from the central government. Very often, they refrain from taking a leader role in issues of development and investment. This is also obvious in CBC projects, as very often, local governments are reluctant on being in the driving seat. The latter comes also as a result of the disparities in institutional capacities between the central and the local level.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to analyze cross border cooperation initiatives between of Albania with two different types of states such as Kosovo and Greece. In general, although there is great enthusiasm for the cross border cooperation initiatives challenges are big and very often hinder the development and implementation of projects. The reason why this two different programs were chosen was to see whether there were any differences between cooperation with a country with similar historic, cultural and economic development background (Kosovo) and a country which is a member state and has higher experience and institutional capacity such as Greece.

Albania and Kosovo have shown a greater degree of cooperation also outside of the EU framework encompassing higher degree inter-governmental meetings, creation of new institutions, and joint initiatives to improve cross border activities. However, the results have not been as expected. These activities have not had any impacts (yet) on the programming and implementation of cross border projects. In addition, compared to the Albania-Greece cooperation, in this case it is mostly NGOs and other actors outside of government structures that seem to be the drivers of success.

Meanwhile, the Albania-Greece cooperation seems to be more structured and better equipped to deal with the high techno-bureaucratic requirements of IPA. The greater experience and capacity of the Greek part has shown its impact also on the program and the projects. As previously mentioned, the projects are dominated by Greek partners leading the way, while Albanian ones are usually followers. Thus the challenge in this case is to increase capacities of Albanian partners to start leading projects.

In addition, there are also some more technical and coordinative challenges that are not fully met and cannot be fully met only by the program but require a greater sense of commitment and political will. Firstly, due to the nature of financing of IPA, there are financial challenges. Especially on the border between Albania and Kosovo which is composed by some of the poorest local authorities. The second challenge is that of coordinating IPA cross border projects with other priority investments done by the central governments. The coordination initiatives initiated by the Albanian and Kosovo government seem to be a good start, however with little results yet. Thus in this case, drafting a (spatial) strategy or an action plan between the two countries for the cross border region would be one of the recommendations and seems possible also due to the very good relationships between the two governments. A similar approach can be done also in the area between Albania and Greece.

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