

**CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION PROGRAMMES –  
FROM PREMISES TO ACHIEVEMENTS. TOURISM WITHIN  
ROMANIA-SERBIA BORDER REGION AS CASE STUDY**

**PROGRAMELE DE COOPERARE TRANSFRONTALIERĂ –  
DE LA PREMISE LA REALIZĂRI. TURISMUL ÎN CADRUL  
ZONEI TRANSFRONTALIERE ROMÂNIA-SERBIA CA STUDIU  
DE CAZ**

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**Abstract:** The INTERREG IPA Cross-border cooperation programme, among other numerous programmes initiated by the European Union, offers ample opportunities for cooperation and social and economic development of neighbouring countries. Within the IPA CBC Romania-Serbia programme, the eligible area for joint action and financing includes three Romanian counties and five Serbian districts, empowering various institutions, local authorities and private non-profit organizations to develop new partnerships and projects to benefit the local and regional economy. The paper aims to assess the territorial impact of the cross-border cooperation programme at the Romanian-Serbian border, with focus on the tourism sector, focusing on the economic, social and cultural outputs of the projects, such as investments, key statistical tourism data, cultural events, local community benefits. Within the two programming periods, 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, tourism was ranked among the main pillars of development, either as a measure within the first priority axis during the first period, or as a major priority axis – Attractiveness for sustainable tourism during the latter. Thus, there were financed 30 tourism related projects, totalling some 15 mil US\$, where local authorities were the leader for most projects during the first programming period, while after 2014, the non-governmental organisations account for almost half of the projects leaders. Not always, the municipalities with highest inflows of finances are those with the highest increase in the number of tourists, nights spent or significant visibility.

**Key-words:** *cross-border tourism, tourism investments, tourism flows, spatial changes.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *turism transfrontalier, investiții în turism, fluxuri turistice, schimbări teritoriale.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

We are witnessing an unprecedented period in the history of mankind, when isolationism and barriers for the free flow of people and goods tend to disappear, at least in part of the world, which led to great international efforts to promote cross-border cooperation. A typical example is the European Union, where following the INTERREG programme aimed at the cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation among countries as well as supporting the peripheral economic areas, there were numerous partnerships between local and regional authorities in neighbouring countries, in view of common interests.

During the last decades, the European Union has developed several supporting programmes which resulted in the creation of more than 30 different legal instruments for financing regional development, some of them for candidate countries (PHARE, PHARE CBC, ISPA, SAPARD, CARDS). Beginning with 2007, the *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance* (IPA) replaced a series of European Union programmes and financial instruments for candidate countries or potential candidate countries. The strategic goal of the *Romania-Republic of Serbia IPA Cross-Border Cooperation Programme* (IPA CBC Romania-Serbia) is to achieve a more balanced and sustainable socio-economic development of the Romanian-Serbian border area, on the basis of joint cross-border projects and common actions by Romanian and Serbian stakeholders (romania-serbia.net). For the 2014-2020 period, the programme is correlated with *EU Strategy for the Danube Region* (better connectivity).

The relationship between tourism and political boundaries has been the focus as researchers for several decades now, who have focused on two main directions: geopolitical changes and development (Gelbman&Timothy, 2010; Grama, 2011; Ilieş et al., 2009; Ilieş, 2010; Ilieş et al., 2012) and various forms of transnational cooperation (Ploae, 2017; Rădoi, 2017).

One issue that has been investigated quite extensively concerns the role of tourism in the regional development processes in the European cross-border regions (Prokkola, 2007, 2008, Ilieş, 2010; Anisiewicz&Palmowski, 2014; Bujdosó et al., 2015, Livandovschi, 2017), tourism easily lifting the border line between nations and countries opening the way to regional networking, due to its interweaving natural, cultural and historical elements of space (Bjeljac&Ćurčić, 2006). The three main attractiveness factors of cross border tourism regions include the border as a subject (e.g. geopolitical, historical, heritage), the location of the border region (natural and cultural) and the type of touristic developments that attract tourism (Weidenfeld, 2013).

Among the key topics addressed by researchers, there are cross-border collaborative efforts for the promotion and management of tourism, studies pointing to the fact that cross-border tourism still faces remarkable hindrances and the development of local cross-border tourism projects is no guarantee for positive destination-wide regional development impacts (Prokkola, 2008, Ioannides et al., 2006; Farmaki, 2015; Stoffelen&Vanneste, 2017; Stoffelen et al., 2017). Nevertheless, tourism is a pioneering industry in the process of cross-border

regionalization, transforming national borderland into places for cooperation and tourist destinations (Prokkola, 2007). Creating sufficient financial resources, and increasing involvement of business interest groups and non-government organizations (NGOs) from both sides of the border are essential for the successful implementation of joint tourism marketing growth strategies (Tosun et al., 2005).

The aim of the paper is to assess the territorial impact of the cross-border cooperation programme at the Romanian-Serbian border, focusing on the economic, social and cultural outputs of the projects, so as to point to the benefits for the local communities and to what extent tourism statistical indicators have improved.

## **II. DATA AND METHODS**

This paper is based to a large extent on the analysis of statistical data related to the tourism market in the study area, data which were provided by the National Statistical Institute in Romania, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia as well as the database for IPA CBC Romania-Serbia programme. One of the challenges was related to the lack of up-to-date official statistics at a local level (LAU units) for the Serbian districts, and to some extent to the different administrative divisions of the two countries. Several field trips to the study area and three focus groups helped us get a better grasp of the benefits for the local communities following projects financed by the programme. We conducted three focus groups to assess residents and stakeholders' opinion on the benefits of such projects; they took place in B. Herculane (April 2018), where 40 Serbian and Romanian stakeholders participated, Dubova (March 2019) with people living in the villages along the Danube and Moldova Noua (May, 2019). Every time, the focus groups uncovered qualitative insight about particular issues addressed by some projects.

## **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **3.1 Funding**

For the 2007-2013 programming period, there were 19 projects funded, which totalled 16.3 mil. € (14.15 mil. € covered by IPA), which generally had a lower absorption rate. Although tourism was not a priority axis in its own right during the period, the budget for tourism projects was more than double compared to the 2014-2020 period. Initially, Serbian stakeholders were much more active than their Romanian counterparts, 11 out of the 19 projects having Serbian lead partners (Table no. 1). It is worth noticing the active involvement of the local authorities in Drobeta Turnu-Severin (3 projects) and the cultural institutions in Serbia (Pozarevac museum).

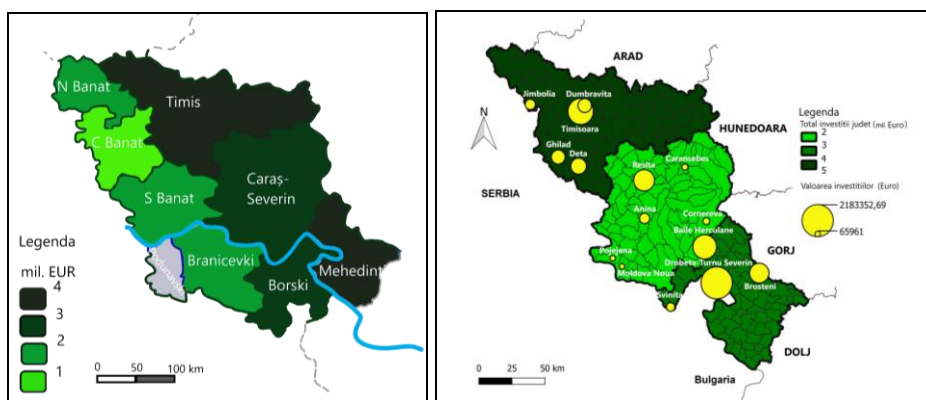
During the second period, 2014-2020, there were 11 projects (as of July, 2019), amounting to 7.31 mil. € (6.56 mil. € IPA), with a much higher absorption rate compared to the first period, exceeding 75%.

Although the Serbian organization have initiated more than half of the projects, out of the total of 20.5 mil. € granted for tourism projects within IPA cross-border cooperation programme, only approximately one third was cashed in

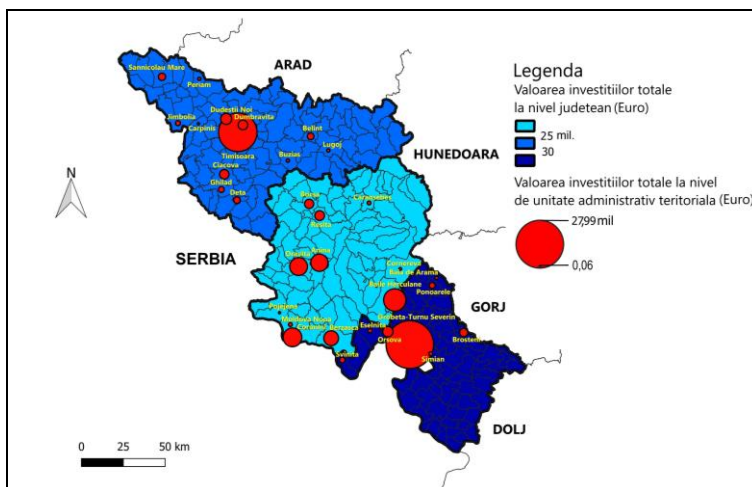
by Serbian municipalities (7.25 mil. €), the three Romanian counties spending more than 65% (13.25 mil. €). Timiș county ranks first, with 5.5 mil. €, closely followed by Mehedinți (some 5 mil. €), while in Serbia, Borski is first with 2.2 mil. € (Fig. 1), which is only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of what Caras-Severin received. It is worth noticing that there were several projects where the county councils were the lead partners.

**Table no. 1. Tourism projects financed by IPA Romania-Serbia**

Period	2007-2013		
Project leader	Local authorities	NGOs	Cultural institutions
Romanian	7	1	-
Serbian	5	2	4
	2014-2019		
Romanian	2	3	1
Serbian	3	2	-



**Fig. 1. Value of tourism projects financed through IPA programme (2007-2019)**

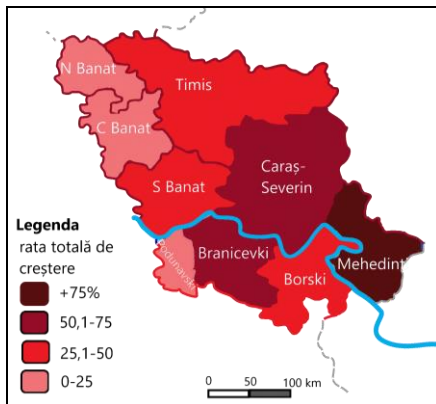


**Fig. 2. Value of tourism projects 2007-2019 (IPA CBC RO-SE; RO-HU, RO-BG, REGIO)**

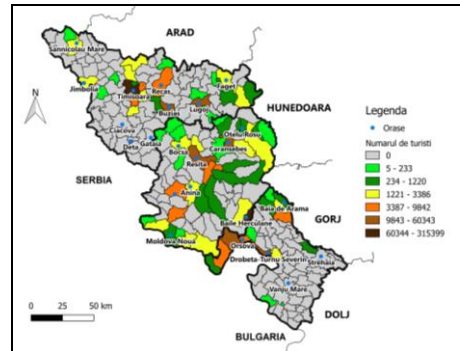
Most of the projects, and most money were granted to Drobeta Turnu-Severin (2.2 mil. €), Timișoara (1.4 mil. €) and Reșița (1 mil. €). Băile Herculane also benefited from large amounts of money through the project *Creation and promotion of the tourist route with Roman specific Via Danubii* including the rehabilitation of the physical infrastructure "Roman Street, during the 2010-2012 (1 mil. Creation and promotion of the tourist route with Roman specific Via Danubii including the rehabilitation of the physical infrastructure "Roman Street).

### 3.2 Tourism indicators

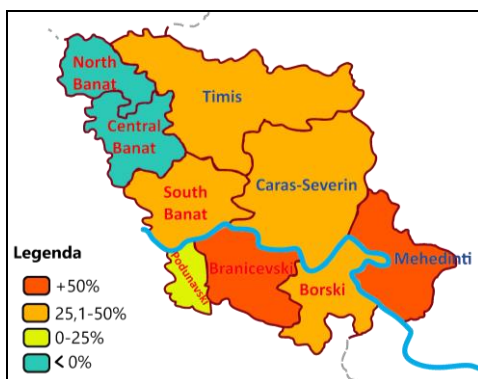
Generally, the number of incoming tourists increased considerably since 2013 to 2018 in most districts, Branicevski (including Velio Gradiste and Golubac), Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți registering quite a spike (an increase of 50% and 90% respectively) (Fig. 3); however, there was a much lower augmentation in several Serbian districts – North Banat, Central Banat and Podunavski (just 1%).



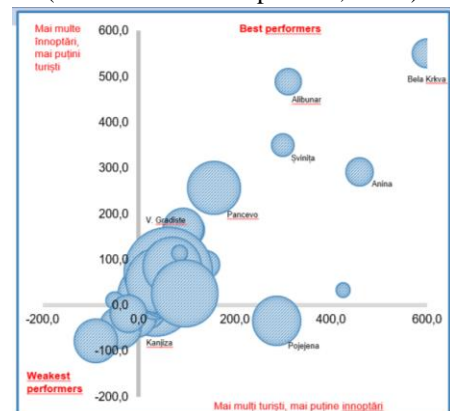
**Fig. 3a) Total increase of tourist inflows (2013-2018)**



**Fig. 3b) Number of tourists (2018)**  
(Data source: Tempo NIS, 2019)



**Fig. 4 Total increase in nights spent (2013-2018)**  
(Data source: Tempo NIS, 2019, Statistical Institute of Serbia, 2019)



Based on the variation in tourism inflows and nights spent, we tried to identify which settlements had the best results and if these might have been influenced to some extent by the IPA funding for tourism projects. Thus, the 28 administrative units that had at least 1 project financed by IPA-CBC during the 2007-2019 period, fall under one of the three main categories:

- Best performers – almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them (20 settlements). Still, as Fig. 4 shows, the towns/villages registering the highest increase in tourism inflows or nights spent (Bela Krkva, Alibunar and Svinița) are not the ones benefiting from large investment; on the contrary, they have some of the lowest amounts of money for the projects (less than 200,000 €), except for Anina (228,921 € following IPA CBC RO-SB and 3.7 mil. € from all the financing programmes – mainly REGIO).
- Weak performers, where either the number of tourists or nights spent decreased (Novi Knezevac in North Banat and Pojejena, Kanijza, Kikinda, respectively).
- The weakest performers – only four settlements: Drumbrăvița and Deta, Zdrenjanin and Golubac, registering a decrease of both incoming tourists and nights spent.

The Romanian towns that benefited from the largest investments (Table no. 2), such as Dr. Tr-Severin, Timișoara or Reșița, had a much more important increase in the number of nights spend compared to the number of tourist (except for B. Herculane). However, even if Dr. Tr.-Severin witnessed much higher rates compared to other towns, the increase was much more modest compared to Timisoara (which gained almost 100,000 more tourists) or Băile Herculane (70,000 tourists more compared to only 23,000) (Table no. 2).

### **3.3. Economic and social benefits**

Overall, both the Serbian districts and the Romanian counties registered an increase rate in tourism inflow and nights spent similar to the national averages, except for the number of foreign tourists within the Serbian cross-border area (which is less than half than the national average) and nights spent by foreign tourists within the Romanian border area (much higher than the national average, mainly due to Timiș county, which had more than 80% of the gain).

The results of the projects financed through IPA CBC Romania-Serbia during the 2 periods, 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, can be summarized as:

- Creation of cross-border cooperation structures: 13 NGOs and 10 new established companies;
- Studies: 22 studies on various tourism related themes, 4 technical studies and 9 feasibility studies;
- 1678 participants attending training
- Joint actions and communication instruments created: 2 promo films, 10 web platforms and 1 mobile application, 6 fairs, 2 exhibitions and 5 seminars;
- Specific infrastructure: 4 centres for sports and cultural activities, 1 concert hall and 1 stage, 3 visitor centers and 11 info points, 4 rehabilitated

tourist attractions, 38.6 km of bicycle paths, 1 cyclo stop, tourist traffic signalization and informative panels, as well as rehabilitation of streets (4.5 km) and sidewalks (23 km).

**Table no. 2. Performance of settlements within the study area (2013-2019)**

Municipality	Increase in the number of		Funding through IPA projects (MIL € )
	Tourists	Nights spent	
DROBETA-TURNU SEVERIN	62,0	73,5	2,18
Kladovo	34,9	15,2	1,61
BĂILE HERCULANE	95,9	25,2	1,25
TIMIȘOARA	40,5	54,0	1,15
REȘIȚA	70,2	84,7	0,96
Pozarevac	52,8	33,2	0,87
Pancevo	156,8	256,7	0,79
POJEJENA	287,3	-34,2	0,67
Kanjiza	12,6	-5,9	0,54
DETA	-89,2	-77,8	0,54
Golubac	-38,3	-49,2	0,50
Zdrenjanin	-5,4	-25,8	0,47
Veliko Gradiste	92,8	167,8	0,46
DUMBRAVITA	-21,3	-19,2	0,40
Negotin	103,4	165,1	0,32
Vrsac	33,6	4,5	0,32
Senta	68,5	65,9	0,31
Bela Crkva	2174,3	825,2	0,24
Bor	140,6	88,6	0,23
Kikinda	14,5	-17,5	0,23
JIMBOLIA	76,4	21,7	0,23
ANINA	460,0	291,4	0,23
Alibunar	311,4	489,0	0,20
SVINITA	300,0	350	0,16
Novi Kneževac	-49,8	10,5	0,09
CARANSEBEȘ	84,7	114,2	0,08
MOLDOVA NOUĂ	425,9	32,9	0,07
Majdanpec	8,0	-1,1	0,05

(Data source: Tempo INS, 2019, Statistical Institute of Serbia, 2019)

In-depth focus groups with the local communities along the Danube valley emphasised the fact that young villagers are willing to engage in tourism activities

(tour guiding, providing various services like boat tours, bicycle renting and tours, selling handicrafts and local products, as well as working in the accommodation facilities in the area). Moreover, hundreds of them attended training activities related to tourism, gastronomy, folk dance, local crafts, which helped them improve their knowledge and skills. People also recognise the importance of training and education as a prerequisite for working in the hospitality sector.

Another benefit is related to the awareness of the importance of culture and handicrafts as tourism attractions, after several projects have promoted local culture and traditional arts and handicrafts. During the focus group in Dubova, several teachers from the local schools admitted working with their students to revive traditional singing and dancing mainly, but also traditional handicrafts (hand-made small textiles and other objects, that are sold as souvenirs by the locals).

No matter if the local events that were organised were high profile or low key, they certainly brought local communities together, offering central focus for some activities (gastronomy, crafts), and thus they helped raising the profile of an area (if it is regularly held), and most importantly, as one of the locals mentioned, ‘raised participants’ awareness that foreign tourists, and even city dwellers [...] are really looking for genuine, simple and tasty food and other things that remind them of good old times. Things that the young generations that were born here no longer appreciate’.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The main priorities targeted by the IPA CBC Romania-Serbia programme were the growth of the demand of local tourism networks and promotion of innovative tourism activities, as well as capacity building initiatives for the improvement of quality and innovation of tourism services and products. The main results of the cross-border cooperation programme at the Romanian-Serbian border can be summarized in three main categories: economic results, preservation of cultural heritage and development of tourism products.

Official statistical data show that both the number of tourists visiting the area and the number of nights spent within the cross-border area has been increasing steadily, which means higher revenues for the local budgets and hence a multiplying effect for local communities. Several tourism products and services were also developed following IPA CBC projects, including thematic routes, gastronomic festivals and a ciclo-tourism platform (Tour de Banat).

There is no doubt that one of the main benefits for tourists and local communities alike is related to the preservation of cultural heritage, by raising awareness of the local population regarding the importance of the cultural heritage and its integrity. Investments were also made for the rehabilitation of several heritage buildings and tourist attractions, mainly in Timișoara or Senta. Not least, there were some 200 people that were trained for the various traditional crafts characteristic for the study area, thus ensuring that traditional skills and activities are carried on for the generations to follow.



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