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*The article deals with the areas of Ukrainian-Slovak relations, in which changes took place under the influence of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement provisions and the tendencies in the development of the bilateral relations in new institutional and geopolitical conditions. The conclusion is made that institutional environment between Kyiv and Brussels, which began to form in 2014 with the beginning of the signing of the Association Agreement has the significant influence on the development of bilateral diplomatic, economic, trade relations, migration trends of Ukrainian citizens to Slovakia. More attention has to be paid to the practical convergence of socio-economic development of border territories and the stimulation of the cross-border practices of local communities, the support of business and public bilateral initiatives and projects.*

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# UKRAINIAN-SLOVAK RELATIONS MILESTONES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EU-UKRAINE ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT

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## **Introduction**

In Central Europe bilateral relations between the states that are on the different stages

of system transformation and European integration, one of which is ahead of the other in terms of system transformation and mode of the European integration, are significantly influenced by the factor of the institutional and legal framework governing their relations with the European Union. In the case of Ukraine and neighboring Slovakia, in addition to traditional cultural ties, the trajectory of parallel historical development after World War II, partial copying by Kyiv of some successful reforms in Slovakia during the 2000s, such influence has the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine (AA) which was signed in 2014 and entered into force in full in 2017.

The purpose of this article is to analyze areas of Ukrainian-Slovak relations, in which changes took place under the influence of the provisions of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, and the tendencies in the development of the bilateral relations in new institutional and geopolitical conditions. We assume that after 2014-2017 new opportunities for bilateral relations between Ukraine and Slovakia have emerged in the field of economic, energy, cross-border projects, and the revival of cross-border mobility. Their effective use is hampered by Kyiv lack of a strategic vision for relations with Bratislava, institutional and human capacity to implement cross-border ini-

tiatives, "Russian" gas blackmail, and limited decision-making by national capitals in terms of EU membership or association.

In order to achieve the aim of the study and confirm or refuse the author's hypothesis, it is necessary:

- 1) to highlight the main areas of bilateral cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia, which were influenced by the Association Agreement;
- 2) determine, using the official data, the dynamics of development of relations in different fields after 2014-2017;
- 3) formulate, on the basis of expert assessments and own author's judgments, successes and obstacles that hinder the development of relations between Kyiv and Bratislava, in particular in the context of Ukraine's European integration ambitions.

#### **Assesment of Ukraine's implementation of Association Agreement with EU**

Speaking in the language of numbers, the implementation of AA norms, which is de facto an indicator of the Ukraine's Government's European integration activities, does not look very optimistic. In particular, according the dynamics that have been recorded by the governmental information and analytical system for monitoring the implementation of the AA "Pulse of the Agreement" the overall progress during 2017 was estimated at 73 %. In 2018 the overall level of completion of tasks reached only 70 %. In 2019, the implementation slowed to 61 % and even decreased in 2020 to 40 %.<sup>1</sup>The Report of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the state of implementation of AA between Ukraine and the EU also noted the negative trends that have formed over the past. In addition to objective factors that have hampered cooperation, including cross-border, such as restrictions imposed by Covid 19, Ukraine, according the mentioned above document, is also strengthening its protectionist and non-AA-compatible policies to

address economic problem.<sup>2</sup> It was noted the need for progress, in addition to the rule of law, also in the energy sector, which – we note – is an important field of interaction with Slovakia.

In independent reports, in particular, in document prepared in 2020 by the Razumkov Centre, it is noted that under the Presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky in some degree were maintained the previous positive trends, as well as gains, in mutual relations with EU achieved during the Presidency of Petro Poroshenko. First of all it is worth to mention:

- a) modernising the partnership's regulatory framework with the initiation of dialogue on updating of the AA;
- b) developing trade and economic cooperation;
- c) ensuring irreversibility of the European course, as enshrined in the Constitution of Ukraine;
- d) preserving political and diplomatic solidarity and economic support in the face of Russian aggression.

At the same time, experts note that the implementation of AA is hampered by a complex of adverse factors, some of which are traditional, and some have arisen over the past two years. Among the main ones are corruption and the incompleteness of judicial reform, and what is even more important – the lack of a strategic view agreed by Kyiv and Brussels on the prospects of mutual relations. Currently the future of the EU-Ukraine relations focuses entirely on the implementation of the Agreement and its updating. This approach, for all its significance, is in fact a short-term perspective from the point of Kyiv. It is symbolic that it was in Bratislava in September 2020 that Presi-

<sup>1</sup> Puls Uhody Monitorynh realizatsiji plany zakhodiv z vykonannya Uhody. Available on the internet: <<https://pulse.kmu.gov.ua/ua/a/year/2020>>.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Staff Working Document Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, European Commission, High Representative of the Union For Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Brussels, 27. 11. 2020 SWD (2020) 329 final. Available on the internet: <[https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020\\_ukraine\\_association\\_implementation\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020_ukraine_association_implementation_report_final.pdf)>.

dent Zelensky stated that Ukraine want to get a clear membership perspective from the EU.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly that at the 22nd EU-Ukraine Summit in October 2020, Ukraine and the EU agreed to start the AA renewal process in 2021 to create conditions for gradual integration into the EU internal market with its four freedoms: movement of capital, goods, services and citizens. In particular, Ukraine has proposed a closer association in the areas of the Digital Single Market and the European Green Deal.<sup>4</sup>

### **Development of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Slovakia in the context of the military conflict with Russia and Kyiv European inspirations**

To understand the direction in which Ukrainian-Slovak relations have evolved after 2017, it is necessary also to evaluate the general atmosphere of relations between Kyiv and Bratislava, which has developed with the establishment of their independence. There are no territorial or historical claims between the two countries, as well as problematic issues. Slovakia consistently supports Ukraine, and this assistance has political, economic and humanitarian components. Bratislava support is palpable in the issue of Ukraine's territorial integrity and independence, which is expressed by joint statements/declarations of the EU, UN, OSCE. In particular, Slovak Republic co-authored two UN resolutions – a 2014 resolution condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as a 2016 resolution condemning human rights violations in Crimea. Slovakia adheres to the consolidated position of the EU on lowering the level of development of relations with the Russian Federation and condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine, in particular, each time supporting the EU's re-

strictive measures against the aggressor (Bench, 2020).

Slovakia has consistently supported Ukraine's European integration course, in particular, actively facilitated the signing of the AA between Ukraine and the EU and was one of the first to ratify this Agreement (in September 2014). During its Presidency of the EU Council in 2016, Slovakia supported Ukraine in granting a visa-free regime for its citizens, namely, it proposed a mechanism for regime suspension, which was approved by the EU institutions. Slovakia also supports the further expansion of the free trade zone between Ukraine and the EU by expanding access to the European market for key Ukrainian export goods (Bench, 2020). Taking into account the role of Bratislava in the transit of Russia's gas to Europe, traditional usage by the part of political parties of the pro-Russian and anti-EU rhetorics, one can agree on the characteristic of Bratislava's foreign policy towards Kyiv, which was proposed by Slovak experts: "Slovakia attempts to find a balanced approach to deny Russia's revisionist policy, assist Ukraine, preserve regional security, and enhance its own interest" (Ukraine-Slovakia Relations: Developing a True Strategic Partnership?).

The importance of bilateral relations is evidenced by the fact that in 2019 the newly elected President of the Slovak Republic Zuzanna Čaputová chose Ukraine as one of the states that was visited just after after being elected to office, having also met with "young" President Volodymyr Zelensky. The culmination of political contacts between Ukraine and Slovakia during past two year was the official visit of the President Zelensky to the Slovak Republic on 23-24 September, 2020 during which he met with the President Čaputová, Prime Minister Igor Matovič and the President of the National Council Boris Kollar.<sup>5</sup> President of Ukraine stressed on the increase of the trade turnover between two countries and made the conclusion that this is certainly facilitated by the norms and provisions of the Deep and

<sup>3</sup> Interview of the President of Ukraine to the Slovak economic media outlet *Hospodárske noviny*, September 23, 2000. Available on the internet: <<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyu-prezidenta-ukrayini-slovackomuekonomichnomu-vidann-63881>>.

<sup>4</sup> Šefčovič v Kyjeve dohodol partnerstvo Únie a Ukrajiny v oblasti kritických surovín a batérií. Available on the internet: <<https://euractiv.sk/section/klima/news/sefcovic-v-kyjeve-dohodol-partnerstvo-unie-a-ukrajiny-v-oblasti-kriticky-ch-surovin-a-baterii>>.

<sup>5</sup> Politické vzťahy, 28. október 2020. Available on the internet: <<https://slovakia.mfa.gov.ua/sk/spolupraca/politicke-vztahy>>.

Comprehensive Free Trade Area with EU (DCFTA) as the integral part of AA.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the sustainable presence of Russian discourse in the Ukrainian-Slovak relations is evidenced by Kyiv's justified sharp reaction in early March 2021 to the unsuccessful joke of Prime Minister Igor Matovič about the possible transfer of "Subcarpathian Rus" (modern Transcarpathian region of Ukraine) to the Russian Federation as the payment for the supply of Sputnik V vaccine. Mr. Matovič was forced to apologize for his fault: "Slovakia's position on the territorial integrity of Ukraine has always been very clear. Respect for international law is mandatory".<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the political crisis that was formed in connection with the supply of the Russian anti-Covid-19 vaccine to Slovakia led to the resignation of the mentioned above Prime minister.

Ukrainian-Slovak relations, in the European context and in cross-border dimensions, have also developed in the format of regional and subregional international organizations. Slovak representatives are stressing on the importance of Eastern Partnership (EaP) where Ukraine plays flagman role. That is why Slovakia is proposing to draw up a plan of concrete measures to increase the security and resilience of Eastern neighbors. This was stated by the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic Martin Klus in February 2021 during the consultation of representatives of the Visegrad Group (V4) on the future of the EaP.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> FTA between Ukraine and the EU contributes to high trade turnover with Slovakia - Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Available on the internet: <<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zona-vilnoyi-torgivli-mizh-ukrayinoyu-ta-yes-spriyayev-visoki-57321>>;

<<https://euractiv.sk/section/obrana-a-zahranicie/news/ukrajina-sa-stala-este-blizsim-partnerom-nato-dobra-sprava-pre-slovensko/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Slovatsyna vybachylasya pered Ukrajinou za zhart pro obitsyane (Словаччина вибачилася перед Україною за жарт про Росію Закарпаття). Available on the internet: <<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-56278261>>.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Klus: "The countries in the Eastern Neighborhood of the EU face serious security challenges, and it is in our vital interest to help them". Available on the internet: <[https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/slovak\\_republic\\_and\\_eu/](https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/slovak_republic_and_eu/)>

## Impact of the Association Agreement on the bilateral trade turnover

The trade relations between Ukraine and the Slovak Republic are very changeable during the whole period that is under research. The continuation of the upward trend in the total trade turnover during three last years demonstrated the recognized by both sides need for the improvement of their economic cooperation. The trade relations between Kyiv and Bratislava can be divided into four periods: the first one from the year 2004 till 2008 (upward), the second one - from 2009 till 2011 (upward), the third one - from 2013 till 2015 (downward) and the fourth one is from the year 2016 till 2020 (upward), that is till the end of the time frame under analysis.

Despite the political support of Bratislava, the basis for the development of relations with Kyiv in recent years is formed by the economic interests, including trade. According to the results of the 2018 the Slovak Republic was among top 20 trade partners of Ukraine with the total trade turnover of more than USD 1.5 billion. It should be stated that the structure of the Ukrainian exports of goods to Slovakia was dominated by the deliveries of ores, slag and ash (39 %), electric machinery (17.1 %), organic chemicals (8.3 %), meat and by-products (6.9 %) and ferrous metals (6.4 %). At the same time the structure of the goods imported into opposite direction was represented by land transport (22.6 %), nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery (11.4 %), ferrous metals (11 %), plastics, polymeric materials (7.5 %). In the frame of services Ukraine exported transport, business, material processing services, telecommunication, computer and information services, and the same were dominating services exported from Slovakia to Ukraine (Kiforenko, 2020).

/asset\_publisher/69SSsvqFCd2a/content/martin-klus-ak-dohodu-o-buducom-rozpocete-eu-a-plane-obnovy-nemozu-niektore-krajiny-podporit-tak-je-dolezite-aby-ju-aspon-neblokovali/10182>.

<sup>8</sup> Ingrid Brocková: "The process of transformation and cohesion begins at the regional level. Cross-border cooperation will contribute to a stable, secure and prosperous Ukraine." Available on the internet: <<https://www.zmenyzakonov.sk/i/?a=normal&next=1617924968885853&state=3&ajax=1>>

There is reason to argue that norms of AA, especially those connected with DCFTA, created a positive background for the development of trade between Ukraine and Slovakia. In 2019, the volume of exports of goods from Ukraine to Slovakia increased by 50 %, although it is worth noting that 70 % of Ukrainian exports are raw materials. On the part of Slovakia, in addition to reverse gas supplies, Ukraine is buying products of transport, chemical industry, other goods of technological production. Also it is widely discussed that Ukraine should study Slovakia's experience in attracting Western investments, thanks to which it gained the status of "Eastern European Tiger" in the early 2000s. Given the EU Green Deal, European business including Slovakian, can invest in high-tech agriculture, food production.

Despite the potential for trade development, in particular in DCFTA's conditions, the coincidence of strategic energy interests in strategic documents of Ukraine's foreign economic policy, interest in Slovakia as the strategic partner is almost non-articulated. Despite the substantial and adequate requirements of time, the agreement framework of Ukrainian-Slovak trade, investment and sectoral relations, inter-agency communication on general issues of economic, industrial and scientific and technical cooperation is currently on pause, which hampers the development of joint projects in the field of alternative energy, cooperation in mechanical engineering, the creation of multi-modal logistics centers. Even in the energy sector, this priority is not fixed in strategic documents of Kyiv: for example, in the Energy Strategy of Ukraine until 2035, the Transport Strategy until 2030.

The institutional base for the cooperation (four intergovernmental commissions and two committees on economic, industrial, scientific and technical cooperation; cross-border cooperation; transport; on scientific, technical and technological cooperation) is not used for the development of the car industry (Slovak Republic, as it is known, is a hub for the production of cars of many corporations), as well as in the field of creative industries, such as the production of video and audio products, small and medium business in general (Yakovenko - Misik, 2020).

This reality is recognized by the Slovak officials; as was pointed by Mr. Heger in May 2021: "Cooperation in economy does not reflect potential. More work is needed. There's a need for proper preparation of Joint Commission on economic, industrial and scientific cooperation and bilateral business forum in Autumn 2021. There will be wider significance of cooperation in energy and we need to build on that. Friendly and transparent business environment is basis for more Slovak (foreign) investments in Ukraine."<sup>9</sup>

### Natural gas transit to EU as the common Ukrainian-Slovak strategic interest

Perhaps the most important element of the architecture of relations between Ukraine and Slovakia is the supply of natural gas and the development of a relevant infrastructure. Ukraine is still one of the main transit countries of Russian gas to Europe, while Slovakia has the largest entry point of Russian gas to the EU. Arriving from Ukraine, the Brotherhood pipeline enters the EU at Slovakia's Veľké Kapušany compressor station and divides on its territory into two branches, which go to the Czech Republic (and further on to Germany) and Austria (and further on to Italy and France).

Starting from 2014 Ukrainian integration with the European gas market has been pushed forward. Ukrainian companies have seen the potential of regulatory alignment with the EU and have, however, already shown their ability to take advantage of business opportunities afforded by closer integration with Europe. From the Ukrainian point of view, closer links with the European market, and a shift of focus away from the East-West gas transit business, will free up political, management and investment resources to focus on the modernisation and decarbonisation of the energy sector.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Slovakia has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine and European aspirations of Ukraine - Prime Minister Heger. Available on the internet: <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/interview/746926.html>>.

<sup>10</sup> Ukraine-EU Gas Market Integration Short-Term Progress, Long-Term Challenges March 2021, The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. Available on the internet: <<https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Insight-86-Ukraine-EU-Gas-Market-Integration.pdf>>.



The gas policy of Slovakia, especially the launch of the reverse gas supply to Ukraine, is in fact the important aspect of Kyiv and, in general, regional security. The issue of maintaining the status of major gas transit countries to the EU determines the prevailing role of energy diplomacy in the field of bilateral economic relations, in particular, in the issue of countering common threats such as the Russian lead Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The high profitability of the reverse gas supply project for Slovakia and millions of savings due to the refusal of direct gas supplies from Russia to Ukraine have become convincing arguments in favor of a “thematically concentrated” energy partnership. Under these conditions, Ukraine should take care of improving the investment image, which will encourage the Slovak side to invest in updating the Ukrainian gas transmission system.

Due to the development of alternative export routes (especially Nord Stream 2), transit via Ukraine (via the Brotherhood pipeline) has significantly decreased already in 2018. However, the pipeline still transports significant volumes of Russian gas to the EU and, for the time being under the research (the finalisation of Nord Stream 2 being slowed down by US sanctions); transit via Ukraine is still crucial for Gazprom to fulfil its obligations towards its European customers, especially during the periods of Nord Stream 2 maintenance. From January 1, 2020, the newly created Operator of the Gas Transmission System of Ukraine and the Slovak transmission system operator Eustream signed a new cooperation agreement to continue gas transit, which enabled the transit of Russian gas to Europe, as well as the transit of gas from Europe to Ukraine via the reverse flow with Slovakia (Yakovenko – Misik, 2020).

Slovak position in gas diplomacy was articulated in May 2021 by the newly appointed Prime Minister Eduard Heger who stressed that: *“As for the Nord Stream 2 Project, it is not in the hands of Slovakia to decide. Slovakia has always been a reliable transit country for the Russian gas to the West through the territory of Ukraine and we are definitely interested in keeping this gas transit through Ukraine. We believe the transit contract between Russia and Ukraine will be fulfilled further*

*on.”*<sup>11</sup> The movement of people across the border, in particular Ukrainians to Slovakia, is another of the cornerstones of the development of bilateral relations. Besides the factors mentioned above, AA in particular, the application of the provisions of the visa-free regime for travel of Ukrainian citizens to most European countries (since 2017) significantly affect the forms of cross-border mobility between Ukraine and the Slovak Republic, as well as the Covid 19 pandemic factor (since March 2020).

**Table 1** Dynamics of the movement of people on Ukrainian-Slovak border<sup>12</sup>

Year	Cases of border crossings (per year)	To Ukraine	From Ukraine
2021 (01.01 - 28.10)	627,875	329,450	298,425
2020	766,156	391,448	374,708
2019	2,632,239	1,360,934	1,271,305
2018	1,995,951	1,022,360	973,391
2017	1,655,986	822,790	833,196
2016	1,697,472	829,989	867,483
2015	1,399,840	686,148	713,692

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

We have to stress that cross-border mobility is one of the main forms of the cross-border cooperation. Modern researchers perceive cross border interactions, which are localized at the interstate border and border, as those that have institutional, socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions. The institutional mechanism of crossing the state border serves the social differentiation of persons who can leave / 8 enter the space of state power. In the socio-cultural dimension, the border defines and redefines social hierarchies, identities and loyalties, establishes barriers and social distances, but also new social groups and practices. As socio-economic phenomena, the border and border area is the space of implementation of practices of production, consumption and exchange, use of goods and the implementation of various

<sup>11</sup> Slovakia has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine and European aspirations of Ukraine - Prime Minister Heger. Available on the internet: <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/interview/746926.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> Data provided by Western Regional Directorate of the State Border Service of Ukraine, October 2021



needs, the place of actualization of social well-being of border resident (Benchak, 2021).

From the point of view of cross-border cooperation, the migration of citizens of Ukraine, in particular from the Transcarpathian region to Eastern Slovakia – to the communities of Koscice and Presov regions – has the most important influence on the socio-economic development. Eastern Slovakia, according to the statistics and focus studies, despite its peripheral status in the EU and, in particular, much worse indicators of socio-economic development than the West of the country, is an attractive location for the economic and educational migration of Ukrainians. According Koroutchev and Novotny, 64,4 % (1,358 persons) of all Ukrainian migrants who came to Slovakia during 2012-2018 stopped here. For residents of the Ukrainian border, interest in moving to Eastern Slovakia is due to family, cultural and historical ties, the possibility of the circular migration, while the Slovak periphery thanks to migrants from the East neutralizes the imbalance in human resources caused by the relocation of young citizens to the Bratislava area (Koroutchev – Novotny, 2020).

Slovakia has gradually become a state that employs foreign labour, especially in manufacturing. This is mainly caused not only by the fact of Slovakia's accession to the EU, but also by the favourable economic development and the creation of new job opportunities for both domestic and foreign labour. Slovakia is currently a recipient of foreign labour due to lack of the qualified domestic labour. It therefore introduces new legislative measures to speed up the employment process, remove administrative barriers especially for workers from non-EU countries (Bajzikova – Bajzik, 2020).

We need to mention that in Slovakia the greatest demand is for workers of the car industry (42 %), specialists in construction, plumbers, etc. (22 %). More than a quarter of work permits for foreigners in Slovakia are issued to citizens of Ukraine, the total number of which in the labor market is about 30 thousand persons. Accordingly Ukrainian migrant workers are the largest group of foreign workers in Slovakia with a clear growth trend (at least in the period before Covid 19 pandemic). The sharp increase in 2018 of Ukrainians is demonstrated by a significant increase in temporary residence permits, which took place af-

ter 2017 that is the year of conclusion of the EU-Ukraine AA. As of the end of 2020, community of the legal Ukrainian migrants in Slovakia amounted to 24,913 people. In 2019 this number has increased to 38,307 and in 2020 to 42,161 persons.

At the same time, Ukrainians form the largest number of cases of illegal crossing or stay in Slovakia – 1,934 people in 2018, 1,413 in 2019, 326 persons in 2020.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the main reason for the violation of migration rules is the excess of the period of legal stay in Slovakia. Nevertheless researchers are convinced that the migration of Ukrainians to the western neighbor brings mutual benefits: Slovak society receives highly educated, professional human resources.

The revival of the movement of people cross the border and various contacts due to the liberalization of the visa regime and trade turnover with European countries, the positive influence of AA on the economics dynamics has demonstrated the need to build or renew a transport (road and rail) network and infrastructure to the direction of Ukraine's border with western neighbors (Habchak – Dubis, 2020).

The crossing points along Ukraine's western border with EU member states (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania) have all witnessed increasing traffic starting from 2014. In 2019, the last year before Covid 19 travel restrictions became the crucial factor for people mobility, more than 32 million people crossed at these border points. Growing volumes of border traffic have often led to congestion and long queues, especially for those seeking to cross the border by cars or other vehicles. Since Ukraine signed the AA, efforts to improve the Ukraine-EU border have been on the agenda both Brussels and Kyiv. Attention has increased since 2017, when Ukrainian citizens gained the right to visa-free travel within the Schengen Zone (Dubenko – Kravchuk).

<sup>13</sup> Štatistický prehľad legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie v Slovenskej republike. Prezídium Policajného zboru, Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície, 2020. Available on the internet: <[https://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/policia/hranicna\\_a\\_cudzinecka\\_policia/rocniky/rok\\_2020/2020-rocenka-UHCP-SK.pdf](https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocniky/rok_2020/2020-rocenka-UHCP-SK.pdf)>.

### **The challenges of the cross-border cooperation development in the framework of Association Agreement**

The issue of building new, jointly operated checkpoints, applying innovative technologies to simplify border and customs control through the introduction of e-services and merging databases on both sides will contribute to reducing queues and corruption, providing quality services, and will also ensure conditions for a further growth of trade between Ukraine and EU countries within the framework of DCFTA (Antonyuk – Fedun – Papish, 2020). The statements issued during bilateral meetings testify to the awareness of improving the capacity of the border by both the Ukrainian and Slovak parties.

In April 2021, during a phone conversation with the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the newly appointed Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic Eduard Heger stated that the introduction of a joint border and customs control would help reduce queues of citizens who want to cross the border, the fight against contraband. A month later, during Heger's visit to Kyiv and a meeting with the Ukrainian counterpart Denis Shmyhal, an agreement was reached to resume the activities of the Joint Commission on Economic, Industrial, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, in particular to attract Slovak investments through the mechanism of industrial parks, to restore the functioning of the airport in the border Uzhgorod, which, of course, will contribute to the development of cross-border cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

We have to mention also that cross-border cooperation on the Eastern border of the EU, which is the Slovak-Ukrainian border, means contact with societies that until recently were part of the geopolitical, socio-political, economic and cultural and ideological system of the Soviet Union, and, therefore, the difficulty in applying patterns of such interaction that are effective in other parts of Europe. In particular, a significant barrier is a much lower level of

economic development of the border regions of Ukraine, which leads to the phenomenon of socio-economic asymmetry, the inability of institutions bordering Zakarpatska region to invest sufficient resources in the development of cooperation.

We support the position of researchers who claim that to stimulate the socio-economic development of the Zakarpatska region as a border territory, international cooperation should be based on the support of the so-called "propulsing" sectors of the economy. It is important to consider car collection, production of computers, electronic and optical products, printing industry, organic agricultural production, culture and winemaking, green (agro-ecological) tourism as the priorities for the investment (currently the leading are chemical, textile industry, timber industry complex with dominant extensive approaches) (Bil – Bachynska, 2021).

As advised by the Deputy Head of the European Commission's General Directorate for Neighborhood and Enlargement Policy, Acting Head of the Support Group for Ukraine in the EC. Katarina Mathernova, Bratislava should invest more resources and human motivation in stimulating cross-border projects with the Zakarpatska region of Ukraine, as well as promote it as a very good neighbor. After all, in fact, Ukraine's prosperity is the most useful recipe to stimulate the development of Eastern Slovakia, as an example of the rise of the previously depressed Burgenland in Austria after the opening of borders with Bratislava.<sup>15</sup>

Although cross-border cooperation dominates in the institutional framework over trade, economic, industrial and investment cooperation, the implementation of joint projects is based mainly on the mechanisms of EU regional policy, as well as the European Neighborhood Policy. This format of building relations is here "cumbersome" due to the need to take into account the positions of Poland, Romania and Hungary. Slovakia and Ukraine have formed their list of promising issues of bilateral

<sup>14</sup> Denys Shmyhal and Eduard Heger discuss topical issues of Ukrainian-Slovak cooperation, Communications Department of the Secretariat of the CMU, May 28, 2021. Available on the internet: <<https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/denis-shmygal-ta-eduard-heger-obgovorili-aktualni-pitannya-ukrayinsko-slovackoyi-spivpraci>>.

<sup>15</sup> Mathernová: Ukrajinu kritizujú za pomalé reformy, ale kde inde ich urobili v takom rozsahu a krátkom čase? Available on the internet: <<https://euractiv.sk/section/all/interview/mathernova-ukrajinu-kritizuju-za-pomale-reformy-ale-kde-inde-ich-urobili-v-takom-rozsahu-a-kratkom-case/>>.

cooperation (border management, including combating smuggling; water issues, forestry, veterinary medicine, scientific, technical and innovative cooperation), for the deployment of which it is necessary to distinguish institutional, financial and organizational support (Zosymenko, 2021).

In April 2021 the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic Ingrid Brocková stressed on the importance of the cross-border cooperation between countries: “[...] we have also implemented a number of long-term development projects. Moreover, we also share a wide range of cultural and interpersonal relations with our neighbours.”<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the closure of the Consulate General of Ukraine in Presov in 2014 did not contribute to the development of the cross-border cooperation, This apparently played into the hands of spreading the Russian information narrative in Eastern Slovakia, where there is traditionally favorable ground for it.

The findings of the sociological research that was made on the Ukrainian-Slovak borderland during 2019-2020 demonstrates that respondents’ opinion on the effectiveness of the border and customs services, consular service, as well as border-crossing practices are quite critical. Slovak respondents have better opinion on the effectiveness of these services, and Ukrainian respondents have a higher level of criticism. In socio-economic dimension there is a significant statistical relationship between the practices of intensive cross-border mobility and social well-being of respondents: cross-border mobility is a correlate of higher level of social well-being, and immobility correlates with low subjective material well-being. Socio-cultural dimension of the perceptions of population of the Ukrainian-Slovak border is characterized by a nonconflict perception of the experience of bilateral relations. At the same time, both the level of awareness and the perceptions cross-border relations between the two countries as important are higher among Ukrainian respondents. In the hierarchy of effective me-

ans of cross-border mobility and cooperation regulation Ukrainian experts gave priority to such positions as development of national and international legislation, while Slovak experts gave priority to indirect, economic means of regulating cross-border mobility and restrictive mechanisms (Benchak, 2021).

The above described data on changes in emphasis in the development of bilateral diplomatic, economic, trade relations, migration trends of Ukrainian citizens to Slovakia, their assessment of cross-border cooperation between the countries indicate a significant impact of the new institutional environment between Kyiv and Brussels, which began to form in 2014 with the beginning of the signing of the AA. At the same time, we can conclude that Ukraine has insufficient institutional support for the development of relations with Slovakia, despite the strategic role that Bratislava plays in confronting gas blackmail by Russia, as well as the potential for the implementation of joint large investment projects in the border areas. Another task that can be implemented for the practical convergence of socio-economic development of border territories is the stimulation of the cross border practices of local communities, the thumping of business and public bilateral initiatives and projects.

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