INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT OF EU-FUNDED CROSS-BORDER INTERREG PROJECTS

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Abstract: Recent collaborative projects have focused on developing border regions and creating data information tools. The KEEP database has seen growing quality and quantity of cooperation-related information. This study examines the data management framework of EU-funded cross-border INTERREG V-A projects across Slovakia, the V4 countries, Austria, and ENI. Study aims to understand the cooperation dynamics and funding geographies of the recent INTERREG V- A period by analysing cross-border programs involving Slovakia's borders. This includes spatial configurations of funded project cooperation, thematic topics addressed, and territorial contexts such as urbanization levels and border proximity. Study evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of institutional mapping using KEEP data, highlighting its usefulness for data exploration and comparative studies. Additionally, we assess the portal's functionality for academics, emphasizing the need for historical data analysis in regional planning. Our study concludes that KEEP-based institutional mapping is valuable for data exploration and enhancing cross-border cooperation insights.

Keywords: Data Management, Data Platform, EU Project Analytics, INTERREG European Planning Studies.

1 Introduction

This study examines Slovakia's cross-border initiatives with other countries of V4 and Austria, and their involvement using data tools. Specifically, the connections between the spatial arrangements of financed project cooperation is analysed, the thematic themes addressed, and the significance of territorial contexts, particularly regarding urbanization levels and proximity to borders. INTERREG is a prominent European Union initiative aimed at fostering cooperation among regions across national borders. It falls under the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) goal, which is a crucial component of the EU's cohesion policy. INTERREG's primary objective is to promote harmonious economic, social, and territorial development across the EU by supporting cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation projects. Since its inception in 1990, INTERREG has played pivotal role in addressing common challenges, facilitating the exchange of knowledge, and enhancing regional integration[1] (European Commission, 2020). This contributes to the overall cohesion of the European Union, promoting peace and stability in the region. For example, Evrard (2017[2]) emphasized the importance of territorial cooperation in fostering social ties and regional cohesion, which are essential for building a stable and peaceful Europe.

1.1 Cross border cooperation in V4

The Slovak-Hungarian cooperation has made substantial strides in improving infrastructure, environmental protection, and cultural heritage preservation. Projects under this cooperation have focused on developing transport links, enhancing environmental sustainability, and promoting the rich cultural heritage of the region. This has led to improved accessibility, environmental benefits, and increased tourism, thereby foster ing economic growth and social cohesion [3](Bachtler, Ferry, 2018).

Similarly, the Slovak-Czech cooperation emphasizes regional development through joint projects in transport, education, and healthcare. By working together on these crit sectors, Slovakia and the Czech Republic aim to enhance the quality of life for their citizens, boost regional competitiveness, and foster social inclusion. For example, joint transport projects have improved cross-border mobility and collaborative efforts in ed ucation and healthcare resulted in better services and opportunities for the population (Baun, Marek, 2017).[4] Slovak-Austrian initiatives under INTERREG have concentrated on enhancing eco nomic integration, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. For instance, pro jects have aimed at improving cross-border transportation infrastructure, which has fa cilitated easier movement of goods and people, thereby boosting economic activities and regional connectivity. Additionally, efforts in environmental protection, such as joint initiatives for water management and biodiversity conservation, have strengthened ecological resilience (European Commission, 2020). [5]Similarly, the Slovak-Polish cooperation under INTERREG has yielded substantial benefits in regional development in infrastructure, promoting sustainable tourism, and protecting natural resources. Environmental initiatives have targeted the preservation of the Carpathian Mountains, fostering biodiversity and mitigating climate change impacts. These projects not only safeguard natural heritage but also create new economic opportunities through eco-tourism (European Commission, 2021).[6]

Cross-border cooperation programmes under INTERREG are crucial for fostering development and integration in the Slovak cross-border regions. By facilitating joint initiatives, they help to overcome barriers that hinder regional growth and contribute to a more cohesive and integrated Europe. One of the key roles these programmes play is in facilitating economic growth. By supporting joint projects that enhance infrastructure, stimulate business activities, and create jobs, they help improve the economic Data Management Framework of EU Funded Cross-Border INTERREG V-A Projects 3 competitiveness of the border regions. For instance, investments in transportation and communication infrastructure can significantly reduce logistical bottlenecks, making it easier for businesses to operate efficiently across borders. Additionally, these programmes often focus on fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, which can lead to the creation of new industries and job opportunities. The pooling of resources and expertise through these programmes enables more efficient and impactful economic development, as evidenced by the significant improvements in local economies reported in various studies (Perkmann, 2003; European Commission, 2020). Moreover, cross-border cooperation projects under INTERREG are essential for bridging economic disparities between regions. Many border regions suffer from eco nomic imbalances, with some areas being significantly less developed than their neigh bours. By improving connectivity and promoting regional development, these initia tives create new economic opportunities and enhance regional equity. Improved infra structure and joint economic activities help in levelling the playing field, ensuring that less developed areas can catch up with more prosperous regions. This not only benefits the border regions but also contributes to the overall stability and prosperity of the in volved countries (Dörry & Decoville, 2016; Medeiros, 2018). Another significant aspect of these programmes is their role in fostering social and cultural integration. Many border regions face common environmental challenges such as pollution, deforestation, and water management issues. By addressing these prob lems collaboratively, regions can implement more effective and sustainable solutions. Joint

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environmental projects can lead to better resource management and conservation efforts, benefiting both sides of the border. This collaborative approach ensures that environmental policies are coherent and mutually reinforcing, leading to more signifi cant and lasting impacts (Knippschild, 2011).

Data management in the context of cross-border cooperation and online platforms is crucial for ensuring effective collaboration and decision-making among diverse stake holders. Proper data management involves the systematic organization, storage, shar ing, and utilization of data across borders, particularly facilitated through online plat forms and data hubs. According to research by White (2024)[7], effective data manage ment frameworks are essential for overcoming barriers related to data fragmentation, privacy concerns, and differing regulatory environments in cross-border cooperation initiatives. These frameworks not only enable seamless data exchange but also promote transparency and accountability among participating entities. The necessity for proper data management in cross-border cooperation is under scored by its role in enhancing the reliability and accuracy of shared information. As highlighted by López-González et al. (2021)[8], robust data management practices mitigate risks associated with data inconsistencies and facilitate harmonized analysis across international boundaries. Online platforms enable real-time data provision and updates, essential for monitoring progress, evaluating impacts, and making informed policy de cisions in cross-border projects (European Commission, 2021)[9]. Institutional mapping in cross-border contexts involves the systematic identification, analysis, and visualization of the various institutions, organizations, and stakeholders involved in governance, decision-making, and service provision across national bound aries (Perkmann, 2003)[10]. Firstly, it enhances transparency and clarity by providing a clear depiction of the roles and responsibilities of different institutions operating in cross-border regions (Beck, 2018).[11] This clarity is crucial for identifying gaps in governance, potential areas for collaboration, and opportunities to streamline administrative processes. Secondly, institutional mapping supports evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation by providing empirical insights into the governance structures and their impacts on regional development, environmental management, public health, and other critical issues affecting cross-border regions (Scherer, Palazzo, 2009)[12]. Furthermore, geographical mapping in INTERREG projects can be used to monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions. By overlaying project data with socio-economic and environmental indicators, project managers can assess the effectiveness of their strategies in real-time and make data-driven decisions to adapt their approaches as needed. For example, an INTERREG project focusing on cross-border environmental management could use geographical mapping to track pollution levels, habitat connectivity, and conservation efforts across the border regions, as highlighted by Scherer and Palazzo (2009).[13]

1.2 Institutional mapping in cross-border cooperation in V4

The growing importance of "institutional mappings" has coincided with contemplation of the dynamics of cross-border collaboration. Institutional mapping is, in theory, the process of gathering and visualising institutional data from a spatial standpoint. Institutions in this context include both "soft" (like informal networks) and "hard" (like legal restrictions) forms that play a specific de facto role. According to Chilla and Lambracht (2022), institutional mappings can take many different shapes, but they always have these three components: the institutional dimension, which includes information about resources, mandates, and thematic priorities; the spatial dimension, which can include general information about different types of spaces or specific geographical information like perimeters; the technical visualization, which brings together important details in a way that is both highly accessible and "didactic." Furthermore, Chilla and Lambracht (2022) evolved on the applications of institutional mapping to various cross-border cooperation objects have been made. These methods usually include deep analytical insights along with some descriptive data. The subsequent categories pertain to cartographic representations that are geolocalized:

a) Diffusion mapping incorporates the governance's time dimension and distinguishes the background role of national players and provide more details on the spatial distribution of the EGTC tool throughout Europe.
b) Several mappings centre on cooperation typologies, which classify certain cooperative patterns integrating geographical contexts with the activity statuses of border zones.
c) The vertical dimension (between actors on various hierarchical levels) and the horizontal cooperative dynamic (between actors of a similar institutional level) are combined in multi-level governance mapping.
d) A visual component of social network analysis could be network mappings by using the example of policy networks in the context of international transportation net works.
e) A frequently used technique to depict the areas included in official border regions and cooperation areas is perimeter mapping. Since perimeter maps frequently specify where involved partners must be situated (or active) in order to get funds, eligibility information is crucial in this context.
f) Academic comments have used thematic priority mapping on several occasions.

Table 1. Analysing INTERREG projects in V4 from mapping point of view

Types of database project mapping	*Description of use in INTERREG*	*Country programme best practice*
Diffusion mapping	*Differentiate the role of the national actors as governance*	*Slovakia Hungary Austria Poland*
Diffusion mapping	*Graphic part of social network*	*Slovakia Poland*
Thematic priority mapping	*Academic reflections*	*Slovakia Hungary*
Cooperation mapping Multi-level governance Perimeter mapping Cooperative areas and legal forms	*Cooperative areas and legal forms*	*Slovakia-Czechia*
Multi-level governance	*Between actors and institutions*	*Slovakia -Poland*
Perimeter mapping	*Eligibility and territory*	*Slovakia Hungary*

Source: own collaboration based on Chillas

Speaking about Network mappings can be the graphic part of social network analyses. In this case study elaborate this for the example of policy networks in the field of cross-border transportation network, labour market and the environmental issues.

Selecting Multi-level governance mapping combines in Slovakia the horizontal cooperation dynamic between actors of a similar institutional level we can experience with the vertical dimension and between actors on different hierarchical levels in the state institutions.

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2 Methodology Data Research

This study relies on data from the KEEP database, which serves as a fundamental resource for INTERREG-related research. Managed under the INTERACT initiative, the KEEP database encompasses information on projects, collaboration partners, financial aspects, and thematic areas across various European programs. It is accessible for download as an open-source repository, presenting its contents through tables, diagrams, and maps. Basic institutional mapping capabilities are also available directly through the database (e.g. https://keep.eu/statistics). Our research specifically focuses on data from INTERREG V A, excluding information from other programs like INTERACT or ENI, as well as the small project grants under INTERREG. Since the INTERREG IV period, nearly 90% of the data has been consistently complete. All quantitative analyses in this study are based on the KEEP database as of December 2020. However, data availability and quality remain issues of concern. Décoville and Durand (2021, p. 4)[14] critique several limitations, particularly focusing on the thematic categorization of the KEEP database. Consequently, a comprehensive data validation process was necessary to ensure the reliability of findings. The dataset underwent thorough review and updates to rectify typographical errors, missing data, and other identified issues, with specific attention given to aligning postal code classifications. Moreover, certain programs lacked comprehensive information on project partners, offering only basic project details such as lead partner, funding, and budget. The official program priorities assigned in the KEEP database were found to lack complete credibility. In response to these challenges, our analysis commences with already classified as signment and categorization by Chilla and Lambracht (2022)[15], which subsequently in forms the following classification: agriculture with specific focus on agricultural prac tices and their socio-economic implications; culture encompasses aspects such as the arts, historical heritage; economics and research covers economic activities, skilled la bour dynamics; environment addresses green energy initiatives, climate change mitiga tion, environmental education, and habitat preservation; forestry includes sustainable practices in forestry; governance focuses on exchanges within public administration and institutional networking; health involves rescue services, sports, inclusive prac tices, and preventive measures; labour market considers aspects like volunteering and societal engagement; transportation encompasses architectural innovations, mobility solutions, and spatial planning strategies; travel includes various modes such as slow travel, green travel, and traditional travel. Based on the aforementioned considerations, we identified Agriculture, the Labor Market, and Environment as the three primary areas of focus concerning Slovakia's neighbouring countries.

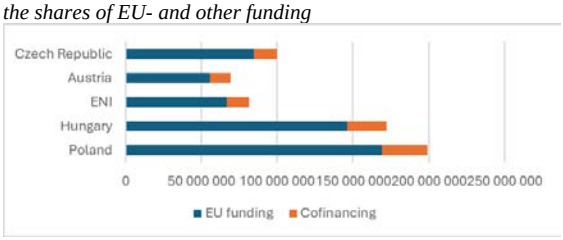
3 Data visualisation

Facilitating evidence-based policy formulation and implementation, Perkmann's (2003)[16] research highlights GIS's pivotal role in mitigating administrative and regulatory barriers among nations. This facilitates enhanced coordination of activities and resource management across borders. GIS achieves this by spatially mapping project activities, assessing environmental impacts, and evaluating socio-economic outcomes, thereby providing valuable insights to stakeholders involved in INTERREG initiatives. There are institutional visualizations presented: a 'thematic programme mapping' and a 'network mapping'. The thematic programme mapping integrates funding amounts and project numbers across different themes, employing a combination of cartographic representations and spider graphs to depict these dimensions simultaneously. This visualization unveils thematic profiles for each programme area. Since 2000, keep.eu has accumulated extensive data on EU-led territorial cooperation projects, programmes, and partners. Although updates to this page occur once daily, continuous additions are made throughout business hours. This page offers an overview of keep.eu's comprehensive coverage of Interreg programmes, projects, and partners, including the number of projects publishing output papers and those featuring their documents on keep.eu. The foundational data and infographics illustrate keep.eu's overall representativeness. Detailed data exports in Excel encompass every field's representation at both pro gramme-type and programme-level. It's important to note that identifying languages in fields with minimal text poses significant challenges. A comprehensive understanding of keep.eu's data is facilitated by consulting the FAQ section, which covers various topics including data meaning, processes, and concepts specific to keep.eu. The institutional priorities of these programmes are delineated through decisions made during their formulation and implementation stages, exemplified by three key elements. The first element focuses on the program level, emphasizing the overarching framework within which projects operate. Concurrently, the second element delves into project-level dynamics, illustrating the spatial aspects of collaborative networks supported by the programs. Perimeter

4 The case study of Slovakia INTERREG V- A

INTERREG V - A funding for cross-border projects involving Slovakia encompasses five neighbouring countries, as illustrated in Figure 1. This funding includes co-financing and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) support at a rate of 85%. Po land and Hungary received the highest funding volumes due to the extent of their bor ders. The European INTERREG V A financing, which incorporates the European Social Fund (ESF), ERDF, and other cohesion funds, reflects this significant financial commitment. It also considers various financing mechanisms, such as co-funding, particularly in terms of national contributions. Programs in countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland notably feature a higher co-funding ratio compared to those in Eastern Europe.

Figure. 1. NTERREG V A Slovakia budget volumes in EUR and the shares of EU- and other funding



Source: KEEP database 2024.

To analyse the length of the borderline and the amounts that can be seen by their linear correlation, the rule is applied that the larger the borderline, the higher the amount of EBRDF granted in terms of Poland. This shows the most extensive amount of the contributions.

The Table 2 provides a summary of the financial grants in the programme period of 2014-2020 in the INTERREG VA programmes of Slovakia's neighbouring countries.

Table 2. Analysing the volumes of INTERREG projects in V4 from financial oint of view

Information	Poland	Hungary	ENI	Austria	Czech Republic
EU Funding	169308291	146460448	665566600	55500000	84 731 096
Cofinancing	29877935	25845964	1479 400	13875002	14 952 548
Number of projects	53	230	170	50	65
Projects in keep	204	168	78	50	159

[14] Décoville, A., F. Durand. (2021) *An Empirical Approach to Cross-Border Spatial Planning Initiatives in Europe*. Regional Studies 55 (8): 1417–1428. doi:10.1080/00343404.2021.1902492

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Source: Precise Poland, Hungary, ENI, Austria, Czech Republic budget volumes in EUR and the shares of EU- and other funding KEEP database 2024 and INTERREG websites: www.skhu.at, www.skcz.eu, www.atsk.eu, www.plsk.eu

Table 2 provides an analysis of the volumes of INTERREG projects in V4 countries (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic) along with ENI and Austria, from a financial stand point. Poland has the highest EU funding, significantly surpassing Hungary's, ENI's, Austria's, and the Czech Republic's. Cofinancing follows a similar pattern, with Poland receiving, which is the highest among the listed countries, while the Czech Republic and Hungary follow with 14,952,548 EUR and 25,845,964 EUR, respectively. The number of projects and their representation indicates a higher involvement and financial backing for Poland, reflecting its substantial participation in INTERREG initiatives compared to its V4 counterparts and Austria. The data underscores Poland's leading role in securing and utilising EU funds for regional development projects within the analysed group.

5 Relevance of cooperation

The cooperative programs involved exhibit various differences, which can be under stood from multiple perspectives. Broader political, historical, and geographical factors influence these processes. Since their establishment in 1990, INTERREG programs have continuously expanded and broadened their scope. In the specific study areas we are examining, namely, the division between post-socialist countries and non-EU mem ber states, is this expansion is notable. Countries lining the western borders are consid ered "original" INTERREG members, having been involved since the beginning and benefiting from decades of prior cooperative efforts. This characterization applies to Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland, all of which were founding members of the EU. Following the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, Poland and the Czechia in the east ern region swiftly became participants in INTERREG programs. Subsequently, through reform processes, there was a significant shift in regional policy strategy. The distinc tiveness of these cross-border cooperation efforts is underscored by notable language barriers and substantial institutional differences. The varying stages of maturity across these contexts are elucidated through institutional mappings. The situation differs notably between Switzerland and Austria, particularly due to Austria's accession to the EU in 1995. The evolution of legal frameworks for cross border governance is a relatively recent area of study, despite generally manageable challenges in terms of language and political alignments in cross-border collaboration. Higher project budgets tend to correlate with more advanced collaboration maturity. Cooperation programs involving countries such as Poland, Czechia, and Austria gener ally allocate smaller project expenditures compared to their counterparts in Western Germany, for example. Funding for projects often mirrors the allocation for broader programs. Moreover, greater cooperation experience tends to foster stronger collabora tion frameworks and more sophisticated project management structures. For less expe rienced participants in INTERREG, engaging in smaller-scale initiatives could be ad vantageous for gaining valuable experience. While governmental support directly con tributes to the establishment of cooperative institutions, domains such as tourism and culture, often viewed as softer topics, are considered suitable arenas for cooperation. Surprisingly, in the western cooperation zones, there is a stronger focus on environmental concerns, economic development, and spatial planning rather than forestry and agriculture. These fields appear to require higher levels of collaborative experience. The institutional mappings outlined above reflect the complex interplay of institutions in multi-level governance environments where INTERREG cooperative dynamics are embedded. Various entities — including national governments, regional agencies, European organizations, and transnational entities — interact within these environments. These interactions fluctuate throughout the policy cycle; during budget negotiations, for instance, the European Parliament and national representatives play significantly larger roles compared to the implementation phase, which primarily involves lower-tier institutions.

6 Conclusion

The presented study presents the information that cross-border regions exhibit similarities in terms of data and economic and geographical characteristics, aligning with the core objectives of the European Union's cohesion policy, which aims to integrate border regions and reduce disparities. Various tools are used to address these dispari ties, including the European Territorial Cohesion (ETC) framework. The evolution of border areas has been increasingly studied through institutional mapping methodolo gies in recent years. These methods visually connect institutional and spatial patterns, enhancing our understanding of cross-border dynamics. Parallel to this, the EU KEEP database has grown significantly in both scope and quality of cooperation-related data. Our study's added value lies in the explicit mapping and analysis of geographical data. The KEEP database is a valuable resource provided by the European Commission, summarising all available data from previous programming periods interactively. The years 2014-2021 are particularly well-represented, providing insights on data utilisation and interpretation of the data from the INTERREG projects. The EU and European Commission intended for this portal to offer policy guidance and strategic recommen dations based on statistical analyses, influencing future programming periods and the matic priorities at NUTS 1, NUTS 2, and NUTS 3 levels. In this study, five INTERREG programs neighbouring Slovakia—HU, CZ, AT, PL, and ENI were compared. The analysis revealed that the number of projects and financial allocations increase with the length of the border segment per each country, as exem plified by Poland and Hungary. Smaller segments, like those with Austria and the Czechia, implement projects that are thematically similar but adapted to regional needs. Additionally, our study has two primary objectives. First, we aim to understand the financing regions and cooperation dynamics of the most recent INTERREG A period, using V4, Austria and ENI cross-border initiatives and data tools. The connections be tween the spatial arrangements of financed project cooperation were analysed, the the matic themes addressed, and the territorial contexts, particularly urbanization levels and border proximity. Second, the pros and cons of institutional mapping using KEEP data were assessed, noting its usefulness for data exploration and comparative studies.

Various functions of the KEEP database were tested. It provides extensive statis-tics on thematic priorities and the EU's 11 priorities for 2014-2021, which have been con solidated into five strategic priorities. According to predictions from experts in sectoral and territorial assessments, this portal will become increasingly useful, particularly for academics, as not everyone is proficient with GIS or Power BI tools. Given the expan sion of regional planning programs, historical data analysis will be increasingly neces sary for effective planning and documentation. Institutional map-ping utilizing KEEP data can make a substantial contribution, especially in light of the new funding term and the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, emphasizing the need for improved analytical insights.

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