

Short report on the activities of CESCİ Balkans 2020-2021

General Assembly of CESCİ, May 2022

Although the financial capacities of the organization were reduced during this period, mainly because of the effects of the Covid19 pandemic, the organization maintained its main activities and was working effectively on supporting cross-border cooperation in the Balkans on the following instances:

Main activities in 2020

Support to the **thematic preparation** of the Serbia Hungary IPA CBC Programme 2021-2027

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary as the Managing Authority and the Ministry of European Integration sitting the National Authority of the current INTERREG-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia (2014-2020) requested the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI) to prepare the programming process of the next INTERREG-IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme Hungary-Serbia (2021-27).

During 2019-2020 CESCİ Balkans contributed to the thematic preparation of the next Hungary-Serbia Interreg IPA-CBC programme, by conducting the planned activities in Serbia. The process of the thematic preparation involved a large number of participants but also diverse activities; organization and implementation of a series of thematic and territorial workshops, conduction of a surveying process targeting all relevant stakeholders, interviewing, analysis of the relevant Serbian strategic documents, etc.

Leadership Academy for cross-border cooperation **Bulgaria-Serbia**

With the support of the Council of Europe, the third stage of the Leadership Academy for cross-border cooperation for the municipalities in the border region of Serbia and Bulgaria was planned to be organized in 2020, following the previous successfully completed sessions of 2018 and 2019.

Continuous mentoring was ensured to the stakeholders in the border region of Serbia-Bulgaria, in accordance with the objective of improving the leadership capacity of mayors and senior officials to promote cross-border cooperation.

Mentoring has been structured as a step-by-step process, within the framework of a methodological concept that includes a benchmarking/evaluation tool developed for imposing sufficient online-friendly solutions

During the mentoring process, identified issues (e.g., legal harmonization, financial incapacity etc.) on both sides of the borders have been addressed based on good practice examples, aligned with existing useful tools that refer to similar cases Europe-wide.

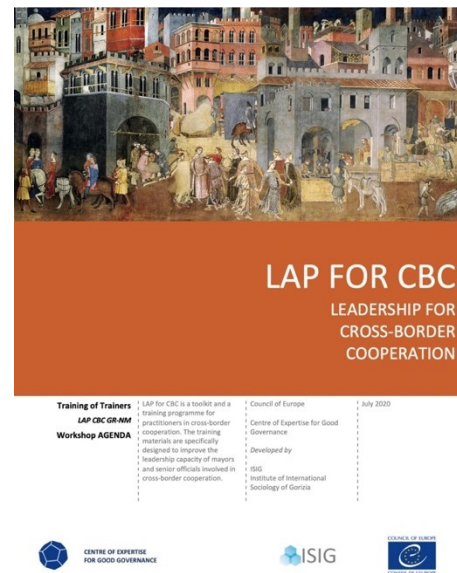
Leadership Academy for cross-border cooperation North Macedonia-Greece

The training of trainers (ToT) was successfully organized online, on 13-14 July 2020. The final list of the modules to be delivered was made in cooperation with the experts of the CoE. The selected modules and training materials have been available to both Greek and Macedonian. The team of trainers was trained by the international trainers and experts of the CoE, Ms. Ramona Velea and Mr. Daniele Del Bianco. To set the structure of the Leadership Academy Programme for Greece - Northern Macedonia based on an in-depth understanding of the border context in terms of CBC-related needs.

Launch event

Under normal circumstances, the launch event would have been held in Thessaloniki, following the relevant communication made with the City of Thessaloniki. However, due to the travelling restrictions imposed as anti-pandemic measures, this was not possible to happen and the solution of an online event was pursued.

Finally, the event was held online on 5 October 2020 with the participation of CoE representatives, governmental representatives from both countries, the program's trainers, and the representatives from the vast majority of the municipalities in the area.



TASQ – **Research** on legal obstacles and opportunities for cross-border trade of **traditional food products** in the IPA target area

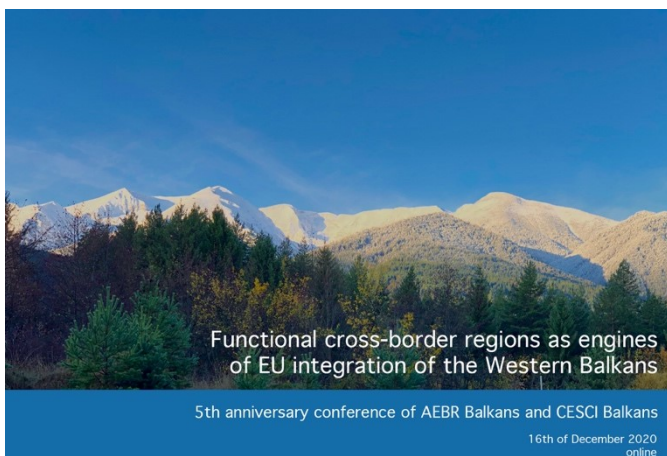
The INTERREG-IPA project TASQ, Traditional and Standard Quality (HUSRB / 1602/41/046) explored the issue of cross-border integration. As part of the project, the Homokhátság Association selected and commissioned the Central European Support Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI) as a project partner to carry out a study to explore the legal framework within which local products can be produced and marketed in a cross-border context.

CESCI already had experience in this field, as since 2016 it has been examining the legal and administrative barriers that exist along the Hungarian borders and make the everyday lives of those living there more difficult. On the other hand, in order to analyze the relevant legal environment in Serbia, the CESCI Balkans office in Novi Sad was involved in order to carry out these tasks with the help of Serbian experts.

5th Anniversary celebration with AEBR Balkans (Conference- *Functional cross-border regions as engines of EU integration of the Western Balkans*)

A large scope online conference was organized online on 16 December 2020, on occasion of the fifth anniversary of CESCO Balkans and AEBR Balkans, focusing on the functional cross-border regions as engines of the European Union's integration in the Western Balkans.

Commissioner of Neighbourhood and Enlargement Mr Oliver Varhelyi, Head of Centre of Expertise for Good Governance of the Council of Europe Ms Alina Tatarenko and Serbian Minister of European Integration Ms Jadranka Joksimovic greeted the event, pointing out the enormous opportunities for a deeper and long-term cross-border cooperation in the broader Balkan region.



Main activities in 2021

“Natural selfness” (NATESS)- Marketing strategy for tourism in the border region SRB-HU

CESCO Balkans was selected to develop the Integrated Marketing strategy for a tourist destination within the “Natural selfness” (NATESS) IPA – CBC project. A large scope analysis was performed covering several aspects of the destination, such as economic, social and environmental. Economic aspects include economic growth, business benefits, increasing the number of employees. Social aspects include protecting the heritage of material and spiritual culture, engaging local communities, improving services and infrastructure, and improving the quality of life of the entire community. Environmental aspects include: protection of natural areas, management of procedures and impacts, environmental information and education of people. A swot analysis was performed, a marketing strategy with a detailed action plan was developed with huge involvement and participation of the local thematic and territorial stakeholders.

Promotional publication on the joint results of CESCO and AEBR Balkans

A specific e-publication on the cross-border cooperation in the Balkans has been prepared, with a direct focus on the targeted border regions, initiatives and best practices related to cross-border cooperation.

This publication will also promote the initiatives of the AEBR Balkans and the CESCO, in the attempt to present and promote the benefits of successful cross-border cooperation, in a persuasive way for Balkan-based decision makers and social stakeholders to act and introduce long-term strategies.



Research about cross-border cooperation in the Balkans

Research and the implementation of the relevant study, concerning the variables of the borders in the Balkans, has been conducted in cooperation with the program's participants and the stakeholders from the target areas. The study aims to give an overview on the changes of border regimes and cross-border cooperation in the Balkans from the end of the post-Yugoslavian wars until now, and to identify future perspectives equipped with recommendations.

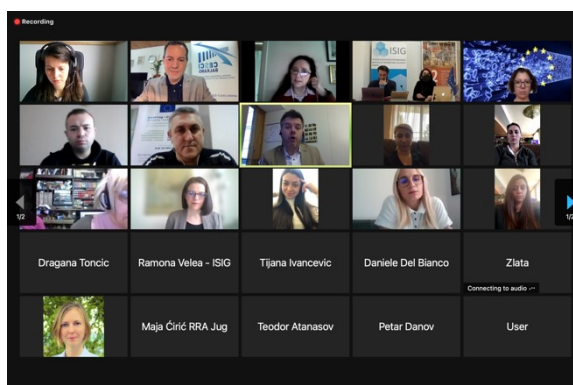
Different border sections have been benchmarked and mapped, with emphasis given to existing key-indicators and structures, concerning mobility (transport, infrastructures, traffic etc.), business environment (beneficial to investment), policy, governance, Covid-19 related information and the prospects of a deeper cross-border cooperation. The research is in the final stage of editing.

Within the framework of the **Leadership Academy programme** for CBC Serbia-Bulgaria of the Council of Europe the following activities were implemented:

A step-by-step methodological concept and a benchmarking tool for mentoring process in cross-border areas with the Council of Europe was developed

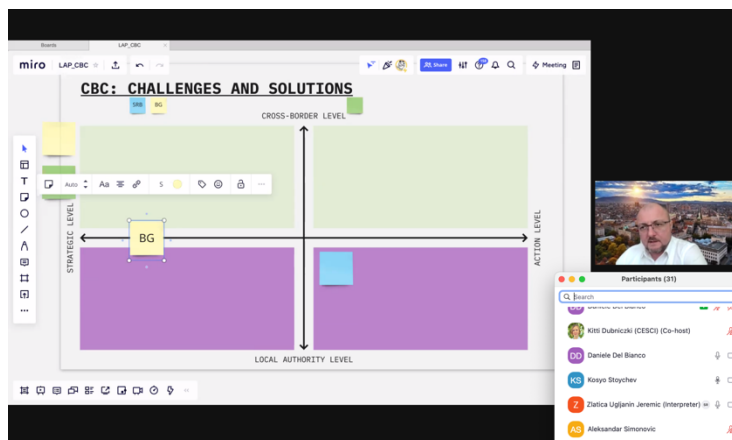
Online workshop, delivered by the experts of the Council of Europe, ISIG and CESCO Balkans.

A total of thirty (30) participants attended the online two-day workshop, representing fifteen (15) entities from both Bulgaria and Serbia. The aim of the workshop was to put the basis for the development of the strategic planning process, in connection with the new framework for the cross-border structure in the target area.



Draft action plan developed for the establishment of a Cross-Border-Cooperation Governance Structure.

Following the findings during the overall years of CESCI's experience in the cross-border-cooperation thematic and the long-term cooperation with the targeted cross-border area, a draft Action Plan specifically for the introduction of a sustainable governance structure of cross-border cooperation has been developed.



Cross-Border-Cooperation Strategic Plan drafted.

Acting as the operational “umbrella” of the previously mentioned Action Plan, a draft Cross-Border-Cooperation Strategic Plan was developed. Apart from the Governance Structure, the Strategic Plan focuses on the identification of current and possible obstacles that prevent the optimization of the cross-border cooperation in the areas of interest, and, of course, the suggestion of specific solutions to overcome these obstacles.

Follow-up training sessions based on the Leadership Academy for the cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and Serbia organised

CESCI planned and delivered two additional virtual sessions, with the aim to further support the strategic planning process of cross-border cooperation in the Bulgarian-Serbian area.

Additional continuous mentoring maintained for the target areas.

Following the above-mentioned training sessions, CESCI proceeded with the additional mentoring of decision makers and executive representatives of municipalities, aiming to render their skills and capacities, as they have been cultivated within the implementation framework of the Leadership Academy Programme in the area

A survey on legal and regulatory issues/obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the area drafted.

In connection with a relevant desk research and given the opportunity of their participation in the Leadership Academy Programme for the cross-border cooperation in the area, a specific survey has been drafted, with the aim to focus on the legal and regulatory issues they feel as issues, or even obstacles, that prevent them from utilizing the most of the cross-border-cooperation potential.

Support to the second phase evaluation of the 2014-2020 Interreg-IPA Hungary-Serbia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme

CESCI Balkans takes part in the second phase evaluation of the 2014-2020 Interreg-IPA HU-SRB CBC Programme by supporting the evaluation process carried out in cooperation with CESCI Budapest office, such as interviewing, data collection and by performing various activities carried out in Serbia;

- preparation of interviews with the Serbian programme authorities;
- preparation of interviews with the Serbian experts according to the priorities of the programme;
- preparation of interviews with the Serbian beneficiaries;
- participation in the preparation of questionnaires in Serbian language;
- a comprehensive overview of the factors that influence the effects of the programme in
- a positive or in a negative way on the Serbian side of the programme area;

- an overview of the Serbian grants affecting the impact of the programme;
- preparation of data collection in Serbia for CESCI's cross-border territorial impact assessment system;
- preparation of the processing of information and data in the monitoring system of the programme.

The representatives of the organization took part/participated on numerous events related to cross-border cooperation, just to name a few of these:

IPA Countries CBC challenges in a time of Covid19 (25.08.2020)

Conference on Cross-Border Cooperation Under the Hungarian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the CoE (Budapest, 9-10. September 2021)

We were supporting, organizing various other initiatives in the Balkans, like the support that was provided (and still is) to the trilateral cooperation between Croatia- Bosnia and Montenegro or the regular Leadership Academy trainings in the region or other initiatives that are promoting CBC and good governance like the Western Balkans Virtual Study Series or the Promoting CBC at local level in BiH both organized by the Council of Europe.

Recent plans

We would like to organize the **third stage** for the LAP in the **Nisava Eurorgeion** together with a **ceremony** where the **new declaration** on the cooperation would be signed in Sofia (this would involve a detailed joint CB development plan and a specific legal proposal for the CB entity).

We plan to continue with the **mentoring process** that was started for CB structures in the Balkans. Hopefully the **First stage** of the Academy for the **Greece – North Macedonia** border region will be organized very soon.

We started working on a creation and launching of the **Balkan CBC e-platform**, having a special focus on the legal perspectives, background and obstacles/solutions for the Balkan countries.

And last but not least the development of a **large scope regional project** have just started that would **foster a new cooperation framework** in the Balkans involving activities tackling the **legal background** of the cooperation, **capacity building** activities, **joint development planning** and **dissemination** of best practices.