

CROSS BORDER COOPERATION BETWEEN NORTH MACEDONIA AND ALBANIA: FOCUS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Regional development is a core element of the European Union's policies and activities. It aims to provide harmonized economic development, territorial cohesion, and protection of the environment. EU environmental policy aims to improve the environment in the member countries, but also on international levels, which covers the accession countries. One of the main pillars of regional policy is to support Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) in the EU and in accession countries. The Union is committed to supporting the accession countries to improve CBC between the neighboring regions in countries, mainly through the IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). This includes N. Macedonia and Albania. Environmental issues are one of the key points of this cooperation. Three phases have been established for IPA to support the CBC. There were realized IPA I and IPA II programs and last year started IPA III. Besides a lot of shortage in the realization of CBC between N. Macedonia and Albania and delay in the beginning of IPA III in the sphere of the environment there are still possibilities to improve this cooperation. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the CBC between N. Macedonia and Albania with a focus on the environment, to detect the shortcomings, and to give some recommendations for further improvement.

Keywords: Cross Border Cooperation, environment, regions, municipalities.

INTRODUCTION

European Union is strongly committed to enhancing its territorial cohesion and balanced regional development. A basic EU legal acts, Treaty on the EU and Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, determine the importance of regional policy. The Treaty of the Functioning of the EU, underlines the importance of these policies, for economic, social, and territorial cohesion and mitigation disparities of the various regions. (Treaty 2012). It promotes a high level of improving the quality of the environment, protecting human health, prudent and rational utilization of natural resources, and promoting measures at national and international levels to deal with regional or worldwide environmental problems. The EU supports CBC in the Western Balkan countries: N. Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Kosovo and Turkey. This includes CBC between border regions in these countries mostly by Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance - IPA. There are three phases of IPA: IPA I, (2007-2014) IPA II (2014- 2021), and IPA III (2021- 2027). Inside of IPA III, there is a budget for CBC between N.

Macedonia and Albania with a budget for seven years of 11.900.000 euro. Environmental matters are one of the key points of this cooperation. The CBC program is under direct management by the EU. Otherwise, the first more intensive steps of CBC between N. Macedonia and Albania were initiated in 1997-1999 by the Phare multi-country program, which aimed at promoting good neighbor relations. This program provided funds for the implementation of cross-border projects in the area of environment, NGO collaboration, and local administrations.

The basic legal framework of IPA III is determined in the Regulation of establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance IPA III, which designs the conditions and procedures. (Regulation 2021/1529). Also, it is important to mention other parts of legislation: Regulation 2021/2128 as regards setting out certain specific objectives and thematic priorities for assistance under IPA III (Regulation 2021/2128 and Commission Implementing Decision (Decision 2021/8914). The responsible authority from N. Macedonia is the Ministry of Local Self-government and from Albania Agency for Strategic Programing and Aid Coordination. The CBC structures of both beneficiaries are assisted by the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) with office in Struga, and Antenna office in Elbasan. JTS is the administrative body responsible for the day-to-day management of the program including support and advice to potential applicants as well as grant beneficiaries. The JTS should assist potential applicants in partner search and project development, organizing information days and workshops, developing and maintaining a network of stakeholders, advising grant beneficiaries in project implementation, and preparing, conducting, and reporting on monitoring operations.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research made during the preparation of this paper is based on an analysis of different aspects of CBC between N. Macedonia and Albania, through IPA and it is focused particularly on the environmental issues. There were analyzed a set of regulations, reports, strategic documents, and plans and were compared with the conditions in the EU. Also, were analyzed statistical data and reviewed relevant published literature. Additionally, a SWOT analysis was performed which determined the main strong and weak points, opportunities, and threats.

The research analyzes the realization of CBC between N. Macedonia and Albania through the IPA programs with special attention to the realization of IPA III. There were performed semi-structured interviews with 22 persons, 12 from both countries, who are involved in the subject of research, from local and central government administration, from the non-governmental sector, and from the academic community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CBC IPA I program N. Macedonia-Albania 2007- 2013, was realized with EU contribution of 9.500.000 euro from which there were some cross border projects in the sphere of the environment: promotion of the values of protected areas, (Bitola and Koresenirca), education and training on natural resource conservation in Ohrid - Prespa area, (Korcha region, Podgradec city, Elbasan region, and Libzhard city),waste management (Debar and Dibra region),environmental promotion, (South West Region in Macedonia and Dibra region in Albania) and water management (Debar and Peshkopi).

CBC N. Macedonia and Albania IPA II program 2014-2021 was aimed at the thematic priority of socioeconomic development where the environment had a significant part. There were realized grants to lead applicant or co-applicant only for 12 municipalities from N. Macedonia and 11 from Albania: Gramsh, Pustec, Klos, Diber, region Coincil, Podgradec, Elbasan, Pustec, Devoll, Libzhard and Cerik. The main point of the program in the environment was to establish and develop an integrated wildfire management strategy covering all phases of wildfire, especially in the protected area, forest protection, monitoring system, and prevention end established joint risk management There are a number of difficulties in performing of the projects and big delays, and some of them still are not finished. The experience from IPA II shows that the local units from both countries have weak capacities and during the realization had problems in preparing project applications and several difficulties in administration and financial management according to the EU procedures. Also, the local units suffer from weak design capacities and unrealistic objectives of the projects. They had unsatisfactory technical assistants during the program period and there is some but not significant improvement. It is a need for much stronger technical education through training, debate, mentoring, exchanging experiences, and other forms of capacity building of local administration. But also

the interviewed persons from both countries, stressed that some difficulties in the realization are produced by the delay in the activities of central government institutions in both countries, changing of responsible persons in the local and central institutions. However, the positive point is that there were establishing relations and cooperation between the municipalities, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders from both countries.

The main purpose of IPA III CBC N. Macedonia and Albania 2021-2027 is to contribute to sustainable development with a focus on the improvement of environmental protection and potential disaster responses, sustainable eco-tourism, environmentally friendly economic activities, greener use of resources, sustainable eco-tourism, culture heritage and climate change and to protect and promote culture and natural heritage. The program area is characterized with very rich natural and environmental resources, such as biodiversity, water resources, water springs, and very valuable lakes at the first place Ohrid Lake, Prespa Lake and Debar Lake. There are numerous protected areas, of which the most important are eight national parks, four on the Macedonian side, Shara, Mavrovo, Pelister and Galicica, and four on the Albanian side, Prespa, Bredhi Drenoves, Lura and Shebenik – Jablanica. Also, all six regions have favorable climate conditions. This is a big potential for much stronger development of eco-tourism.

The total budget of IPA III is 13.790.000 euro, with of EU contribution of 11.900.000, and 15% should be from institutions from both countries. This funding is divided on 6.300.000 euro for environmental protection and 6.300.000 euro for sustainable tourism including eco-tourism and 1.190.000 euro for technical assistance to support the implementation of the program. The CBC area includes 27 municipalities in N. Macedonia and 17 municipalities in Albania. This area is shown in picture 1 and in table 1. It is worth to underline that regions in N. Macedonia are based on planing and statistical base and they have no directly elected bodies.



Figure 1. CBC area.

Table 1. Cross-Border Cooperation Regions.

Country	Region	Size(km ²)	%	Population	%
N. Macedonia	Pelagonia	4.717	18,3	210.431	11,6
	Polog	2.416	9,4%	251.553	14,8
	Southwest	3.340	13,0%	177.398	9,9%
	Total	10.473	40,7%	639.382	
Albania	Diber	2.586	9,0%	119.963	9,7%
	Elbasan	3.199	11,1%	119.963	9,7%
	Korce	3.717	12,9%	209.124	7,3%
	Total	9.496	33%	605.852	21,3%
Whole CBC area			19.969		1.245.234

Table 2. Municipalities in the regions of CBC area.

N.Macedonia	Region	No.of municipalities	Municipalities
	Pelagonia	10	Bitola, DemiHisar, Dolneni, Krivogastani, Krusevo, Mogila, Novaci, Prilep, Mogila, Resen.
	Polog	9	Bogovinje, Brvenica, Gostivar, Jegunovce, Mavrovo-Rostusa, Tearce, Tetovo, Vrapciste, Zelino.
	S. west	9	CentarZupa, Debar, Deabarca, Kicevo, Makedonski Brod, Ohrid, Plasnica, Struga, Vevcani.
Albania	Region	No.of municipalities	Municipalities
	Diber	4	Diber, Bulqiza, Mat, Klos
	Elbasan	7	Elbasan, Belsh, Cernik, Gramsh, Librazhd, Peand, Prenjas
	Korce	6	Korce, Devoll, Kolonje, Maliq, Podgradec, Pustec

Table 3 presents the general structure of IPA III CBC.

Table 3. Structure and scopes of the IPA III CBC N. Macedonia and Albania program.

Program overall objective	An environmentally friendly cross-border region with sustainable tourism
Strategic general objective	To ensure the efficient, effective, transparent, and timely implementation of the CBC program, to raise awareness, and, in general, a greener development.
Thematic priority 1	greener and improved resource efficiency.
Thematic priority 2	environment protection, climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management.
Strategic objective 1	enhanced capacities of public services dealing with disaster response to environmental threats.
Strategic objective 2	improved environmental protection of the area, climate change adaptation, mitigation and risk prevention.
Thematic Priority 1	tourism and natural heritage.
Strategic objective 1	Strengthen sustainable natural and cultural heritage tourism.
Strategic objective 2	enhanced cultural cooperation and cultural and natural heritage.

The data from the table 3 shows that the environment is a big priority of this program. Even in the sphere of cooperation in tourism, environment is at the top place, because natural and cultural heritage is closely linked with eco-tourism. Besides very rich biodiversity and environmental resources, a large amount and space of water, the CBC area suffers from a lack of water supplying system and sewage system. CBC area has an unsustainable waste management system, a lack of waste collection and recycling and almost all collected waste ends in landfills that do not meet environmental and other standards. The situation is even worse because a big amount of waste is dumped directly into nature. This affects quality of life, of human health, produces degradation of the environment and disables sustainable tourism. In many cases, the natural resources are used in an unsustainable way. The prevention and monitoring system for disaster response is on a low level. Most of the municipalities in CBS regions, especially small, have low administrative capacities and low budget.

The procedure of project application for CBC IPA III grants, is divided into two parts. The first part is pre-application, as a concept note application and after the final second phase, where projects that are selected, can submit full application. One of the conditions for IPA III grants is that a lead applicant per country must be a public authority. This is related with the priorities of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkan (Communication 2020) and Green Agenda for Western Balkan (Anonym 2020), which means that environmental issues and climate action, including decarbonization, energy efficiency, circular economy, waste recycling, sustainable use of the resource, biodiversity, pollution, of air, water and soil, environmental sustainability and climate change combating, must be clearly explained from the applicants.

The Program CBC N. Macedonia and Albania for IPA was adopted by The European Commission Decision on 19 May 2022, with thematic priorities described in table 3 (Decision C 2022). In 2022 in the frame of preparation, were drafted documents such as the Methodology of establishing partnerships and Protocol for drafting project proposals for IPA III CBC N. Macedonia and Albania. The Ministry of Local Self-Government, the State Agency for Strategic Programming and Coordination of Assistance of Albania, and the representatives of the EU, after a big delay, officially marked the start of the implementation of the IPA III Program for CBC on 28 February 2024 in Ohrid. But almost one year later is clear that the process will be performed very slowly in the future. With a big delay on 10 May 2024 was announced the First call for proposals on a concept note for the IPA III CBC program.

The deadline for application is 26 June 2024. The available budget for this call is 2.890. 000 euro (for the first year). This is a restricted call for proposals. In the first instance, only concept notes could be submitted for evaluation. The lead applicants, who have been pre-selected will be invited to submit a full application. After the evaluation of the full applications, an eligibility check will be performed, for those which have been provisionally selected. Eligibility will be checked based on the supporting documents requested by the contracting authority and the signed declaration by the lead applicant. Any grant requested under this call for proposals must be designed between the following minimum and maximum amounts: minimum amount of 400.000 euro and maximum amount of 800.000 euro (Anonym). Relating to the environment the application has to clearly explain how the project will contribute to better environmental protection.

For the preparation of the applications, were selected two experts one from each country, to perform the training of local administration and NGOs, s for preparation applications in line with the methodology and protocols to be used in drafting the project proposal. The Delegation of EU to North Macedonia together with the Ministry of Local Self Government (MK) and the State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination (AL) just a week before call for concept notes, organized in May, six information sessions for the preparation for concept note applications. in Bitola, Diber, Ohrid, Korca, Elbasan, and Gostivar It is obvious that a delay produced a time-gap in the preparation of the applications. There were performed two training and after that, the process stopped, without any explanation. After the deadline for the selection of concept notes, there were still no results for selection. There is no further information on the websites of both country institutions, which shows a lack of transparency and visibility.

The beneficiaries from CBC in the field can be local government units and local services public entities, national and regional centers for disaster management and monitoring, local and regional development organizations, nature and environment protection institutions, institutions in the field of environmental/nature heritage, non-governmental organizations in the relevant fields, educational, science and research organizations and institutions. The lead application has to be a non-profit legal person established in N. Macedonia or Albania. Each application must be submitted by a partnership which will include at least one public authority as lead applicant or co-applicant per country. If the applicant is established in North Macedonia, at least one co-applicant must be established in Albania, and vice versa. A maximum four co-applicants could be involved in the projects.

In 2005 was signed an agreement between the governments of N.Macedonia and Albania, for establishing ship international passenger line in Ohrid Lake: Struga- Ohrid – Podgradec and Podgradec- Ohrid Struga. It was a declarative idea to support this line through IPA, as a strategic project and to buy two solar ships, which will be sailing to this line. This should to support environmentally friendly traffic and tourism. This project is considered as strategic because it could contribute to economy, environmental protection of Ohrid Lake, and to eco-tourism development. Also, this was promoted before the start of the IPA III CBC program, as a strategic project, but now it is clear that for now, it is still far from realization. There are many causes for the failure of realization the project, such as not establishment of police and customs border points at the ports of these three cities, shortage in planning and project preparation, lack of political will in both countries but also shortage in management of IPA programs in both countries.

During the research, it was performed a SWOT analysis which shows strong and weak points, opportunities, and threats for establishing CBC between both countries. The following are only the main points of this analysis. The main strong points are: favorable environmental and geographic conditions, established partnerships, agreement for the cooperation of lakes and natural protected areas, various natural and cultural heritage, and establishment of some eco-tourist infrastructure. Weak sides are: lack of financial resources, insufficient political will, low capacity of administration, poor strategic and planning documents, weak CBC organizational and management system, poor waste and water management, low level of public awareness about environmental protection, and big delay in the realization of the projects. The main opportunities are: EU and other international grants, further intensive capacity building, establishing CBC environmental and risk prevention management, increase of public awareness, and stronger political will. The main threats: are depopulation and migration, slow improvement of all aspects of environmental management, lack of transparency, offer changing in the administration, and unrealistic project applications.

CONCLUSION

There are still delays in the realization of IPA III CBC N. Macedonia and Albania and after two years the projects have not started and even the first selection process is not finished. It shows that besides the negative experience of

the realization of IPA I and IPA II, the situation still has not been significantly improved. There are still several weaknesses in the program realization such as the low capacity of local and central government institutions, poor level of all aspects of environmental management, and many other shortcomings. Besides numerous of weaknesses and delays in the realization, there are possibilities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the CBC program performance. It should be paid more attention to capacity building of administration, through training, and exchanging experience with the local and regional authorities from the EU member countries. The governments in both countries have to show a stronger political will to implement IPA programs.

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