



# How to decentralize central mountains

A practical guide for CBC makers of XXI Century

**A real Toolbox for identifying, creating  
and developing Cross-Border Functional  
Areas in Central Europe**

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**Warning!!!**

**This is not a publication for scientists, researchers or analysts! The main objective of TOOLBOX is to prepare a comprehensible and simple guide for end participants in territorial cooperation processes in Central Europe from the public, private and non-governmental sectors.**

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## **Methodological introduction**

This publication is the result of cooperation between partners within the Central Mountains project, co-financed by the INTERREG Central Europe programme. It is also based on over 30 years of experience of the Carpathian Euroregion – the largest and oldest international territorial cooperation structure in Central and Eastern Europe – and the experience and activities of the partners of the ZMOS, FOK and ARZ. The Toolbox is a methodology for the development of cross-border functional areas (CBFAs) – it is therefore a true reflection of the cross-border process. The publication is a handbook – a guide to the process of reorganizing the principles, structures and methods of cross-border cooperation. The main topic is CBFAs – a new, innovative model for the development of border areas.

The publication is divided into three parts focus on specific proposals for solutions for border areas in Central Europe. We hope that these materials will prove helpful to local, regional, national and European leaders of territorial cooperation. The Toolbox aims to promote a new approach to the development of border areas, in particular mountain areas, by providing guidelines and step-by-step instructions for building effective management structures for CBFAs. It is intended for all actors involved in cross-border cooperation – public authorities, public institutions, non-governmental organizations and economic operators.

CBFA is a territorially delimited cross-border area of cooperation established by local and regional stakeholders from at least two neighboring countries, based on shared socio-economic, environmental, cultural or functional characteristics.

A CBFA serves as a practical development-oriented governance framework, enabling coordinated planning, decision-making and implementation of joint

activities aimed at addressing common challenges and fostering sustainable territorial development across borders.

For the purpose of this Toolbox, CBFA is understood as a functional and flexible cooperation structure, which may take different legal and organisational forms depending on national contexts and development objectives.

Carpathian Euroregion Team

+ Partners

## **Territorial cooperation in Europe - by Association of the European Border Regions**

After the Second World War, Europe changed. Borders changed. Apart from the most important one, known as the 'Iron Curtain', dividing our continent into two hostile camps, national borders continued to exist. People continued to live side by side and opposite each other. Then, new ideas emerged in Western Europe. The great idea that borders are not only divisive barriers, but also axes of cooperation and development, gave rise to new forms of cooperation – Euroregions. Since the 1950s, they have revolutionised the approach to border areas. What used to frighten and divide people was now supposed to unite them. People, environments, institutions. The first legal structures appeared, introducing common elements of cross-border planning, management and promotion. Over time, legal solutions such as the 'Madrid Convention', known as the European Framework Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation, adopted by the Council of Europe on 21 May 1980 in Madrid, appeared. It defines the legal and structural models for cooperation between border regions and forms the basis for cross-border cooperation. Financial solutions have also emerged, namely the INTERREG programmes. The borderlands of Europe began to change. To cooperate and develop. In 1971, the Association of European Border Regions was established at Anhalt Castle – the most important organisation on the Old Continent, bringing together over 100 Euroregions, border regions and cross-border cooperation structures.

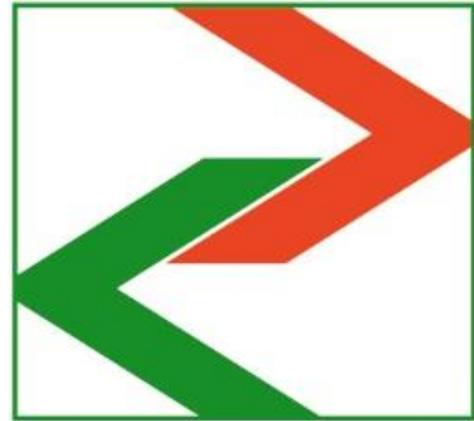


Image no.1: the AEBR logo

Picture no.1 : *Martin Guillermo – Ramirez the Secretary General of the AEBR*

***The Association of European Border Regions is an organization that brings together and supports Euroregions, border regions and all important actors involved in the development of border areas. We want to be the voice of the border region at the European Union level and in European capitals. Central Europe is an important area of activity for us. For years, we have been supporting our member, including the Carpathian Euroregion, which combines activities at the macro-regional level with development at the local level. We are particularly pleased with the process of building Cross-Border Functional Areas, also thanks to the Central Mountains project. We hope that this will improve the management of territorial cooperation in the Carpathians, Alps, Sudetes and Central Europe.***

***Martin Guillermo – Ramirez the Secretary General of the AEBR***

**TIP: Every responsible cross-border structure in Europe should be a member of the AEBR! Unity is strength!**

# **Cross-border Functional Areas – the foundation and glue for the Central Europe Borderlands. CBC development laboratories 3.0**

## **Summary of the Solution**

CBFAs are a new, innovative format for cross-border cooperation in Europe. They are territorially delimited areas of cooperation and development on both sides of a national border, regardless of their geographical location. The rationale behind the creation and establishment of CBFAs is the marginalisation of border areas and unfavourable socio-economic phenomena in border regions. The aim of CBFAs is the socio-economic development of their territory based on their own natural, cultural, human and economic resources. To this end, development challenges and cross-border obstacles are identified, needs are highlighted and measures to meet them are identified. CBFAs are not only a territory, but above all a new model of cross-border cooperation management in a delimited area. CBFAs require the development of a participatory development strategy with the involvement of experts and the creation of an institutional framework.

The CBFA is an organisation whose role is to coordinate ongoing cross-border development cooperation between partners from different countries. The CBFA is aimed at all partners from the public, private and non-governmental sectors. It is assumed that local authorities will play a key role, but public institutions, non-governmental organisations and businesses should also be the driving force behind the CBFA. The CBFA is addressed to the inhabitants of the area. Therefore, acceptance of the initiative at the local level is very important. CBFAs are, in a sense, quasi-cross-border administrations with their own decision-making bodies and mechanisms for identifying development issues and challenges, as well as an efficient system of public consultation. It is a universal model, ready

for use in virtually any section of the European Union's borders. This Toolbox is a guide to the process of conceptualizing and creating a CBFA.



Image no.2: the map of the first CBFA in the Carpathians – “Kremenaros” (PL/UA/SK)

## **Practical guidelines based on an example.**

In this section, we will show you how to turn the idea of a CBFAs into an initiative, action and organisation. Step by step, based on the experiences of the Carpathian Euroregion, FOK, the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and ARZ from the Czech Republic, we will show you:

- The process of creating CBFAs
- The design of territorial branding solutions for CBFAs

## **Why the CBFA? What do we need to break the deadlock?**

The idea of CBFAs originated in the Carpathians, in the Carpathian Euroregion, and stems directly from the systemic crisis facing the Carpathian Macroregion. Deprived of the INTERREG transnational programme, without a Macroregional Strategy, and lacking the interest of Brussels and the support of the Carpathian governments, the Carpathian area requires special activity on the part of regional and local actors. One such player is the Carpathian Euroregion, the largest and oldest Euroregion in Central Europe, operating since 1993.

The future of the Carpathians – its development opportunities – depends largely on the commitment and cooperation of local partners. That is why the Carpathian Euroregion sought solutions dedicated to supporting cross-border cooperation on a micro and meso scale. This is how the idea of CBFAs was born. After several rounds of implementing INTERREG programmes, it turned out that insufficient funding, a bureaucratic implementation system and scattered thematic intervention did not lead to the achievement of the basic objective of European Territorial Cooperation, which is to support the cohesion of the EU border region. The need for new, innovative solutions became very urgent.

**Through the Central Mountains project, we designed a model and carried out a full cycle of CBFA development. This Toolbox is a handbook promoting this solution in Central Europe.**

## **Why this initiative?**

INTERREG Cross-Border Programmes (Interreg A) from the financial perspective 2007-2013 to the perspective 2021-2027 have accustomed cross-border cooperation actors to the same setting and similar storyline. In addition, in subsequent financial perspectives, the budgets of cross-border programmes have been reduced, while the supply of projects has increased. Since 2015, the Carpathian Euroregion has been working on designing new development solutions for the Carpathians. On a macro scale, the CARPATHIA Carpathian Brand Strategy, inspired and supported by Swiss experts, plays a leading role in this area, while at the local level, the idea of delimiting and creating CBFAs is gaining ground.

In the Carpathian Horizon 2030 strategy, one of the fundamental challenges within the Integration Paradigm is to design and create links between the macro-regional sphere in the Carpathians and local communities. The architecture of the new system proposed by the Carpathian Euroregion **assumes that CBFAs will serve as laboratories and testers for development solutions** in the Carpathians, and other borderlands in Europe connecting them into a network, and maintaining links with the transnational sphere.

## **A new life on the border. Time for update.**

The Carpathian Euroregion has over 20 years of experience in managing funds under European Union cross-border cooperation programmes (PHARE CBC, INTERREG). Hundreds of projects have been co-financed through the Euroregion, but most of them were not continued after the funding ended. There was a lack of sustainability. On the other hand, despite the excellent quality of cross-border cooperation (Polish-Slovak), no sustainable mechanisms for cross-border cooperation and management were developed. This was pointed out by the European Commission itself in its report:

**'Border Needs Assessment' ('Gathering robust evidence to assess needs to be addressed by INTERREG cross-border cooperation programmes') conducted in 2016; 'Reducing legal and administrative barriers in EU border regions', carried out in 2015-16; and 'Comprehensive analysis of existing cross-border transport connections and missing links at the EU's internal borders' carried out in 2017-18.**

The European Commission's recommendations were clear:

***"Interreg programmes may cover several overlapping functional areas, depending on the theme."***

***"Authorities are encouraged to use the various tools available to support functional areas, such as EGTCs, Euroregions, metropolitan areas, nature parks, and to cooperate with relevant key stakeholders, where appropriate. In order to develop or strengthen cooperation in the fields of employment, business and health, it may be necessary for relevant institutions and organisations to participate in the monitoring committee."***

***"Support functional areas based on cooperation themes and the geographical level of the issues discussed. Support appropriate implementation tools and engage relevant entities"***

This conclusion means one thing. New forms of cross-border area management must be developed and proposed. This is based on several premises:

- **The low effectiveness of INTERREG programmes in creating permanent development solutions**
- **Recommendations of the European Commission**
- **A new development strategy for the Carpathian Euroregion based on the use of its own potential**
- **The stagnation of the development of territorial cooperation**
- **the need for a new impetus for development in the border areas of the Carpathians**

Thus, in 2018, the first declaration of intent to create the CBFA ‘Kremenaros’ connecting the border areas of Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine within the Carpathian Euroregion was signed in Ustrzyki Dolne, Poland. HISTORY has begun!



Selection of pictures no. 2: Declaration of the establishment of CBFA Kremenaros, Ustrzyki Dolne, Poland 2018

## **How will the system work?**

In Poland, there is a saying: **‘One swallow does not make a spring.’** In dialectical terms, this means that only a few well-functioning CBFAs in the Carpathians can

ensure a new quality of territorial cooperation. That is why the Carpathian Euroregion has proposed new initiatives to its local partners and members: the Polish-Slovak CBFA 'Beskid Niski' and the Polish-Ukrainian CBFA 'Brama Przemyska', which has been replaced by the Slovak-Hungarian 'Gemer'. Each of these areas has different development problems, different socio-economic characteristics and different resources. Therefore, it requires a separate approach and a separate strategy. As part of the Central Mountains project, the Carpathian Euroregion has designed and is implementing a process of institutionalising CBFAs. Ultimately, our goal is to delimit and create a network of such areas throughout the Carpathians. **We also want to encourage partners from other mountain ranges to engage in this type of activity.** In parallel with the establishment and institutionalisation of the CBFA network/system, the Carpathian Euroregion will improve its network management skills. A system of CBFAs will be created in the Carpathians, coordinated by the Carpathian Euroregion. **Ultimately, the plan is to establish an international CBFA platform in Central Europe.**

## 1. Solution 1: Cross-border structures for cooperation: from strategy to planning and operation



This section describes the process of creating CBFAs using the examples of CBFA ‘Kremenaros’ (PL/SK/UA). Based on our own experience, we indicate how the path from idea, plan, strategy, organisation and operationalisation should proceed. It is assumed that by 2030, at least five CBFAs will be operating within the Carpathian Euroregion. At the same time, the description of the process serves as a guide – it is universal and can be applied to any section of the borders in Central Europe.

We want pointed out how important the ‘great idea’ or ‘founding myth’ is for territorial cooperation. Here, we would like to add that although we have written about the Carpathians and Sudetes as a large European macroregions, this also applies to initiatives on a smaller geographical scale. A good example is the CBFA “Kremenaros”. It takes its name from a peak in the Carpathians where the borders of Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine meet. **Symbolic, isn’t it? And that’s the point!**



Selection of pictures no. 3: Kremenaros Mountain, Tripoint PL/UA/SK

## 1.1 Definitions. Do they exist?

The CBFAs is a novel concept. Although there is no single formal definition of CBFAs in European or national policy documents, for the purpose of this Toolbox a working definition of CBFA is applied (see Methodological introduction).

So far, no clear and generally applicable definition of a "functional area" has been developed in national and European documents, although this term is often used and newly developed documents recognize "functional areas" as areas where investment activities should be concentrated. Most often, the elements defining the functional area include:

- 1) separate territorial area
- 2) with common geographical, spatial and socio-economic conditions
- 3) including a set of functional connections,
- 4) with uniform development goals.

These four elements indicate that the strategy of a cross-border functional area has the character of a territorial development strategy - and in this sense it is similar to the strategy of development of homogeneous administrative units (which may also constitute functional areas themselves).



Picture no.4: *Polish-Slovak Carpathians*

## 1.2 Real needs – real solutions – real goals.

Now that we know the CBFA's philosophy, we need to consider whether this form of cooperation is necessary. European Territorial Cooperation has been supporting the Central Europe borders in various forms (PHARE/TACIS/INTERREG programmes) for about 30 years. Programmes are being implemented and projects are being carried out. So is there anything that makes cross-border cooperation – which, let us add, influences socio-economic development – truly effective? CBFA are not forms of cooperation. Rather, they are intended to be practical mechanisms influencing the **DEVELOPMENT** of the border region. They are to be a new way of managing cross-border areas.

The action of "Creating and Testing New Cross-Border Functional Areas (CBFAs) in Mountain Areas of the Carpathians and the Sudetes" is an integral part of the Central Mountains (CM) Work Package 2 (WP2), as outlined in the CM project timeline. This initiative encompasses three pilot actions aimed at enhancing the strategic and operational framework of three CBFAs within the Carpathians, developing a mobile application to support these areas, and establishing a joint branding strategy for the Sudetes CBFA.

The primary goal of these actions is to foster stronger cross-border cooperation and integration within the Carpathian and Sudetes regions, addressing common challenges and capitalizing on shared opportunities in sustainable tourism and environmental conservation. By creating and testing these new CBFAs, the project aims to establish a model for effective, sustainable cross-border collaboration that can be replicated and scaled across similar mountainous regions.

The creation of CBFAs will introduce a novel form of transboundary cooperation aimed at fostering the development and promotion of sustainable tourism in the Carpathians. This innovative approach is designed to bring together various stakeholders from different sides of the borders to work collaboratively on common goals and initiatives that enhance the region's appeal as a sustainable tourism destination. By leveraging the unique cultural and natural assets of the Carpathian region, the CBFAs aim to create a cohesive strategy that not only promotes sustainable tourism practices but also contributes to the socio-economic well-being of local communities. This action represents a significant step towards integrating efforts across borders, ensuring a unified and sustainable approach to tourism development in the Carpathians.

Therefore, from the outset, it is recommended to change the mindset from project-based to development-based. A well-defined problem facilitates the selection of measures and the involvement of the right partners to solve it. The objectives for CBFA should be simple, understandable and practical. There cannot be too many of them!

### **1.3 INTERREG context**

There are few funds available under the INTERREG Programme. From one perspective to the next, there are fewer and fewer. But the context exists. INTERREG programmes should:

- Include information about existing/creating CBFA in programme documents.
- Treat them as strategic projects, supported on the basis of CB ITI (*Integrated Territorial Investment*) outside the competition mode
- Support, in the form of competitive projects, the activities of the CBFA or its stakeholders acting on the basis of the strategy

Each of the INTERREG programmes (*Interreg A - Cross-border Cooperation and Interreg B - Transnational Cooperation*) in the Central Europe region is managed by a different managing authority. The process of harmonising activities aimed at incorporating the CBFA idea is therefore very difficult. In a situation where there is no transnational Carpathian or Sudetes programme, it is not possible to provide a systemic solution for the entire area.

### **1.4 So where to start? How to formulate a special message?**

CBFAs will be treated with suspicion. After three decades of functioning in the Western sphere of influence, we are facing a visible crisis of confidence in the European Union, its agendas and policies. Discouragement also applies to instruments supporting territorial cooperation. INTERREG programmes are

highly bureaucratic and their budgets are too small to introduce and maintain **CHANGE**. Therefore, the initial message for the CBFA idea must be chosen very carefully. The Carpathian Euroregion has focused on the postulate of co-organisation and the use of borderland resources independently of EU policies, programmes and support, in order to reverse the trend of marginalisation of border areas in the regional and national context. The border, which has been a dividing line until now, is to become an axis of development. And what allows for the coordination of development policy based on shared resources is precisely the CBFA – a new type of territorial organisation. A quasi-cross-border administration.

### 1.5 Process and system approach – essential from the outset

We suggest to use two complementary approaches to others. The process approach – using the BPM (Business Process Management) methodology – and the systemic approach.

**Business Process Management (BPM)** is a strategic approach to improving and optimizing an organization's workflows and processes to achieve business goals. It involves discovering, modeling, analyzing, improving, and automating processes to increase efficiency, reduce costs, enhance customer satisfaction, and improve agility. BPM utilizes methodologies and technologies to streamline business activities, ensuring better, more adaptive, and compliant outcomes

**A systemic approach** is a way of understanding and addressing problems by viewing them as a whole, interconnected system rather than focusing on individual parts or symptoms. It emphasizes the relationships and interactions between various components of a system to identify root causes and uncover emergent properties, providing a global perspective to solve complex challenges in fields like health, development, and therapy

We must imagine our CBFA as a system whose elements are institutions, values, people, places and material. This system operates in a specific area and there are interactions between its elements. We define these interactions as processes,

the most important of which are developmental. CBFAs are also a subsystem of larger macro-regional systems.

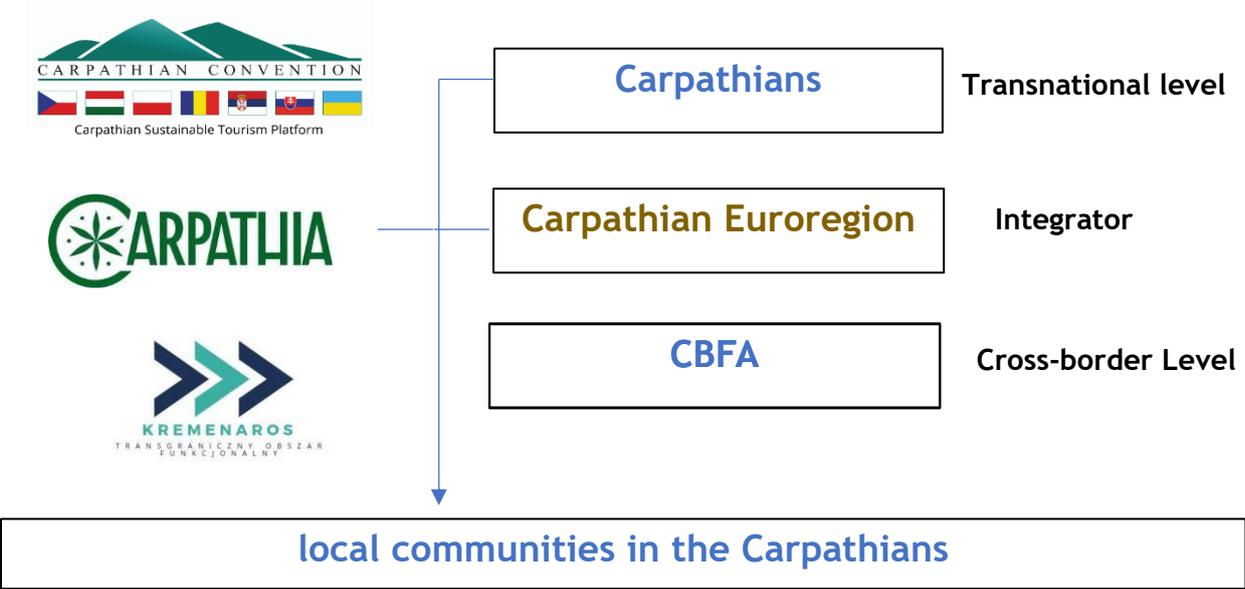


Diagram no.1: CBFA in CE architecture

**1.6 Who do we engage? Who do you need to engage?**

The Carpathian Euroregion has been operating for 33 years. It has built recognition and an organisational structure that will have around 100 members in 2025 – local governments at various levels. From different countries. Operating as an international corporation, it directs most of its initiatives to its stakeholders, members and partners. This was also the case this time. The initiative arose from discussions among members of the Carpathian Euroregion on both sides of the border. This certainly makes things easier. The capital of trust built up over the years is paying off. So, at the initial conceptual stage, we engage our closest allies, present the idea, discuss it and draw up preliminary plans.

**Tip: It is worth starting a discussion about CBFA – the challenges facing the border region from its closest allies/members/partners.**

## 1.7 Leaders

The border region is a complex space. In addition to local governments, various public institutions, non-governmental organisations and entrepreneurs operate here. It is crucial to identify and engage leaders - local government officials with authority and a willingness to act.



Selection of pictures no. 5: Leaders of the CBFA – local self-government officials

In our organisation, we have adopted a system of appointing regional coordinators for each CBFA. Above, the Mayor of Zagórz and friends from Slovakia receive their letters of appointment as coordinators of CBFA 'Kremenaros'.

## 1.8 Who else? – analysis of the institutional environment

When deciding to base the CBFA initiative on local governments, it is important to remember that it concerns the entire institutional environment of the border region. Placing local authorities at the center has the significant advantage that the socio-economic life of the local community revolves around them. Social organizations, non-governmental organizations and entrepreneurs all cooperate with local authorities in some way and to some extent. This is a good transmission belt for promoting the idea of the CBFA. The role of the Coordinators is to identify and verify partners for cooperation. There are many enthusiasts among the inhabitants of the borderland – authentic and committed leaders and authorities. Their acceptance of the initiative and involvement in its implementation are crucial.



Selection of pictures no. 6: Governance trainings on CBFA



Selection of pictures no. 7: Conferences on CBFA

### **1.9 How to design a communication and coordination system at the initial stage? What to tell people?**

You have to be actively involved in a wide range of activities. These include numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings. Following a series of working consultations, it is worth organising opening conferences to present the initiative's objectives. It is important to ensure that not only heads of administration participate in these conferences, but also experts and representatives of local communities. It is good to secured the participation of representatives of central authorities from neighbouring countries.



Picture no.8: Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Investment, Regional Development and Informatisation of the Slovak Republic on CBFA



Picture no.9.: Signing of a cooperation agreement with the Minister of Sport and Tourism of the Slovak Republic. One of the points: CBFA!

### **1.10 The process of establishing the CBFA**

Once the idea leaves the minds and offices and reaches the people, the actual process of creating the CBFA begins. Based on the general assumptions, a roadmap must be constructed that will materialise the idea in the form of an institution, after first creating a strategy and an operational model. Below, we will show how to prepare and carry out such a process in 5 steps

## Step 1: Stakeholder Engagement and Analysis

### Participants in the process (case: Kremenaros CBFA)

Work on the CBFA establishing assumes the active involvement of two key groups:

1. **Experts** – people with knowledge and experience in particular thematic areas and the methodology of creating strategic documents. They are responsible for the substantive level of the prepared document.

In order to engage experts with appropriate competences, cooperation with key substantive partners is assumed: Statistical Office in Rzeszów, University of Rzeszów, Podkarpackie Office of Spatial Planning in Rzeszów, Rzeszów Regional Development Agency. In order to agree the strategy with documents at the European Union, national and regional levels, cooperation with the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and the Marshal's Office of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship will also be necessary.

2. **Local stakeholders** – representatives of local governments, institutions and organizations from the areas covered by CBFA. Their role will be ongoing consultation of studies prepared by experts, as well as formulation (with the participation of experts) of vision, mission, goals, priorities and key actions.

Cooperation with local government units will be used to ensure the participation of this group. It is assumed that district and municipal coordinators will be appointed - from all districts and municipalities that constitute CBFA.

A third group should also be taken into account:

3. **External stakeholders** – representatives of bodies, institutions and organizations outside the CBFA territory for which the existence of CBFA will affect the activities they undertake. These include government institutions in Poland and Slovakia, bodies and institutions responsible for creating regional policy, including financial support instruments, as well as for cross-border cooperation.

Their role in the CBFA strategy development process will consist in consulting and verifying the compliance of the created document with relevant documents and policies at the regional, national and EU level.

**Objective:** To identify and engage a diverse range of stakeholders from the CBFA, ensuring their active participation in the development process of the strategy and operational model.

**Result:** A comprehensive stakeholder analysis report that categorizes stakeholders by their level of influence, proximity to the project, and potential

impact on the CBFAs. This report will serve as a basis for developing an inclusive participatory process for strategy formulation.

**Initiation of Stakeholder Engagement:** Launch the process of identifying and engaging stakeholders. This includes preliminary meetings to introduce the CBFA concept and gather initial input.

**Stakeholder Analysis Report:** Finalize and disseminate a comprehensive stakeholder analysis report, categorizing stakeholders based on influence, impact, and proximity to the project. This report will inform the subsequent participatory strategy development process.

## Step 2: Participatory Strategy Development

**Objective:** To collaboratively develop a strategic framework for the selected CBFAs, incorporating insights and contributions from stakeholders to ensure the strategy is well-informed and grounded in local realities.

**Result:** A finalized strategic document for each CBFA, outlining clear objectives, initiatives, and actions designed to enhance cross-border cooperation and sustainable tourism development. The strategy will reflect a balance between environmental, economic, and social conditions, aiming for long-term stability and community-led sustainable development.

**Drafting of Strategic Documents:** Begin the consolidation of input from the strategy development workshops into draft strategic documents for each CBFA. This phase will involve refining the objectives, initiatives, and actions outlined during the workshops.

**Strategy Development Workshops:** Conduct participatory workshops with stakeholders to collaboratively draft the strategic framework for each CBFA. These sessions aim to harness local insights and ensure that the strategy is reflective of the diverse interests and needs within the CBFAs.

### **STEP 3: Operational and Financial Model Design**

**Objective:** To design practical operational and financial models for the CBFA that will support the implementation of the strategic objectives and ensure the sustainability of initiatives.

**Result:** Detailed operational guidelines and a sustainable financial framework for CBFA, including potential funding sources, revenue models, and cost management strategies. These models will facilitate the translation of strategic goals into actionable and funded projects.

**Operational and Financial Model Design:** Initiate the design of operational and financial models for the CBFA. This task will involve detailed planning sessions with financial experts, legal advisors, and key stakeholders to ensure the viability and sustainability of the proposed models.

### **STEP 4: Legal Framework Establishment**

**Objective:** To develop and establish a legal basis for the operation and cooperation within the CBFA, ensuring that activities are compliant with national and EU regulations and that cross-border collaboration is facilitated.

**Result:** A set of legal agreements or memoranda of understanding signed by stakeholders from both sides of the border, providing a solid legal foundation for the CBFAs' activities and ensuring their legitimacy and operational viability.

**Legal Framework Discussions:** Start discussions and negotiations to establish a legal framework conducive to cross-border cooperation within the CBFAs. Engage legal experts and representatives from relevant national and EU regulatory bodies to guide this process.

**Example:**

**The participants in the consultation process decided that the model for the CBFA Carpathian Euroregion would be European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation.**

## **STEP 5: Capacity Building and Knowledge Exchange**

**Objective:** To enhance the capacities of local stakeholders through training, workshops, and the exchange of best practices, focusing on the management of CBFAs and sustainable tourism development.

**Result:** A series of capacity-building programs successfully conducted, leading to improved skills among local stakeholders in areas such as sustainable tourism, cross-border cooperation, project management, and participatory governance.

**Finalization and Adoption of Strategic Documents:** Complete the final versions of the strategic documents for each CBFA, incorporating feedback from stakeholders and experts. Hold meetings with key stakeholders to formally adopt the strategies.

**Operational Guidelines and Financial Frameworks:** Finalize the operational guidelines and sustainable financial frameworks for each CBFA. These documents will detail the implementation mechanisms for the strategic objectives, funding sources, and cost management strategies.

**Signing of Legal Agreements:** Facilitate the signing of legal agreements or memoranda of understanding between stakeholders from both sides of the border, solidifying the legal basis for CBFA activities and ensuring regulatory compliance.

**Launch of Capacity Building Programs:** Implement the first series of capacity-building programs aimed at enhancing stakeholder competencies in sustainable tourism management, cross-border cooperation, and participatory governance.

**Knowledge Exchange Initiatives:** Organize knowledge exchange initiatives, such as best practice sharing sessions and study visits between the CBFAs, to foster mutual learning and collaboration on sustainable tourism development.

**Evaluation and Future Planning:** Conduct an evaluation of the CBFA development process, assessing the outcomes against the set objectives and identifying areas for improvement. Initiate discussions on the continuation and scaling of CBFA initiatives beyond the CM project timeline.

## 1.11 CBFA architecture – key elements

After completing the conceptual and organisational path, we should have a well-designed cross-border structure: the functional area. Below, we indicate the key elements in the construction of the strategy and operational model for the CBFA.

### **Element 1 – organisational structure.**

In the case of the CBFA Carpathian Euroregion, we have introduced the following organisational and decision-making structure. It is balanced in nature. It is based on the experience and practice of the Euroregion and utilises elements of the INTERREG programme implementation system. It is universal in nature and can be applied to other sections of the Carpathian border.

- CBFA Kremenaros Board (Zarząd CBFA) – 7 members with balanced representation: at least two from each participating country (Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine) plus a rotating chair to ensure equal leadership opportunities. Responsible for executive decision-making, financial oversight, and operational supervision.
- CBFA Steering Committee / Council (Komitet Sterujący / Rada CBFA) – a larger advisory and decision-making body including representatives of local and regional authorities, sectoral organisations, NGOs, business stakeholders, and border-area institutions. Meets quarterly to validate strategic decisions, approve annual work plans, and monitor progress.
- Thematic Working Groups – flexible expert clusters (e.g., “Tourism, Culture & Heritage”, “Mobility, Safety & Infrastructure”, “Environment, Climate & Energy”, “Digital Innovation & Data”, “Social Inclusion &

Security”), engaged in designing, preparing, and implementing cross-border projects.

- CBFA Secretariat – a permanent administrative unit acting as the technical backbone of the governance system, responsible for coordination, communication, project pipeline management, fundraising, and monitoring & evaluation. The Secretariat will operate in close partnership with the Carpathian Euroregion, which will provide strategic coordination and institutional support.

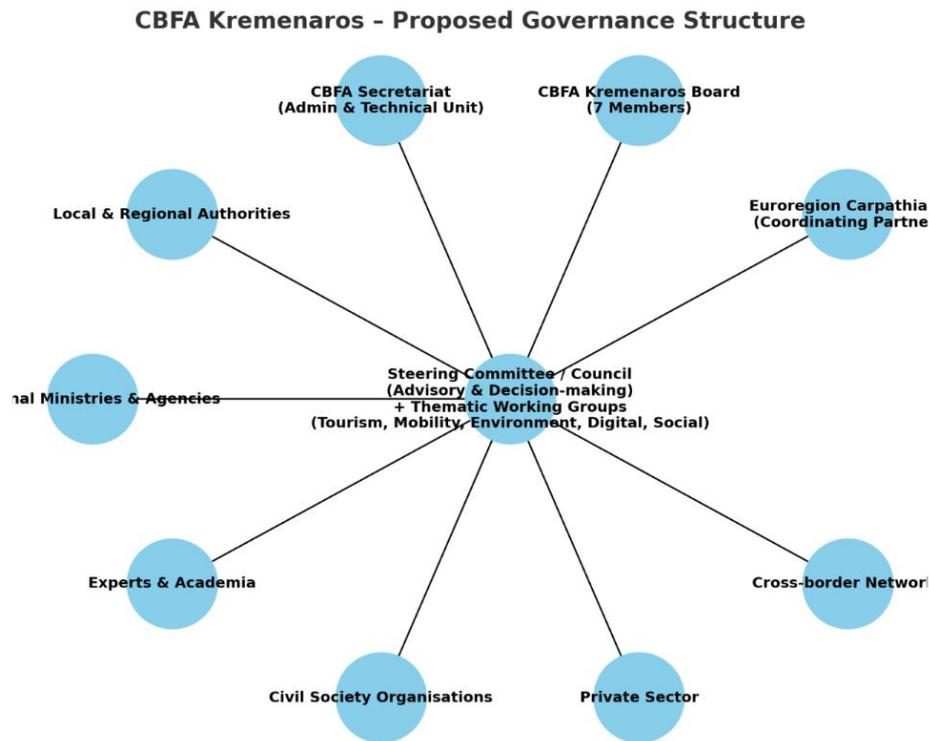


Diagram no.2: Proposed Governance Structure CBFA

## Element 2 – legal form

After consultation and consideration of the possible options, the Carpathian Euroregion chose the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation as the legal

form for future CBFA. This process proceeded as follows in the case of CBFA 'Kremenaros':

### **Legal and Institutional Setup**

- **Foundational Document:** *Statute of the CBFA Kremenaros*, drafted in compliance with **EU EGTC regulations** (Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006, as amended by 1302/2013) and relevant national legal frameworks in Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine (with adaptations for the EU's external border legal environment).
- **ICT-enabled Governance:** Adoption of **digital governance tools** – shared document platforms, secure virtual meeting systems, project monitoring dashboards, and GIS-based investment tracking – to enable continuous tri-border cooperation regardless of physical barriers.
- **Preparatory Roadmap to EGTC Registration:**
  1. Drafting and internal approval of the Statute;
  2. Legal review in **all jurisdictions**;
  3. Submission to **national authorities** in PL, SK
  4. Official registration in the **EGTC Register**;
  5. Transition from interim CBFA governance to fully operational **EGTC structures**.

This governance model ensures that CBFA functions with the **agility of a pilot structure** while building the **institutional credibility and legal readiness** for EGTC registration. The tri-border composition recognises the **symbolic and strategic importance** of Kremenaros as a cooperation hub at the EU's external border,

integrating both EU and non-EU partners under a single, functional governance framework.

### **Element 3 Participants, their roles and competences**

We emphasised the enormous importance of selecting, mobilising and engaging stakeholders and partners from the idea and concept phase to institutionalisation and strategy development. This is only the beginning. The true test of the CBFA's sustainability will be its continued operation based on the active participation of stakeholders, members and partners. Below we present the structure of stakeholders and their assigned roles.

The governance system for CBFA reflects the **multi-level governance principle**, defining clear and complementary roles for each category of stakeholders.

- **Local and Regional Authorities:** Strategic leadership, provision of co-financing, integration of CBFA priorities into local/regional development strategies, hosting of CBFA working structures, and facilitation of cross-border community participation.
- **National Ministries and Agencies:** Alignment of CBFA actions with national policies and cross-border cooperation frameworks, facilitation of access to **Interreg** and other EU programmes, support for EGTC registration procedures in PL, SK, and UA.
- **Carpathian Euroregion (Euroregion Karpacki):** Acting as the initiator, lead coordinator, and principal governance actor for CBFA Kremenaros. Responsible for ensuring strategic continuity, facilitating tri-border decision-making, mobilising resources, and leading the preparatory

process for the establishment and registration of the CBFA as an **EGTC**, with special consideration of the EU external border legal framework.

- **Thematic Experts and Academia:** Provision of evidence-based policy input, feasibility analysis for proposed projects, applied research, and capacity-building for local stakeholders.
- **Civil Society Organisations:** Co-design and co-delivery of social, cultural, and environmental projects; community outreach; and fostering cross-border citizen dialogue.
- **Private Sector:** Development of investment partnerships, piloting innovative business models, engaging in sponsorship and **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** initiatives with a cross-border impact.
- **Cross-border Networks (Carpathian Euroregion, Carpathian Convention bodies, etc.):** Coordination with wider Carpathian and European initiatives, promotion of Kremenaros at the international level.
- **Scientific Council of the Carpathian Euroregion (*Rada Naukowa Euroregionu Karpackiego*):** Advisory and analytical body providing expert assessments, strategic recommendations, and knowledge transfer to support evidence-based decision-making and innovation in cross-border project development.

#### **Element 4 Financing and maintaining the structure – the basis for development**

The introduction of a new model for managing cross-border areas is intended to bring about strategic socio-economic change. For this change to be real, it must be continuously supported by a stable institution and stable sources ensuring

maintenance and development. Below we present solutions in this area for the Kremenaros CBFA.

The financing and sustainability framework for **CBFA Kremenaros** is designed to ensure that **flagship projects and integrated investment packages** are not only implemented successfully but also maintained and scaled over time. The approach combines **secure core funding, diversified project financing, and long-term sustainability mechanisms** to safeguard the impact of investments beyond initial funding cycles.

### **Key Financing Sources:**

#### **1. EU Programmes** *(for both internal and external borders):*

- **Interreg NEXT Poland–Slovakia–Ukraine** – primary source for cross-border infrastructure, tourism, cultural, and community projects;
- **Interreg Central Europe** – for innovation, governance, and climate action;
- **LIFE Programme** – for environmental and biodiversity projects;
- **Horizon Europe** – for research, innovation, and digitalisation;
- **NDICI / Neighbourhood Cross-Border Cooperation** – for initiatives involving Ukraine as a non-EU partner.

#### **2. Territorial Instruments:**

- **Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI)** – for large-scale, multi-municipality infrastructure and service projects;
- **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** – for micro-projects and community-led initiatives with cross-border reach.

- **CARPATHIA territorial brand management**

### **3. National and Regional Funds:**

- Targeted co-financing from PL, SK, and UA government programmes;
- Inclusion of CBFA priorities in regional operational plans to ensure funding alignment.

### **4. Private Sector Contributions:**

- Public–private partnerships in tourism, renewable energy, and technology;
- Corporate sponsorship and CSR programmes for cultural and environmental projects;
- Tourism levies reinvested in local infrastructure and promotion.
- CARPATHIA Brand bussines models

### **5. Own Resources:**

- Membership fees from participating municipalities and regions;
- Service charges for events, facilities, and consultancy;
- Revenue from CBFA-branded products, tourism services, and promotional initiatives.

### **Sustainability Mechanisms:**

- Establishment of **multi-annual funding agreements** between local/regional authorities to secure baseline operational costs;
- Creation of a **CBFA Kremenaros Development Fund**, managed by the Euroregion Carpathians, to pool resources and finance cross-border initiatives;

- Integration of maintenance and operation costs into initial project planning and budgets;
- Diversification of revenue streams through economic activities (e.g., branded tourism services, licensing, knowledge services);
- Continuous monitoring of financing opportunities at EU, national, and international levels to ensure a pipeline of resources.
- Links to Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform

### **Role of the Carpathian Euroregion (or any other process leader):**

The Euroregion Carpathians will serve as the **financial coordination hub**, ensuring strategic alignment with wider Carpathian projects, leading fundraising efforts, and facilitating access to complex cross-border and tri-border funding mechanisms. This role will be critical in bridging the funding frameworks of EU internal and external borders, especially in the cooperation with Ukrainian partners.

### **Element 5 – Monitoring and evaluation**

Everything is working. There is a vision, a goal, a structure, a strategy and funding. But every serious institution requires constant self-monitoring and a system of monitoring and evaluation. Below, we present several solutions that may be helpful in maintaining the path of development.

CBFA Kremenaros will implement a **results-based Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) system** aligned with EU standards and adapted to the **tri-border and external border context**. This will ensure **accountability, transparency, and continuous learning**.

#### **Core Components**

- **Indicator Framework:**

- *Output indicators* – tangible deliverables (e.g., km of cross-border cycling routes, number of cultural events, number of joint rescue exercises).
  - *Result indicators* – short- to medium-term effects (e.g., increased cross-border tourist arrivals, reduced travel times, improved community safety perception).
  - *Impact indicators* – long-term change (e.g., GDP per capita growth, biodiversity improvements, reduced youth outmigration).
- **Data Sources:**
    - Administrative data from authorities and agencies;
    - Project reports;
    - Surveys, interviews, and participatory assessments;
    - Geospatial monitoring for infrastructure and environmental status;
    - Digital tracking tools for events, flows, and online engagement.
- **Evaluation Cycle:**
    - *Ex-ante* – validate assumptions, establish baselines;
    - *In itinere* – monitor progress, adjust strategies;
    - *Ex-post* – assess outcomes, sustainability, and added value.
- **Transparency & Participation:**
    - Annual public report;
    - Open-access online dashboard;
    - Biannual stakeholder review sessions;
    - Publication of all evaluation outputs online.

- **Institutional Setup for M&E**

The **CBFA Secretariat** will coordinate M&E in close cooperation with the **Carpathian Euroregion**, ensuring compatibility with broader Carpathian monitoring systems. The **Scientific Council** will review methodologies, validate findings, and provide strategic recommendations. This framework will go beyond tracking outputs—it will evaluate the **quality of cooperation, level of engagement, and sustainability of results**, making it a management and trust-building tool across the tri-border area.

### **1.12 Instead of a conclusion – an introduction**

Above, we have presented our own solutions for identifying and creating CBFAs. They are the result of our own experience and the conclusions drawn from the Central Mountains project. But this is only the beginning. Building a fully functional, conscious and autonomous system of cooperation, based on its own resources and professionally managed, will take years. The Carpathian Euroregion, in its current 5-year plan (2025–2030), treats the creation of further CBFA as a priority.

## 2. Solution 2: Joint branding in CBFAs

### **Summary of the Solution**

CBFAs are not only a public sphere; cooperation between economic sectors may play a decisive role in the future and stability of the initiative. As part of its policy, the Carpathian Euroregion promotes the development of business models based on the Brand Place Management methodology. This is how the CARPATHIA Carpathian brand is developing. As part of the Central Mountains project, we inspired our partners to test solutions related to the creation of a common territorial brand in the Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border. The role and experience of the Association of Regional Brands (ARZ) from the Czech Republic, a leader in creating cooperative solutions in this field, is particularly helpful here. Below you will find a record of the process of creating a cross-border brand in cooperation with the Foundation for Landscape Protection (FOK).

The objective was to strengthen cooperation of rural SMEs and regional products producers as well as support development of socially, culturally and environmentally oriented economies in Czech-Polish border area.

In addition, the aim was to raise awareness of regional products, highlighting their high quality and traditional production methods in the Czech-Polish border region.

## **2.1 Identified needs for solutions**

In searching for ways to strengthen cooperation between the public and private sectors in the segment of entrepreneurs certified by regional brands, we focused on two main areas:

### **1. Enhancing the marketing skills of local producers**

Local producers are excellent in their branches but often lack basic promotional skills, or they lack the capacity to plan their marketing. To address this, we organized targeted workshops and training sessions focusing on digital marketing, branding, and storytelling. These initiatives aimed to equip producers with practical tools to promote their products more effectively

### **2. Increasing the awareness of regional products and their potential for sustainable regional development among various groups, including:**

- Local public authority
- Regional public authority
- Interest groups including NGOs
- Higher education and research organisations
- Tourism brands
- School pupils and teachers

To foster a deeper understanding of the value of regional products and their role in sustainable development, we targeted a wide range of stakeholders.

For public authorities and interest groups we organised workshops highlighting how regional branding contributes to preserving local heritage, stimulating the local economy, and encouraging sustainable tourism.

For schools, we developed educational materials tailored to pupils age groups. Activities included classroom projects aimed at connecting students with local traditions, sustainable production and the importance of supporting their regional economy.

## **2.2 Target groups**

Association of Regional Brands (ARZ) and Foundation for Landscape Protection (FOK) were responsible for preparing the solution. The following entities were also involved in the cooperation on the solution: coordinators of 5 regional brands in regions on the Czech-Polish border, external consultant – a specialist on branding and online marketing.

The target groups for this solution may include:

- Regional entrepreneurs  
Need support in improving marketing and promotional skills and accessing new markets. The solution helps them build visibility, gain customer feedback, and engage future generations
- Local and regional public authority  
Need tools to support local economies and sustainable development. The solution offers ways to link education, tourism, and entrepreneurship.
- Interest groups including NGOs  
Need to promote local identity and community involvement. The solution enables them to cooperate on educational and promotional initiatives.
- Higher education and research organisations  
Need real-life case studies and cooperation opportunities. The solution supports student engagement and research on regional branding.
- Tourism organisations

Need quality content and experiences to promote. Regional products enhance their offer and authenticity.

- Primary school pupils

Need to acquire entrepreneurial skills. Thanks to the proposed solution, they will learn about the basic organisational requirements for entrepreneurship and the characteristics of regional or local products, including respect for traditions and environmental sustainability.

- Primary school teachers

Need content for civic education and project-based teaching, or possibly content for extracurricular education (school clubs). The proposed solution provides them with a practical tool for lesson preparation and, if interested, long-term partnerships with entrepreneurs from the region that can be used in various subjects and extracurricular activities (clubs, school trips, project days, etc.).

- Regional brand coordinators

They need to be included in the House of Brands, which offers a new platform of cross-border cooperation in promotion of quality regional products and services.

### **2.3 Step by step description of the design and testing process**

The creation of the joint branding solution was carried out in several key stages:

1. Preparatory phase:

The process should begin with stakeholder meetings held in both sides of the border. During these meetings you need start with a SWOT analysis of regional products which helped us with the identification of the need for better promotion of high-quality regional products under the umbrella of the CBFA House of Brands

## 2. Establishing the House of Brands:

The House of Brands is established as a shared platform for promoting certified regional products and facilitating cross-border cooperation and networking between regional brands owners. It functions as a space for knowledge exchange, experience sharing, and networking between regional brand coordinators, entrepreneurs, educators, NGOs, and public authorities. The platform supports mutual learning, joint promotional activities, and the development of shared strategies for strengthening the visibility and impact of regional brands across borders.

## 3. Educational support and capacity building:

To strengthen the competencies of owners of regional brands as well as regional producers, a series of online educational events were conducted on both sides of the border. One side could focus on topics included brand audits, social media, customer journey mapping, and photography for non-photographers. Other on, training focused on historical and cultural storytelling, and the practical use of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for promoting regional brands.

## 4. Educational pilot programme for schools:

To build awareness among younger generations, you have to, in cooperation with a branding expert and teachers, developed educational worksheets for pupils aged 11–13. These materials covered basic concepts of regional products and entrepreneurship. The pilot was tested in eight schools across four regions, with activities such as workshops with local producers and sourcing local materials for classroom use.

## 5. Ongoing cooperation and scaling:

Following the success of the pilot, participating schools continued their collaboration with regional brands through various forms of engagement. Based on positive feedback, plans were made to scale the initiative by printing and distributing the worksheets more widely, with the added incentive of a prize draw to encourage participation and further connect pupils with local producers.

## **2. 4 Obstacles and how to overcome them**

Among the main obstacles you need to identify organizational and cultural differences between partners from different countries, limited experience in cross-border cooperation, and fragmentation of communication channels. These factors, combined with limited staff capacity at stakeholder institutions, posed initial challenges in ensuring smooth coordination. Regular communication and flexibility in planning helped us gradually overcome these difficulties.

One of the most persistent challenges is the limited time availability of regional producers. Many operate family farms where all members are occupied from early morning until late at night, often burdened with both physical labor and administrative tasks. Craftspeople, on the other hand, frequently hold additional jobs, as their traditional work alone does not generate sufficient income. This lack of availability made it especially difficult to engage them in scheduled educational activities. To address this, we designed the training program to be as accessible as possible — offering each session twice in one day (morning and afternoon) to increase participation and flexibility.

Engaging primary schools also proved to be a challenge, as they are often overwhelmed with external offers and programs. During the pilot phase, success was possible mainly due to existing personal contacts between regional brand coordinators and specific schools or teachers. However, for broader outreach, we recognize that a dedicated support campaign and collaboration with school methodology centres will be essential in reaching a larger number of schools and ensuring lasting engagement.

## **2.5 Challenge**

The greatest challenge we faced was establishing long-term cooperation between rural SMEs and producers of regional products and schools. While initial interest can be sparked through individual activities, building lasting partnerships requires consistent effort, mutual commitment, and structural support.

Educational tools like worksheets are a valuable starting point. They introduce pupils to the concept of regional production and entrepreneurship, but on their own, they are not enough to sustain engagement. To deepen the connection, cooperation must evolve into more interactive and recurring formats.

So far, the most common form of engagement has been excursions to farms or artisan workshops. However, these are typically one-off and mostly passive experiences. A more meaningful impact can be achieved through hands-on workshops led by producers directly in schools, allowing for practical learning and real interaction. Ideally, this cooperation would take the form of regular activities, such as thematic clubs or long-term projects, fostering stronger ties between students and local producers.

Another promising, though still emerging, model is the integration of local products into school canteens. This approach not only improves food quality and supports local farms, but also creates indirect outreach to parents, who become

more aware of the value and availability of regional products through their children's school experience.

Sustaining these initiatives long-term will require coordination, institutional backing, and incentives on both sides—but the potential benefits for local communities, producers, and education are significant.

### 2.6 Tips

**1. Leverage personal relationships and clear communication**

When introducing the joint branding solution, personal contact with key stakeholders—whether they are schools, local producers, public authorities or NGOs proves most effective. A direct, tailored approach builds trust and allows for a clearer explanation of the purpose and benefits of the initiative, such as the House of Brands or educational components like the worksheets.

**2. Motivate all involved actors, not just end users**

For joint branding to succeed, it is important to engage and motivate all participating groups—producers, educators, brand coordinators, and institutions. Practical activities such as site visits, co-hosted events, or hands-on workshops are effective tools to create shared experiences, deepen understanding, and build stronger commitment to long-term cooperation.



**3. Collect feedback systematically**

To improve and scale the joint branding approach, it is crucial to gather feedback from all participants. A simple survey or questionnaire after events helps capture valuable insights, evaluate impact and adjust the implementation process based on the needs of stakeholders such as teachers, producers or brand coordinators.

Picture no. 11: personal archive of Veronika Hegarova

***“It was quite challenging for the kids, but they got great ideas. They haven't encountered a theme like this before, much less tried to work out everything from start to finish. But they handled it pretty well. I'm glad for the challenge”***

Veronika Hegarová

Role: After-school club teacher

## **2.7 Conclusion/Summary**

Local action groups and tourism management organisations operate on both sides of the border. Both types of organisations, each with its own specific resources, are tasked with developing particular areas. In border areas, they also promote natural cross-border cooperation, benefiting local businesses.

In the case of LAGs, the main motivation is the grant support, which is targeted at a specific area and geared towards its defined needs. LAGs also support other activities aimed at entrepreneurs and cooperate, for example, with the Chamber of Commerce.

Tourist destinations, in turn, can promote individual service providers and experiences or manufacturers of tourist products.

The main functioning cross-border structures on the Czech-Polish border are individual Euroregions, which actively contribute to the development of the area, including tourism.

The platform for the integration of regional brands in the Czech-Polish border region is the House of Brands on the Czech-Polish Border, which brings together representatives of regional brands and explains the values and benefits that regional brands bring to their holders. It means above all:

A regional brand strengthens the identity of a region and highlights quality products that embody the brand's values, i.e., locality, tradition, and respect (for people and nature). A regional brand strengthens businesses that are based on regional uniqueness and are environmentally friendly. In relation to tourist services, it offers original experiences and services that are in line with the brand's values and in the interest of sustainable development on both sides of the border and mountain ridge.

### 3. Solution 3: CBFA goes digital

In this section, we will introduce you to a solution implemented by the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia (ZMOS) as part of the Central Mountains project. Today, it is difficult to imagine any activity that is not part of virtual reality. This is also true of CBFA. The Slovak partner has proposed a solution to support stakeholder cooperation within CBFA. Below, we outline a step-by-step process for creating and designing this solution, initially available to Slovak-, Polish-, and English-speaking stakeholders. There is also potential for extending it to Hungarian, Romanian, Czech and other languages along the Carpathian Mountains. **ZMOS is the most representative organisation of towns and municipalities in Slovakia, with 95% of all cities, municipalities, and city districts in Slovakia being its members.**

#### 3.1. Solution Introduction

The digital application (the app) developed by ZMOS supports networking, communication, cooperation, the sharing of expertise, and the promotion of sustainable tourism. Its aim is to create an innovative digital platform that enables cross-border collaboration and communication, allowing members and partners to connect and exchange knowledge. The app also seeks to promote sustainable tourism by highlighting cultural and natural heritage. Digital tools CBFA are making governance processes more consistent, secure, efficient, and effective.

**CBFAs goes digital - a digital (mobile) application aimed at the SK and PL cross-border areas that seeks to create an innovative digital tool supporting cross-border cooperation and communication, enabling networking and the exchange of know-how among member partners. The application will also promote sustainable tourism, encompassing cultural and natural heritage.**

### **3.2. Identified needs for solutions**

Communication among tourism actors, such as DMOs, municipalities, and SMEs along the Slovak-Polish border, is often inconsistent and inadequate. Common channels include in-person and online meetings, phone calls, emails, and chats. While mainly used with existing partners, stakeholders also pursue new contacts online, through colleagues, or at exhibitions. Their communication involves sharing statistical data, planning activities, making investments, exchanging contact information for partners and volunteers, and coordinating efforts. The digital platform should enhance communication, highlight opportunities from local businesses, and help manage the activity calendar.

This app is designed for SK and PL cross-border regions, such as Prešov and Podkarpackie, as well as CBFAs like Kremenaros, Beskid Niski, and Bramã Przemyska. However, it is not necessarily limited to that area alone.

### **3.3 . Target groups**

**Municipalities and Regions** requested a B2B app to improve cross-border communication on specific themes, find new partners, and engage local SMEs. “There is no need for another tourist app; instead, focus on providers and stakeholders.” The initiative included towns such as Prešov, Svidník, Snina, Veľký Šariš, Revúca, Tornaľa, Stropkov, Spišská Belá, Spišské Podhradie, and Bardejov, as well as municipalities such as Muránska Huta, Muráň, and Zemplínske Hámre.

**Ministries.** The Destination Management Department, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, and Ministry of Environment participated. They view the app as a

valuable tool for investors in the tourism industry, as it may offer more information and a broader context of the CBFA.

**DMOs** include OOCR North-West Tatras, OOCR Region Šariš, OOCR Horný Zemplín, Prešov Region DMO, Levoča Tourism Association, and the Department of Tourism for both Prešov Region and Prešov City. These organizations intend to use the app as a communication platform for stakeholders to plan and coordinate tourism-related events and investments. They proposed organizing app communication around specific themes, such as destination products like Wallachian culture. This approach encourages an integrated method, facilitating the development and sharing of destination products.

**ZMOS** could coordinate multiple initiatives to aid small entrepreneurs, such as those selling from home, schools like “Biela voda” in Kežmarok, and social economy enterprises, in displaying their products and helping small border municipalities attract tourists. DMOs suggested sharing Alpine Pearls' expertise with the Carpathian Mountains. The app should leverage the existing Alps' experience to create a unified platform that integrates institutional support, funding, destination management, and data monitoring and evaluation. ZMOS will also ensure the digital tool's sustainability and support its ongoing development.

**Youth.** Prešov Student Council and Prešov University. Students demanded a modern, user-friendly, and intuitive app to coordinate all activities in the tourism industry. They also helped test the app and offered many clever suggestions.

**Museums, LAGs, and SMEs.** Examples include the Museum of Mining Rožňava, the Public-Private Partnership Stredný Gemer, Hotel Villa Siesta, and the Local Action Group (Leader programme) LEV. They considered coordination of activities and early communication essential.

**National Parks.** The National Parks Muránska planina, Slovenský kras, Slovenský raj, and High Tatras highlight the importance of sustainable tourism and the role of improved communication in preserving cultural heritage while supporting tourism development. Although they have their own rules and communication channels, the app would allow for highly transparent information exchange.

**NGOs** such as AEVIS from the National Park Poloniny aim to utilise the app as an information source and communication tool. The app enables them to expand their outreach and discover new partners.

### **3.4 . Step-by-step description of the design and testing process**

The process was divided into four steps: engaging stakeholders, selecting a supplier, testing the product and making necessary improvements, and promoting and scaling up the app.

#### Step 1. Engage stakeholders to co-create the app's features

Several stakeholder meetings took place, where participants discussed the design, implementation, and deployment of a digital communication platform for planning tourism activities in border regions. The role of stakeholders as co-creators of the app they intended to use was essential.

#### Step 2. Select a supplier to develop the app

We learned an important lesson here. The standard procurement process for low-value contracts typically involves comparing at least three bids and choosing the lowest-priced option. This approach is common and generally considered safe. While effective for homogeneous products, it may not always deliver the best value for more complicated, heterogeneous products. Developing the app—created through a stakeholder co-creation process within well-defined boundaries—required extensive knowledge, adaptability, and communication. In

such cases, applying multiple selection criteria and involving an evaluation jury might be more appropriate. Although less frequently used, more complex, and time-consuming, this method can potentially yield better results.

### Step 3. Test the prototype and the final app

ZMOS held four more meetings with stakeholders to discuss the prototype. Validation meetings were held with professionals and students, supported by remote testing conducted by local stakeholders and project partners.

Meanwhile, discussions and development of the app's content continued beyond the partnership through conferences and workshops to incorporate external input.

Since the app tests did not yield positive results and the initial supplier was unwilling to make the necessary improvements, a quick solution was needed: find a new supplier and repeat some activities. This real-life scenario highlights the importance of considering potential delays when developing new products. The main lesson is to preserve team energy and allocate buffer time for potential setbacks in your planning.

### Step 4: Promote and scale up the app.

The real work begins now, when the product is ready but still largely unknown. While it is modern, useful, and user-friendly, the goal is to reach a critical mass of users and ensure its sustainability. To be efficient and effective, monitoring and evaluation must also be implemented.

The promotion begins with stakeholders, co-creators, their networks, and training workshops and roadshows. An important lesson is to include marketing costs in the budget. Potential users raise a crucial question about the app's sustainability: its maintenance and future development. We propose one of

several solutions: establishing public-private partnerships to handle these aspects. Finally, a user satisfaction survey could be integrated into the app or conducted separately. Ideally, it would be carried out by an external organization, which could also serve as a useful exercise for students. The collected data should be analysed and carefully evaluated to inform the app's management board's decisions.

### **3. 5. Obstacles and how to overcome them**

**Main lessons on the potentials and obstacles are the following:**

There are three main challenges:

- Engaging stakeholders in co-creating the app is vital. Stakeholders serve as co-creators of the app they plan to use. During this phase, the team needs to clarify project goals and available tools, select audience groups based on theme and geography, and gather additional input for the “core stakeholder group.” With numerous activities happening simultaneously and limited time and capacity, the team must clearly communicate why stakeholders should prioritize their participation in this particular activity.
- Selecting the appropriate supplier for the technical solution often involves comparing prices, which is the simplest and most common method for low-value procurement. However, this approach may not be effective when the procured product is not uniform or homogeneous.

Reaching critical mass in user numbers is essential. Even the best app is ineffective if it doesn't attract a large user base. This stage is just as important as earlier phases and demands sufficient time and budget.

Challenge:

***Supplier selection: Although not mandated by regulations, incorporate multiple criteria and a jury of evaluators when comparing bids and selecting the winner. This method helps lower the risk of choosing an inappropriate supplier.***

Main lessons on the potentials and obstacles are the following:

- Identify and engage relevant stakeholders early. A compelling product and process are essential. Invite stakeholders to collaborate in creating the product. Trips focused on the best solutions and genuine engagement in development encourage stakeholder involvement. Stakeholders must feel their contributions are valued and that their involvement results in clear tasks and outcomes.
- Youth involvement. The project benefits from honest assessments and fresh, innovative ideas offered by young people.
- Supplier selection should involve using multiple criteria and an evaluation jury when comparing bids and choosing the winner, even though regulations do not require this. This method minimizes the risk of selecting an inappropriate supplier and conserves time and effort throughout the process.
- Maintain team momentum and include extra time in your schedule to handle possible setbacks.
- Include marketing costs in the budget. Road shows, training workshops, and marketing techniques should be used to reach the critical mass of users.

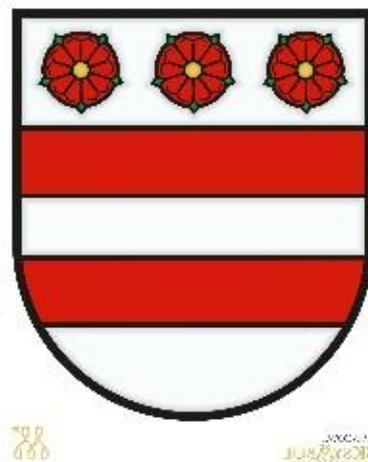
**TIPS:**

1. Engaging stakeholders early in the co-creation process of the app design is crucial.
2. Involve multiple criteria and the evaluation jury in the procurement process.
3. Effective communication between the app supplier and stakeholders during the prototype testing and final version evaluation is essential.



Picture no. 8: Milan Gacík, Director of the Museum, The Red Monastery Museum

*“Stakeholders are rarely invited to co-create a product at the start of a project. You managed to do it.”~ Milan Gacík*



Picture no. 9: Peter Krajňák, Vice-Mayor, Prešov

*“Our goal is to use the app to boost interaction with local craftsmen and support the local economy, thereby contributing to and gaining from tourism activities.” - Peter Krajňák*

### 3. 6. Conclusion

Effective communication is essential and should extend beyond traditional channels. A digital app accessible to many users in the Carpathian Mountains enables sharing statistical data, planning activities, making investments, exchanging contact details, and coordinating efforts across borders.

The app should be developed by its future users and beneficiaries. In the travel industry, DMOs, the public sector, LAGs, SMEs, and all other active agents should be engaged. Including youth is highly advantageous, as they are not only digitally savvy but also tend to offer very open suggestions.

The application was developed in four stages: engaging stakeholders to generate content, choosing a supplier for the technical solution, testing the prototype and final app, and then promoting and scaling it up. The main challenge occurred during the supplier selection, where common procurement methods proved unsuitable.

Based on lessons learned, we have developed the following recommendations:

- Identify and engage relevant stakeholders early, including the youth.
- Choose more complex multiple criteria and include an evaluation jury in the selection process, as this approach is more likely to identify the right supplier.
- Maintain team momentum and stay prepared to adapt to changes.
- Include marketing expenses in the budget.

Feel free to register and begin using your digital communication platform.

<https://carpathia.freemap.sk/>

## Final remarks:

The Association of the Carpathian Euroregion would like to thank all partners involved in the preparation of this document. We believe that this material will be useful in developing pro-development solutions in the Carpathians, Sudetes and Alps.

We invite you to cooperate with us!

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