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Original
The importance of cross-border cooperation in the Balkans: Evidence from the bilateral agreement between Albania and Kosovo / Berisha, E.. - In: FORUM A+P. - ISSN 2227-7994. - STAMPA. - 20:(2018), pp. 159-163.

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2854756 since: 2020-12-04T10:39:28Z

Publisher:
Polis University

Published
DOI:

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27 November 2026

ARTICLE 1

The importance of cross-border cooperation in the Balkans: Evidence from the bilateral agreement between Albania and Kosovo

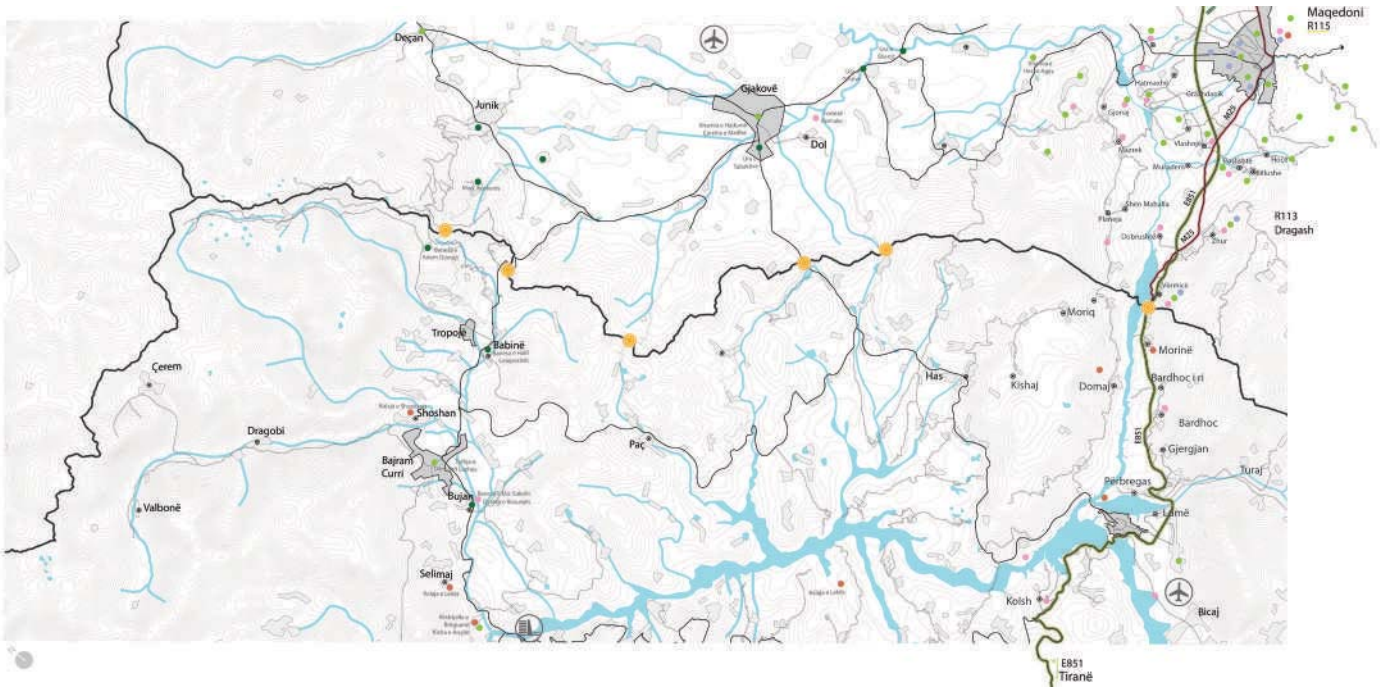
Erblin Berisha

The cross-border cooperation between Albania and Kosovo is undoubtedly an interesting experience, as a result of the shared vision between both governments and finalized with a bilateral agreement promoted and signed by the Ministry of Urban Development of the Republic of Albania and its counterpart, the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of Republic of Kosovo (Aversa et al., 2017a, b). The declared intention is to imagine a common and shared cross-border territorial strategy based on three main pillars: (i) sustainable management of the environmental, social and historical heritage; (ii) implementation of the touristic facilities and (iii) the promotion of a "soft cross-border cooperation", focused on the sharing of knowledge and competencies among institutional and non-institutional actors within the specific policy area. The strategy involves the areas of the Kukës Region (Albania) and the Prizren and Gjakovë regions in Kosovo, too. This initiative is part of a comprehensive strategy that will involve, under different responsibilities and forms, all countries in the Western Balkan region lead by the European Union through different EU instruments (among others IPA II) and initiatives. Before the introduction of the proposed example, it must be appropriate and interesting in the same time, to contextualize the cross-border cooperation between both countries within a Western Balkan's historical point of view and afterwards to shed light on the types of cooperation developed in the recent history in the EU.

WESTERN BALKAN REGION BETWEEN TRANSITION AND INTEGRATION PROCESS

The implementation of the cooperation policy process between Albania and Kosovo has been constrained by the existing geopolitical and economic context in the Western Balkan region, strongly influenced by its problematic and ongoing predominant historical legacy (European Commission, 2018). Since 1990, indeed, more than a quarter of century has passed after the fall of the communist regimes (represented by the Hoxha's and Tito's autocratic dictatorship respectively). The transition process which affected all the everyday life sphere's in this region in general, and in Albania and Kosovo, in particular. Despite several attempt to govern and address it, the transition process , revealed to be non-linear and unpeaceful, too. Indeed, the ethnical conflicts reached their peaks during the Bosnia war between 1993 and 1995 (concluded with the signature of the Dayton agreement), and the conflict in Kosovo in 1998-1999 (concluded with the establishing of the UNMIK mission). The question of regional stability saw involved important international organisation to normalise the regional situation by promoting different democratic approaches, but with political outcomes far from being acceptable. Indeed, in spite of the economic and democratic transformation began during the first part of the transition process and the simultaneously process of the EU integration, still persist unresolved historical contradictions within the ex-Yugoslavia territory, in particular (Berisha, 2018). However, the recent international geopolitical situation and the awareness that the joining the EU must be a common goal for the all Balkan countries, generated the optimal conditions to improve and develop a better an intensive cooperation process within the region (European Commission, 2018). At these regards, during the European Summit hold in Berlin in 2014, known as the Berlin Summit Process, it has been confirmed the importance of the dialog and the cooperation as internal stability factors, that represent at the same time, the main factors to accelerate towards the EU membership join process (BPRG, 2918). The EU leverages (among other political and economic conditions) are still an important strategic tool in order to influence the regional and domestic political environment. This is possible due to the fact that, for each country, the EU represents an attractive "window of opportunities" which cannot be ignored and that's where their domestic policy should be projected (Berisha, 2018).

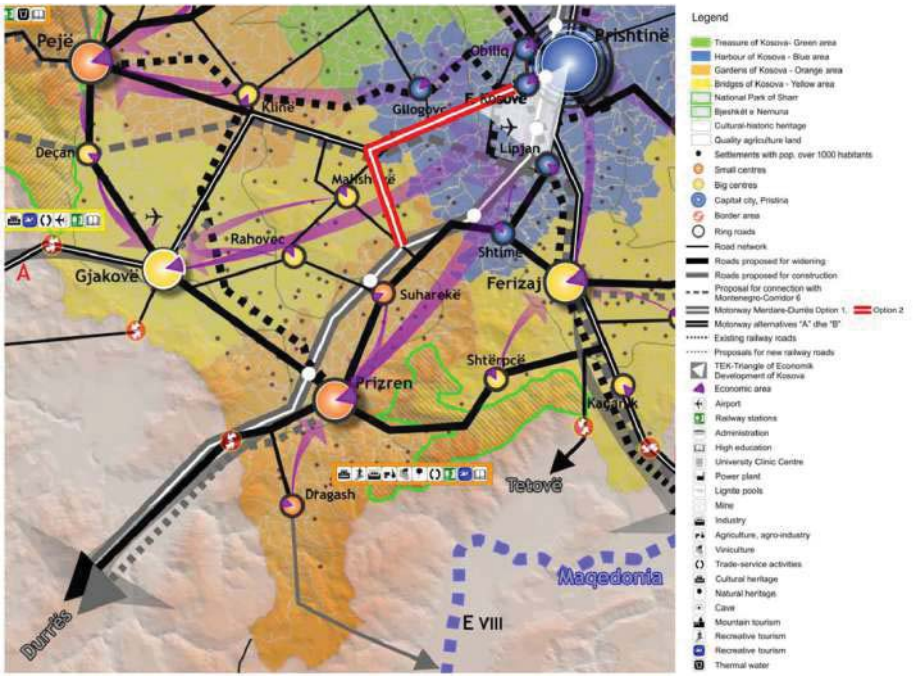
Within this problematic geopolitical context, dshould be contextualised the bilateral cooperation initiatives between Albania and Kosovo. Indeed, since 2008, simultaneously to the Kosovo's Independence proclamation, collaboration between the two



countries became more intense and furtherly strengthened in 2014, with joined governmental meetings between both Councils of Ministers initiatives and several bilateral agreements. The most important result of this collaborative process is undoubtedly the sign of the first common Strategic Partnership Agreement, aiming to increase the collaboration, sharing of information and to facilitate any kind of inter-institutional relation, including the presented cross-border cooperation in the field of spatial planning and territorial development.. In this perspective, the cross-border cooperation between Albania and Kosovo represents an important step, as a result of a new political attitude within a proper political environment that cannot be separated from the progressive integration process where the Western Balkan region countries are still involved.

THE CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION TRADITION IN THE EU AND THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

For a better comprehension of the role of the cooperation initiatives within the EU, this part gives a brief overview with the main cooperation tools used during the last period in Europe. Indeed, since the 90's, the cross-border territorial cooperation is a very debated topic in both academic and political arenas. The debate reflected the intention of the EU to promote several cooperation initiatives in the economic, social and territorial development sfield. Since the beginning, the intent has been to reduce the distance among bordering communities along internal (i.e. member states) and external (i.e. not member states) EU borders (EPRS, 2016). On this focus, in 1990 the UE launched the first ETC - European Territorial Cooperation better known as INTERREG I, that was followed by a series of similar initiatives . More in detail, the INTERREG mechanisms consider the EU a platform of cooperation, where member and non-member states cooperate in different fields) EPRS, 2016; Dühr, Stead and Zonneveld, 2007). Recently, after a significant redefinition of the enlargement parameters (factors and conditions), the EU introduced a specific instrument called IPA – Instruments for Pre-Accession Assistance for helping the aspirant states on their process to join in the EU. The first generation of the IPA 2007-2013 was built on five different components, where the cross-border cooperation played an important role in the mitigation of the differences among territorial borders. Later on, was launched the second IPA generation called IPA II , for the 2014-2020 period, increasing the country's ability to cooperate through a strategic perspective. In order to benefit from IPA, each future (and possible) beneficiary country should prepare the Country Strategy Paper, where are specified the main strategic country's objectives. While,the Multi-Country Strategy Paper, where is illustrated the countries' shared goals in the specific fields. The implementation of these new strategic documents obligates each country to increase its cooperation activities in order to benefit from the IPA funds. The result of this new approach was



the adoption of several Multi-Country Strategy Papers and the launch of the IPA CBC program between Albania and Kosovo ratified by the EU Commission with the Albania – Kosovo Cross-border Cooperation Action Program agreement (Berisha, 2018). In general, despite the EU framed cooperation initiatives, there have been activated several new forms of cooperation such as the bilateral one, that involved many countries. Since 1990, there have been launched different cooperation activities, differing in the strategic goal and financial mechanisms.

As emerged from this brief analysis and by this consideration, the Albania's and Kosovo's experience might be considered as "mixed" type cooperation. Indeed, after the bilateral agreement has been signed and financed by each country, the common strategic goals are similar with the EU's cooperation strategy. It seems that the proposed experience is constrained between a place based approach under the EU umbrella where each country may benefit from IPA II fund for Cross-border Cooperation if they guarantee the total implementation of the projects and by the allocation of part of the requires financial resources.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION: TOOLS AND GOALS FOR TERRITORIAL PLANNING

The recent bilateral agreements between the Ministry of Urban Development of the Republic of Albania and the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of Republic of Kosovo represent an opportunity to undertake numerous initiatives with the purpose to guarantee a wider and deeper institutional collaboration within the cross-border territory along the 123 km border line involving the Albanian cities of Kukës, Bajram Curri e Has and the Kosovar cities of Prizren and Gjakovë (Aversa et al., 2017a). This territory counts 559 335 inhabitants, where 85 461 inhabitants (3% of country's population) live in the Albanian side and 473 874 inhabitants (about 27% of country's population) living in the Kosovo side.

In addition, the current national planning tools and documents, in particular the Albanian General National Plan (figure 1), recently approved and the Spatial Plan of Kosovo 2010-2020+ (figure 2), have conferred to the cross-border area an important role. Indeed, if the former plan aimed to improve the economic resources of the territory by investing on specific economic and social asset like commercial exchanges and by the promotion of the sustainable tourism, this one focuses on the intrinsic potential and territorial factors that this border region may acquire in terms of infrastructural connection at the regional scale. Both national plans, indeed, remark its strategic importance within their national panorama and in the Western Balkans region, too.

The institutional actors involved, at the central and the local level, had the opportunity to compare their own planning institutional structure. Despite the initial difficulties because of the different legislative and institutional frameworks (or spatial planning system), the collaborative approach and the political attitude toward a bilateral cooperation, revealed fundamental to identify the main objectives where will be based for further and deeper discussion between the ministries in the future, concerning with. At the regards, the recognized priorities shared by the participants are: (i) the improvement of the institutional capacities of the local and the regional actors in the field of spatial planning and promotion of a trans-institutional collaboration; (ii) promotion of investments to improve the urban and rural quality; (iii)

increase the level of investments in the territorial accessibility and through regional slow mobility system; (iv) improvement of the economic and social development; (v) guarantee the protection and conservation of the natural heritage. All these goals, have been included in the common drafted preliminary action plan, where each ministry is committed (or invited) to implement some established projects for each emerged five priorities.

Despite of its informal nature, this document represents the programmatic reference base of the first cross-border initiative between the two countries that has involved, among the local actors and the inter-ministerial staff, a selected team of young professionals to elaborate a series of project proposal organised in two phases. The first phase, consisted in the organisation of the international competition regarding two main themes: (i) the Green Corridor "Kukës-Prizren" and (ii) the paths of Freedom: Has-Tropojë-Gjakovë. The winning teams of the respective themes, signed an agreement to develop an integrated document where these two themes should be treated with the same approach. Indeed, the second phase consisted in the harmonization of the proposals and the preliminary draft of the architectural projects that had the possibility to be financed. At the end of this collaboration, has been redacted a common document that identifies the integrated territorial strategy for the entire cross-border area and specific architectural intervention in conformity with the proposed strategy (Aversa et al., 2017b). The document evidences the main guiding lines for the future initiatives and actually is the main important tool for attracting private and public donations and for the ongoing application for the financial channel established by the IPA II.

THE PROPOSED INTEGRATED TERRITORIAL STRATEGY

The integrated territorial strategy has been structured in three main points: (i) analytical framework –identifying the characteristics of the territory, object of the future development strategy; (ii) objectives and priorities –establishing a series of strategic goals and (iii) the project proposal –identification of few architectural interventions in agreement with the actors involved.

The adopted analytical approach focuses on the identification of the three structural territorial components considered representative of the referred context, such as: (a) the urban, anthropic and cultural system, (b) the rural and agricultural system and (c) the natural system. Based on these components it has been given a critical interpretation of the state of the arts and the definition of the guiding lines (see figure3). From a critical analyse perspective, emerged some weaknesses related to the quality of urban settlements, level of conservation of the architectural, socio-cultural heritage and the lack of infrastructure connection, in particular in the rural area. In addition, despite its enormous natural value, there are some areas under constant pressure of the human activity increasing the level of natural deterioration. However, incidence of significant weaknesses apart, there have been recognized relevant potentialities such as the historical value, touristic vocation and the presence of an extended portion of natural areas that are still well-preserved on the entire.

The second step, consisted on the definition of objectives and priorities, delineating the strategic vision of the cross-border area through the promotion of the objectives, directives and programs, considered as priorities. On this purpose, there have been identified three main strategic objectives such as: (a) the constant implementation of cross-border coordination, at the institutional level, and especially by involving the local actors in order to increase the attractiveness of the entire region; (b) improvement of the territorial connective system, in cross-border area between urban and rural areas, by completing the existing infrastructural network and by introducing a slow mobility network as a catalyser for the eco-tourism; (c) preservation of the landscape, through the promotion of existing policies and best practices, for the protection and enhancement of natural, historical and cultural heritage, with a positive impact for the tourism sector in the region (Aversa et al., 2017b).

The territorial analysis and the definition of the objectives for the local and the cross-border development, revealed important in the elaboration of a multilayer strategic program based on the development of the "Water corridor" between Kukës e Prizren that interlaced with the other two networks: the green and the cultural network, respectively. The green corridor,

represents a connective tissue where is increased the accessibility toward the natural potentials of the area, with a positive impact for the rural centres in particular, with a different configuration respect the linearity of the typical corridor

These three layers are interlaced together with an existing but still uncompleted infrastructural system that will be the subject of the discussion in the next section. While the last part of the contribution will focus on the role of the water corridor and the proposed architectural intervention.

Cross-border mobility between Albania and Kosovo. Importance of the Green Corridor.

Saimir Shtylla

Since 2010 the infrastructural connection between Albania and Kosovo grew enormously thanks to the construction of the new highway, made of two parts: “Rruga e Kombit ” (Albania) and “Ibrahim Rugova ” (Kosovo). In 2017, Albania registered 1.745.973 visitors from Kosovo, representing 34 % of the foreign tourists visiting the country (Ibrahimaj 2018). Even if not in the highest levels, in 2016 Kosovo was the second main export destination for the Albanian goods with 15,7 % from 10,5% in 2012 (Ibrahimaj, Dhuli, et al. 2017). Unfortunately, this important infrastructure had an asymmetric impact in the Kukës and Prizren regions, in terms of promotion of the territory and the economic development. The Green corridor, represents an ambitious project promoted by the respective governments to boost the cross-border cooperation, on an area where territorial morphology makes accessibility very hard in remote inhabited centers. Restoration of the existing infrastructure and the reactivation of the disused M25 road will be fundamental to achieve a major territorial connection and promote tourism and local development. On this base the article is dived in three parts. In the first, there will be described the impact of the highway

