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Partnerships, Co-operation, Networking - When the State Does Not Intervene

It all began in 1989, when Romania's dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, wanted to wipe out hundreds of villages, mainly from Transilvania. As many as 206 Swiss communes took part in public protests and "adopted" the threatened villages. The fall of the communist regime on 22 December 1989 immediately triggered off a vast solidarity movement of the Swiss communes sponsoring the Romanian local communities. The "Operation Village Roumaines" (OVR) thus became more than a mere protest. Multiple humanitarian convoys were dispatched towards Romania. Some French and Belgium communes joined in an action of solidarity for the rural settings. In two years time, the OVR involved 4.500 communes, the decentralized cooperation being ten times more intensive than the inter-state relations, as pointed out by the French ambassador to Bucharest in 1992 and confirmed by the journalistic inquiry of "Paris Match" a year later. The OVR still exists, with the coordinating committees in the EU countries and Romania; the tangible results are the networking among over 50 communes in Romania, France and Belgium and a well-established touristic network, helping the development of agro-tourism in almost one third of Romanian regions (counties). This exercise of solidarity, cooperation and networking enormously boosted the development of local democracy in Romania, gave impetus to its local rural authorities to push for more responsibilities to be delegated from the higher administrative bodies and learned a valuable lesson that strength comes from pulling forces together. With time, the strong political aspects of cooperation faded away, giving way to cultural and economic exchanges.

Is Romania's case an isolated one? Definitely not. Although under different circumstances, local authorities in the former Yugoslavia benefited from the networking skills of similar bodies, affiliated to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, through the program "Local democracy embassies", launched in Strasbourg in 1993 with the express purpose of "giving support to municipalities dealing with the aftermath of the conflict". Five years later, a sum-up conference focused on the political and financial involvement of the partnering local and regional authorities and the work carried out by the delegates assigned to the local democracy embassies in Subotica (the Federal

Republic of Yugoslavia), Osijek/Slavonia, Brtonigla-Verteneglio and Sisak (Croatia), Tuzla, Sarajevo and Zavidovići (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Ohrid (The Former Republic of Macedonia) and changed the rather confusing name of “embassy” into “agency” (Local Democracy Agency - LDA). The conference also evaluated the cooperation as valuable in terms of fulfilling the aims set forth by the program: to contribute to the improvement of living conditions, to foster exchange and inter-municipal cooperation, to strengthen democratic processes and to give substance to confidence-building measures (in accordance with the draft drawn by the Council of Europe) through intercultural activities, human rights and peace education, to encourage micro-economic projects, development and reconstruction aid. A Local Democracy Agency was and still is composed of the following partners: a host municipality, town or region which has accepted the general principles of the program and where the democratic process has been re-launched, at least three municipalities, towns or groups of municipalities or regions from different Council of Europe member-states which agree to join forces to operate the LDA and to make contributions according to their financial capabilities, partner institutions (such as the Council of Europe, the European Union, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, etc.), NGOs or other associative organizations. The financing of LDAs is provided by local authorities or regions, national governments, partner institutions or international donors. As recommended activities, the official documents list exchanges between local or regional representatives, school exchanges, family-to-family links (including reception or return of refugees), cultural exchanges, micro-economic contacts. The tangible results of the programme, ten years later (as presented at the anniversary meeting of LDAs in Subotica, in 2003), are numerous meetings, activities and good-practice developments, but also well-designed projects: “Promoting civil society and trans-border cooperation” (Ohrid, Macedonia), “Trans-border Cooperation in the Euroregion Danube-Sava-Drava” (Osijek, Croatia), “The Centre for Women's Rights” (Sisak, Croatia), “Actors for Tomorrow's Europe” (Verteneglio, Croatia), “Advanced Training Seminar for Young Political Leaders” (Subotica, Serbia), “Environment, health, development: an intercommunity project in the Zavidovići area” (BiH), “Stage of journalism for a free, independent and multiethnic information course of journalism” (Prijedor, BiH).

The above mentioned examples give a brief insight into what the East-West European solidarity means and into the network development, with loose ties between the involved authorities; the required solid

financial support is provided either by the committees organized by the network itself (OVR), or by joining various sources (LDAs, mainly through the Pact for Stability). At much lower levels, the twinning projects stimulated by the Council of Europe have brought together numerous rural and urban localities, from the EU and the non-EU countries, in a large variety of forms, the outcomes depending on the human and financial resources invested in the projects and on the content of the protocol.

Basic framework for cooperation

What is common to all these cooperation projects? First of all, there is a need for at least a minimum of paper work, starting with a *protocol*. This document stipulates who the involved parties are, their wish to cooperate, the intended *temporal* extension of cooperation (for a specified or unspecified period) and the *areas* (domains) of the cooperation, even if it comes to only accepting a donation or hosting an expert. Depending on the range of cooperation, the parties may stipulate the *resources* pulled together for pursuing the common projects (financial, human, infrastructure). And finally, when it comes to intensive cooperation, the parties may develop *institutions*, such as OVR committees, LDAs, forums, assemblies etc. and *procedures* regarding the practical aspects of cooperation. The protocol may be an informal memo, if the project is a one-time effort, or may bear the force of a contract or legal document, when financial resources are involved and especially when the instruments of cooperation (institutions) are developed (almost all models of cooperation documents, from the twinning protocols to the cross-border contracts for regions are available on the Council of Europe's official web site; however, the national practice varies greatly in memos or contracts and it really depends on the involved authorities how this matter is handled). The projects mentioned at the beginning of this paper started from the international/European level. Yet not all cooperation projects among local authorities are of international magnitude. More and more often these links are created on the intra-national level, since local authorities in post-communist countries have been learning rather fast the importance of cooperation at the horizontal level, with the neighboring authorities - when it comes to specific needs such as organizing services for the communities (water management, waste management, developing infrastructure) - or with the similar regional or national authorities when it comes to lobbying higher (and definitely more politically and financially powerful) authorities. The states, in turn, have

learned that dealing with lobbies is easier than with a loose gathering of authorities, each trying to promote local interests, and that in the international arena local authorities might prove important allies. European politics in fostering local initiatives and the lobbying of such bodies as the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (Council of Europe), the Committee of Regions (European Union), the Assembly of European Regions, etc. has pushed for a quicker understanding, in the post-communist countries, of the value and importance of cooperation among local/regional authorities, both intra- and inter-national.

Why cooperate? This paper started with the examples of how uncalled for (but necessary!) the offers for cooperation were for the Central and Eastern European countries (more exactly, the countries included in the Pact for Stability programmes). Yet, cooperation is necessary, useful and even fun, even outside such ambitious networks. It stems from the everyday tasks of local/regional administrative bodies/authorities, accountable to the citizens in their respective settings or regions. Cooperation is *necessary* because:

- a) the human and financial resources for action available to local authorities are limited
- b) the competences rendered to local administration increase step by step, due to the implementation of new principles in public administration, such as decentralization and subsidiarity
- c) citizens become more demanding, due to the strengthening of accountability of elected bodies in democratic societies
- d) increasing pressure from other local actors, private capital especially
- e) influence of new factors such as globalization, modern technology, etc.

Cooperation is *useful* because:

- a) it attracts partners and funds otherwise not available to local authorities
- b) it helps solve problems which are too big for a community to handle, but too small for the state to look into them
- c) it enhances the capacity of local administration to fulfill the requests of the citizens
- d) it facilitates progress and creates the possibility to introduce reforms;
- e) it alleviates the pressure coming from the contemporary challenges such as globalization.

Cooperation is *fun* because:

- a) it allows for experimenting in administration matters
- b) it makes dreams come true
- c) an enormous amount of innovation makes its way even to remote, isolated localities
- d) local administrations can manifest their resourcefulness, bargaining abilities, problem-solving skills and the vision regarding the future development of their respective communes, towns, groups of administrative units or regions.

The remaining question is the *manner of cooperation*. Here the relevant literature gives a rather systematic answer, in four basic parts or types:

- 1) Loose cooperation or “pre-cooperation”. This includes exchanges of information, activities aimed at creating a climate of trust and establishing common ground, reaching consensus for actions and procedures. The tools in this phase are: conferences, working groups, seminars, information/study visits. Practically all authorities, local or regional, have attended such events and can easily provide their own experiences.
- 2) Cooperation based on contracts. While the first stage is strategically oriented, this stage envisages more concrete responsibilities of each involved party. Authorities may jointly deal with a certain problem (water management, waste management, providing educational services for the population, developing infrastructure), organizing an event or developing a common project.
- 3) Partnerships resulting in creating an agency or institution empowered to act in the name of the involved parties. The example of LDAs is only one of many. In Hungary and in Romania, for instance, regional development is pursued by the responsible administrative bodies, not through their own personnel and institutions, but through “development agencies”.
- 4) Special partnerships, involving the local (or regional) initiative, but financed mainly from other sources, such as private capital.

Each type can include, along with the public administration bodies/authorities, NGOs and private enterprises. In fact, the public-private partnership, though a rather new concept even for the EU countries, has been gaining momentum, as the answer to the necessity faced by local actors to keep pace with competition and market rules. Also, it should be emphasized that these types of cooperation apply both to the intra-national cooperation and the cross-border

(international) cooperation, with nuances due to the specificity of the actors involved, but not to the scope and the range of cooperation.

So far, only the positive aspects of cooperation have been pointed out. Yet, like in any other serious analysis, there is a balance between the benefits and the risks. And on becoming a partner for cooperation, one must keep in mind also the “dark side of the moon”. There is no need to be overcautious, but certain measures should be taken so that the potential risks do not endanger the projects developed or proposed within the framework of a given cooperation activity.

Benefits	Risks
To achieve objectives more ambitious than resources available to authorities (human and financial) enable	Genuine priorities of citizens / administration are upset, due to different interests of involved partners
To stimulate development of localities or regions	One (or more) of the parties may pull out, at different stages project development, thus hindering or even stopping the project.
To enhance advantages of locality/region: geographic position, resources, favorable legislation (e.g. for remote localities, for disadvantaged areas, etc.)	Replacing strategic plans with short-term projects, concentrated on swift visible results but not always in accordance with more enduring problem-solving
To bring in new actors (other authorities, businesses, NGOs etc.)	Losing social/human dimension of local policy, while trying to adapt to market and competition.

Of course, this chart does not include “force major” cases, such as dramatic social conflicts, deterioration of peace climate or (inter)national crises, when other priorities come first.

The success of cooperation depends, therefore, on a number of subjective and objective factors, which it would be wise to evaluate before entering into a fully-fledged cooperation. National legislation may foster cooperation or be completely indifferent to it. For instance, the French Code of Administration has a voluminous chapter entitled “La coopération locale”, which starts with the statement that “territorial collectivities can associate to exercise their competences and create public institutions for cooperation under the current legislation”. The code further develops the typology of cooperation and actions in over 200 articles! Unlike France, in Romania in 1993/1994 the regional (county) authorities were warned *not* to develop intra-national cooperation, which was sanctioned by law; such possibilities were

envisaged only for local actors. It took several years of lobbying for this interdiction to be banned (in 1997); only recently the legislation started developing the frameworks of intra-national cooperation (with the establishment of internal “regions for development”, meaning not regions as such, but a form of cooperation among counties). Also, the discretionary right was granted to competent sub-state authorities to experiment and use local funds. Parallely, some theoretical foundations were laid concerning inter-communal cooperation (included in the Law no. 339/2004 on decentralization, but with a promise for a separate law). Also, the international lobby is not to be neglected. The introductory examples of this paper showed that the European networks practically made the projects acceptable to national higher authorities, otherwise rather jealous and suspicious that they might lose control over local or regional authorities. The most important subjective and objective factors (of course, the list can be improved) are:

Subjective factors	Objective factors
(Prior) experience of local actors in cooperation, networking, developing projects	Economic power of the locality/region
Existence of certain communication skills and ability to set clear rules from the beginning (to avoid creation/accumulation of conflicts during cooperation)	Potential of local actors to build up partnerships
Correct perception and evaluation of micro and macro factors relevant for cooperation	Interests, aims and actions of public and private actors, connected to the cooperation

Because the picture is so complex, it is important to launch all cooperation efforts in the first stage, during which ample/costly actions are not yet undertaken, and during which a climate of trust can be built (or, vice versa: the termination of contacts does not create legal, financial or social problems) and the parties can take time to find common grounds for further activities. It is not unusual (and definitely it gives a good impression) to start with the exchange of ideas, to draft rather vague blueprint contracts, to develop the paperwork and to institutionalize the cooperation after a thorough evaluation of the strong and weak points in the partnership.

Too much theory? Perhaps, but it is necessary to give some serious thought to the concept of cooperation, which is not just a word in a

dictionary. Also, even in the same country people might mean something different when referring to new concepts, thus making explanations and debates a vital precondition of success. Below are some examples of cooperation, in complex forms, but with tangible/visible results as an inspiration for further action.

Food for thought: success stories of recent partnerships

Timisoara is the largest city in the western part of Romania (and the third biggest in Romania on the whole), with good economic development, close to the Romanian-Serbian and Romanian-Hungarian borders, with a long experience in bilateral and multilateral partnerships, aimed at enhancing the evident advantages of the city (low unemployment rate, qualified labour force, good infrastructure, multiethnic composition, a number of universities and research centers, openness towards innovation and experiment in all spheres of activity). Among the numerous partnerships currently under way through a variety of implementation/management units (or institutions) anyone can study on-site, there are projects such as: the *Industrial Park Timis* (partners: Local Council Timisoara, Timis County Council and two private companies, SOLECTRON SA and ICCO SRL), *Technological Park Timisoara* (partners: Local Council Timisoara, Timis County Council, Economic Development Agency ADETIM, Timisoara Chamber of Commerce, Multidisciplinary Research Association West, Regional Development Agency V West, Polytechnic University and University of the West Timisoara), *Conference Center Timisoara* (partners: Local Council Timisoara, Timis County Council and the Timisoara Chamber of Commerce). Also it is useful to mention that the “Strategic Development Plan for Timisoara” is the result of the partnership of the local administration with more than 100 institutions (local administrations from neighboring villages, county councils, research centres, NGOs, businesses, etc.) which commenced in 1999 and is still going on.

In answering the question “why cooperate?”, most local/regional authorities would first point out the economic benefits, and only then other outcomes such as cultural enrichment or (political) alignment with the European/international trends. So let's look deeper into a project which is unquestionably valuable for economic development, namely the *Technological Park*, as it has been described in the paper *Public-Private Partnership Timis: the concept*, sponsored by the Timis County Council and the Economic Development Agency ADETIM in 2001. The project's implementation has been monitored as well.

Partenerial structure for implementation provided an implementation unit to which all the involved parties delegated a representative. The structure is open to new partners (from the public, private or banking spheres), interested in holding the shares of the future Society for Managing the Technological Park.

Juridical (legal) status

According to the Romanian *Law on parks for developing information technologies* (no.134/2000), the Society for managing the Technological Park will be an economic enterprise with the sole activity of administering the park.

Necessity of the project

Timisoara is a strong economic and industrial center of Romania, but the ties between its research institutes, universities and industry are hindered by a lack of coordination in experimenting and implementing new, competitive technologies. The industry has undergone some tremendous changes and is confronted with the particular challenge of coping with information technologies. The necessity of using technological innovation in the region has been pointed out in the studies concerning the possibility to speed up the development of the city of Timisoara, the Timis county and of the Development Region V West (with the four western Romanian counties which compose it).

Opportunity

A project has to be not only necessary, but part of the agenda of local/regional actors. Therefore, a study of opportunity is important for fund-raising. The project was declared "loaded" with opportunity due to the fact that Timisoara hosts 6 universities, 29 research centers, important investors from multinational companies (Alcatel, Solectron, Katrein, Siemens etc.), domestic enterprises interested in modernization, and a solid net of services, able to provide expertise, finances and activities to the project.

Objectives

Short term objectives concern the development of the documents necessary to create the park and to attract the necessary funds (including the feasibility study). The partners identified the following tasks: the definition of the concept of the technological park, the development of the physical infrastructure and services to support the companies operating in the park and the actual construction of the park.

Long term objectives in this case concern the desire to shorten the transition period for restructuring the economy and for attracting foreign investment in the region. The long-term targets of the partners for their participation in the project are: stimulating economic development, industries and commerce in the region; assisting in the fast transformation of the structure of labour force in the region; stimulating cross-border cooperation and inter-regional exchanges; linking industries with universities and research centers, expanding the labour market.

Results

So far, the following has been done:

- the concept of the “Technological park” has been defined
- the public-private partnership for implementing the project has become operational
- the sources for financing/co-financing have been identified (among others, a PHARE 2001 project for over 2,2 million euros has been accessed for this purpose)
- the feasibility study has been prepared
- the Society for managing the Technological Park has been created
- the target group for this project is aware of the opportunities opened by the park.

Stages/activities in implementing the project

- creating the public-private partnership for the project
- drafting the documents (feasibility study + technological project) for the actual construction
- creating the Society for Managing the Technological Park
- recruiting personnel and launching the activities
- making the park operational
- drafting the strategy for marketing and promotion.

Only the last two activities are still pending, but the project is rapidly developing.

Impact

The project is an essential component of the regional strategy for innovation in the Economic Development Region V West, implemented within the framework of the programme RIS/RITTS (Regional Innovation Strategies/Regional Innovation and Technology Transfer

Strategies and Infrastructure) of the European Union. The main priorities of this strategy are: using the local, regional and euro-regional potential to full extent. The Technological Park is envisaged as the hub of economic growth especially due to its vicinity to the Romanian-Serbian-Hungarian borders. The Technological Park is viewed as the nucleus of an efficient network for technological transfer, capable to ensure, organize and channel the transfer of know-how and to apply the research made by the specialized institutions from Timisoara, but also from the neighboring research centers in Hungary and Serbia. A favourable factor for such expectation is the recent opening of a crossing-point between the Timis county and Hungary, at Cenad-Kiszombor, a project developed within the framework of the Euro-regional cooperation Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa (DKMT).

There are further examples, for instance regarding the water management in the Lugoj municipality (Romania again), where other eight local authorities from the communes belonging to the same water basin cooperate, jointly with a commercial enterprise and a research institute, in order to ensure a proper water supply for domestic and industrial use in the region.

These examples illustrate the problem of intra-national cooperation, with some regional and Euro-regional impact and with the possibility of using foreign capital and private partners. Rather often, especially due to the innovative model in Central and Eastern European countries, the Euro-regional or cross-border cooperation is considered an important tool for implementing confidence-building measures, for stimulating economic development in regions far from their national centers (which quite often suffer because of this distance in the form of a lack of interest for nationally sponsored investments), for toning down possible tensions along the borders. In the described area, several Euro-regions are already functional:

- Danube-Sava-Drava Euroregional Cooperation
- Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion
- Danube 21 Euroregion
- The Southern Adriatic Transfrontier Cooperation Initiative (between the border areas of Croatia, BH and Montenegro).

Maybe these cooperation projects have little to show for the time being. But they may (and do) look with confidence to the “older” cooperation ties of the cross-border type. For instance, the Arba region at the Hungarian-Austrian border. According to the Hungarian expert in CBC,

Gyorgy Csalotzky, after the political changes of 1989-1990, three phases of cooperation along the Austrian-Hungarian border can be distinguished:

- a) Recognition of common interests and the rationale for cross-border cooperation (CBC). In this phase, the fields of cooperation are: economic relations, building infrastructural facilities in transport and communication, environmental protection, emergency protection, tourism, science, culture, education, health, sports, and civil relations.
- b) Identification of projects, ideas and priorities (among them the development of joint programmes, development and exploitation of common information systems, fostering cooperation between chambers of commerce, fostering the creation of joint venture companies, endorsing economic agreements between companies, developing joint economic and financial activities on third markets, etc).
- c) Finding the appropriate financial support for the planned activities. It is important to point out the fact that despite the disparity between the European programmes to finance the CBC (often criticized and presented as an obstacle to developing cooperation), Austria appealed to the INTERREG II programme, while Hungary used the mechanisms of PHARE CBC. The budget for 1995-1997 was 42 million euros, which was enough for 66 big projects and a large number of the so-called "small projects".

Among the tangible results of this particular partnership, due to the Euro-regional planning and coordination, important projects have been implemented. Here is a brief list:

- Gongu-Györ port on the Danube
- An airport in the village of Per (Hungary)
- An International Trade Center in Györ
- An industrial area in Sopron
- Bicycle routes besides the Danube and lake Fertő
- Common industrial areas of Szentgotthard/Hungary and Heiligenkreutz/Austria
- Innonet incubator house.

Analysts, experts, practitioners, and representatives of public authorities recognize the value of such cooperation ties and urge for the model to be developed beyond specific details which may divert the attention from the essence of the matter: cooperation is valuable and has very practical outcomes, conducive to economic development.

To sum up

Success stories in the area are many. What most parties keep mum about, though, are the failures. A lot of times the expected outcomes cannot be realized, due to a large number of subjective and objective factors. Cooperation is time-consuming. It is also not very rewarding if a local/regional administrative representative only thinks about it in electoral cycle terms, since most often projects need a long period of “gestation”. But this does not mean that, while waiting for the funds or the authorization, the involved partners should lose sight of the project. And local/regional governments may search for the partners not only among the similar bodies in their own country or abroad, but also for those institutions, businesses and NGOs capable of enhancing the organizational and financial capacity of the given authority for the envisaged project. For any idea to cross the border between the concept and the reality it is vital that all those who begin the race have the stamina, perseverance, and interest to reach the finish line. Here is a brief “check-list” for ensuring that a cooperation project will be a success story:

- the idea is shared/embraced by a large number of people (belonging to the public administration, NGOs, businesses, etc.)
- the project solves a problem regarded important for the local/regional community
- the paperwork is properly done (documents are comprehensible, responsibilities are defined and properly distributed, there is no room for misinterpretation)
- the legal frame is favourable (otherwise the law may terminate the project at various stages)
- the partners work consensually and have developed a smooth cooperation
- there is enough financial support and adequate personnel in charge with monitoring and implementing the project
- institutions created to implement/manage the project or its outcomes have the competence and the willingness to perform their duties, as described in the project
- when a project is completed, it is useful and used for the intended purposes

- the local/regional administration does not see the projects isolated from the “big picture” of larger cooperation programmes, networking, strategic planning.

The only possible concluding words are: be courageous, be imaginative, be perseverant - be successful!

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