

4 Strategic objectives in the Carpathian region

Considering the listed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, four strategic objectives could be defined for the Carpathian area as a whole.

- 1) Strengthening the internal cohesion of the Carpathian region
- 2) Strengthening the cohesion with the other parts of the European territory
- 3) Enhancing economic growth and job creation in the Carpathian area
- 4) Improved management of the region's environment and natural-cultural heritage.

4.1 Strengthening the internal cohesion of the Carpathian area

It is a general observation that the internal cohesion of the Carpathian for the time being is weak. This weak cohesion has *natural-geographic, technical-infrastructure, historical, political and ethnical-linguistic reasons*:

- The Carpathian mountain range divides the region into two halves: areas inside of the Carpathian basin, and the areas outside of it. The two were divided by a 150 km wide hardly passable mountain range, which was uninhabited or hardly inhabited for centuries. The mountain range was a natural defence system for the nations and regions on both sides, but simultaneously it separated them from each other and substantially restricted the interactions.
- The Alps were even less passable, nevertheless, the North-South routes were vital for the economic and cultural development of Western Europe, and therefore serious efforts were made to construct roads and railway lines across the Alps. In contrast, in Central Europe, North-South connection was not a priority issue. Consequently, the number of trans-Carpathian roads and railways is insufficient and the capacity of the existing ones is limited.
- Historically, the Carpathian region, as a whole was the “border area” of big empires: of the Ottoman, the Russian (Soviet), the German and the Austrian-Habsburg empires. The joining of forces and solidarity was very rarely the political strategy of the smaller nations in this “border area”. They looked more frequently for the support of one or more of the great powers to attain their political and military objectives. Conflict was more characteristic of inter-nation and inter-ethnic relations than collaboration.
- Sustaining hostility among the small nations was the tactics of the great powers as well for a longer period. But it was misused also by some communist leaders to divert people's attention away from the worsening economic situation in their countries.

- 8 languages are spoken in the Carpathian region. Mutual understanding is somewhat less a problem in the case of the 5 Slavic languages (Czech, Polish, Serb, Slovak, Ukrainian), much more difficult with the other 3 languages (German, Hungarian, Romanian). Latin was the “Lingua Franca” until the 18th century. This role was partly taken over by the German language in the 19th century. Unfortunately, Russian was taught, but not learned in the schools of the Carpathian area for almost a half century. As a consequence, there are whole generations in the Carpathian countries, who can hardly communicate with each other.

At the same time, there are some favourable preconditions for more cohesion:

- Carpathian countries and regions share – though in different languages – a common “Central European” culture. With the exception of some Eastern and Southern Romanian regions, all Carpathian regions were part of the Habsburg empire for at least 150 years, some regions for a much longer period. This empire – besides its serious problems – represented a peculiar milieu and way of life which left their marks in every Carpathian country. But even the life under Soviet hegemony was a common experience. A strange consequence of the restrictions of travelling to the West was that people got more acquainted with neighbouring countries. The common fate and the simultaneous efforts to change the political-economic system created a kind of solidarity between the nations;
- Though the Carpathian Mountains are the geographic “asset” bounding the countries and regions together, their geographic endowments are much differentiated, which would offer huge opportunities to exchange their products in the framework of international trade. Nevertheless, from the collapse of the Habsburg Empire until the EU accession, Carpathian countries seriously – though with changing instruments – discriminated each other in their foreign trade relations. It was true not only concerning the tariff-wars between the two World Wars, but also for the COMECON trade and partly even for the CEFTA co-operation. Only the EU accession abolished all the obstacles of economic division of labour between Carpathian countries and regions, and since 2004, economic relations and trade developed very rapidly.
- Finally, common intervention might be useful even as members of the EU and in EU forums. Carpathian regions are among the least developed regions of the EU and the common presentation of their problems would give more emphasis to their claims.

The actions for achieving more internal cohesion in the Carpathian region would be the following:

- development and improvement of transport and communication networks across and within the Carpathians;
- supporting partnership and cooperation agreements between Carpathian countries, regions and cities;
- supporting the creation of Euroregions and converting them to regions of genuine common projects and efforts;
- enlarging the Schengen zone with Romania as soon as possible
- facilitating border crossing also for citizens from non-EU Carpathian regions
- establishing cross-border passenger transport networks between the neighbouring parts of the Carpathian countries to strengthen micro-regional linkages, to promote tourism and facilitate commuting.
- formulating more joint cross-border projects for improving infrastructural systems
- enhancing exchanges of pupils and students and supporting language courses on the languages of the neighbours.
- Supporting mutual visits of theatres, ensembles, actors and artists in the Carpathian regions.

4.2 Strengthening the cohesion with other parts of the European territory

Beyond the strengthening internal cohesion, the Carpathian region is part of the wider European territory. The European integration process means that for the first time in the European history, this area is an equal member of the European community. It means that the more fortunate part of Europe supports the adaptation and development of the Carpathian countries, but Carpathian countries also have to contribute to the All-European stability and development. The main challenges and tasks of the Carpathian regions in this respect are the following:

- One of the most important tasks is to catch up with the more developed countries of the European Union. For the Carpathian regions, the principal model is the Alpine area. But this catching up process is important for the whole of Europe. In the recent years, the growth rate of some Carpathian regions (mainly in Slovakia) was substantially higher than the EU average, so they positively contributed to the implementation of Lisbon objectives, to the economic dynamics of the EU.
- The catching up process does not mean that the Carpathian region should be in every respect similar to the Western European models (e.g. to the Alpine regions). Central Europe and within it the Carpathian region has its own characteristics, peculiarities which are worth to preserve them. Such things are the special Carpathian foods and drinks, special culture, folklore, crafts,

city and village structures, specialities of the transport system, land use peculiarities, agricultural practices, and so on. By preserving its peculiarities, the Carpathian region can contribute to the diversity of the European space.

- The border and bridge function: the Carpathian region is now the most important part of the EU external border. The EU has now 6631 kilometres external land borders, and 1884 kilometres, more than one fourth of it can be found within the Carpathian region. These are the borders of EU member states to Ukraine and Serbia. These borders, however, are more important than their quantitative share. Ukraine is the largest state in the whole area, and the Ukrainian Carpathians are of key importance for Ukraine and for the whole mountain range as well. It represents 70 percent of the whole Ukrainian wood production and a substantial part of the Carpathian wood production as well. Several important rivers of the Carpathian area take their sources in the Ukrainian Carpathians (San, Bug, Tisa, Prut, Latorica, Uzh). But beyond the economic and hydrological importance, the Ukrainian and Serbian Carpathian regions are of pivotal importance for the whole neighbourhood policy of the EU. These Carpathian regions are borders, but they are also bridges to the neighbouring countries. The stability and development of Ukraine and Serbia are important factors for the stability of the EU as well, and fruitful cross-border cooperation is an important guarantee of this stability.
- In the framework of the EU structural, cohesion and agricultural policies, Carpathian countries and region enjoy significant support for their economies. Simultaneously, it is an important income transfer within the EU from the more affluent countries and regions to the poorer ones. But beneficiary countries and regions have the political, economic and moral obligation to utilise these transfers as fully and as efficiently as possible and to prepare for the period when – due to their dynamic development – they should ensure the conditions of their economic balance and development without the external income flows, as soon as possible.

The main actions to implement these objectives are the following:

- the strengthening of transport and communication links between the Carpathian region and the Pan-European transport and communication corridors;
- connecting the Carpathian region with the European waterways
- the inclusion of the mountain tourist tracks into the international structure of tourist tracks and area, and its active international promotion;
- integrated actions aimed at attracting new economic investment projects, especially in the field of new technologies;
- the development of information society on the basis of integrated systems of state-of-the-art telecommunication infrastructure.

4.3 Promoting economic growth and job creation in the Carpathian area

Obviously, that is the main objective in the Carpathian area. It has been ranked as third in the list only because its instruments and measures are of more general character, not unique to the Carpathian space.

Nevertheless, there are specific “Carpathian” features even of the “growth and jobs” policy in this region. The most important is the low activity rate. In the Carpathian region 50–51 percent of the population between 15 and 64 years is working, while in EU average, this figure is 64 percent, in some regions more than 70 percent. It means that even if productivity would be equal to EU average (what is unfortunately not the case), the GDP per head would be 22 percent lower. The first and most important task is, therefore, to create jobs for a larger part of the population. According to experience, large multinational firms contribute substantially to GDP and exports, but their impact on employment is rather restricted. It means that these additional jobs must be created by small and medium enterprises. Their support is therefore vital for the whole Carpathian economy (*Table 2*).

Table 2

Activity rate of 15–64 population (2004)

NUTS code	Name of the region	
PL22	Śląskie	49.5
HU31	Észak-Magyarország (north Hungary)	49.5
HU32	Észak-Alföld (North Plain)	50.2
SK04	Východné Slovensko	51.5
PL33	Świętokrzyskie	51.6
PL32	Podkarpackie	52.3
HU33	Dél-Alföld (South Plain)	53.8
RO12	Centrum	54.1
RO22	Sud-Est	54.6
PL21	Małopolskie	55.0

Source: Eurostat.

But even this low employment means over-employment in some Carpathian areas. The GDP per head indicator is the lowest in the Romanian Nord East region (23.6 percent of the EU average), but productivity is even lower: GDP per employed person is 11.6 percent of the EU average. The reason is that half of the working force is employed in agriculture with very low efficiency. 50 percent agricultural employment is hardly else than latent unemployment.

Inactivity and latent agricultural unemployment together means that in the next years 6-7 million jobs should be created in the Carpathian area only to achieve the present average EU activity rate. The regions with the lowest activity rates are the following:

4.4 Improved management of the region's environment and natural-cultural heritage

The Carpathian region is particularly rich in natural assets. However, the use of such resources, especially during the last 50 years, has in many cases upset the balance of nature, and now action is needed to restore it. A concern for the natural environment improves the quality of spaces, creating better conditions for life and for businesses. This can be one of the factors generating positive social change, e.g. reversing depopulation. The cultural heritage is also very rich. Its objects were accumulated during centuries, and they consist of contributions of several nations, ethnic and religious groups, some of which do not live in the area any more. Such mixture of cultures can generate substantial momentum of development, provided it is properly researched, managed and considered in development policies.

The natural environment of the Carpathian Region is the heritage of the entire European Community, and so its protection should be a priority task. However environmental and cultural assets can also form the basis for the development of certain types of economic activities (e.g. tourism). This is why protection and actions aimed at restoring the value of environmental and cultural assets can also be assessed in economic terms, and in the long run can be converted into quantifiable advantages.

The potential common actions can be the following:

- Common and coordinated care for cross-border natural parks and reserves;
- Implementation of European nature conservation programmes (like green belts);
- Protection of cross-border rivers against pollution and improvement of water quality in the catchment basins of rivers, crossing the borders;
- Coordination of actions regarding the use and protection of hydro-geological structures which cross the borders, including the restoration of hydro-geological balance in areas with disrupted water systems. Protection of areas both with underground and with cavern water;
- Cooperation in preparing environmental and strategic impact assessments for cross border areas;
- Integrated monitoring of air quality;

- Sustainable management of forests in the border areas and increasing the woodland cover;
- Preparation of studies, assessing the capacity to reclaim and redevelop industrial and degraded land, and preparation of joint reclamation and redevelop-ment projects;
- Strengthening and conservation of regional architectural traditions;
- Raising of social awareness and education for cultural and natural environ-mental protection;
- Revitalisation of cultural landscapes in rural areas;
- Promotion of the tourism to industrial heritage places;
- Organisational and technical efforts aimed at protecting cultural heritage.