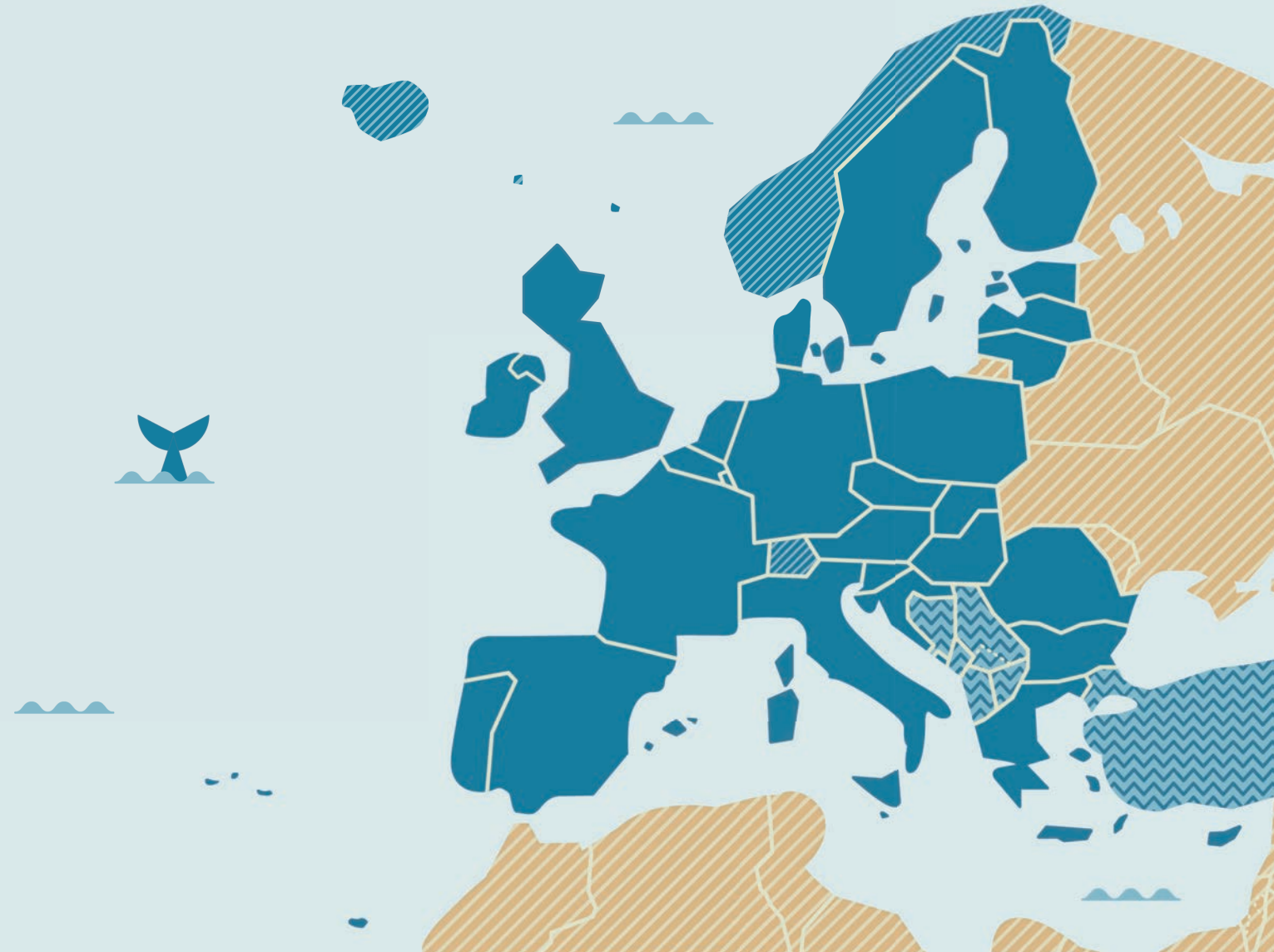


Stories of European cooperation

Slovakia, Austria & Hungary



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Introduction

During the autumn of 2017, I was volunteering as an **IVY Interreg reporter** at the **Interact programme** in Bratislava. Interact helps EU cooperation programmes, also known as Interreg, to manage different problems that can arise when cooperating across borders. During my time at Interact my main task was to work with the **European Cooperation Day campaign** (popularly known as EC Day), which shows the benefits of European cooperation to civil society in a fun way. In 2017, around 80 events were organised within the EC Day and people enjoyed cross-border biking paths, cultural and food events, different seminars or field excursions in border regions.

What I came to discover when working with the European Cooperation Day was how many cool, interesting, important and even life-saving projects that are going on locally in different places all over Europe and beyond, making a concrete difference in people's everyday lives. Thanks to the EC Day campaign, I discovered some of the projects that are presented in this publication.

The European Union idea is often seen as something that's rather distant, something that takes place in Brussels and something that doesn't care about the local dimension or the locals. This publication shows the opposite. Having been an Interreg reporter in Slovakia, I learned that cooperation, just like the politics of the EU, is complex. But I also learned that it is a great possibility to build a better society through cooperation, peace, and shared knowledge. That's why campaigns such as the European Cooperation Day are important. For us to appreciate and support the idea of cooperation, it's essential that we know all the good things that are being done through it locally, in our neighbourhood.

In this publication, I give a brief presentation about some of the cooperation projects that I discovered in my Slovakian neighbourhood. Hopefully, this will encourage you to go out, participate actively in your EC Day event, and discover the European projects in your region.



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Autism Competence Exchange



Interreg cross-border competence exchange for better autism care

In the regions of Austrian Vienna, Slovakian Bratislava and Trnava alone, around 28,000 people are affected by autism. Autism is a lifelong disorder which effects an individual's social, linguistic and life-practical functions. The life of those in the close family is affected by the disorder as well. But even if this is a problem for many people in the area, there were huge knowledge gaps in the region.

From 2007 to 2013 an Interreg cross-border cooperation programme called Autism Competence Exchange was implemented to improve care structures for people with autism disorders. The project aimed to increase the level of autism education and service. The intention was to raise the quality of care in both areas by transferring skills from Vienna to Bratislava and to establish an accredited, autism-specific therapy training according to the most recent methods in both areas. Olga at the Autistické centrum Andreas n.o. in Bratislava is one of the participants

that benefited from the project. She works with therapy for autistic children and consultations for parents and kindergarten teachers. For one month she went through intensive training about ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) through the Autism Competence Exchange project.

ABA is about intensive individual therapy where you work a lot with reinforcement and rewards. The individual is also taught to be comfortable with other people and to interact with them. *"It was very good education for us to improve all the skills that we need when doing our job. It also helped us improve the way we inform the parents and everyone else that is working with the child. The quality of our work with children is higher now"*, Olga explains.



Olga at Autistické centrum Andreas n.o.



"The children improve their skills faster than before because now I know how to do the therapy better which makes it more efficient. The ABA method brings us a way to teach children things that we didn't think that they could learn. How to play together, communicate, and keep eye contact, for example. Things you usually do every day - like to dress themselves or brush their teeth", she adds.

The approach also includes strong involvement of family members. Olga explains that parents and the people working in the school that the child attends also are involved in the therapy. They have change their behaviour on how to communicate with the child. Everybody need to behave in the same way to the child to help the development of skills: *"I need to cooperate with the parents all the time. It's really like a team work between the parents and the therapist, because we need to trust each other. It means a lot to the parents if the children can dress themselves"*.

Olga says that children with autism sometimes don't like changes, to go to a place that they don't know or be with somebody they don't know. Through ABA therapy children are more capable of coping with the changes they face, like changing clothes, meeting a new person, or going to a new place. This means a lot to the families. When the child is capable to attend the kindergarten, then the mother doesn't need to be at home with them

but can work instead. This is important since autism care is expensive in Slovakia, so both parents need to work to afford it. And if the child has siblings, sometimes parents don't have much time left for the other children. All kinds of improvement that makes a child with autism more functional also help the parents to have more time for the other children in the family.

The Autism Competence Exchange project was a forerunner in the region, and promoted long-term efforts to understand and treat autism. The participants were also trained to educate others. Due to this, Olga now supervises workshops on ABA at Autistické centrum Andreas n.o. Olga explains that a lot of people come from the other side of Slovakia since they don't have enough education there. So far, she has educated 120 people in the ABA-method through her workshops in Bratislava.

Since autism affects the whole family, better autism care generates a better life both for the affected individual but also for that person's family. With more people learning about how to enhance autism care through the ABA method, life can improve for a lot of people in the region. *"This project was the best way to improve my skills and it was a great education for me"*, Olga concludes.

More information

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/austria/joint-project-in-austria-and-slovakia-increases-education-and-training-on-autism-and-raises-level-of-health-services

Cross-border emergency healthcare project



In the cross-border region between Slovakia's city Dunajská Streda and Hungary's city Győr, two hospitals launched an Interreg project in 2011 to improve the accessibility of urgent health services in their cross-border region.



This cooperation enabled the hospitals to each acquire two highly equipped ambulances that are suitable for disaster management. In one of these two ambulances there is also an incubator for transporting new-born babies. In addition to improving their equipment, their cross-border cooperation also made possible for them to strengthen their skills in joint disaster management for the area. In the scope of the project, the two hospitals simulated a serious disaster situation that required the involvement of both hospitals. This was a learning opportunity which gave them better insight in each other's activities and will enable them to better respond to any future disaster situation.

The cross-border cooperation has also strengthened the emergency care in general. Doctors and medical experts operating in the area have received education and training during the project, and the hospitals have developed common standards and mutually accepted documentation in the field of emergency care. This helps the use of an integrated cross-border emergency care and makes life in the border areas easier and safer.

Hungary and Slovakia work together for better health and safety through cross-border cooperation

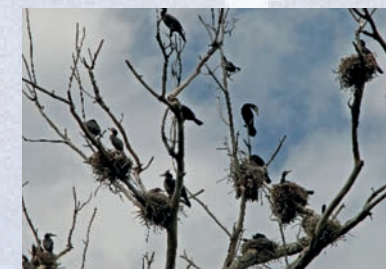
The joint nature park in the Szigetköz-Žitný ostrov region

Cooperation for nature, education, and regional identity

The Szigetköz-Žitný ostrov region is surrounded by the Little Danube on the Slovak side and the Moson Danube on the Hungarian side, contains the

largest inland delta in Europe. This 8 kilometre-narrow but 52 kilometre-long nature area has a unique wildlife with many birds, fishes, special plants and some rare species. This nature area needs both cooperation and coordination regarding nature conservation and preservation efforts.

To institutionalise the cross-border nature conservation cooperation, an Interreg project has been established. Participating project partners on the Hungarian and Slovak side are aiming to create a joint Nature Park in the Szigetköz-Žitný ostrov region. The purpose of joining forces is to coordinate initiatives related to nature



conservation, environmental education and eco-tourism in the Slovakian-Hungarian border area. Meeting up with the lead project manager Attila Fresh from Fertő-Hanság Nemzeti Park Directorate and the project partner Zoltán Füzfa from the NGO Pisztráng Kör Egyesület (Trout Circle Association), it is soon evident that there's a big interest and involvement in this joint nature park amongst the local people. On the Hungarian side, they are forming a nature park association to organise public access to the area.

Attila Fresh explains the importance of having a nature park association consisting of local stakeholders: *"The association of the nature park will organise all public accesses. They will be able to guarantee the quality standards. And of course, making it a nature park gives the area a good label, so it's like an invitation to the public - let's come here since it's a nature park"*.

Zoltán Füzfa further clarifies why quality standards are important in the area. During May to August, the nature area is visited by at least 100,000 tourists. This makes tourism an important income for many people in the region. But with these tourists also come irresponsible guide companies who take people out to the islands in the delta who make illegal camps and litter, which is bad for both wildlife and nature. Attila Fresh adds that it's very important to make the tourism in the cross-border area sustainable and promote eco-tourism. By creating a cross-border nature brand they hope to achieve this, Attila Fresh emphasises:



Attila Fresh and Zoltán Füzfa discussing the project's goals and work.

"The nature park administration will have rights to give special eco-tourism brands for local services and local products. An important Interreg aim is that we create this special cross-border eco-tourism brand and cross-border services from each part of the area. The services that gets the cross-border brand will hopefully remain and the unserious actors will be out of business".

This is part of the overarching Interreg goal: to establish cross-border contacts and material that links together this nature area across the border.

Currently, there is no cross-border public access in the nature area, which this project wants to change. The idea is that a visitor on the Hungarian or Slovakian area is able to get hold of information about what they can do in the nature site in the other country as well. The aim is to make common maps and programme possibilities, for example.

The creation of this joint document for cross-border public access involves many stakeholders and a big engagement in the local community. Fresh gives more details: *“We try to have many workshops, to involve as many opinions from the local public as we can. If we manage to produce a joint document regarding public access, including eco-tourism, local products market, environment education, it must be accepted by the locals in both countries. In order to do that we will organise cross-border meetings”.*

At the moment, there is no contact between Hungarian and Slovakian firms that are working in the same sector, like tourism. Through the Interreg project, these workshops for stakeholders will be arranged from both areas so that they can get to know each other and offer joint activities to the public. If a tourist is on one side of the joint nature park but wants to see the other side, organisations on both sides can cooperate to provide services to enable the tourist to do so. The aim is that the locals and local companies in the cross-border region get as much benefit from the project as possible.

Attila Fresh thinks this will benefit both countries: *“In the end of the project we want to increase the contact between stakeholders on both sides regarding all topics related to public access. This will benefit both countries, since we then will know what the other side offers and will inform about this. It’s also important that people who come here know that they come to a cross-border area, not only to Slovakia or Hungary”.*

This cross-border component is partly important because before the first world war this was one integrated region. Along the years, the mobility in the area has been restricted by borders, which separated both families and businesses. This is a reason why the local people are very engaged in

the project. *“This is not about Hungarian identity, but about regional identity. You had daily contact between settlements. They transferred products to the markets by boat over the Danube. This stopped 100 years ago. In all settlements there are people who would like to reconnect to the other side”*, Fresh Says.

Another important aspect of the project is environmental education that aims to connect people from both areas and root the sustainable thinking in the area. The project organises joint activities for about 1,000 children from both countries, for example through summer camps where children discover and learn about the nature in the area with nature pedagogues. One initiative is the “Aqua kid lab” organised by the project partner and NGO Pisztráng Kör Egyesület that Zoltán Fűzfa is part of. The idea is to show the impact of humans on nature by a hands-on experience. Children from both countries in the region will visit the river banks to have interactive environmental education about water. During the two years that the Interreg project runs, the plan is to reach 30 schools. Another eco-educational activity is the organisation of several workshops with groups of mentally and/or physically disabled people, both children and adults.

Zoltán Fűzfa explains: *“We take them out in the nature, not only for a tour but also to feel the nature, to produce herbs and different fruits and make tea. They do gardening, and we planted and collected lots of herbs. In the workshops they get a lot of knowledge connected to nature. Each season, they are working on different topics”.*

In addition, project partner Pisztráng Kör Egyesület also organises trainings for teacher students.

Teachers from both countries will come to the area various times and be introduced to eco-pedagogics. This will enable them to take school children out to nature and hold lessons there. All and all there will be 80 teachers going through these trainings.

Pisztráng Kör Egyesület is also doing an interactive exhibition about the forest of the floodplain of the

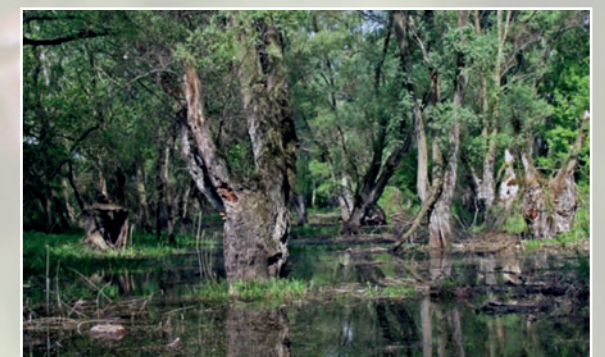


Danube that will tour in both countries to be used by different schools. Furthermore, there are also plans to create a small solar boat that people who are unable to use a canoe can use to enjoy the Danube. This will make the area more inclusive. “Enhancing Geocatching sites” is also planned as well as an app where people can follow a route together with information about what they can see in terms of nature values.

In conclusion, Zoltán Fűzfa says he hopes that the nature park project will help people understand how they can make better choices both for the region and for the environment.



Zoltán Fűzfa with tea made from herbs collected during eco-education activities.



Improving the quality of wetlands in the

Cross-border cooperation to increase knowledge and protect nature

Wetlands like lakes, swamps, deltas or wet grasslands are important for us humans. They are often our freshwater supply, give us food like fish, contribute to the biodiversity in our nature, and mitigate climate change and floods. Yet, the area of wetlands in the world and their quality is declining. The Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty (e.g. between several governments), which provides a framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

The Morava-Thaya Wetlands between Austria and Slovakia are selected as Ramsar areas since they have so many different species living there. In the connecting Marchfeld area there are dry habitats which are also protected. The Interreg cooperation projects Ramsar ECO NaTour (2013-2014) and previous Ramsar SKAT (2010-2013) between Austria and Slovakia strived to enhance the work protecting these areas and use them wisely.

One of the goals of the project is to inform and raise awareness amongst locals and visitors of the region.

To do this, the nature protection non-governmental volunteer organisation AURING was hired to educate school classes about the nature area and Ramsar. Ute Nüsken works as an eco-pedagogue at AURING. She explains that AURING was not an official partner but did several activities, amongst them the school education. Within the frame of the Ramsar project, exchanges between Austrian and Slovakian primary schools were made. AURING performed eco-education with Austrian schoolchildren and organised an exchange between Slovak and Austrian students. During the exchange, the children contributed to nature conservation by collecting and putting hay together on the meadows. When cutting the grass in this area, it's needed to take the hay away so that new dry lands can be created.

AURING eco-pedagogues often start in the classroom to teach the children some basic information, like what amphibians are and where they live. After getting to know the basics, the students go out on field excursions. They do three field excursions during the year to learn about the environment

on site. *“During the education the children get to visit this special area and discover it. Often, they live nearby but they do not know why the area is special. By being out in nature, the children learn about the environment and the animals that live in it”,* Nüsken describes.

During these excursions, the pedagogues show and teach the kids about the amphibians, insects and plants. By playing games and making it a fun interactive activity, the children remember what

What the children learn about the environment does not only stay with them, but is also communicated to their parents, grandparents and communities. Ute Nüsken sees many benefits arising from cooperation projects. She thinks people became more aware about Ramsar and this made them talk more about the value of the region. In addition, AURING also designed and performed excursions in the wetlands that people could partake in for free. Four eco-guides were also educated within in the scope of the project and there were observation towers built for birdwatchers.

Austria-Slovakia border

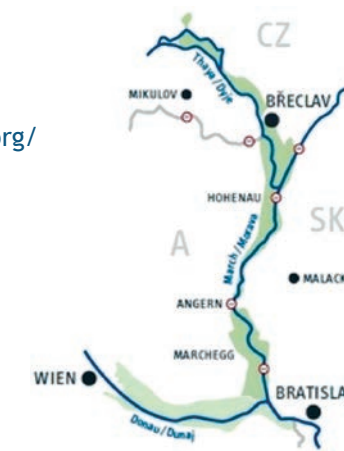
a toad is, or what a special plant is called. Ute Nüsken stresses the importance of doing several field excursions with the children to make them realise the value of nature. *“Going out several times opens the children’s eyes. They get to know how to recognise animal trances and footprints. They get more aware about what happens around them. This awareness helps protect the environment. As the saying goes, you only protect what you know”,* explains the eco-pedagogue.

A three-way memory game was also created with pictures that kids are supposed to link together: pictures of animals, food for the animals and where the animals live. This game was given to schools in the region.

Lastly, Nüsken stresses that schools in the area usually do not have enough money to pay for environmental programmes. Therefore, they are dependent on projects like the Ramsar one. *“Education about these issues are necessary for nature protection, since we cannot protect what we do not know the value of”,* she highlights.

By cooperating through Interreg, Slovakia and Austria can enable the new generation to see the value of nature, and use it wisely.

Read more!
<https://www.ramsar.org/>





Wine tourism: a key element for the local economy

Cooperation between Slovakia and Hungary for wine and tourism

Endorsed by the UNESCO, the wine cellars of the Hungarian village Herceghút and the wine cellars in the neighbouring Slovak village Malý Horeš have great potential to attract tourism and spur the economy in the cross-border region. However, due to the lack of basic infrastructure, (like walkways, toilets with disability access, event spaces or services for tourists) it was hard to interest visitors. By launching a EU cooperation project between the villages of Herceghút and Malý Horeš, the potential of the area was able to be realised. Through cross-border collaboration, the missing infrastructure was built and common tourist packages for both areas were developed.

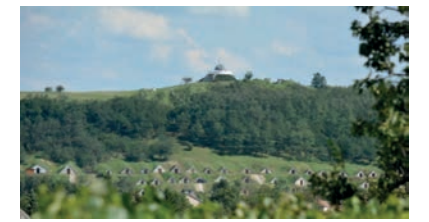
László Horváth, the project lead manager for the now finished project, explains that since these investments were made there has been a great development in the area. The increased tourism

that the project has generated means a great deal to local people and has improved their possibilities to make a living in the area. There are now two big wine tasting festivals with open cellars being arranged in both Herceghút and Malý Horeš. It attracts a lot of visitors and enables the small-scale local wine producers to market and sell their wines. In total, about 3,000-5,000 people visit these areas every year.

The possibility to make a living out of the local wines is also very important for the future of the villages. The making of the sweet and semi-sweet wine “Aszu” is now again booming: Horváth says that in Herceghút, the project made possible for young people to stay in the area: *“You know, we have a problem here that many young people don’t stay in the countryside area, but go to Budapest to work and live. Thanks to the wine cellars and the*



Köporos Wine cellars.



Gombos Wine Hill - wine cellars with chapel.

increase of people visiting the area to taste wines and buy products, by now 10-15 young people work with wine-making here”, he optimistically declares.

In Malý Horeš, there are now 300 active winemakers creating wine anchored in an old wine tradition that allows a brighter future

for these villages. An NGO consisting of around 20 members to help support the small-scale winemakers in the both areas has been established.

This shows how cross-border cooperation can empower the communities in both countries and improve people’s lives in economically disadvantaged border regions.



Music and gastrofest on Gombos Wine Hill at the event square.



Wine tasting and Open Cellars on Köporos Wine Hill.



Wine and Folk music Festival on Gombos Wine Hill.



Herceghút image - from top of the Gombos wine cellars.



Köporos wine cellars built walkways and lightning.



Open Cellars Fest on the Köporos Wine Hill.



Tourists on Gombos wine hill.