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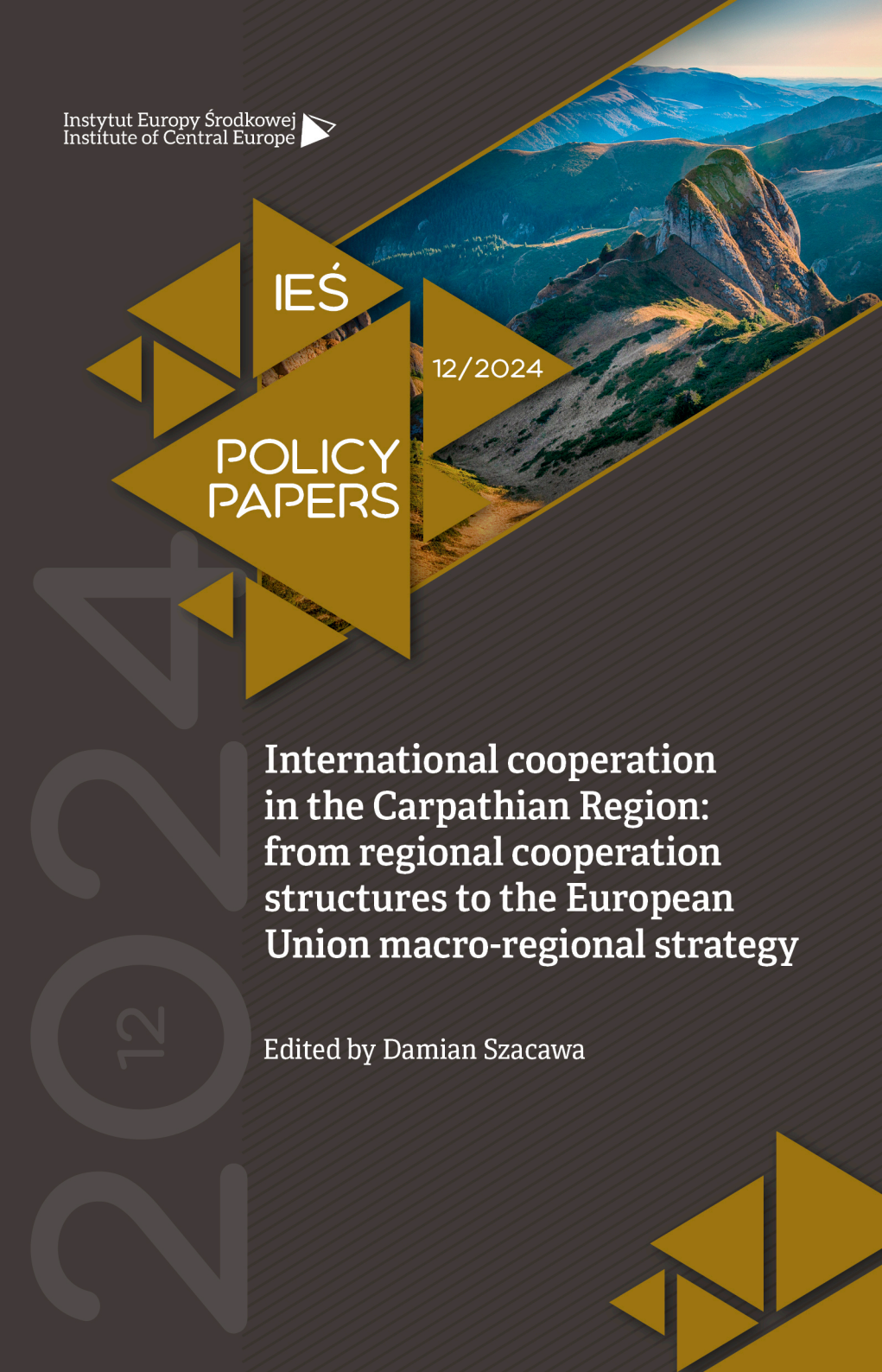
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# International cooperation in the Carpathian Region: from regional cooperation structures to the European Union macro-regional strategy

Edited by Damian Szacawa

12





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in the Carpathian Region:  
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Edited by Damian Szacawa

Lublin 2024

**Reviewer**

Dr hab. Łukasz Jureńczyk, prof. UKW  
(Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego w Bydgoszczy),  
Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

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## Introduction

*Central Europe, therefore cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers (which are inauthentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests, and occupations), but by the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition<sup>1</sup>.*

Milan Kundera

Regional cooperation is a crucial element of European integration. Administrative borders often divide territories and large areas connected by common geographical features. These regions extend beyond the boundaries of individual states, encompassing numerous and diverse interconnections. The watersheds of seas, river basins, and mountain

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, "The New York Review of Books" 1984, no. 31(7), p. 35.



ranges create natural geographical areas that are characterised by a set of distinctive features. This specificity gives rise not only to shared developmental potentials, but also to similar problems and challenges. Cross-border cooperation, focused on addressing specific issues stemming from these areas' unique characteristics, becomes crucial. Milan Kundera's observation provides a profound reflection on the nature of regional identity in Central Europe. He argues that political borders, often artificial and imposed through historical conflicts and occupations, fail to capture the essence of the Central European identity. Instead, Kundera emphasises the importance of shared historical experiences, cultural memories, and common socio-political challenges that transcend these borders.

The Carpathian Region is such a territory, covering an area of 190,000 km<sup>2</sup>, inhabited by 68 million people, and located within the borders of eight Central and Eastern European countries. In the first chapter, Damian Szacawa invokes the concept of new regionalism and highlights the role of the Carpathians within the structure of subregional cooperation, such as the Visegrád Group, established in 1991. The specificity of large areas was first recognised and protected within the framework of international environmental conventions, i.e. multilateral agreements ratified based on treaty principles of international law. Therefore, in the second chapter, Elena Fischer and Klaudia Kuraś present the genesis and achievements of the Carpathian Convention, signed at the end of 2003 in Kyiv. Finally, Kinga Stańczuk-Olejnik and Damian Szacawa analyse the conditions, actions to date, and prospects for creating an EU macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCARP),

which, modelled after the EU's Alpine Strategy (EUSALP), could become a driving force for the regional development of this area.

In the context of the Carpathian Region, this insight is particularly relevant. The Carpathians span multiple nations, yet common geographic, cultural, and historical characteristics unite them. Much like Kundera's Central Europe, the Carpathians are defined not by administrative boundaries but by "great common situations" – environmental challenges and socio-economic issues – that bind the peoples of this region together. The region's cross-border cooperation, mainly through initiatives like the Carpathian Convention, reflects an understanding that regional development and protection efforts must account for these more profound, more authentic connections, rather than be constrained by the arbitrary political lines that have historically divided them. Kundera's quote underscores the importance of recognising these unifying elements in creating meaningful regional cooperation and development strategies, such as the potential EUSCARP.

For the Carpathians, such a strategy could be a vital catalyst for regional growth and sustainability. By promoting coordinated action in areas such as environmental protection, infrastructure development, tourism, and cultural heritage preservation, the Carpathian Region could see accelerated progress in overcoming socio-economic challenges. Additionally, a macro-regional strategy would help address the region's environmental vulnerabilities, particularly regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable resource management. Moreover, a Carpathian strategy could facilitate stronger cooperation between EU

and non-EU countries in the region, such as Ukraine, thereby facilitating its integration with the EU and enhancing cross-border cohesion and stability during the negotiations.

However, based on experiences from implementing the previously established EU macro-regional strategies, the success of an EUSCARP will depend on strong political will and active participation from all stakeholders. Governments, local authorities, civil society, and the private sector must collaborate to ensure that the strategy reflects the region's unique characteristics and development goals. Additionally, the strategy must remain adaptable to the ever-changing geopolitical and environmental landscape – an insight that Kundera's quote brings to the forefront.

Damian Szacawa  
Lublin, October 2024



Damian Szacawa

## **New regionalism and subregional cooperation in Central Europe: the role of the Carpathian Region for the Visegrád Group**

### **Executive summary**

- Following the end of the Cold War, Central European states prioritised regional integration to manage new security concerns and international challenges, mainly through the creation of subregional cooperation structures like the Visegrád Group (V4), which sought alignment with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU).
- New regionalism emerged as a response to global shifts. It focused on regional cooperation to address shared challenges related to security, as well as political and economic integration, among others. It emphasised regions acting as cohesive units, with subregional cooperation becoming a vital tool for Central Europe's engagement with global governance.

- The Visegrád Group (V4), established in 1991, stands out as a flexible platform for political dialogue without formal institutions, save for the International Visegrád Fund (IVF). Despite challenges, V4 states have collaborated on various issues, including defence, education, and environmental cooperation.
- Environmental cooperation within the V4, especially concerning the Carpathian Mountains, has been limited due to institutional barriers and conflicting national interests. However, the V4 has promoted sustainable development, biodiversity protection, and cross-border cooperation, aligning with EU strategies like the European Green Deal.

## Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War and the democratic transformations in Central Europe, regional integration processes became a priority in the foreign policies of states in the region. These efforts to strengthen cooperation within regional alliances were part of a broader issue: creating new rules and mechanisms for the international order after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Following the 1989 Autumn of Nations revolutions, the Soviet bloc rapidly collapsed. Western European states, alongside neutral countries in Northern Europe, faced the challenge of managing a new security space often referred to as a “grey zone”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See more: W. Park, G. Wyn Rees (eds.), *Rethinking Security in Post-Cold War Europe*, London 1998.

Simultaneously, Central European states, engaged in creating a new regional international order, sought the most effective forms of international cooperation, considering global turbulence, the increasing importance of cooperative security facilitating management of the security “grey zone”, and the internationalisation of nearly all spheres of states/activities. Therefore, Central Europe’s primary driver of regionalism, as in other regions, was and continues to be states’ growing and expanding expectations. These prospects require the development of ever-new and improved forms of interstate cooperation. The rapid growth of regional political and economic organisations after World War II and the numerous attempts to create new regional forms of cooperation following the Cold War are evidence of this trend. Regionalism can be defined as a comprehensive set of actions aimed at creating an international environment conducive to realising state interests within the region. This is achieved by institutionalising local connections based on their patterns and preferred values and creating a functional regional international order through integrative groupings, alliances, and spheres of influence catering to a state’s needs and interests<sup>3</sup>.

This article analyses the evolution of regionalism and subregional cooperation in Central Europe, focusing on the Visegrád Group (V4) and its role in addressing political, economic, and environmental challenges in the post-Cold War era. The article is structured into several sections: first, it provides an overview of the historical context and

<sup>3</sup> A. Hurrell, *Explaining the resurgence of regionalism in world politics*, “Review of International Studies” 1995, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 331–358.

theoretical foundations of regionalism; second, it discusses the development of subregional cooperation structures, including the V4; and finally, it explores the dynamics of environmental collaboration within the V4, highlighting both achievements and ongoing challenges.

### **New regionalism and subregional cooperation in Central Europe**

The qualitative changes in the international system's functioning, parameters, and structure have allowed for the distinction of different waves of regionalism in the 20th century. The new regionalism, often called "post-hegemonic regionalism", is characteristic of the post-Cold War period<sup>4</sup>. It marks a renaissance of various concepts of regional cooperation and the creation of regional and subregional communities, whose members turn to historical ties stemming from belonging to smaller groups connected by a shared geographic space<sup>5</sup>. Subregional cooperation, which is the subject of this analysis, is "a process of regularised, significant political and economic interaction among a group of neighbouring states. This interaction occurs between national governments, local authorities, private business and civil society actors across various issues"<sup>6</sup>. According to Björn Hettne, new regionalism can be understood as a specific type

<sup>4</sup> See more: L. Fawcett, *Regionalism from an Historical Perspective*, [in:] M. Farrel, B. Hettne, L. Van Langenhove (eds.), *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*, London 2005, pp. 21–37; M. Telò (ed.), *European Union and New Regionalism: Regional Actors and Global Governance in a Post-Hegemonic Era*, Aldershot 2007.

<sup>5</sup> B. Hettne, *The Europeanization of Europe: endogenous and exogenous dimensions*, "European Integration" 2002, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 325–326.

<sup>6</sup> R. Dwan, *Subregional, Regional and Global Levels: Making the Connections*, [in:] G. Herolf (ed.), *Subregional Cooperation and Integration in Europe*, Stockholm 2000, p. 81.

of interstate political cooperation at the regional level that promotes the region as a distinct entity capable of functioning independently across various dimensions. This concept represents a renaissance of diverse forms of regional cooperation grounded in historical ties resulting from the shared membership of smaller groups connected by a common geographical space. New regionalism emphasises regional integration not merely as a strategic or economic necessity but also as a process that strengthens the identity and autonomy of regions within the broader global framework<sup>7</sup>.

In this view, regionalism's re-emergence is driven by economic factors as well as political, cultural, and security concerns that bind regions together, facilitating their collective agency on the global stage. The process allows regions to act as cohesive units with a capacity for self-regulation and mutual support, challenging the traditional nation-state-centric view of global governance. Hettne's approach emphasises that new regionalism is less about domination by international powers, as seen in earlier forms of regionalism, and more about the empowerment of regions themselves, often driven by both economic interdependence and shared cultural or historical legacies. This approach supports the notion that by reinforcing internal cooperation, regions can emerge as significant actors within the international system, capable of influencing global governance and economics<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> B. Hettne, *Beyond the 'new' regionalism*, "New Political Economy" 2005, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 543–571.

<sup>8</sup> B. Hettne, *Development, Security and World Order: A Regionalist Approach*, "European Journal of Development Research" 1997, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 83–106; idem, F. Söderbaum, *Theorising the Rise of Regionness*, "New Political Economy" 2000, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 457–473.



In response to the existential need for security in the immediate international environment, new regional groupings developed in the early 1990s, spanning from the Barents and Baltic Seas in the north, through Central Europe and the Balkans, to the Black Sea in the south. These included the Central European Initiative (CEI) and the Visegrád Group (V4)<sup>9</sup>. These structures were intended to realise the vision of Barry Buzan's security complex, where states recognise that their primary security concerns bind them closely enough that their national security cannot be considered in isolation from other states<sup>10</sup>.

These newly formed cooperation structures, dubbed the "Cinderellas" of European security, dealt with persistent issues such as combating prostitution, human trafficking, and marine pollution from ships, while often being subordinate to larger European organisations. Nonetheless, they significantly complemented the regional architecture by addressing security concerns at the heart of the Cold War division of the continent along the East-West axis<sup>11</sup>.

Soon after the formation of subregional cooperation structures and the development of coordination mechanisms, many Central and Eastern European states that had regained sovereignty shared a common goal: association with the European Communities followed by full membership and entry under the security umbrella of the North

<sup>9</sup> A. Cottey, *Europe's New Subregionalism*, "The Journal of Strategic Studies" 2000, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 23–47.

<sup>10</sup> B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, London 1991.

<sup>11</sup> See more: A.J.K. Bailes, *Subregional Organizations: the Cinderellas of European Security*, "NATO Review" 1997, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 27–31.

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Consequently, structures in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. V4, CEFTA, CBSS) were initially seen as tools to establish cooperation with NATO and the EU and to support candidate countries in adopting the legal norms establishing political, economic, and military standards. Other groups, involving states with less likelihood of integration into Western European structures, ensured that new dividing lines would not emerge on the continent soon<sup>12</sup>.

Martin Dangerfield analysed the relationship between the EU and subregional cooperation structures based on post-war experiences. Using this criterion, he distinguished four types of subregional cooperation: pioneer, substitute, complementary/preaccession instrument, and involuntary alternative/substitute. He termed cooperation a “pioneer” when it represented an advanced level of integration that significantly influenced later EU integration processes (e.g. the Benelux Economic Union). The second type, a “substitute”, arises when a group of states creates an alternative integrative grouping that operates on a broader or narrower level (e.g. CMEA, the European Free Trade Association, and the European Economic Area). The “complementary/preaccession instrument” category is typical of structures established after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, formed by states aspiring to EU membership. These states aimed for integration into advanced European structures, with subregional cooperation primarily supporting these aspirations (e.g. CBSS, CEFTA, the Baltic Free Trade

<sup>12</sup> R. Zięba, *Współpraca subregionalna w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej po zimnej wojnie*, “Przegląd Zachodni” 2000, no. 2, p. 59.

Area, and the Visegrád Group). A vital feature of this type of cooperation is the initial reluctance of member states to deepen cooperation due to fears that it might negatively affect their integration with the EU. The last category, the “involuntary alternative/substitute”, refers to states without the possibility of full integration into the European Union – they are “condemned to be forgotten”. These states can only achieve some incomplete form of association with the EU. This hypothetical category is most closely associated with states denying the prospect of EU membership and offering an alternative model, such as Eastern European states cooperating with the EU under the European Neighbourhood Policy<sup>13</sup>.

After the 2004 enlargement of the EU and NATO, sub-regional cooperation structures (SCSs) faced a dilemma regarding their continued relevance and the need for appropriate activity niches. Despite their low significance compared to organisations like NATO and the EU, sub-regional cooperation groups have established themselves within the system of international relations and are taking on increasing importance and responsibility in developing this part of Europe. Providing organisational frameworks for addressing non-military security threats, particularly in democratisation, human rights protection, environmental conservation, and the prevention of transnational crime – these groupings are increasingly becoming initiators or co-authors of new regional integration projects.

<sup>13</sup> See more: M. Dangerfield, *The Visegrád Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation*, “East European Politics and Societies” 2008, vol. 20, no. 10, pp. 632–634.

In summarising the considerations on new regionalism, it should be noted that this phenomenon occurs almost globally and has roots that date back to the political and economic transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Clear distinctions differentiate between “new” regionalism and the “old”. Based on Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, the older forms were conditioned by political cooperation between great powers, often serving as a forum for advancing the interests of the most vital states.

### **The Visegrád Group (V4) cooperation and the Carpathian Mountains**

The Visegrád Group is one of the oldest examples of new regionalism in Central and Eastern Europe, established in February 1991 by the Visegrád Declaration signed by the Presidents of Czechoslovakia and Poland and the Prime Minister of Hungary in Visegrád<sup>14</sup>. Among the regional structures established after the Cold War, it stands out for its lack of permanent institutional organs, aside from the Secretariat of the International Visegrád Fund, headquartered in Bratislava. This absence of formal structures means that the V4 operates as a loose platform for consultations and dialogue among its member states, making it particularly sensitive to changes in the political “climate” within the region<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Visegrád Group, *Deklaracja o współpracy Czeskiej i Słowackiej Republiki Federacyjnej, Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i Republiki Węgierskiej w dążeniu do integracji europejskiej*, Visegrád, 15 February 1991, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/deklapl> [9.10.2024].

<sup>15</sup> A. Cottey, *The Visegrad Group and Beyond: Security Cooperation in Central Europe*, [in:] idem (ed.), *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe: Building Security, Prosperity and Solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*, Basingstoke–New York 1999, pp. 69–89.

The informal nature of the Visegrád Group, combined with its very broadly defined goals, lack of a coordinating mechanism, and the four-member countries' accession to the EU in 2004, has challenged its development<sup>16</sup>. This characteristic underscores the institutional dilemma that the V4 faced. While it facilitated cooperation, it lacked the structural dimension to act cohesively and effectively in areas other than political cooperation. Although its low level of institutionalisation has certain disadvantages, such as the absence of a central coordinating body and the informal nature of decisions, it also offers undeniable advantages, including greater flexibility and the ability to form ad-hoc coalitions with other countries<sup>17</sup>. The only permanent institution within the V4 framework is the International Visegrád Fund (IVF), established in 2001. Through this fund, the V4 has created a solid and dense network of interactions, including diplomats and state officials from various administrative bodies, academics, politicians, and civil society organisations.

Moreover, during the course of Visegrád cooperation – particularly after its revitalisation in 1998 – the prime ministers of the Visegrád countries agreed on the critical contents of their collaboration, which were approved in Bratislava in 1999. This agreement covered substantial areas of cooperation in eight fields: foreign affairs, internal affairs, education and culture, science and technology, environmental

<sup>16</sup> M. Kořan, *The Visegrad Group on the Threshold of Its Third Decade: A Central European Hub?*, [in:] Z. Šabič, P. Druľák (eds.), *Regional and international relations of Central Europe*, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 201–218.

<sup>17</sup> T. Strážay, *Neither beautiful nor ugly, but functional: a pragmatic view on the Visegrad Group*, "Contemporary European Studies" 2014, vol. 2, pp. 37–47.

protection, infrastructure, and cross-border cooperation<sup>18</sup>. Another significant element was the description of the structure of intergovernmental cooperation within the Visegrád Group, along with the involvement of other stakeholders, such as parliaments and civil society organisations.

The main areas of cooperation in the post-accession period were then outlined in the so-called Kroměříž Declaration (2004) and the attached Guidelines for Future Areas of Visegrád Cooperation (2004)<sup>19</sup>. These documents provided more detailed descriptions of the cooperation mechanisms while emphasising the specific role of meetings between the V4 presidents and parliamentary cooperation. Member states have sought to utilise Visegrád cooperation as a tactical alliance within the EU, leveraging their collective bargaining power. However, in the new geopolitical environment, the risk of abandoning V4 cooperation has become more pronounced, particularly during EU accession negotiations and shortly after their completion. This simultaneously marked the achievement of the main objective of cooperation in the V4 format<sup>20</sup>.

This evolving situation highlights the functional dilemma as a critical issue that the Visegrád Group must address. While member states initially saw cooperation as beneficial for aligning their interests during EU negotiations, differing

<sup>18</sup> Visegrád Group, *Contents of Visegrad Cooperation approved by the Prime Ministers' Summit Bratislava on 14th May 1999*, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412> [11.10.2024].

<sup>19</sup> Visegrad Group, *Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union (12 May 2004)*, <https://www.visegrad-group.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1> [11.10.2024].

<sup>20</sup> R. Fawn, *Visegrad: Fit for purpose?*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies" 2013, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 339–349.

national priorities – especially post-EU accession – have created divisions. These challenges have been particularly evident in policy areas such as migration, the rule of law, and relations with EU institutions. Consequently, the sustainability of the Visegrád Group as a cohesive entity remains uncertain, and it must redefine its role and collaboration mechanisms in this new political context<sup>21</sup>. This shift underscores that, despite the formal declarations, maintaining long-term unity within the V4 requires practical cooperation in addressing institutional and functional gaps.

However, the declaration adopted in Bratislava on the V4's 20th anniversary focused on future commitments within the EU and the broader transatlantic space rather than on day-to-day cooperation among various line ministries<sup>22</sup>. Despite this, in the following years, political decisions were accompanied by rather strong collaboration among the ministries of defence and among the Visegrád Group armies, as well as among the ministries of internal affairs, education, culture, transport, and industry and trade<sup>23</sup>.

However, similar experiences did not extend to regional environmental cooperation, which remained on the margins of policymakers' interests, partly due to the ecological legacy of communism and the low popularity of green

<sup>21</sup> L. Cabada, *The Visegrad Cooperation in the Context of Other Central European Cooperation Formats*, "Politics in Central Europe" 2018, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 165–179.

<sup>22</sup> Visegrad Group, *The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group*, Bratislava, 15 February 2011, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava> [11.10.2024].

<sup>23</sup> B. Lehoczki, *Semi-periphery regionalisms in a changing world order: the case of Mercosur and Visegrad Group*, "Third World Quarterly" 2022, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 779–796.

parties in Central Europe<sup>24</sup>. Over time, however, environmental crises, disasters, and pressure from international organisations (EU law, OECD environmental assessment) have led to increased visibility of environmental issues on the V4 agenda. This was accompanied by regular meetings of V4 environment ministers, who met for the first time at the invitation of the Minister of Environment of the Slovak Republic, L. Miklos, in Banska Stiavnica on 7–8 May 1999. These meetings facilitated the exchange of information and strengthened international cooperation in environmental protection in nuclear energy safety, wastewater treatment, monitoring of transboundary air and water pollution, and protection of landscape areas. In later years, issues of green economies, the restoration of environmentally damaged cross-border regions, the development of anti-flood measures, and the maintenance of bio-corridors and original animal migration routes (particularly in the Carpathian-Danube corridor) were also added to the environmental agenda<sup>25</sup>.

The Carpathian Mountains became a particularly significant area of interest for V4 cooperation with the signing and ratification of the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians, signed in Kyiv in 2003 (Carpathian Convention)<sup>26</sup>. Shared by all V4 countries, the Carpathians represent a unique hub for sustainable environmental development, and

<sup>24</sup> M. Gołębiowska, M. Paszkowski, D. Szacawa, *Neutralni dla klimatu: zielona transformacja państw Europy Środkowej w dobie pandemii COVID-19*, Lublin 2021, pp. 25–35.

<sup>25</sup> Š. Waisová, *The Environmental Situation in the Visegrad Region: Neglect and Insufficient Cooperation in the Face of Serious Environmental Threats*, "Politics in Central Europe" 2018, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 66–70.

<sup>26</sup> See more: E. Fischer, K. Kuraš, *The Carpathian Convention: a collaborative approach to biodiversity and sustainable development in the Carpathian region*, this volume.



the Carpathian Convention plays a crucial role in environmental cooperation in the region. This treaty addresses common ecological issues such as deforestation, climate change adaptation, and water resource management and promotes sustainable development and biodiversity protection throughout the Carpathian Mountain range<sup>27</sup>.

As the V4 Joint Declaration highlights, environmental cooperation is expected to extend beyond political discussions. However, within the V4 group, there is minimal potential for joint ecological projects. This is due to three main reasons: firstly, the environmental challenges to be addressed exceed the boundaries of the V4 region. Secondly, the institutional and bureaucratic structure of the V4 group poses significant obstacles. The only framework supporting environmental collaboration among V4 countries is the International Visegrád Fund (IVF), which faces financial and organisational limitations. The fund primarily supports non-state actors, such as universities and NGOs. Consequently, cross-border projects involving state institutions from V4 countries must seek funding and support from alternative sources<sup>28</sup>. Lastly, environmental issues also caused ecological and eco-political conflicts among the V4 countries, for example, the construction of a hydropower plant in Gabčíkovo/Nagymaros on the Hungarian-Slovakian border or the Polish-Czech dispute over the Turów coal mine in 2020.

Nevertheless, environmental cooperation aligns with broader EU strategies, including the European Green

<sup>27</sup> Visegrad Group, *Joint Statement of the 11th Meeting of Ministers of Environment of the Visegrad Group Countries*, Siófok, 20–21 May 2004, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/joint-statement-of-the> [11.10.2024].

<sup>28</sup> Š. Waisová, *op. cit.*

Deal, though it is tailored to the specific challenges faced by the Carpathian Region. This cooperation also included the “V4+ format” with Bulgaria and Romania, which aimed to establish a common stance on the EU’s proposals for the post-2020 European climate and energy policy framework and international climate negotiations (UNFCCC Conference of the Parties)<sup>29</sup>.

Moreover, the Carpathian Region is also connected with cross-border cooperation, especially regarding rural and infrastructure development<sup>30</sup>. Infrastructure projects enhance connectivity between the V4 countries, facilitate economic integration, and contribute to the resilience of mountain communities by improving transportation, energy infrastructure, and access to services<sup>31</sup>. Through projects financed by the IVF, the V4 countries have promoted sustainable tourism in the Carpathians, highlighting shared heritage and natural and cultural assets (traditional crafts, local festivals, and historical monuments). This approach aims to boost local economies while maintaining ecological balance, which is a key component of regional development policies<sup>32</sup>. In addition, V4 cultural cooperation promotes the Carpathians

<sup>29</sup> Visegrad Group, *Joint Statement of Ministers of the Environment of the Visegrad Group and Bulgaria and Romania*, Bratislava, 30 September 2014, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/joint-statement-of-the-220127> [11.10.2024].

<sup>30</sup> Ł. Lewkowicz, *Współpraca transgraniczna państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej: uwarunkowania, struktury, perspektywy*, Lublin 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Visegrad Group, *Joint Declaration of the Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic Responsible for Transport, Development and EE Funds Concerning the Project of High-Speed Railway Network in Central Europe and its Financing*, Bratislava, 21 May 2019, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/v4-declaration-on-high-190523-1> [11.10.2024].

<sup>32</sup> Visegrad Fund, *Inspirational Projects*, <https://www.visegradfund.org/explore/inspirational-projects/> [11.10.2024].

as a symbol of shared identity, fostering cross-border partnerships in art, education, and historical preservation<sup>33</sup>.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, regionalism in Central Europe, particularly after the Cold War, has evolved significantly through new forms of interstate cooperation aimed at addressing shared challenges across political, economic, and environmental dimensions. New regionalism results from the political evolution of states' core foreign interests, expressed in the transition from the isolation of national economies to greater "openness". It represents a bottom-up process of building international interdependencies, reflecting societies' political and economic awareness. A characteristic feature of Central and Eastern Europe is the high intensity of structures shaping new regionalism, contrasted with their low level of institutionalisation. This phenomenon was driven by the desire of Central European states to fill the security grey zone that threatened this part of the continent after the dissolution of Cold War structures, as well as a reluctance to build more permanent cooperation mechanisms, which might have been perceived as a substitute for transatlantic groupings that these states aspired to join.

The emergence of subregional cooperation structures, such as the Visegrád Group (V4), has played a crucial role in strengthening collaboration among Central European countries, driven by security concerns and aspirations for

<sup>33</sup> Visegrad Group, *Communiqué from the 30th Meeting of the Ministers responsible for Culture of the Visegrád Group Countries*, Prague, 24 June 2020, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/communique-from-the-30th> [11.10.2024].

EU and NATO integration. These subregional alliances have enabled countries to collectively navigate the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape and establish mechanisms for addressing non-military security issues, such as human rights, environmental protection, and transnational crime.

The Carpathian Mountains are integral to Visegrád cooperation and are a focal point for environmental, socio-economic, and cultural initiatives. However, despite notable progress in various areas, environmental cooperation within the V4 has encountered challenges. The lack of institutional capacity, financial constraints, and ecological conflicts have limited the potential for joint environmental projects. The 2003 Carpathian Convention remains a crucial framework for addressing ecological concerns in the region, particularly in deforestation, climate change adaptation, and biodiversity conservation. Therefore, it may also represent a significant turning point regarding the importance of environmental cooperation between the V4 countries. Nevertheless, further efforts are needed to overcome bureaucratic obstacles and expand cooperation, especially in alignment with broader EU environmental strategies like the European Green Deal. The continued success of V4 cooperation will depend on its ability to adapt to new challenges and maintain cohesion in pursuing political and ecological objectives.





Elena Fischer, Klaudia Kuraś

## **The Carpathian Convention: a collaborative approach to biodiversity and sustainable development in the Carpathian Region**

### **Executive summary**

- The Carpathian Region, spanning seven countries, is a critical ecological zone characterised by Europe's largest continuous mountain forests, biodiverse semi-natural grasslands, and key populations of large carnivores. The region's rich biodiversity supports essential ecosystem services for millions of inhabitants, while its cultural landscape plays a vital role in agriculture, tourism, and biodiversity conservation. However, the region currently faces significant emerging threats from climate change, land-use change, and socio-economic pressures, necessitating coordinated efforts for sustainable development.

- The Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention), adopted in 2003, is the only treaty-based mechanism for the protection and sustainable development of the region. It addresses areas like biodiversity conservation, land management, sustainable agriculture, and infrastructure. The Convention contextualises global frameworks, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, into regional policies through thematic protocols and collaborative projects, aligning international goals with local actions.
- The Carpathian Convention fosters regional collaboration by engaging networks like Science for the Carpathians (S4C) and the Carpathian Network of Protected Areas (CNPA), which include scientists, policymakers, and local stakeholders. It also supports initiatives like the LECA project for large carnivore conservation and NaturaConnect for ecological connectivity. These projects promote knowledge exchange and the implementation of the Convention's objectives across borders, enhancing multi-level governance.
- Two main recommendations aim to ensure the continued success of the Carpathian Convention: first, pursuing the EU's accession to the Convention would align EU legislation with the Carpathian Convention's Protocols, increase transnational cooperation, and unlock funding opportunities. Second, improving stakeholder involvement at the local and regional

levels would generate political will, bridge gaps between policy and practice, and strengthen enforcement. Greater integration of political commitment and local ownership will enhance the region's sustainability and socioeconomic development.

## Introduction

The Carpathian Mountains span seven countries in Central-Eastern Europe, from Czechia to Serbia, through Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, and Romania. Renowned for their breathtaking landscapes, rich biodiversity, and cultural heritage, the Carpathians play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and supporting diverse ecosystems.

The Carpathian Region is a biodiversity hotspot in Europe, providing crucial ecosystem services to its 17 million residents and beyond<sup>1</sup>. It hosts tributaries of four major European watersheds, Europe's largest continuous mountain forests<sup>2</sup> – including the largest unmanaged old-growth forests<sup>3</sup>, and biodiverse-rich semi-natural grasslands<sup>4</sup>. These ecosystems serve as refuges for Europe's largest populations of large carnivores, such as brown bears, wolves, and lynxes<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> M. Alberton et al., *Mountain Adaptation Outlook Series: Outlook on Climate Change Adaptation in the Carpathian Mountains*, United Nations Environment Programme, GRID-Arendal 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See more: M. Melnykovich et al., *Social-ecological innovation in remote mountain areas: Adaptive responses of forest-dependent communities to the challenges of a changing world*, "Science of The Total Environment" 2018, vol. 613–614, pp. 894–906, DOI: 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2017.07.065.

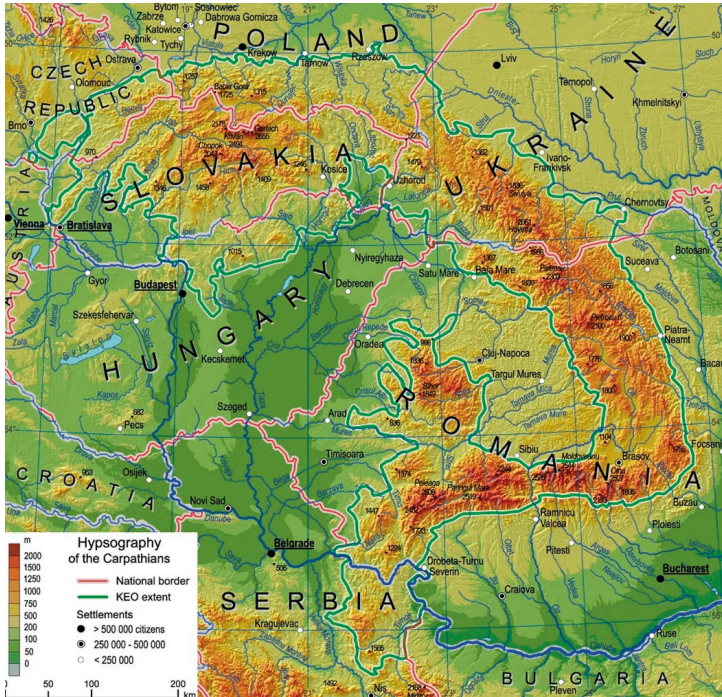
<sup>3</sup> A.B. Gurung et al., *Global change research in the Carpathian Mountain region*, "Mountain Research and Development" 2009, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 282–288, DOI: 10.1659/mrd.1105.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Molnár et al., *Social justice for traditional knowledge holders will help conserve Europe's nature*, "Biological Conservation" 2023, vol. 285, p. 110190, DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110190.

<sup>5</sup> A.B. Gurung et al., op. cit.



Figure 1. A topographic map of the Carpathian Mountain region



Source: UN Environment Programme, *Carpathians Environment Outlook (KEO)*, 2007.

The cultural landscape, defined by unique forests and grasslands, holds significant agricultural, biodiversity, and cultural conservation values<sup>6</sup>. Forests cover 66% of the region<sup>7</sup>, while semi-natural grasslands are managed through low-intensity farming<sup>8</sup>. These areas are vital for forestry,

<sup>6</sup> D. Babai, B. Jánó, Z. Molnár, *In the trap of interacting indirect and direct drivers: the disintegration of extensive, traditional grassland management in Central and Eastern Europe*, "Ecology and Society" 2021, vol. 26, no. 4, DOI: 10.5751/ES-12679-260406.

<sup>7</sup> M. Alberton et al, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Z. Molnár et al, op. cit.

agriculture, tourism, spirituality, social cohesion, biodiversity, and other social activities<sup>9</sup>.

However, these landscapes and traditional land use systems are threatened by climate change, land-use change, demographic changes, and socioeconomic pressures<sup>10</sup>. Deforestation, habitat fragmentation, pollution, infrastructure development, rural depopulation, and socio-economic disparities highlight the need for balanced conservation and sustainable development in the Carpathians<sup>11</sup>.

The Carpathian Convention, signed by seven Central and Eastern European countries in 2003, aims to protect and sustainably develop the Carpathian Region. Over the past two decades, it has addressed challenges ranging from biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation to enhancing regional cooperation. However, challenges remain in implementation and addressing emerging threats. This article delves into the Convention's achievements and outlines key areas for improvement to ensure a resilient and prosperous future for the Carpathians.

## **The Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention)**

In response to these challenges, the Ukrainian government approached the United Nations Environment Programme

<sup>9</sup> See more: D. Babai, B. Jánó, Z. Molnár, op. cit.; M. Melnykovich et al., op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> D. Babai, B. Jánó, Z. Molnár, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> D. Kholiavchuk, W. Gurgiser, S. Mayr, *Carpathian Forests: Past and Recent Developments*, "Forests" 2024, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 65, DOI: 10.3390/f15010065; J. Kozak, C. Estreguil, M. Troll, *Forest cover changes in the northern Carpathians in the 20th century: a slow transition*, "Journal of Land Use Science" 2007, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 127–146, DOI: 10.1080/17474230701218244.

(UNEP) in 2001 to facilitate an intergovernmental dialogue. This effort aimed to develop a convention for coordinating policies for the Carpathian Mountains. In May 2003, the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention) was adopted and signed by all seven Carpathian countries at the “Environment for Europe” Fifth Ministerial Conference in Kyiv, Ukraine<sup>12</sup>. The Convention entered into force in January 2006, setting a remarkable precedent for the rapid ratification process compared to other international agreements.

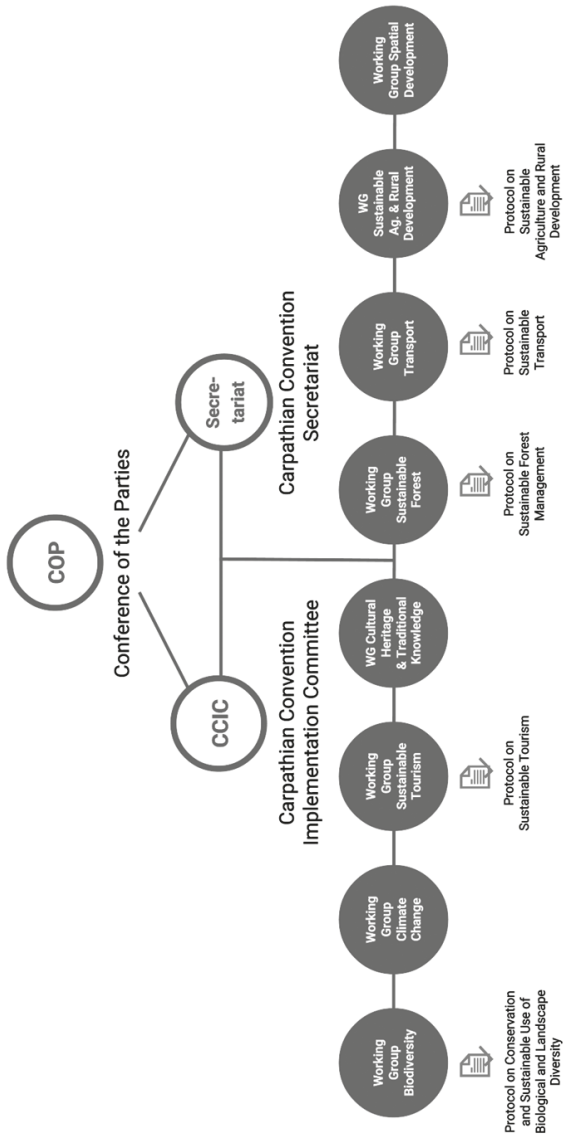
The Carpathian Convention seeks to protect the natural and cultural heritage of the area while promoting sustainable development. It is the only multi-level governance mechanism for the entire Carpathian Region and the second sub-regional treaty-based regime in the world focusing on mountain protection and sustainable development, following the Alpine Convention<sup>13</sup>.

The Carpathian Convention operates as a framework agreement, outlining overarching policy objectives aimed at fostering an integrated approach to conserving the natural and cultural heritage of the Carpathian Region. Its thematic sectors are outlined in Articles 3 to 13: integrated approach to land resources management; conservation and sustainable use of biological and landscape diversity; spatial

<sup>12</sup> Carpathian Convention, *The Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians*, Kyiv, 22 May 2003, <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/convention/history/> [25.09.2024].

<sup>13</sup> O. Bilobran, *Changing Conceptions and Potential for Conflict in Convention Signed: Carpathian Region*, “Environmental Policy and Law” 2003, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 203–218, DOI: 10.3233/EPL-2003-33\_5\_08.

Figure 2. A depiction of the organizational structure of the Carpathian Convention



Source: Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention.

planning; sustainable and integrated water/river basin management; sustainable agriculture and forestry; sustainable transport and infrastructure; sustainable tourism; industry and energy; cultural heritage and traditional knowledge; environmental assessment/information system, monitoring and early warning; climate change; and awareness raising, education and public participation<sup>14</sup>.

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the main decision-making body of the Carpathian Convention, where all Parties to the Convention are represented. The COP sets the political direction, decides on the Programme of Work and the budget of the Convention, and reviews and supports the implementation of the Convention and its Protocols. The COP is responsible for adopting Protocols and amendments to the Convention and for establishing subsidiary bodies to the Convention.

To ensure the effective implementation of each thematic area of cooperation (Articles 3 to 13), the COP established various subsidiary bodies to the Convention to guide overall implementation of the Convention, develop tangible activities and projects, and establish strategic partnerships. These bodies include the Carpathian Convention Implementation Committee (CCIC) and Working Groups. The CCIC ensures that the objectives and principles of the Convention are translated into practice. Working Groups are specialised groups that focus on specific thematic topics to support the implementation of key Convention provisions. The Working Groups discuss issues that require expert analysis before the main organs decide on them. Current

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<sup>14</sup> Carpathian Convention, *The Framework Convention...*

Working Group topics include biodiversity, spatial development, sustainable agriculture and rural development, forest management, tourism, transport and infrastructure, cultural heritage, and climate change.

Having recently celebrated its 20-year anniversary in 2023, the Convention boasts successful mechanisms that facilitate regional cooperation and enable multi-level dialogue.

### **Successes of the Carpathian Convention**

The Carpathian Convention facilitates regional cooperation by contextualising policy frameworks, partnering with regional networks, and supporting projects.

#### **Facilitating regional cooperation through policy framework contextualisation**

The Carpathian Convention contextualises multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs)<sup>15</sup> – treaties, conventions, protocols and other binding instruments that address specific environmental concerns – to integrate environmental protection, community well-being, and developmental considerations into a set of principles tailored to the Carpathian Region. Its geographic focus, coupled with the establishment of institutions and cooperative frameworks dedicated to the region’s challenges, constitutes the Convention’s primary added value.

<sup>15</sup> See more: T. Delreux, *Multilateral Environmental Agreements: A Key Instrument of Global Environmental Governance*, [in:] C. Adelle, K. Biedenkopf, D. Torney (eds.), *European Union External Environmental Policy: Rules, Regulation and Governance Beyond Borders*, Cham 2018, pp. 19–38; P. Haas, *Regional Environmental Governance*, [in:] T.A. Börzel, T. Risse (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford–New York 2016, pp. 430–456.

For example, following the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022, the Carpathian Convention became the first region to apply this Global Framework at the regional level through the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework<sup>16</sup>.

The Carpathian Biodiversity Framework, adopted at the 7th Meeting to the Carpathian Convention Conference of the Parties in Belgrade on 12 October 2023, translates the Global Framework's biodiversity goals and targets into tangible actions relevant to the region. Thus, the Carpathian Convention enhances implementation processes across biodiversity-related conventions due to the Convention's collaborative partnerships with other conventions.

The Carpathian Convention also contextualises its thematic Articles into tangible actions. Five thematic Protocols define binding commitments of the contracting Parties: Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological and Landscape Diversity Protocol, Sustainable Forest Management Protocol, Sustainable Tourism Protocol, Sustainable Transport Protocol, and Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Protocol<sup>17</sup>.

These Protocols represent the main areas of the Convention's work and offer concrete opportunities for collaboration and prioritisation for networks, projects and other bodies to build upon.

<sup>16</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity, *Carpathian Biodiversity Framework*, Belgrade, 12 October 2023, <https://www.cbd.int/article/carpathian-biodiversity-framework> [25.09.2024].

<sup>17</sup> Carpathian Convention, *Protocols*, <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/convention/protocols/> [25.09.2024].

### **Facilitating regional cooperation through networks**

The Carpathian Convention helped establish and closely partners with three regional networks: The Science for the Carpathians (S4C), established in 2008, is a network of scientists and researchers conducting work in the region<sup>18</sup>. The Carpathian Education for Sustainable Development Expert Network (CESDEN) is a group of experts in the field of education for sustainable development. Finally, the Carpathian Network of Protected Areas (CNPA) is a network of the Carpathian protected areas<sup>19</sup>.

These networks include experts, practitioners, and other local stakeholders who capture and exchange knowledge, divergences, and recommendations, which are then presented to the Convention. Their own local contacts help better integrate these voices within the Convention, which are often underrepresented in policymaking.

Another networking platform is the Carpathian Wetland Initiative (CWI), which was initiated in 2004 by Slovakia. This regional initiative facilitates collaboration between the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention) and the Carpathian Convention on conserving and sustainably using wetlands in the Carpathian Region and beyond. Such collaborative efforts recently resulted in the establishment of the transboundary Ramsar site Iron Gates Natural Park

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<sup>18</sup> T. Mitrofanenko et al., *Bridging science, policy and practice for collaborations towards sustainable development in the Carpathian region*, [in:] S. Schneiderbauer et al. (eds.), *Safeguarding Mountain Social-Ecological Systems: Building Transformative Resilience in Mountain Regions Worldwide*, Elsevier 2024, pp. 207–217.

<sup>19</sup> Carpathian Convention, *Related Groups and Initiatives*, <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/organization/related-groups-and-initiatives/> [25.09.2024].



– Djerdap National Park along the Danube River, which spans the border between the Republic of Serbia and Romania<sup>20</sup>.

### **Facilitating regional cooperation through projects**

Not only is the Carpathian Convention concerned with policymaking, but it also emphasises the actual implementation of the Convention and its Protocols. Thus, the Carpathian Convention Secretariat facilitates, participates in, or leads projects and initiatives within the region and beyond. Some example ongoing projects and initiatives involve:

- Large carnivores: the status of large carnivores varies across regions, as do conservation practices. Creating a harmonised conservation strategy for the coexistence and conservation of Carpathian large carnivores is what the LECA project (April 2023 – March 2026), funded by the Interreg Central Europe Programme, seeks to achieve<sup>21</sup>.
- Ecological connectivity: in alignment with the EU's commitment to legally protect 30% of its land and sea, the Horizon Europe NaturaConnect Project (July 2022 – June 2026) aims to help create a resilient and well-connected Trans-European Nature Network to benefit biodiversity and people while enhancing resilience to climate change<sup>22</sup>.

Through policy contextualisation, networks, projects and other initiatives, various fora are created for allowing exchange across sectors and multi-level actors, including

<sup>20</sup> *Carpathian Wetlands Initiative*, <http://www.cwi.sk/> [25.09.2024].

<sup>21</sup> Interreg Central Europe, *LECA*, <https://www.interreg-central.eu/projects/leca/> [25.09.2024].

<sup>22</sup> *NaturaConnect*, <https://naturaconnect.eu/> [25.09.2024].

governments, international organisations, and stakeholders, within the Carpathian Convention and beyond.

### **Interregional exchange and mountain advocacy on the global agenda**

The Convention is a platform for facilitating exchange among the Carpathian countries, between MEAs and across mountain regions, enabling the gradual advancement of the international legal framework for mountain regions.

For example, the development of the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework played a pivotal role in fostering dialogue and collaboration between the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Carpathian focal points. This process facilitated better understanding of each other's priorities and objectives, laying the foundation for a more synergistic approach to biodiversity conservation. Moreover, it established a framework for ongoing cooperation, ensuring regular exchange between the Secretariats of the CBD and the Carpathian Convention. This continuous communication is crucial for aligning regional efforts with global biodiversity goals.

As one of two legal agreements in the world that specifically addresses mountain regions, the Carpathian Convention disseminates best practices and governance models through joint research initiatives, policy dialogues, and capacity-building workshops. Such exchange has supported other mountain regions, such as the Andes<sup>23</sup> and the Him-

<sup>23</sup> See more: K. Price Rios et al., *Mountains Connect Brief: Experience Exchange Between the Andes, Alps and Carpathians. Exploring mountain governance paths for climate resilient development*, Adaptation at Altitude Programme, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. CONDESAN, United Nations Environment Programme,

alayas, in addressing their unique challenges and pursuing the establishment of formal cooperation frameworks in their regions<sup>24</sup>.

This interregional exchange and MEA cooperation furthers the Convention's advocacy for including mountain ecosystems on global environmental agendas. The Convention co-organises numerous side events and workshops at various international fora, particularly under the CBD and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It also co-develops policy briefs<sup>25</sup> and contributes to and implements international campaigns, such as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030, where the Carpathians in Serbia were recognised, among other countries, as one of 10 pioneering efforts in reviving mountain landscapes<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, it participates in an initiative to set up a group of like-minded mountain countries<sup>27</sup>. These activities promote the critical role of mountains in global environmental health and socioeconomic development. While individual measures taken by

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Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention, Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention, 2024, [http://www.carpathianconvention.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Mountains-Connect-Brief\\_.pdf](http://www.carpathianconvention.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Mountains-Connect-Brief_.pdf) [1.10.2024].

<sup>24</sup> See more: Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians, *Cooperation with other conventions and international bodies*, Decision COP7/5, paragraph 12, [http://www.carpathianconvention.org/cop7/docs/officialdocuments/CC\\_COP7\\_DOC3\\_COP7%20DECISIONS\\_ADOPTED.pdf](http://www.carpathianconvention.org/cop7/docs/officialdocuments/CC_COP7_DOC3_COP7%20DECISIONS_ADOPTED.pdf) [1.10.2024].

<sup>25</sup> See more: UNEP, GRID-Arendal, *Elevating Mountains in the Post-2020: Global Biodiversity Framework*, GRID-Arendal 2019.

<sup>26</sup> UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, UNEP, FAO, *Multi-country Mountain Flagships*, <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/multi-country-mountain-flagship> [30.09.2024].

<sup>27</sup> See more: Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians, *Implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*, Decision COP7/6, paragraph 6, [http://www.carpathianconvention.org/cop7/docs/officialdocuments/CC\\_COP7\\_DOC3\\_COP7%20DECISIONS\\_ADOPTED.pdf](http://www.carpathianconvention.org/cop7/docs/officialdocuments/CC_COP7_DOC3_COP7%20DECISIONS_ADOPTED.pdf) [1.10.2024].

mountainous countries may pursue environmental objectives, their effectiveness could be limited without support from region-wide and global initiatives.

### **Recommendations for the Carpathian Convention**

An international agreement like the Carpathian Convention serves as an effective tool to amplify the impact of national and local efforts and ensure a harmonised approach across the region. However, to ensure actual enforcement and further implementation of the Carpathian Convention, two recommendations are proposed below.

Firstly, the seven Carpathian countries could take steps to encourage the EU to join the Carpathian Convention. Although the EU is a party to most regional conventions (such as the Helsinki Commission – HELCOM, the Alpine Convention for sustainable development of the Alps, or the Danube River Protection Convention)<sup>28</sup>, it has yet to join the Carpathian Convention, raising concerns about the lack of EU attention and support for the Carpathian Region. EU membership to the Carpathian Convention would enhance coordinated efforts, integrate the Convention’s protocols with EU legislation, improve transnational cooperation, and increase visibility and potential funding for the region. This alignment with EU environmental policies would also enhance cooperation with non-EU countries like Serbia and Ukraine, facilitating their further integration into EU structures.

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<sup>28</sup> European Commission, *Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)*, [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/international-cooperation/multilateral-environmental-agreements-meas\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/international-cooperation/multilateral-environmental-agreements-meas_en) [25.09.2024].

EU accession would promote a unified approach to regional environmental challenges and symbolise a commitment to the sustainable development of this ecologically and economically vital region. The Carpathian Region is one of Europe's least competitive areas and includes some of its poorest states. Its significant socioeconomic challenges require critical investment in environmental protection, transportation infrastructure, and local entrepreneurship to stimulate job creation and improve quality of life to combat rural depopulation.

Targeted investment in these areas would uplift the region economically while ensuring sustainable development, ultimately transforming the Carpathians into a vibrant, competitive region and contributing to the broader stability and prosperity of Europe.

Secondly, it is worth increasing the involvement of stakeholders from the Carpathian countries, which could lead to the generation of political will. The Carpathian Convention has endorsed several action plans and legally binding documents. However, enforcement remains inconsistent largely due to a lack of political will among local and national authorities. Political priorities are often focused on short-term economic gains rather than long-term sustainability. Limited financial resources and institutional capacities hinder the effective implementation and monitoring of these measures. Thus, the gap between policy endorsement at the international level and actual practice on the ground persists, undermining the overall effectiveness of the Carpathian Convention.

Strengthening political commitment through greater local stakeholder involvement and institutional capacity

is crucial. Targeted funding and technical assistance can help establish robust monitoring and reporting mechanisms, ensuring accountability while better addressing local needs. Bridging civil society with policymakers will better address gaps and, strengths, and build local ownership over potential interventions.

## **Conclusions**

The Carpathian Convention has proven to be an important mechanism in balancing conservation with sustainable development, offering a unified framework for addressing complex ecological, social, and economic challenges in the Carpathian Region. Its focus on preserving biodiversity, fostering sustainable land use, and integrating local communities into environmental efforts has been pivotal in maintaining the ecological health of the region. By providing substantive obligations through the five Protocols and tangible actions and projects, the Convention has ensured the parallel coexistence of environmental protection and socio-economic development and the creation of a model that other mountain regions can follow.

The Carpathian Convention's impact on international cooperation has been especially significant in fostering regional cohesion. By facilitating dialogue and collaboration between the seven Carpathian countries, the Convention has provided a platform for harmonising environmental policies and cross-border initiatives. Through its contextualisation of global agreements, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Convention has aligned regional conservation efforts with international goals, ensuring that global standards are adapted to regional

contexts. Moreover, the establishment of networks like Science for the Carpathians (S4C) and the Carpathian Network of Protected Areas (CNPA) has further strengthened cooperation, creating an inclusive space for scientific, governmental, and civil society stakeholders. These efforts have not only enhanced biodiversity conservation but have also improved political and social cohesion in the region, making the Carpathian Convention a vital instrument for regional and global multilateral environmental governance.

Despite its successes, the Carpathian Convention faces ongoing challenges in enforcement and broader EU integration. Addressing these gaps through increased political commitment, better stakeholder engagement, and stronger institutional capacities is essential for the continued effectiveness of the Convention. The proposed inclusion of the EU as a Party to the Convention represents a promising step toward enhancing transnational cooperation and securing financial and political support for the region. By continuing to evolve and adapt to emerging challenges, the Carpathian Convention has the potential to drive long-term ecological resilience and socio-economic prosperity across the region.



Kinga Stańczuk-Olejniak, Damian Szacawa

## **The European Union Strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCARP): the idea, actions, and perspectives**

### **Executive summary**

- The Carpathian macro-region spans the Carpathian Mountain range, which is home to nearly 70 million people. Seven states – Czechia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Hungary – ratified the Carpathian Convention (2003) for sustainable development. Advocates argue that the unique conditions of the Carpathians necessitate a dedicated macro-regional strategy akin to the Alpine, Baltic, Danube, and Adriatic-Ionian regions. So far, however, the European Commission has not adopted this initiative.
- Since 2016, Poland has led efforts to formalise the EU Strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCARP). The Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy



(MFiPR) has worked on socio-economic diagnostics and proposed a strategy centred on three pillars: competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and cohesion. Despite the Krynica Declaration (2018), which gathered support from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Ukraine, further efforts are required to persuade Romania, Serbia, and Czechia to support the initiative.

- Opposition to the EUSCARP centres on concerns about potential overlap with the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), which already covers much of the Carpathian macro-region. Proponents emphasise the Carpathians' distinct mountainous challenges. Regional stakeholders – especially those in Poland, Romania, and Ukraine – continue to support the initiative, seeing it as crucial for adapting to climate change, accessing green energy, preserving cultural heritage in the Carpathian region, and fostering the socio-economic development of local and regional communities.
- Efforts to establish the EUSCARP face geopolitical challenges, including the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and resistance from certain states. Current initiatives focus on building a comprehensive knowledge base, led by studies on the region's socio-economic development, environmental sustainability, and territorial cohesion. The KARPAT project, expected to conclude by 2025, aims to provide detailed insights into the region's potential, offering a foundation for future collaboration and funding under the EU's macro-regional framework.

## Introduction

At the heart of each existing EU macro-regional strategy (EU MRS) lies a shared, vast territory characterised by unique features. On the one hand, these common conditions outline the macro-region potential and, on the other, shape horizontal challenges that stakeholders at various levels of governance need to address. The axis of the Carpathian macro-region is the Carpathian mountain range, the second largest in Europe, inhabited by nearly 70 million people<sup>1</sup>. In 2003, this area was covered by the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (hereafter referred to as the Carpathian Convention, CC)<sup>2</sup>. The CC has been ratified by seven countries: Czechia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Hungary. Despite the efforts of its members, the European Commission has not become a party to the Convention.

In the remaining four official EU macro-regions (Alpine, Adriatic-Ionian, Baltic, and Danube), complementary functions are fulfilled by instruments that enable the implementation of integrated development policies, adopting both a bottom-up approach and multi-level governance, extending beyond administrative borders. These include conventions for nature protection, macro-regional strategies, and INTERREG

<sup>1</sup> The Carpathian Region also includes neighbouring Moldova, which has not yet ratified the Carpathian Convention.

<sup>2</sup> Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians, adopted in Kyiv on 22 May 2003, "Journal of Laws" 2007, no. 96, item 634. The aim of this international agreement is both the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians, and its scope covers the following areas: land management, biodiversity conservation, spatial planning, water management, agriculture and forestry, transport and infrastructure, tourism, industry and energy, cultural heritage, environmental monitoring with an early warning system, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and building knowledge, environmental awareness, and public participation.

programs, facilitating access to dedicated EU funds. The coherent functioning of these instruments contributes to building economic, social, and territorial cohesion across the entire EU.

Macro-regional strategies can be considered a crucial instrument among those mentioned, serving as a political platform for strategic decision-making processes that are essential in the face of increasing regional interconnectedness. These strategies establish a shared, long-term vision for cohesive macro-regional development, realised through multi-level governance. This three-level system of instruments allows for comprehensive programming and development policy implementation, ensuring the protection and development of individual macro-regions<sup>3</sup>.

### **History and the rationale of the EUSCARP: intergovernmental level**

Early cooperation in the Carpathian Region was established through cross-border initiatives and the Carpathian Euroregion<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, governments collaborated within the Visegrád Group (so-called V4) and launched the Three Seas Initiative, spearheaded by the Polish president, which brought together 12 countries<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Gänzle, *New strategic approaches to territorial cooperation in Europe: from Euro-regions To European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) and macro-regional strategies*, [in:] S. Piattoni, L. Polverari (eds.), *Handbook on Cohesion Policy in the EU*, Cheltenham-Northampton 2016, pp. 384–398.

<sup>4</sup> The Carpathian Euroregion was established on 14 February 1993, in Debrecen. An agreement on the establishment of the Carpathian Euroregion Interregional Association was signed by representatives of the regional authorities of borderland areas in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Ukraine. For more information see: Ł. Lewkowicz, op. cit., pp. 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> The Three Seas Initiative includes: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary. See: P. Kowal, A. Orzelska-Stączek, *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie*, Warszawa 2019.

Simultaneously, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region covers almost the entire Carpathian macro-region, involving 14 countries<sup>6</sup>. This strategy, along with its Action Plan and the dedicated transnational INTERREG program, focuses on issues related to the Danube River: improving water quality, navigation, monitoring and environmental protection. Recognising the added value of cooperation within the EU Baltic Sea Strategy and highlighting the lack of reflection of the Carpathians in European policy, Polish politicians and regional stakeholders have been actively pursuing the creation of a comparable instrument for the Carpathian macro-region for nearly a decade.

In 2016, the Polish Ministry of Investments and Development launched informal, intergovernmental cooperation with Carpathian states, elaborating on *The Diagnosis of socio-economic and spatial aspects of the Carpathians and The Assumptions of the Carpathian macro-regional Strategy*<sup>7</sup>.

Based on the *diagnosis* and *assumptions*, an international group of experts and a draft of the *Carpathian strategy* were developed. The strategy's main objective was defined as "strengthening the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Carpathian Region and improving the quality of life of its inhabitants based on its internal development potential while respecting the natural and cultural heritage of the Carpathians". The Strategy is based on three pillars: Competitive, Green, and Cohesive Carpathians.

<sup>6</sup> The Danube Strategy includes: Germany, Czechia, Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary.

<sup>7</sup> J. Kwieciński, *Współpraca regionalna państw karpackich – idea i jej przyszłość*, [in:] W. Paruch (ed.), *Europa Karpat. Rzecz o współpracy*, Warszawa 2019, pp. 83–85.

Subsequently, a high-level *Carpathian Declaration* was signed on 5 September 2018 in Krynica-Zdrój to further elaborate on the project. The signatories to the declaration were Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Poland. The signing of the Declaration was intended to be a milestone towards establishing the fifth EU macro-regional strategy. The signed Declaration was submitted by the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy (further called MFiPR) to the European Commission, European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of Regions. Appreciating the efforts already undertaken by the Carpathian countries, the European Commission indicated that unanimous support from all countries in the macro-region is a *sine qua non* for the establishment of a new EU macro-regional strategy, thereby emphasising the need for the involvement of Romania, Serbia, and Czechia.

MFiPR developed the *Carpathian Roadmap* to launch the process<sup>8</sup> of adopting the macro-regional strategy, outlining the required steps. Its objective was to gain the support of other Carpathian countries and place this issue on the European agenda. The next step, initiated by the government of Slovakia, was the establishment of the *Carpathian Executive Board (CEB)*, whose goal was to implement the provisions of the *Krynica Declaration*. The inaugural meeting of the CEB, organised by the Polish MFiPR, took place in February 2020 at *Krasiczyn Castle*. The members of the CEB were the signatories of the *Krynica Declaration*.

<sup>8</sup> MFiPR, *Carpathian Roadmap – Schedule of Activities Aimed at Adopting the EU Macroe-regional Strategy for Carpathian Region (EUSCARP)*, 6 February 2019, [https://www.gov.pl/documents/33377/436740/Carpathian\\_Road\\_Map\\_2019.pdf](https://www.gov.pl/documents/33377/436740/Carpathian_Road_Map_2019.pdf) [30.05.2023].

The meeting was also attended by representatives of other Carpathian countries, the Carpathian Convention, the European Commission, and the Committee of the Regions. During the meeting, the members of the Board reaffirmed their commitment to supporting the region and exploring opportunities to utilise EU funds. The functioning of the CEB was significantly hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the war in Ukraine and its geopolitical consequences<sup>9</sup>.

The Polish government has undertaken numerous initiatives to gather support for the new macro-regional strategy, seeking to persuade the governments of Romania, Czechia, Serbia, and Moldova to endorse the initiative through inter-governmental consultations, bilateral meetings, and various international events. However, the Carpathian governments have not been convinced to adopt the Carpathian Strategy. Despite the intergovernmental dialogue, the main argument remains the same: the opponents of the Carpathian Strategy are concerned with potential overlap with the Danube Strategy. Proponents of the new initiative underline its different thematic focus, concentrating on the specific characteristics of mountainous regions and significantly smaller territories. This facilitates tailored interventions that address particular challenges faced by mountainous areas.

<sup>9</sup> Sejm RP, *Krasiczyn*: 26. edycja „Europy Karpat”. Podsumowanie drugiego dnia Konferencji, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=7812FDF4BAA2C941C-1258518002D68AE> [30.05.2023].

## Sub-national activities

Parallel to the governmental process, regional authorities, particularly those grouped within the Carpathian Group at the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) established at the initiative of the Marshal of the Podkarpackie Region<sup>10</sup>, have been playing a very active role. The Group recognised the significant potential and specific support that could arise from cooperation within a new EU macro-regional strategy framework. Therefore, the CoR adopted two opinions, one of which reflected support from representatives of the regional and local levels for the adoption of EUSCARP in December 2019, and the other in 2020<sup>11</sup>.

The CoR's opinions highlighted the need for a new form of cooperation in the Carpathian Region, catalysing collaboration across all levels of governance. Recognising the joint strategy as a valuable opportunity to strengthen cooperation and facilitate access to additional funding, regional authorities expressed their commitment to the initiative through numerous appeals and declarations:

- *A joint call from representatives of the Podkarpackie (Poland) and Central (Romania) regions for collaborative international efforts to develop project proposals aimed at advancing the Carpathian Macro-region, March 2020*<sup>12</sup>;

<sup>10</sup> This body brings together representatives of regional authorities from 5 countries: Czechia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary.

<sup>11</sup> *Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region*, No. 2020/C 79/03, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IR3425> [31.07.2024].

<sup>12</sup> Samorząd Województwa Podkarpackiego, *Wspólny apel przedstawicieli regionów Podkarpackiego (PL) i Centrum (RO) o podjęcie międzynarodowych prac nad projektami na rzecz rozwoju Makroregionu Karpat*, 2020.

- A joint supporting standpoint of SK8 for the creation of the Carpathian Strategy, March 2020<sup>13</sup>;
- A joint statement by the regional administrations of Zakarpattia, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Chernivtsi in support of the creation of an EU macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian Region, November 2020<sup>14</sup>;
- The joint declaration of Małopolskie, Podkarpackie i Śląskie regions enhancing elaboration of Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, November 2020<sup>15</sup>;
- Two appeals from the North-Western Romanian Regions (Maramureș, Cluj, Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud County Councils) and North-Eastern Romanian Regions (Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui County Council)<sup>16</sup>, 2021.

To summarise, since 2020, regional stakeholders across the Carpathians have demonstrated a high level of commitment, outlining key goals for joint action at the regional, national, and international levels, such as mitigating

<sup>13</sup> *Wspólne stanowisko poparcia regionów słowackich (SK8) dla utworzenia "Makroregionalnej Strategii dla regionu Karpat"*, 2020; Zarząd Województwa Podkarpackiego, *Informacja nt. działań podejmowanych przez Województwo Podkarpackie na rzecz powstania Makroregionalnej Strategii dla regionu Karpat ( Strategia Karpacka) w 2020 roku oraz w I kwartale 2021 roku*, Rzeszów 2021, p. 23, [https://sejmik.podkarpackie.pl/attachments/article/3520/06%20Informacja\\_nt\\_dzialan\\_na\\_rzecz\\_Strategii\\_Makroregionalnej\\_%20dla\\_regionu\\_Karpat.pdf](https://sejmik.podkarpackie.pl/attachments/article/3520/06%20Informacja_nt_dzialan_na_rzecz_Strategii_Makroregionalnej_%20dla_regionu_Karpat.pdf) [30.05.2023].

<sup>14</sup> *Wspólne oświadczenie administracji obwodowych Zakarpacia, Lwowa, Iwano-Frankowska i Czerniowiec dla wsparcia utworzenia makroregionalnej strategii Unii Europejskiej dla regionu Karpackiego*, 2020; Zarząd Województwa Podkarpackiego, *Informacja...*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Wspólna Deklaracja Marszałków trzech polskich województw: Małopolskiego, Podkarpackiego i Śląskiego popierająca utworzenie Strategii Karpackiej*, November 2020; Województwo Małopolskie, *Wspólna deklaracja na rzecz utworzenia Strategii Karpackiej*, <https://www.malopolska.pl/aktualnosci/wspolpraca/wspolna-deklaracja-na-rzecz-utworzenia-strategii-karpackiej> [30.05.2023].

<sup>16</sup> *Apel Północno-Zachodniej Regionów Rumunii*, 2021, and *Apel Północno-Wschodniej Rumunii popierający przyjęcie Strategii Karpackiej*, 2021; Zarząd Województwa Podkarpackiego, *Informacja...*, p. 23.



and adapting to climate change, conserving biodiversity and mountainous landscape, ensuring access to green energy, and enhancing the competitiveness and cohesion of the Carpathian Region through the utilisation of endogenous innovation. Regional authorities have also emphasised preserving the unique cultural heritage and developing essential public services jointly.

### **Prospects for the EUSCARP**

Despite the lack of international consensus thus far, Polish stakeholders at both the governmental and subnational levels remain active in seeking support for the initiative and promoting the macro-region. Recent and ongoing efforts focus on building a knowledge base about the macro-region, which faces substantially diverse conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all regions, but numerous studies indicate that areas with lower socio-economic development are characterised by lower resilience and greater vulnerability to external shocks. This was followed by the Russian aggression directed against Ukraine, one of the countries located in the Carpathians and actively engaged in strengthening macro-regional integration. The war, now in its third year, is a significant challenge for Ukraine and the entire Carpathian Region, transforming the landscape of international cooperation. This crisis has also forced countries on the EU's border to rethink their development strategies, with an intensified focus on defence and resilience.

Given the unstable geopolitical circumstances and the lack of consensus on adopting the Carpathian Strategy, stakeholders focus on analysing new conditions, building

a knowledge base, gathering best practices, and seeking optimal forms of future cooperation.

The Polish MFiPR continues its analytical and expert work, including a study on the need for joint actions from the perspective of Carpathian stakeholders, conducted by the Regional Studies Association under the leadership of Professor Maciej Smętkowski<sup>17</sup>. The project's main objective was to verify the relevance and directions of the actions outlined in the Carpathian Strategy project (2018), to adapt them to internal and external conditions, and to identify priority projects and those that could be easily implemented. The researchers conducted the study in May and June 2021, using a comparative analysis of the EUSCARP project and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, as well as a survey of the needs of macro-region stakeholders.

The study involved 310 stakeholders representing governments, regional and local authorities, and other institutions. Respondents identified Goal 2: Green Carpathians as the most crucial objective of EUSCARP (60% of responses), emphasising the need to ensure a high-quality natural environment. The remaining two goals received similar mentions, underlining the need to achieve both Goal 3: Cohesive Carpathians and Goal 1: Competitive Carpathians. The study's conclusions led by M. Smętkowski also indicated that, in territorial terms, the most remarkable development potential was found in the geographical centre

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<sup>17</sup> M. Smętkowski, J. Majewski, E. Przekop-Wiszniewska, *Carpathian macro-regional Strategy – proposed actions in the light of diagnosis, international experience and stakeholder preferences*, "Reports and Analyses EUROREG" 2022, no. 11.

of the macro-region, encompassing Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Romania<sup>18</sup>.

A second important project aimed at updating and deepening knowledge about the macro-region has been initiated by the Podkarpackie Voivodeship in cooperation with partners from Romania (Maramureş County and Suceava County Council) and Slovakia (Prešov Self-Governing Region), within the framework of the ESPON cooperation program<sup>19</sup>. The project, entitled KARPAT – *The Determinants and Opportunities of Socio-Economic and Spatial Development of the Carpathian Region*, is being implemented by the Centre for European Regional and Local Studies at the University of Warsaw (EUROREG) under the leadership of Professor M. Smętkowski. The project's results are expected in the first quarter of 2025.

The objective of the KARPAT project is to develop a comprehensive response to the current challenges facing the macro-region, namely to intensify socio-economic development while preserving the area's unique environment, landscape, and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the project's findings are expected to answer how, under the current rapidly changing conditions, to effectively support regional functional linkages, going beyond administrative boundaries and short-term goals. To achieve its objectives, the KARPAT project utilises a variety of research methods: desk

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 63–65.

<sup>19</sup> European Spatial Planning Observation Network, ESPON is an EU funded programme that bridges research with policies. Program provides territorial analyses, data and maps for policy makers. ESPON include UE member states, Island, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland. Application for KARPAT project was delivered under Targeted Analysis under priority "New geographies", Podkarpackie Voivodeship, 2023.

research, questionnaires for involved stakeholders from different levels and sectors, participatory workshops, and more. Among the expected results are an analysis of current and projected territorial patterns of development, the identification of potential themes and areas for cooperation, preparation of an atlas on determinants and opportunities for socio-economic and territorial development, and recommendations for policymakers on various levels<sup>20</sup>.

To sum up, as of mid-2024, the process's main stakeholders are concentrated on building a robust knowledge base about the macro-region to better anticipate future challenges and opportunities. This foundation will enable us to quickly adapt to evolving political landscapes and facilitate the elaboration and effective implementation of the EUSCARP.

## Conclusions

Developing a dedicated EU Macro-regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region – EUSCARP – remains a significant yet unresolved initiative. Despite the efforts of critical stakeholders, particularly Poland, and the creation of a draft strategy emphasising competitiveness, sustainability, and cohesion, the lack of unanimous support from all Carpathian nations continues to hinder progress. While Slovakia, Hungary, and Ukraine have shown commitment, states like Romania, Serbia, and Czechia remain hesitant due to concerns over potential overlaps with the existing EU Strategy

<sup>20</sup> More information about the KARPAT project: <https://www.espon.eu/projects/karpat-determinants-and-opportunities-socio-economic-and-spatial-development-carpathian> [25.09.2024].

for the Danube Region. This ongoing debate underscores the need for a clear distinction in thematic focus, particularly around the unique challenges faced by mountainous regions like the Carpathians.

As of mid-2024, efforts are concentrated on building a comprehensive knowledge base to inform future strategic directions. Projects like the KARPAT initiative and studies on regional development are crucial in identifying priority areas and potential interventions. In the context of geopolitical instability resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, these efforts highlight the importance of fostering resilience and cohesion across the Carpathian macro-region. The groundwork being laid today may eventually facilitate broader consensus, positioning the proposed EU Strategy for the Carpathian Region as a critical tool for regional development and the preservation of the region's natural and cultural heritage.



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## About the authors

**Elena Fischer** works for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as a Communications and Outreach Facilitator for the Carpathian Convention Secretariat in the Vienna Office. She has substantial stakeholder engagement, education, communications, and marketing experience in the environmental field, having worked in various roles across national conservation agencies and NGO-operated nature preserves. She brings this expertise to the Secretariat, where she supports their nature conservation and sustainable development goals. Elena has an M.S. in Environmental Policy from Bard College's Center for Environmental Policy and a B.A. in Anthropology from Indiana University Bloomington.

**Klaudia Kuraś** is the Associate Programme Officer at UNEP and Carpathian Convention Coordinator at the Convention's Secretariat. Since joining UNEP in 2012, she has supported the implementation of environmental agreements and policies, focusing on cross-border cooperation and sustainable development in Central and Eastern Europe. With a strong background in ecological governance, project management, and international relations,

she facilitates dialogue with governments, international organisations, and other relevant stakeholders. She holds degrees in International Relations and Political Science from Jagiellonian University and is passionate about advancing sustainable development in the Carpathian Region.

**Kinga Stańczuk-Olejniak** graduated from the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, and the Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Faculty of Spatial Economics. Her professional life is associated with a territorial dimension of development policies at different territorial levels, specialising in macro-regional strategies. Currently, she works as a counsellor at the Polish Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, representing Poland in the Committee of Spatial Planning and Development within the VASAB cooperation. She is also responsible for environmental topics within the National Development Concept of Poland 2050. Privately, she is a yoga teacher.

**Damian Szacawa** is a Senior Analyst in the Department of the Baltics, Institute of Central Europe. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Political Relations at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. He holds a Doctorate of Humanities in the field of political science. Damian is the project leader of the initiative "The Potential of Grounded Theory in the Study of Relations Between International Organisations" ("Miniatura", 2021–2022) and member of the research team for "Scientific Diplomacy in Northern Europe" ("Opus", 2022–2026). He is the author and co-author of publications on international cooperation, regional governance systems, international organisations and international security, with a focus on the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe.

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This policy paper examines international cooperation within the Carpathian region, focusing on three key aspects. Firstly, it evaluates the role of the Carpathian region within subregional cooperation structures like the Visegrád Group (V4), noting limitations in environmental collaboration despite EU alignment goals. Secondly, it analyses the Carpathian Convention (2003), highlighting its success in fostering collaboration through networks and projects focused on biodiversity and sustainable development but recommending enhanced stakeholder engagement for a more significant impact. Finally, it explores the proposed European Union Strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCARP), acknowledging the challenges of securing unanimous support amidst concerns of overlap with existing strategies and highlighting ongoing efforts to build a comprehensive knowledge base for future collaboration.

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