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Ukraine's Strategic Partnership with the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe: The Cross-Border Dimension of Economic and Security Cooperation

Abstract. Introduction. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and the intensification of Ukraine's European integration have fundamentally transformed the role of cross-border cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Under these conditions, cross-border interaction is evolving from a set of individual bilateral projects and infrastructure initiatives into a multidimensional system encompassing transport and logistics, economic and industrial cooperation, finance and investment, security, institutional development, education, and research. However, these dimensions are still insufficiently integrated within a comprehensive framework of economic and security resilience.

Purpose. The purpose of the article is to substantiate the role of Ukraine's strategic partnerships with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in shaping an integrated cross-border space of economic and security resilience, identify the functional specialisation of the main partnership directions, and determine the role of education, human capital, and international accreditation in strengthening Ukraine's institutional compatibility with the European Union.

Results. The study applies systemic, institutional, comparative, and structural-functional approaches and is based on the analysis of academic publications, legal and strategic documents, EU institutional materials, international agreements, cross-border cooperation programmes, and official analytical sources. The analysis demonstrates that Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Moldova perform complementary functions within Ukraine's cross-border partnership system. Poland represents a major logistical, trade, financial, security, and educational gateway to the EU; Slovakia and Hungary strengthen Carpathian transport, energy, and labour-market linkages; Romania contributes to the Danube-Black Sea transport and security dimension; the Czech Republic provides technological, industrial, defence, and research cooperation; while Moldova supports parallel regulatory, transport, energy, and institutional adaptation to EU frameworks. The study substantiates the need to integrate transport infrastructure, investment, production, human capital, innovation, financing, and markets into long-term functional chains. Particular attention is given to Interreg programmes, investment mechanisms, university networks, joint educational programmes, and international accreditation as instruments of institutional learning, human-capital development, and European integration. Based on the findings, the concept of Ukraine's cross-border belt of economic and security resilience along its western and south-western borders is proposed.

Conclusions. Ukraine's strategic partnership with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is gradually developing into an interconnected regional system in which economic, transport, financial, security, institutional, educational, and research dimensions mutually reinforce one another. The effectiveness of this system depends on the functional complementarity of individual partnership directions, the development of resilient infrastructure and investment mechanisms, the strengthening of institutional capacity, and the integration of human capital into cross-border economic processes. The proposed cross-border resilience model provides a conceptual basis for combining European integration, reconstruction, economic continuity, infrastructure diversification, and human-capital development. Further research should focus on empirical verification of the proposed model through indicators of transport and trade flows, investment, joint projects, inter-university cooperation, insurance and guarantee mechanisms, and border-crossing capacity.

Keywords: strategic partnership, cross-border cooperation, economic resilience, security, European integration, international accreditation, higher education, human capital, Interreg.

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Стратегічне партнерство України з країнами центральної та східної Європи: транскордонний вимір економічного та безпекового співробітництва

Анотація. У статті досліджено трансформацію стратегічного партнерства України з країнами Центральної та Східної Європи в умовах триваючої війни та поглиблення європейської інтеграції. Обґрунтовано перехід від традиційного транскордонного співробітництва до багаторівневої моделі транскордонної стійкості, що охоплює транспорт і логістику, економічно-виробничу взаємодію, фінанси та інвестиції, безпеку, інституційний розвиток, а також освіту і науку. Визначено функціональні ролі Польщі, Словаччини, Угорщини, Румунії, Чехії та Молдови у формуванні цієї системи. Особливу увагу приділено програмам Interreg, європейським інвестиційним механізмам, спільним освітнім програмам і міжнародній акредитації як інструментам посилення інституційного узгодження

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України з Європейським Союзом. За результатами проведеного аналізу запропоновано концепцію транскордонного поясу економічної та безпекової стійкості України вздовж її західного та південно-західного кордонів.

Ключові слова: стратегічне партнерство, транскордонне співробітництво, економічна стійкість, безпека, європейська інтеграція, міжнародна акредитація, вища освіта, людський капітал, Interreg.

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Analysis of recent research and publications. Recent academic literature increasingly interprets cross-border cooperation not as a collection of individual projects, but as a system of stable economic, institutional, and infrastructural linkages. T. Studzieniecki, M. Szyda, and K. Szelągowska-Rudzka demonstrate the role of European Neighbourhood Policy instruments in the development of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland and in the formation of long-term partnership networks [1, pp. 364–379]. K. Prytula, E. Łażniewska, A. Maksymenko, Ya. Kalat, and O. Demedyuk associate the resilience of border communities with the quality of local institutions, the diversification of economic ties, and their capacity to mobilise resources through cross-border cooperation [2, pp. 21–39].

S. Hippe, D. Bertram, and T. Chilla found that European border regions tend, on average, to demonstrate lower short-term resilience to shocks, while showing a stronger capacity for recovery and more favourable long-term convergence trends [3, pp. 186–207]. E. Medeiros and his co-authors view European territorial cooperation as an instrument of territorial cohesion, operating through the reduction of border barriers, the strengthening of networks and governance, and the development of functional linkages [4, pp. 1518–1529]. Taken together, these approaches shift the analytical focus away from the border as an administrative boundary towards the concept of a cross-border functional area.

T. Zhurzhenko, drawing on the Ukrainian-Polish borderland, describes “everyday Europeanization” as a process shaped through mobility, local economic interaction, and social networks [5]. E. Brunet-Jailly, G. Ocskay, M. Guillermo Ramírez, M. van der Velde, and T. Shaban emphasise the multiplicity of horizontal linkages connecting regions, municipalities, businesses, and universities [6, pp. 20–24]. At the regional level, M. Lendel demonstrates that EU programmes influence not only the availability of funding but also the professionalisation of local actors and the quality of multi-level governance in Transcarpathia, while at the same time exposing persistent limitations in administrative capacity [7, pp. 33–59].

The educational and research dimension further extends this perspective. H. Protsyk argues that Ukraine’s earlier convergence with the European Higher Education Area and the principles of the Bologna Process strengthened the institutional resilience of higher education during the war [8, pp. 279–310]. Accordingly, university networks, joint programmes, academic mobility, and external quality assurance can be regarded as part of the human-capital infrastructure underpinning the cross-border economy.

A synthesis of the literature reveals a clear research gap. Resilience, functional integration, multi-level

governance, human capital, and educational quality are still largely examined as separate dimensions. What remains insufficiently developed is an integrated model that would bring together the transport and logistics, economic and industrial, financial and investment, security, institutional, and educational and research dimensions of Ukraine’s strategic partnerships.

Identification of previously unresolved aspects of the general problem. An unresolved issue is how the above components can be integrated into a coherent system of long-term economic and security resilience, as well as how to define the role of universities, joint educational programmes, and international accreditation in developing the human capital required for European integration.

Objectives of article. The aim of the article is to substantiate the role of Ukraine’s strategic partnership with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in shaping an integrated cross-border space of economic and security resilience, to identify the functional specialisation of the main partnership directions, and to clarify the importance of education and international accreditation for Ukraine’s institutional compatibility with the European Union. The study employs systemic, institutional, comparative, and structural-functional approaches. The author’s typology of partnership directions is based on a qualitative comparison of their logistical, economic, security, institutional, and educational and research functions.

Research methodology. The methodological framework of the study combines systemic, institutional, comparative, and structural-functional approaches. The systemic approach is used to examine Ukraine’s cross-border cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as an integrated multi-level system encompassing economic, transport and logistics, financial and investment, security, institutional, and educational and research dimensions.

The institutional approach is applied to assess the role of EU programmes, international agreements, financing mechanisms, public authorities, and universities in strengthening cross-border resilience. The comparative method is used to examine the functional specialisation of Ukraine’s main partnership directions and to compare them with the experiences of the Western Balkans, the Baltic States, and the Nordic/Øresund region. The structural-functional approach makes it possible to identify the interconnections between infrastructure, investment, security, human capital, and institutional capacity.

The empirical basis of the study includes academic publications, legal and strategic documents, materials of EU institutions, international agreements, cross-border

cooperation programmes, and official analytical sources. Their qualitative comparison provides the basis for the author's typology of partnership directions and the proposed concept of Ukraine's cross-border belt of economic and security resilience. The study is primarily conceptual and analytical in nature.

Main research findings. Since 2022, Ukraine's western and south-western communication routes have acquired significance not only as channels of external economic interaction, but also as critical trade, transport, humanitarian, energy, and security infrastructure. Under these conditions, cross-border resilience can be understood as the capacity of interconnected territories, organisations, and infrastructure systems on both sides of the border to maintain the continuity of essential functions, adapt to crises, and at the same time generate new opportunities for development. This transformation has been further reinforced by Ukraine's EU accession process. Following the formal opening of accession negotiations on 25 June 2024 [9], Cluster 1, "Fundamentals of the Accession Process," and Cluster 6, "External Relations," were opened in 2026 [10; 11]. As a result, Ukraine's regulatory alignment with the European Union is gradually moving from the political level into practical implementation, while cross-border territories are becoming one of the key spaces in which this compatibility is being realised.

The practical substance of this model is particularly evident in the transformation of Ukraine's security partnerships with the countries of the region. The Ukraine–Poland security agreement, for example, combines defence cooperation with the development of trade, investment, financial services, capital markets, insurance, and long-term cooperation in higher education and research [12]. The agreement with Romania establishes cooperation in the Black Sea region, logistics, and demining [13], while the Czech dimension includes support for the development of Ukraine's defence-industrial base and the identification of mechanisms for financing it [14]. Accordingly, the contemporary understanding of security extends well beyond the purely defence-related sphere and increasingly encompasses access to capital, technologies, insurance mechanisms, and skilled human resources, thereby becoming directly linked to economic resilience.

The material basis of this interdependence is provided by transport and logistics infrastructure. The EU–Ukraine Solidarity Lanes, established in May 2022, effectively created an alternative system for sustaining Ukrainian exports and imports under wartime conditions. In June

2026, these routes handled approximately 70% of Ukraine's imports and 80% of its non-agricultural exports. Since May 2022, around 226 million tonnes of goods have been exported and approximately 108 million tonnes imported through these corridors, with the total value of trade estimated at about EUR 296 billion [15]. At the same time, the European Union is financing the integration of the transport infrastructure of Ukraine and Moldova with the TEN-T network [16]. Transport corridors therefore perform more than the function of physically moving goods; they have become an instrument of economic resilience and a means of gradually integrating Ukraine into the European economic space.

Infrastructure integration, in turn, requires adequate institutional capacity at the regional and local levels. In this context, the Interreg NEXT Poland-Ukraine, Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine, and Romania-Ukraine programmes are of particular importance, as they support transport accessibility, healthcare, environmental protection, border security, mobility, education, and cooperation between local communities [17–19]. Their role extends beyond the grant financing of individual projects. Participation in these programmes develops practical skills in joint planning, partnership-based governance, and the preparation and implementation of cross-border initiatives in accordance with the rules and procedures of EU cohesion policy. Interreg can therefore be regarded as a form of institutional learning for Ukrainian regions in the process of European integration.

At the same time, the structure of cross-border interaction is not uniform, as individual partner countries perform different but mutually complementary functions. Poland combines the logistical, trade, financial, security, and educational dimensions of the partnership to the greatest extent. Slovakia and Hungary are particularly important for the Carpathian region, energy linkages, transport mobility, and regional labour markets. Romania shapes the Danube-Black Sea transport and security dimension, the Czech Republic acts as an important technological, industrial, and research partner, while Moldova constitutes a space of parallel regulatory, transport, and institutional adaptation to the European Union [20].

This functional differentiation suggests that Ukraine's strategic partnership with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe should be viewed not as a set of isolated bilateral relationships, but as an interconnected regional system in which transport, economic, financial, security, and institutional mechanisms reinforce one another. A summary of these functional roles is presented in Table 1

Table 1 Functional roles of Ukraine's key partners in the cross-border and regional context

Country	Key Functional Role	Priority Areas for Further Development
Poland	Logistics, trade, financial, and security gateway to the EU	Insurance, capital markets, production chains, education and research
Slovakia	Carpathian transport, energy, and institutional link	Transport interoperability, energy cooperation, industrial cooperation, university networks
Hungary	Carpathian regional cooperation and labour-market link	Local infrastructure, healthcare, education, digital and labour-market platforms
Romania	Danube–Black Sea transport and security corridor	Ports, multimodal logistics, energy, healthcare, tourism
Czech Republic	Technological, industrial, defence, and research partner	Mechanical engineering, defence technology, R&D, training of engineering professionals
Moldova	Partner in parallel European integration	TEN-T integration, customs and digital interoperability, energy cooperation, coordination of reforms

Source: developed by the author.

A comparison of the main partnership directions shows that their strategic value lies not in the use of an identical set of instruments, but in the complementarity of their functions. Poland serves as Ukraine's principal western gateway to the EU market and its financial infrastructure; Slovakia and Hungary provide transport, energy, and labour-market linkages that are particularly important for the Carpathian region; Romania strengthens the alternative Danube–Black Sea route; and the Czech Republic contributes technological and industrial capacity. For regional policy, this implies moving away from a uniform model of cooperation towards differentiated strategies in which Interreg instruments, transport investment, cluster policy, and university networks are aligned with the specific functional specialisation of each partnership direction.

Such a differentiated approach is particularly important in the financial and investment sphere, where the role of individual partners varies considerably in terms of both the scale and the nature of available resources. Poland's particular importance stems from the combination of geographical proximity and access to the EU internal market, as well as to banking, insurance, and business institutions [12]. At the broader European level, the financial framework is provided by the Ukraine Facility, with up to EUR 50 billion allocated for 2024–2027, together with the Ukraine Investment Framework. Following the agreements signed at the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2026 in Gdańsk, EU commitments under the UIF reached EUR 8.5 billion, with almost EUR 26 billion in investment expected to be mobilised [21]. This creates the conditions for a gradual shift from a predominantly grant-based model of support towards the systematic mobilisation of private capital and investment co-financing.

For this reason, the next stage in the development of cross-border cooperation should involve the creation of permanent economic clusters capable of generating

added value even after external funding has ended. In the Polish-Ukrainian area, promising fields include logistics, agri-food, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, defence technology, and IT; in the Carpathian region, tourism and recreation, medical rehabilitation, energy, and education; and in the Ukrainian-Romanian area, port logistics, agro-industry, and energy. Under this approach, the basic unit of planning should no longer be an individual project, but rather a functional chain of “infrastructure - production - human capital - financing - innovation - market,” in which each element contributes to the resilience of the system as a whole.

The Ukrainian-Moldovan dimension occupies a distinct place within this architecture. Both countries are advancing through parallel EU accession processes, while their transport, customs, energy, and digital systems are becoming increasingly integrated into common European frameworks [20]. This creates opportunities not only for bilateral coordination, but also for joint planning of TEN-T sections, border procedures, energy cooperation, and recovery projects. Within the proposed model, Moldova should therefore be viewed not as a peripheral direction, but as a partner in synchronised regulatory and infrastructure adaptation, strengthening the overall resilience of Ukraine's south-western vector.

The development of such clusters and infrastructure linkages is impossible without human capital capable of operating within a shared regulatory, technological, and professional environment. University cooperation should therefore gradually move beyond the model of “mobility as a visit” towards the joint development of educational provision, including double and joint degree programmes, micro-credentials, master's and postgraduate programmes, research networks, and lifelong learning. This approach is consistent with the logic of the European Universities Initiative [22] and Erasmus+ instruments, particularly Partnerships for Cooperation and Capacity Building in Higher Education [23]. In this context,

education is no longer merely a supporting social sphere, but becomes one of the structural mechanisms of cross-border development.

Strengthening educational integration, in turn, requires mechanisms that foster mutual trust and ensure comparability of quality. International accreditation therefore has strategic importance not as a reputational label, but as an instrument for enhancing confidence in learning outcomes, improving the comparability of academic programmes, and strengthening compatibility between quality assurance systems. Research on international accreditation within the European Higher Education Area confirms that cross-border accreditation has become an established practice among quality assurance agencies [24]. A key reference point within this framework is EQAR, the register of agencies that have demonstrated compliance with the ESG [25]. Ukrainian legislation provides for the recognition of accreditation decisions issued by designated foreign agencies [26], while the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance is developing the field of cross-border quality assurance [27]. The practical value of international accreditation, therefore, depends not on the mere fact of its international status, but on the quality of the procedure itself and its capacity to contribute to the genuine improvement of an educational programme.

This approach directly links the education system with the economic needs of the cross-border area. Logistics corridors require engineers and customs specialists; investment platforms need finance professionals, insurance experts, lawyers, and project managers; medical clusters depend on healthcare and rehabilitation professionals; and digital and energy integration requires IT specialists and engineers. Accordingly, the causal chain “economic specialisation - joint educational programmes - quality assurance - competencies - research - innovation - investment - cluster development” should be regarded not as a supplementary component, but as a structural element of the proposed model.

At the same time, the mere establishment of a joint educational programme or the award of international accreditation does not in itself guarantee an economic effect. Such an effect emerges only when educational instruments are closely aligned with the actual needs of the cross-border labour market and innovation system. For a logistics cluster, this means developing shared competencies in transport planning, customs regulation, and digital logistics; for a medical cluster, it involves training qualified professionals and ensuring mutual recognition of learning outcomes; and for a technology cluster, it requires the development of joint laboratories, R&D activities, and researcher mobility. In this way, the educational and research dimension supports the long-term reproduction of relevant competencies while simultaneously reducing institutional gaps between Ukrainian and European organisations.

Comparative international cases of cross-border economic and security resilience. To strengthen the

comparative dimension of the proposed model, the Ukrainian case can be examined alongside international examples representing different stages of cross-border integration. The most relevant cases are the Western Balkans as a model of pre-accession functional integration, the Baltic States as an example of the interaction between transport, energy, and security resilience, and the Nordic/Øresund region as a mature model of labour-market and institutional integration. Their value lies not in direct replication, but in identifying mechanisms that may be adapted to the Ukrainian context.

The experience of the Western Balkans shows that deeper economic integration can take place even before formal accession to the European Union. The EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans combines gradual access to elements of the Single Market with stronger regional economic cooperation, reform implementation, and increased pre-accession financing. Its priorities include the free movement of goods, services, and workers, access to SEPA, greater integration of transport and energy markets, participation in the digital economy, and closer involvement in European production and supply chains. The Reform and Growth Facility provides EUR 6 billion for 2024–2027 [28]. For Ukraine, this demonstrates that cross-border regions can serve as practical spaces for introducing EU-compatible rules, infrastructure, and economic mechanisms even before the accession process is completed.

The Baltic case illustrates how infrastructure integration can simultaneously strengthen both economic and security resilience. In 2025, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania synchronised their electricity systems with the Continental European Network via Poland, thereby reducing their strategic dependence on Russia and Belarus [29]. A similar logic underpins Rail Baltica, which combines transport integration with objectives related to economic development and regional security [30]. For Ukraine, this experience suggests that transport and energy corridors should be assessed not only in terms of commercial efficiency, but also in terms of their ability to diversify routes, reduce strategic vulnerabilities, and ensure the continuity of economic activity during crises.

The Nordic/Øresund region represents a more mature model of cross-border integration, where the emphasis is placed on reducing barriers to the movement of people, services, knowledge, and economic activity. A common labour market and intensive cross-border mobility are important elements of this integration [31]. At the same time, cooperation is supported by permanent institutional mechanisms, cross-border committees, and close interaction between local and regional authorities [32]. For Ukraine, this experience highlights that a resilient cross-border area cannot be built on infrastructure alone. It also requires stable institutions, labour mobility, educational cooperation, and lasting networks among municipalities, universities, and businesses.

The comparison reveals different drivers of cross-border resilience. In the Western Balkans, the main driver is regulatory and market convergence with the EU; in the Baltic States, it is the combination of strategic infrastructure, energy independence, and security; while in the Nordic region, it is the integration of labour markets and multi-level institutions. Ukraine combines elements

of all three models, as its border regions must simultaneously support wartime economic continuity, reconstruction, European integration, infrastructure diversification, and human capital development. This provides the basis for a distinctive Ukrainian model in which cross-border cooperation functions as an instrument of both resilience and European integration.

Table 2 Comparative international models of cross-border resilience and implications for Ukraine

Case	Primary integration driver	Institutional and infrastructure mechanisms	Market / security dimension	Human capital and governance	Main lesson for Ukraine
Western Balkans	EU accession and economic convergence	Common Regional Market; Single Market integration measures; SEPA; road, energy and digital integration; reform-linked financing	Progressive market integration before membership; regional stability reinforced through reforms and economic convergence	Institutional adaptation to EU rules; regional cooperation and administrative capacity	Use border regions as practical spaces for pre-accession regulatory, logistical, financial, and business integration
Baltic States	Strategic infrastructure and detachment from external dependencies	Electricity synchronisation with Continental Europe via Poland; Rail Baltica; TEN-T connectivity	Very strong: infrastructure supports market integration, energy security, route diversification, and common security	High level of interstate coordination and specialised implementation structures	Evaluate transport and energy infrastructure simultaneously as economic assets and resilience/security instruments
Nordic / Øresund	Mature functional integration of labour markets and territories	Cross-border commuting; municipal and regional cooperation; cross-border committees; coordinated public governance	Lower direct geopolitical component; strong emphasis on mobility, services, competitiveness, and removal of practical border barriers	Very strong: joint labour market, local governance, knowledge networks, and permanent coordination mechanisms	Build durable institutions and interoperable services, not only individual infrastructure projects
Ukraine–CEE	Wartime resilience, reconstruction, and accelerated EU integration	Solidarity Lanes; TEN-T integration; Interreg; energy and digital links; investment platforms; university networks	Very strong: trade continuity, security, investment risk reduction, and integration into the EU economic space are interdependent	Developing; requires stronger municipal, university, business, and multi-level governance networks	Combine accession logic, strategic infrastructure, institutional learning, and human-capital integration within one cross-border resilience architecture

Source: developed by the author based on [28–32].

The comparative matrix confirms that no single international model can be mechanically transferred to Ukraine. Rather, the relevant policy approach is selective institutional adaptation. From the Western Balkans, Ukraine can draw on the principle of staged integration into EU market mechanisms before full membership; from the Baltic States, on the treatment of energy and transport infrastructure as dual economic-security assets; and from the Nordic/Øresund area, on permanent multi-level institutions that remove practical barriers to mobility and cooperation. The proposed Ukrainian cross-border belt therefore should not reproduce one foreign model. Its comparative advantage lies in combining regulatory convergence, strategic connectivity, investment and risk-sharing mechanisms, local institutional capacity, labour-

market integration, and university-business cooperation within a single resilience framework.

Taken together, these interconnections provide a basis for moving beyond the analysis of individual areas of cooperation towards their integration within a single systemic model. The cross-border belt of economic and security resilience is proposed as a system of interconnected territories, institutions, and infrastructure nodes along Ukraine's western and south-western borders that are functionally integrated with the corresponding systems of EU member states and are capable of simultaneously supporting Ukraine's economic viability, crisis adaptability, and European integration (Fig.1).



Figure 1 – Structure of Ukraine’s Cross-Border Belt of Economic and Security Resilience

Source: developed by the author

A defining feature of the model is the mutual reinforcement of its interconnected dimensions: transport infrastructure enhances investment attractiveness; investment generates demand for skilled labour; universities develop the required competencies; quality assurance strengthens trust; research produces new technologies; financial and insurance mechanisms support their scaling; and security infrastructure reduces the risk of disruptions to economic activity.

Key constraints on the implementation of the model. The principal risks include the prolonged duration of the war and the resulting high level of investment risk; insufficient capacity at certain transport hubs; regulatory asymmetries with the EU internal market; uneven administrative capacity among local communities [2; 7]; and economic tensions with neighbouring countries in sectors where direct competition exists. The quality of strategic partnership will therefore depend on the ability to manage such conflicts without undermining long-term cooperation.

Strategic directions for improving cross-border partnership. Priority should be given to planning Ukraine’s western transport system in close coordination with TEN-T; developing long-term functional strategies for the Polish-Ukrainian, Carpathian, and Danube–Black Sea areas; using Interreg as an instrument of institutional learning; establishing investment platforms that support projects from initial preparation through insurance, guarantees, and capital mobilisation; promoting clusters built around shared economic specialisations; aligning joint educational programmes with recovery needs; and using international accreditation as a mechanism for improving quality and strengthening mutual trust.

Methodological limitation and direction for further verification. The proposed model is conceptual and analytical in nature. The functional specialisation of the partnership directions has been identified through a qualitative comparison of policy documents, programmes, and academic sources rather than through the calculation of an integrated index. The next stage of the research should therefore focus on empirical verification using indicators such as freight and passenger flows, trade and investment volumes, the number of joint projects, the intensity of inter-university cooperation, the availability of insurance and guarantee instruments, and border-crossing capacity. This would make it possible to compare individual cross-border directions over time and to assess not only the existence of cooperation instruments, but also their actual contribution to resilience.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. The findings of this study suggest that Ukraine’s strategic partnership with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is acquiring a new substance. It is no longer limited to a set of bilateral agreements, cross-border programmes, or individual infrastructure projects, but is gradually evolving into an interconnected system in which Ukraine’s western and south-western borders simultaneously perform economic, transport, financial, security, institutional, and educational and research functions.

Within this system, economic resilience is directly dependent on security, while security, in turn, relies on the capacity of the economy and institutions to maintain the continuity of critical processes. The reliability of transport routes determines the stability of external trade; access to insurance, guarantees, and financing

affects investment activity; energy and digital compatibility supports the continuity of production; the institutional capacity of regions and local communities determines their ability to work effectively with European resources and regulatory frameworks; and human capital enables the implementation of complex investment, technological, and recovery projects. These dimensions should therefore be considered not in isolation, but as interdependent elements of a single cross-border space.

The analysis also demonstrates that the effectiveness of strategic partnership depends on the appropriate functional specialisation of individual cooperation directions. The Polish, Carpathian, Danube–Black Sea, Czech, and Ukrainian-Moldovan vectors should not develop according to a uniform model. Their strength lies precisely in their complementarity across logistics, finance, energy, industry, technology, institutions, and education. This implies that future cross-border policy should be organised not around individual grants or projects, but around long-term functional chains in which infrastructure, production, financing, human capital, innovation, and markets form an integrated system.

The educational and research component occupies a particularly important place within this architecture. Without systematic human capital development, even

large-scale transport, investment, or cluster initiatives will remain constrained by skills shortages and differences in professional and institutional standards. Joint educational programmes, university networks, academic mobility, research cooperation, and international quality assurance should therefore be directly linked to the needs of cross-border labour markets, investment platforms, and economic clusters. From this perspective, education is not an additional element of economic integration, but one of the mechanisms that ensures its long-term resilience.

Further development of the proposed model requires a transition from conceptual analysis to empirical measurement. A promising direction for future research is the development of a system of indicators capable of assessing the intensity of transport, investment, production, institutional, and educational linkages between Ukraine and its partner countries, comparing the effectiveness of different cross-border directions, and identifying the factors that contribute most strongly to resilience under crisis conditions. Such an approach would make it possible to move beyond a general assessment of strategic partnership towards practical models for managing cross-border development in the context of Ukraine's recovery and its further integration into the European Union.

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