

RESEARCH ON THE FORCED MIGRATION FROM THE CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION PERSPECTIVE

Paul-Panfil IVAN

*Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, 720229, Romania
paul.ivan@usm.ro*

Abstract

The war on the borders of Romania and the European Union has not only caused forced population movements but also economic imbalances at the European and global levels, as well as significant societal changes. Last but not least, at the level of European institutions, the direction of funding has been altered to assist the Ukrainian people, the success of military defence operations and the reconstruction of affected areas. Also, the financing programs aimed to foster economic, social and cultural ties between the cross-border regions on both sides of the border were affected.

This is particularly concerning since most of these projects included activities aimed at target groups and the population in cross-border regions, including Ukrainians. The purpose of this paper is to analyse, based on a survey addressed to the project teams involved in the Romania-Ukraine 2014-2020 program, how the refugee crisis from Ukraine has impacted the implementation of cross-border projects, especially the activities involving target groups and also the solutions that have been found to achieve the proposed project indicators. The research results have shown that many of the projects encountered difficulties in organizing activities for the target groups due to the refugee crisis, and some were suspended or irrevocably delayed. Moreover, entire project teams found themselves as refugees, receiving support from their colleagues in Romania

Key words: migration, forced migration, refugee crisis, cross-border cooperation, projects, target groups

JEL Classification: F22, F24, O15

I. INTRODUCTION

The war has caused significant economic upheavals, exacerbating existing imbalances and introducing new challenges. According to a report by the European Commission, the conflict has driven up energy prices, disrupted supply chains, and fuelled inflation across the continent (Maurer, Whitman et al., 2023). These economic shocks have been particularly acute in countries bordering Ukraine, such as Poland and Romania, which have also faced substantial societal pressures due to the influx of refugees. Also, the war has exacerbated Europe's energy crisis, leading to increased energy prices and a need for rapid diversification of energy sources (Kochan, 2022). Poland, heavily reliant on Russian energy, has had to make significant adjustments, including increased coal usage and expedited development of liquified natural gas infrastructure. This shift has impacted energy costs and inflation within the country (Jenkins, 2023).

Both Romania and Poland had received a substantial number of refugees from Ukraine, adding significant pressure to its social services and infrastructure. This influx has required considerable investment in housing, healthcare, and education to accommodate the new arrivals. The integration of a large number of refugees has also impacted the labour market – while there are benefits such as increased labour supply in certain sectors, there are also challenges related to social integration and provision of adequate public services. These pressures are evident in the strain on healthcare and education systems, which have had to expand rapidly to meet increased demand (Piotr, 2023).

The conflict in Ukraine, particularly following Russia's invasion in 2022, has led to profound disruptions in European Union (EU) funding mechanisms and cross-border cooperation programs. In response to these disruptions, the European Commission has enacted several measures to ensure the continuity of essential cross-border programs. These measures include 100% co-financing for projects with Ukraine and Moldova, allowing for the continuation of support for local schools, hospitals, and social care institutions despite the war. The flexibility introduced in funding mechanisms aims to mitigate the immediate impacts of the conflict and sustain long-term cooperation objectives (European Commission, ec.europa.eu).

The cross-border cooperation program between Romania and Ukraine for the 2014-2020 funding period was part of the European Union's European Neighbourhood Instrument and focused on enhancing cooperation and promoting sustainable development in the border regions of the two countries.

The program addresses the border area between Romania and Ukraine and contributes to the overall objective of the European Neighbourhood Instrument: evolution towards a region of prosperity and good

neighbourliness, achieved through cross border cooperation actions to the benefit of neighbouring EU Member and Non-member States. The program area consists of Romanian counties of Satu Mare, Maramures, Botosani, Suceava, Tulcea and Ukrainian oblasts of Ivano-Frankivsk, Zakarpatska, Chernivtsi, Odessa, Kiev (Ukraine) and Bucharest (Romania) are included in the Programme area as major centres. Organizations from the major centres may participate as partners in equal conditions as the organisations located into the core area only in large Infrastructure projects. The programme has been prepared by the Joint Programme Committee with consultation of stakeholders from the programme area. The programme was approved by the European Commission in December 2015 and 66 projects were selected, with a budget of 65.577.201,7 Euro for the following priorities: support to education, research, technological development and innovation, promotion of the local culture and preservation of historical heritage, improvement of accessibility to the regions, development of transport and common networks and systems, common challenges in the field of safety and security (Managing Authority, <https://ro-ua.net>).

On February 22, 2022, the Russian aggression against Ukraine significantly escalated, leading to widespread geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian repercussions. This day marked a significant escalation in the conflict, with wide-ranging consequences that continue to shape global politics, economics, and humanitarian efforts. Millions of Ukrainians fled the conflict, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries such as Poland, Romania, and Hungary. This created one of the largest refugee crises in recent history, with substantial humanitarian aid required to support the displaced populations.

Russia's aggression began in 2022, continuing in the last two years of the program's execution, virtually freezing the implemented projects, after they had already endured nearly two years of the pandemic. This is particularly concerning since most of these projects included activities aimed at target groups and the population in cross-border regions, including Ukrainians. The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and Interreg programs have faced significant challenges due to the war. Many projects, particularly those under the Romania-Ukraine cross-border cooperation program for the 2014-2020 period, have been halted or delayed. These programs, designed to foster economic, social, and cultural ties, were critically affected by the geopolitical instability.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research tried to analyse how the projects under implementation were affected by the refugee crisis in Ukraine in the context where the war broke out with less than two years of implementation remaining (the maximum period in which the project can be extended). As of February 22, 2022, the day the Russian aggression against Ukraine escalated, a significant portion of the cross-border cooperation projects between Romania and Ukraine were actively being implemented. Specifically, 58 out of 66 projects, representing approximately 88% of the total, were still in progress. This high level of engagement underscores the commitment and resilience of the project teams in maintaining collaborative efforts despite the brewing geopolitical tensions. In terms of beneficiary involvement, 188 out of 196 beneficiaries continued their participation in the project implementation. This equates to nearly 96% of the beneficiaries actively engaged, highlighting the robust participation and dedication to the success of these initiatives.

The beneficiaries were almost evenly split between the two countries, with 96 beneficiaries from Romania, accounting for 51%, and 92 beneficiaries from Ukraine, making up 49%. This balanced representation illustrates the cooperative spirit and mutual investment in the cross-border projects aimed at fostering regional development, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation. These data points from the onset of the Russian aggression indicate the strong foundation and commitment to cross-border cooperation, which faced severe challenges in the subsequent period due to the unfolding conflict.

As we mentioned before the objective of this research is to analyse the impact of the Ukrainian refugee crisis on the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects between Romania and Ukraine. Specifically, the research seeks to validate the following hypotheses:

1. All projects under implementation have been affected by the refugee crisis in Ukraine;
2. More than 50% of the projects suspended their activity in the first months of the refugee crisis;
3. More than 90% of the projects faced challenges in carrying out activities with the target groups.

The primary data collection tool used in this research was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gather comprehensive information on how the Ukrainian refugee crisis has impacted project implementation. The questionnaire was distributed to all 58 projects that were under implementation at the time of the outbreak of the war in February 2022. This included projects that were eventually completed by the time of the survey. For some projects, the surveys were administered directly during on-site meetings with Lead Partners to ensure detailed and accurate responses. Respondents were given a period of three weeks to complete

and return the questionnaire, with the data collection period occurring in September 2024.

The collected data was subject to both quantitative and qualitative analysis: statistical methods were used to determine the prevalence and extent of the impacts reported, including calculating percentages and averages and responses were qualitatively analysed to understand the nature of the challenges faced and the effectiveness of the mitigation strategies employed.

This research methodology was designed to provide a thorough and systematic examination of how the Ukrainian refugee crisis has affected cross-border cooperation projects. By leveraging a detailed questionnaire and robust analysis techniques, the study aimed to generate valuable insights that can inform future project planning and crisis management strategies.

III. INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

The Ukrainian refugee crisis, triggered by the Russian aggression on February 22, 2022, has profoundly affected various aspects of regional stability and development. Cross-border cooperation projects between Romania and Ukraine, aimed at fostering mutual growth and collaboration, have faced unprecedented challenges due to this crisis. Understanding the specific impacts on these projects is crucial for developing strategies to enhance resilience and ensure the continuity of cooperation in such volatile contexts.

The data collected from the questionnaires was analysed to test the three research hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** To test if all projects were affected, responses indicating any form of impact from the crisis (e.g., delays, increased costs, logistical challenges) will be analysed.
- **Hypothesis 2:** The proportion of projects that suspended their activities in the initial months of the crisis will be calculated. If more than 50% of respondents report suspension, the hypothesis will be supported.
- **Hypothesis 3:** The data on challenges faced in engaging with target groups will be scrutinized. If more than 90% of respondents indicate facing such challenges, this hypothesis will be validated.

The comprehensive methodology presented before and the detailed questionnaire interpretation provide insights into the resilience and adaptability of cross-border cooperation projects in the face of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The following charts illustrate key findings from the survey, highlighting the extent of the crisis's impact, the specific challenges faced, and the solutions implemented to navigate through the disruptions. These visual representations offer a clear and concise overview of how the Ukrainian refugee crisis has reshaped the landscape of cross-border cooperation between Romania and Ukraine.

The first question was related with the impact of the refugee crisis on project implementation and as we can see in the chart below 51 out of 58 projects were impacted by the refugee crisis, with only 7 projects reporting no impact.

The overwhelming majority of projects (88%) experienced disruptions, underscoring the widespread effect of the refugee crisis. This finding highlights the pervasive nature of the crisis and its ability to affect almost all aspects of cross-border cooperation, from logistical challenges to resource reallocation.

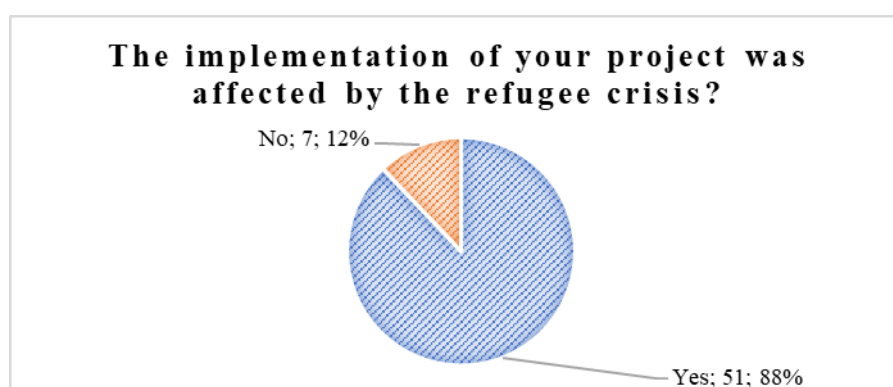


Figure 1 – Number of projects affected by the refugee crisis

Regarding the project suspension the results of the questionnaire shows that only 10 projects suspended activities due to the refugee crisis, while 48 projects continued without suspension. Despite the significant disruptions, the majority of projects did not suspend their activities. Instead, they adapted by extending timelines and modifying plans. This resilience highlights the determination of project teams to fulfil their objectives despite adverse conditions.

The next chart categorizes the types of impacts, showing that partners were involved in managing

refugees (48 projects), project teams became refugees (3 projects), financial resources were redirected to refugees (32 projects), and target groups included refugees (19 projects).

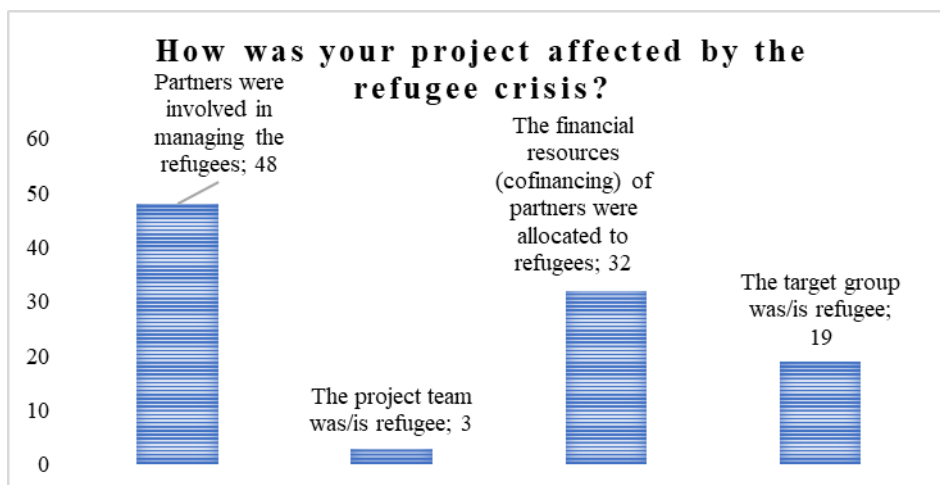


Figure 2 – Types of impact on projects' implementation

The chart indicates significant shifts in project priorities and resource allocation. The high involvement in refugee management and financial redirection demonstrates the projects' adaptive responses to urgent humanitarian needs, while also highlighting the strain on original project goals.

The next question outlines target group challenges such as delayed activities (33 projects), reduced target group (16 projects), increased target group (4 projects), hybrid/online activities (36 projects), harder to involve target group (7 projects) and involvement of refugees in activities (9 projects).

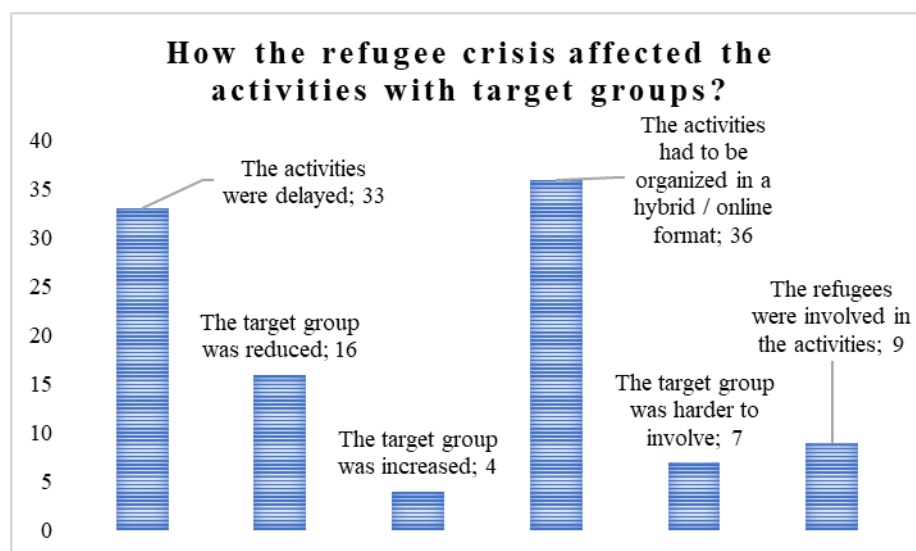


Figure 3 – Challenges with target groups of the projects

The data shows that the crisis necessitated major adjustments in project execution. The shift to hybrid/online formats and the difficulties in engaging target groups reflect the operational challenges posed by the crisis. Additionally, the inclusion of refugees in project activities indicates an expansion of project scope to address emerging needs.

Regarding the solutions we can say that some project beneficiaries had to find quite innovative options – various solutions were employed, including temporary suspension (10 projects), extension/rescheduling (41 projects), hybrid/online formats (36 projects), redirection of deliverables to the refugee crisis (18 projects) and budget updates to assist refugees (9 projects).

The chart below illustrates the diverse strategies adopted to manage the crisis. The primary reliance on extending project timelines and shifting to online formats shows flexibility in project management. Redirecting deliverables and updating budgets to support refugees further demonstrates again a commitment to addressing

immediate humanitarian concerns.

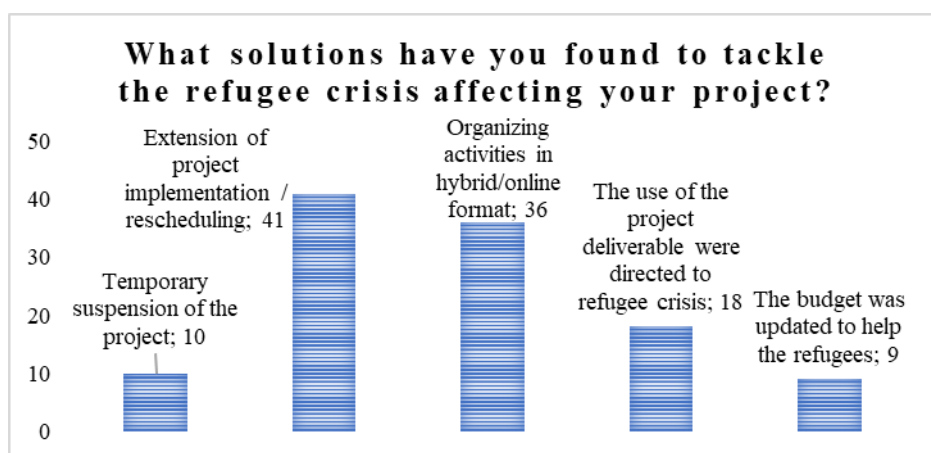


Figure 4 – Solutions to tackle the crisis used by the projects

The answers to last question indicate that 54 projects managed to overcome the crisis, while 4 projects continued to face challenges but they are certain that until the end of project implementation the crisis will be managed, as we can see from the chart below:

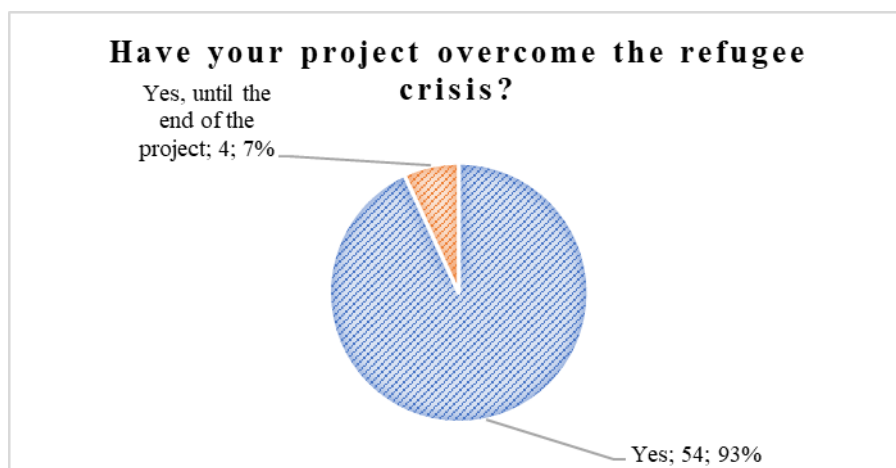


Figure 5 – Overcoming the refugee crisis

The ability of 54 projects to successfully navigate the crisis indicates strong adaptive capacities and effective crisis management. However, the ongoing challenges faced by 4 projects suggest that some issues require sustained efforts and additional support to be fully resolved.

IV.CONCLUSION

The analysis confirms the substantial impact of the Ukrainian refugee crisis on cross-border cooperation projects, highlighting both the challenges faced and the resilience demonstrated by project teams. Here, we delve into detailed conclusions aligned with each research hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 1: All projects under implementation have been affected by the refugee crisis in Ukraine

The data strongly supports this hypothesis. Out of 58 projects surveyed, 51 reported being affected by the refugee crisis. This high percentage (approximately 88%) demonstrates the widespread and pervasive impact of the crisis on the projects. The disruptions ranged from logistical challenges and reallocation of resources to direct involvement in refugee management, indicating that no aspect of the projects remained untouched by the crisis.

- More than 50% of the projects suspended their activity in the first months of the refugee crisis

The findings challenge this hypothesis. Only 10 out of 58 projects (17%) reported suspending their activities due to the refugee crisis. While a majority of projects did not suspend their activities, many adapted by extending their implementation timelines or modifying their operational plans. This suggests that while initial disruptions were significant, the overall approach leaned more towards adaptation and continuation rather than

suspension.

- More than 90% of the projects tackled the problems in carrying out the activities with the target groups

The data supports this hypothesis, as the majority of the projects reported facing challenges in engaging with their target groups. Specific issues included delays in activities (reported by 33 projects), reduced target group size (16 projects), increased target group (4 projects), the need to organize activities in hybrid/online formats (36 projects) and difficulties in involving the target group (7 projects). This comprehensive array of challenges highlights the significant impact on target group engagement, with projects having to employ various strategies to address these issues.

As we can see a predominant solution for managing the crisis was the extension or rescheduling of project timelines, as reported by 41 out of 58 projects. This approach allowed projects to accommodate delays and disruptions while still aiming to achieve their objectives. Also, the shift to hybrid or online formats for activities was a crucial adaptation, reported by 36 projects. This transition enabled continuity of operations and engagement with target groups despite physical and logistical barriers.

The reallocation of financial resources to support refugee-related activities was reported by 32 projects. This reallocation reflects the projects' responsiveness to immediate humanitarian needs, though it also underscores the financial strain on achieving original project goals. The involvement of project partners in managing refugees (reported by 48 projects) and the transformation of some project teams into refugees themselves (reported by 3 projects) indicate significant human resource challenges. These factors necessitated adjustments in project management and operations.

The findings provide valuable insights for future crisis management strategies and underscore the importance of flexibility, resource reallocation, and innovative solutions in maintaining project continuity and achieving objectives in the face of significant disruptions.

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