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*European Territorial Cooperation and Ethnicity: Interreg Projects
as Instruments of Minority Integration*

Europejska Współpraca Terytorialna wobec etniczności: projekty Interreg jako narzędzia integracji mniejszości

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze the ways in which issues related to ethnicity and ethnic minorities are addressed in projects implemented under the European Union's cross-border cooperation instrument (Interreg). The main research question is: How do Interreg projects engage with the topics of ethnicity and minority integration? Three hypotheses are proposed: (1) ethnicity is primarily treated as a cultural resource; (2) the type of program influences the framing of ethnic issues; (3) post-conflict programs are more likely to include components of civic education and dialogue. The study is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of 211 projects referencing ethnicity, identified in the KEEP.eu database. Projects were classified by program type (including IPA CBC, PEACE, ENI CBC, Interreg CBC) and thematically coded. The findings confirm the dominance of a cultural narrative: ethnicity is viewed as an element of heritage and identity. The approach varies depending on the nature of the program and the geographical context – more political in post-conflict regions, more symbolic within the European Union (EU). EU values (equality, integration, minority rights) are present, though most often in a declarative form. The article concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening Interreg's potential as an instrument of social cohesion and equality.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation, ethnicity, ethnic minorities, social integration, cohesion policy, Interreg, European Union values, civic education, post-conflict programmes

INTRODUCTION

Phenomena related to ethnicity and the presence of national and ethnic minorities represent significant political, social, and administrative challenges for contemporary European states [Czaja 2008: 150–185; Matuszczyk 2016: 181–206]. In an era of increasing mobility, identity tensions, and intensified migration flows, the issue of minority integration is gaining prominence both in political discourse and in the practice of public governance. At the same time, at the level of the European Union, growing emphasis is being placed on the values of equality, cultural diversity, and social cohesion – principles that underpin the EU's cohesion policy and funding programmes [Woźniak 2021: 51–72].

Within this context, particular importance is attached to Interreg, one of the instruments of European Territorial Cooperation. Since its launch in 1990, Interreg has supported cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation, enabling the implementation of joint projects that transcend national boundaries [European Commission 2020]. While the instrument initially focused primarily on preparing border regions for functioning within an integrated European space, it now also encompasses social and cultural initiatives [Medeiros 2018: 1].

Existing research on cross-border cooperation rarely provides a systematic analysis of projects undertaken for the benefit of ethnic minorities within the framework of Interreg, particularly from a comparative and empirical perspective. These studies primarily focus on areas such as project management [Marx 2017: 1–45; Giordano, Greco 2024: 760–780], attempts to assess the effectiveness of Interreg programmes [Haarich, Salvatori, Toptsidou 2019: 1–14], or the presentation of the regional context [Dolzblasz 2010: 25–35; Nowińska-Łażewska, Nowak 2007: 27–45; Reitel, Wassenberg, Peyrony 2018: 7–23].

It is precisely in border regions – where different languages, cultures, and traditions intersect – that the demand for instruments supporting social integration and counteracting exclusion is the greatest. These areas can also serve as testing grounds for models of ethnic policy under conditions of international cooperation.

The aim of this article is to analyze projects implemented under the Interreg instrument across four consecutive financial perspectives: 2000–2006, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, and 2021–2027, whose content directly relates to ethnic minorities and ethnic policy. The study is exploratory in nature and combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis focuses on the thematic classification of projects, the identification of their geographical scope, and the evolution of activities over time. Particular attention is given to assessing the extent to which Interreg supports local and regional integration processes and contributes to the implementation of equality policy and social cohesion in multiethnic societies.

The starting point of this study is the following research question: How do projects implemented under the Interreg instrument address the issues of ethnicity and ethnic minorities? This question entails an analysis not only of the frequency

but also of the manner in which these topics are framed in territorial cooperation projects carried out under Interreg – one of the key instruments of the European Union's cohesion policy.

The study does not limit itself to verifying whether the topic of ethnicity is present; rather, it focuses on the social, cultural, and political functions attributed to ethnicity in project documentation. Specifically, it examines whether ethnicity is treated as a value, a challenge, a source of social problems, or perhaps as an element of regional identity that contributes to the construction of cross-border ties.

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the ways in which ethnicity is conceptualized in projects co-financed by Interreg programmes. This involves an attempt to understand how project initiators – that is, public institutions, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, and other partners – define ethnicity and ethnic minorities within the context of territorial cooperation. The study also seeks to identify the dominant narratives present in these projects.

Based on preliminary observations and the theoretical framework, three research hypotheses have been formulated:

- 1) Projects implemented under the Interreg instrument primarily treat ethnicity as a cultural resource. This hypothesis assumes that ethnicity is predominantly presented as an element of cultural heritage, diversity, and local identity, which can be leveraged as a potential driver of regional development – for example, in tourism, education, or cultural promotion.
- 2) The type of Interreg programme influences the framing of ethnic issues. It is assumed that different types of programmes (such as Interreg CBC, IPA CBC, ENI CBC, or PEACE) shape varying approaches to ethnicity. Programmes involving non-EU countries are more likely to address themes related to integration and social inclusion, while intra-EU programmes may tend to emphasize the promotion of local heritage.
- 3) Peace-oriented programmes (e.g. PEACE) are more likely to include elements of civic education and intercultural dialogue.

In regions with a history of ethnic tensions (such as Northern Ireland), it is assumed that projects will place greater emphasis on social reconciliation, counteracting polarization, and promoting civic engagement and attitudes of tolerance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In studying the integration of ethnic minorities within the context of public policy and cross-border cooperation, it is essential to adopt an interdisciplinary theoretical approach. This area intersects with issues from political science, sociology, administrative studies, and European Union studies. The present analysis focuses in particular on three key concepts: ethnicity, ethnic policy, and cross-border

cooperation as an instrument for advancing the values and objectives of the EU's integration policy.

The concept of ethnicity is multidimensional, encompassing both the subjective sense of belonging to a community and objective cultural characteristics such as language, religion, history, and tradition. According to Fredrik Barth, ethnicity is based more on symbolic boundaries than on cultural content – meaning that the way in which “we” and “they” are defined is of central importance [Straczuk 2006: 158]. Ethnic minorities, in turn, are defined as social groups that differ from the majority in cultural or linguistic terms. Henryk Chałupczak and Tomasz Browarek define an “ethnic minority” as “a community composed of citizens of a given state, formed as a result of a historical process, possessing a sense of distinctiveness and stable forms of integration based on shared origin, language, or religion, but without aspirations formulated in terms of statehood” [Chałupczak, Browarek 1998: 15].

In the context of public policy, it is widely accepted that the integration of minorities does not equate to their assimilation, but rather entails ensuring equal opportunities for participation in social, economic, and political life while preserving cultural identity [Kymlicka 2007: 585–597; Medda-Windischer 2017: 25–42].

The European Union does not possess a unified, community-level ethnic policy. Actions in this area are primarily undertaken by the Member States [Chabasińska 2017: 63–76; Godlewska 2017: 91–102; Trzcielińska-Polus 2017: 113–124; Kowalewska 2017: 125–132]. However, the EU promotes principles of equal treatment, non-discrimination, and the protection of minority rights. In practice, many initiatives are implemented at the regional level – through structural funds, operational programmes, and instruments such as Interreg.

EU immigration policy, by contrast, has evolved from the full dominance of nation-states to a gradual process of community-level coordination in the areas of migration, asylum, and integration. A turning point came with the migration crisis of 2015, which exposed systemic shortcomings and reinforced tendencies toward securitization. Today, EU policy balances between border protection and its declared values of solidarity and human rights [Janusz 2017: 17–34].

As Izabela Zabielska observes, cross-borderity is analyzed from various perspectives, as cross-border relations occur at multiple levels – from the global, through the subregional, down to the local [Zabielska 2013: 50]. Cross-border cooperation conducted along both the internal and external borders of the European Union depends on a wide range of factors. Key among them are: differing directions and paces of integration processes, the specific characteristics of a given border and its degree of permeability, institutional differences, and unequal levels of socio-economic development [Jakubowski, Bronisz, Miszczyk 2020: 74].

This cooperation is implemented through the Interreg programmes, which currently comprise:

- 64 cross-border cooperation programmes on both the internal and external borders of the EU, aimed at improving citizens' quality of life by increasing

access to services and new opportunities (49 internal programmes, 24 external programmes, including 10 IPA and 14 NEXT, as well as the PEACE+ programme) [European Commission 2021a];

- 4 interregional cooperation programmes, supporting capacity building and collaboration among cities and regions across Europe [European Commission 2021b];
- 14 transnational cooperation programmes, enabling joint problem-solving and the exchange of best practices within defined geographic areas [European Commission 2021c];
- 5 programmes covering the EU's outermost regions, supporting their cooperation with their nearest geographical neighbours [European Commission 2021d].

Within the framework of the aforementioned programmes, it is possible to implement projects that address ethnic-related challenges – such as joint education initiatives, support for migrants, the promotion of minority cultural heritage, or efforts to combat social exclusion. As a result, cross-border cooperation can be viewed as a tool of ethnic policy, even if it is not formally defined as such.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to identify projects implemented under the Interreg instrument that address the themes of ethnicity, ethnic minorities, and social integration. A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining content analysis of project descriptions with statistical analysis of thematic and geographical distributions.

The empirical material consists of a dataset of projects co-financed under Interreg programmes across four consecutive financial perspectives (starting from 2000), identified using the following keywords: “ethnicity”, “ethnic minorities”, and “ethnic policy”. The data were sourced from the open-access KEEP.eu database, which collects information on all projects implemented under European Territorial Cooperation, including Interreg A, B, and C. Out of several thousand projects, a subset of 211 was selected – each containing at least one of the specified expressions in its description.

The study employed a mixed-methods design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative elements. The objective was to examine Interreg projects whose descriptions in the KEEP.eu database referred to issues of ethnicity, ethnic minorities, and social integration. The research process consisted of four main stages: content analysis, thematic classification, geographical analysis, and longitudinal comparative analysis.

Content analysis involved the systematic review of project descriptions available in the KEEP.eu database. The key criterion was the presence of references to ethnic minorities, social integration, equality, multiculturalism, or activities targeted at specific minority groups (e.g. migrants, indigenous populations). This analysis enabled the identification of a project sample that met the inclusion criteria for the study:

- the term “ethnic” appears in the descriptions of 166 projects – making it the most frequently used term;
- the phrase “ethnic minorities” is found in 34 projects;
- the term “ethnicity” appears least frequently – only in 17 projects.¹

In total, 166 projects include at least one of the analyzed terms.

Despite efforts to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, several important limitations must be acknowledged that may affect the interpretation of results and the scope of conclusions.

First, a major limitation of this study is the restricted informational content of project descriptions available in the KEEP.eu database. The analyzed descriptions are often abbreviated, inconsistently formatted, and lacking in detailed information regarding social objectives, implementation strategies, target groups, or outcomes. In many cases, the content is limited to general declarations (e.g. “supporting co-operation”, “cultural activities”) without specifying concrete mechanisms, tools, or results. This characteristic of the source material limits the ability to fully reconstruct the intentions and actual scope of project activities, which may lead to either underestimation or overestimation of the presence of ethnic components. In particular, it was difficult to precisely distinguish between projects that merely declare openness to diversity and those that genuinely implement integration measures.

Second, another limitation is the lack of access to comprehensive data on final outcomes and the actual impact of the analyzed projects. The KEEP.eu database focuses primarily on formal and descriptive aspects – it contains information on objectives, partners, budgets, and general outlines of activities. However, it lacks systematically collected evaluation data that would enable an assessment of effectiveness, sustainability of results, or the degree of minority community engagement. As a result, the study does not allow for a full evaluation of the practical or social effectiveness of the projects.

Third, particular caution is required when analyzing projects from the 2021–2027 programming period. As many of these projects are still ongoing, the available data are fragmentary, and their results are not yet known. This makes it impossible to conduct a fully comparative analysis with previous periods (2000–2006, 2007–2013, and 2014–2020) and requires that conclusions regarding the most recent projects be treated as preliminary and open to revision in subsequent phases of research.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis of the project database indicates that issues related to ethnicity and ethnic minorities appear across all types of Interreg programmes. However, the highest concentration of ethnicity-related projects is observed within three main categories:

¹ Some project descriptions contained more than one of the specified terms, which is why the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of projects analyzed.

- IPA CBC – covering cooperation with candidate countries for EU accession, primarily in the Balkans. Projects in this group often focus on building social and educational capacities in the context of national and ethnic minorities;
- ENI CBC – neighbourhood programmes implemented with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. In these projects, ethnicity is sometimes framed as an element of multicultural promotion, but also as a challenge linked to democratization and social integration;
- Interreg CBC (Cross-Border Cooperation) – programmes carried out within the EU, involving cross-border cooperation between regions of Member States. These projects typically address ethnicity in the context of promoting cultural heritage and regional identity.

It is worth noting that a number of projects were classified as “Other/Unclassified”. These are primarily older projects (from the 2000–2006 period) that do not clearly align with the current typology of programme categories. Their presence in the dataset indicates that ethnic-related themes were present in Interreg initiatives even at earlier stages, albeit in a less systematic manner than today.

Among the analyzed projects, three main thematic categories are particularly prominent: ethnicity as a resource, education and youth, and EU values.

The first of these categories – ethnicity as a resource – is by far the most frequently represented. Projects in this group focus on the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, support for ethnic identity, and the organization of cultural events such as festivals, exhibitions, or tourist routes. This approach frames ethnic diversity as a developmental asset that reinforces local identity and fosters integration, rather than as a source of social tension. It reflects the dominance of an affirmative and cultural narrative.

The second most frequently observed category is education and youth. This includes educational initiatives targeting children, youth, and teachers – such as exchange programmes, workshops, summer schools, and school-based activities promoting tolerance. These projects operate on the assumption that civic education and intercultural dialogue from an early age are key to achieving intercultural cohesion.

References to EU values – such as equality, diversity, social inclusion, and minority rights – are also commonly found in project descriptions. These values are often used as reference points for project activities and serve to legitimize project interventions. In practice, they are reflected in efforts to promote integration, combat discrimination, and foster an open civil society.

In contrast, topics of significant social importance but less prominently featured in the projects include dialogue and reconciliation as well as ethnicity as a challenge. Dialogue and reconciliation, despite their importance, appear only in selected programmes – primarily within PEACE (Northern Ireland) and, to some extent, IPA CBC (the Balkans). These projects attempt to foster social trust in regions affected by past ethnic conflicts. Their relative scarcity outside these areas may indicate an underutilization of the Interreg programme as a tool for social reconciliation.

References to conflict, tension, marginalization, or ethnic exclusion – i.e. ethnicity as a challenge – are very rare. Projects in this category are few in number, which may suggest that the topic of ethnic conflict is often overlooked or addressed only indirectly. The prevailing tendency is to avoid controversial subjects in favor of “soft” and positive initiatives, which may limit the projects’ capacity to effectively address structural inequalities.

Clear differences in how ethnic themes are approached can be observed depending on the type of programme:

- PEACE – focuses on EU values, social dialogue, and educational activities related to memory, identity, and peace. This post-conflict programme is specifically aimed at fostering reconciliation within communities in Northern Ireland;
- IPA CBC – frequently emphasizes civic education, integration efforts, and support for national minorities in candidate countries, particularly in regions affected by ethnic tensions;
- ENI CBC – combines elements of education and EU values with the promotion of equality, social cooperation, and intercultural exchange with the EU’s neighbouring countries;
- Interreg CBC (within the EU) – is largely centered on promoting local cultural heritage and shared identity in cross-border regions.

The analysis of projects implemented under Interreg programmes indicates that ethnicity and cultural diversity are significant, though not unambiguously defined, themes.

Firstly, the majority of projects referring to ethnicity adopt an affirmative narrative, treating ethnic diversity as a cultural asset, a component of regional identity, and a developmental potential – especially in the context of tourism, education, or the promotion of local culture. This approach reflects a high level of cultural sensitivity and aligns with the official discourse of the European Union, which promotes equality, diversity, and social inclusion.

At the same time, there is a clear tendency to avoid the themes of conflict, marginalization, or structural inequality. Projects rarely address the issue of social exclusion of ethnic minorities, historical tensions, or the contemporary challenges of integration. Instead, “soft” activities – educational, promotional, or cultural – tend to dominate. While these initiatives are important, they do not necessarily lead to lasting institutional change.

Differences in how ethnicity is addressed are partly dependent on the type of programme and the geographical context. In the analyzed Interreg projects, it is evident that the framing of ethnicity varies according to the type of programme and its political and territorial setting. While the theme of ethnic minorities plays an important role in all cases, its significance, function, and narrative assume different forms.

The highest number of “ethnic projects” was identified within the IPA CBC programme – an instrument of cooperation with EU candidate countries, particularly

those in the Western Balkans (e.g. Serbia, Albania, Montenegro). In these projects, ethnicity frequently carries post-conflict and identity-related dimensions. It often concerns efforts to overcome the consequences of historical divisions, to foster dialogue between national groups, and to build a new, inclusive social space. Many of these projects focus on integrating communities that previously existed under conditions of pronounced ethnic tension.

In contrast, Interreg CBC programmes – representing classic cross-border co-operation between regions of EU Member States – tend to frame ethnicity in more cultural and educational terms. Here, minorities are primarily perceived as carriers of cross-border cultural heritage, and project activities focus on the promotion of language, tradition, shared history, and local identity. Dominant initiatives include festivals, tourism-related events, and educational programmes – often implemented as cultural partnerships between borderland communities.

Within the ENI CBC framework – cooperation programmes with non-EU neighbouring countries such as Ukraine or Moldova – the topic of ethnicity acquires a more concrete social dimension. Projects in this group frequently address the strengthening of social integration, counteracting exclusion, and fostering cooperation in contexts marked by challenging geopolitical conditions. Ethnicity is not merely a cultural value here, but also a politically sensitive factor, requiring deliberate efforts to promote stability and social inclusion.

A distinct category within the examined dataset consists of projects implemented under the PEACE programme, focused on Northern Ireland and its border with the Republic of Ireland. In this context, ethnicity – understood through the lenses of religion, political identity, and collective memory – assumes a fundamentally political dimension. These projects primarily concentrate on reconciliation, dialogue-building, and intercultural education. The objective is not merely to promote diversity, but more importantly, to foster peaceful coexistence and address the consequences of historical conflict.

In summary, while ethnicity appears across all the programmes discussed, its function and narrative tone vary significantly depending on the local context. It may be understood as a source of trauma and a call for reconciliation (as in PEACE), a tool for social integration and combating exclusion (as in ENI CBC and IPA CBC), or a cultural resource and component of shared heritage (as in Interreg CBC). This variability demonstrates how deeply the concept of ethnicity is embedded in political, historical, and geographical contexts – and how differently it can be mobilized within EU cooperation instruments.

Finally, although EU values – such as equality, inclusion, and minority rights – are frequently referenced in project descriptions, their role often remains declarative. These values tend to function more as an ideological framework than as instruments of tangible social control or institutional transformation.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Interreg projects whose descriptions refer to ethnicity and ethnic minorities allows for several important conclusions, while also raising broader questions about the nature and scope of the European Union's engagement with intercultural and identity-related issues at the local and cross-border levels.

Most notably, the data reveal a clear dominance of an affirmative narrative, in which ethnicity is portrayed as heritage, a cultural asset, and a marker of local identity. Projects developed within this framework focus on the promotion of traditions, languages, and customs, often in the context of cultural tourism or artistic collaboration. This approach aligns with the EU's rhetoric, which regards cultural diversity as a value in itself and as a source of legitimacy for integration policies. Such a perspective is consistent with the views of Will Kymlicka, who advocates for multicultural citizenship – the coexistence of equal identities within democratic institutions [Kymlicka 1995: 51].

At the same time, the analysis confirms the limited presence of projects that engage with ethnicity as a social or political issue – for example, in the context of marginalization, discrimination, or tensions. Here, a gap is evident between the declarative level (in which EU values such as equality and integration are frequently invoked) and the practical level of project activities, which rarely translate these values into structural interventions. A similar observation was made by Thomas Diez, who argued that the EU has exercised “normative power”, but that its influence has often been superficial and symbolic if not supported by concrete mechanisms for change [Diez 2005: 613].

The findings also suggest that the type of programme significantly influences how ethnicity is framed. Programmes such as PEACE, implemented in the context of Northern Ireland, include explicit components of civic education, dialogue-building, and social reconciliation – supporting earlier research by James Hughes, who examined PEACE as an instrument for transforming ethnic conflict [Hughes 2013: 12–31]. Similar elements are present in some IPA CBC projects in the Balkans, where ethnicity continues to be a focal point of political and social tension. In contrast, Interreg CBC programmes, implemented in internal EU regions, tend to “depoliticize” ethnicity, treating it primarily as neutral cultural heritage – a tendency that aligns with Rogers Brubaker's observation of ethnicity as a “category without groups”, framed mainly in symbolic terms [Brubaker 2004: 7–27].

A particularly interesting aspect of the analysis concerns the role of European Union values. References to principles such as equality, diversity, integration, and minority rights are present in project documentation. However, as Ian Manners has pointed out, the mere invocation of values does not guarantee their effective implementation [Manners 2002: 235–258]. In the analyzed projects, these values most often serve a legitimizing function, but are rarely treated as a set of operational guidelines – for example, through the use of equality indicators or measurable outcomes related to social inclusion.

The analysis also confirms a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature, namely the prevalence of “soft Europeanization” [Radaelli 2003: 27–56]. In this model, actions supporting EU values tend to take on symbolic, educational, and partnership-based forms. While this has advantages – such as flexibility and local ownership – it also limits the potential of projects to generate meaningful social change in areas such as minority rights or the reduction of inequalities. Projects that lack monitoring tools, equality indicators, or plans for institutional sustainability often remain at the level of declarative engagement.

It is worth noting, however, that this situation is beginning to shift. In the most recent financial perspectives, there has been a growing emphasis on mainstreaming horizontal EU values – including rule of law, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities – as criteria for project evaluation and conditions for implementation. Compared to earlier programming periods – especially the first one analyzed (2000–2006) – a clear evolution in approach is observable: from a symbolic narrative to a more binding and structural one (2021–2027). This may signal that Interreg’s role in strengthening fundamental rights and combating exclusion will become increasingly concrete and measurable in the future.

In conclusion, Interreg projects provide important tools for promoting intercultural dialogue and cross-border cooperation, but their impact on ethnic issues remains largely limited to affirmative, symbolic, or educational actions. In the context of rising social tensions and migration-related challenges, it is worth considering how to strengthen the institutional dimension of support for equality and minority participation – so that Interreg becomes not only an instrument of territorial integration, but also one of genuine social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Interreg projects that address the theme of ethnicity allows for several key conclusions concerning both the content and the operational logic of the EU’s cross-border cooperation programmes.

First, ethnicity is present in these projects in a systematic, though non-uniform, manner. The dominant approach portrays ethnicity as a cultural value – a component of heritage, local identity, and a potential driver of regional development. Projects frequently focus on activities promoting diversity, intercultural education, and the construction of shared symbolic spaces. This confirms the first research hypothesis: that ethnicity in Interreg projects is primarily treated as a resource.

The analysis also shows that the type of Interreg programme significantly influences the framing of ethnic issues, confirming the second hypothesis. Programmes such as PEACE and IPA CBC, operating in post-conflict or transitional contexts, are more likely to address themes of social integration, reconciliation, and civic education. In contrast, within Interreg CBC (within the EU), ethnicity typically assumes a more

cultural and symbolic dimension. This confirms the existence of clear narrative and functional differentiation depending on geopolitical context.

A third important finding is that, although EU values are strongly present in project language, there is insufficient evidence that these values translate into concrete implementation strategies, institutional outcomes, or measurable effects in terms of social integration and minority equality.

Lastly, although Interreg projects play an important role in building a space for dialogue and cross-border cooperation, their potential as instruments of social change remains partially underutilized. In contexts where ethnicity is linked to historical or ongoing tensions, there is a need for projects that are more ambitious, systemic, and grounded in actual social needs. It is therefore recommended to strengthen components related to civic education, equitable access to services, minority participation, and monitoring of integration outcomes.

Based on the analysis, several actions can be proposed to deepen the role of Interreg programmes as tools for not only territorial cooperation but also genuine social integration and ethnic minority equality. First, attention should be paid to reinforcing the equality and inclusion components of projects. Currently, values such as equal opportunity, diversity, and minority rights often operate at a declarative level. It is recommended that they be translated into concrete implementation mechanisms – for instance, by introducing indicators to measure the effectiveness of inclusion efforts and by implementing impact assessment systems for project effects on minority groups.

The next step should be a more consistent treatment of EU values as operational criteria, not merely symbolic justifications for projects. References to fundamental rights and integration ideals should be supported by concrete practices: mandatory inclusion of non-discrimination principles in project planning, systematic monitoring of outcomes, and verification of whether beneficiaries truly reach socially vulnerable groups.

Another important issue is the need to broaden the scope of addressed themes. Currently, many projects are limited to cultural and educational initiatives, avoiding difficult topics such as marginalization, exclusion, or intergroup conflict. While such activities are valuable, they should be complemented by more structural interventions – for instance, those improving access to services, increasing the representation of minorities in decision-making processes, or strengthening the social capital of marginalized groups.

Minority organizations could play a particularly crucial role as project partners. Their active involvement at the planning and implementation stages would enhance the relevance, local anchoring, and sustainability of project outcomes. In many cases, these organizations possess the most accurate knowledge of their communities' actual needs, yet they remain underrepresented in cross-border cooperation planning.

Finally, it is worth considering the transfer of good practices from post-conflict programmes, such as PEACE. Although developed in the specific context of Northern Ireland, many of their methods – such as dialogue-based approaches, civic

education, or the use of local mediators – could be adapted to other regions where ethnic tensions exist, even if they are not as deeply institutionalized.

In summary, the future of Interreg programmes should move toward greater social responsibility, stronger grounding in the realities of minority communities, and a bolder engagement with themes that go beyond cultural promotion. Only then can ethnicity cease to be treated solely as an aesthetic or historical resource and become a meaningful point of reference for equality policy and social cohesion in Europe.

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EUROPEJSKA WSPÓŁPRACA TERYTORIALNA WOBEC ETNICZNOŚCI: PROJEKTY INTERREG JAKO NARZĘDZIA INTEGRACJI MNIEJSZOŚCI

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest analiza sposobów ujmowania zagadnień związanych z etniczością i mniejszościami etnicznymi w projektach realizowanych w ramach unijnego instrumentu wspierającego współpracy transgraniczną (Interreg). Główne pytanie badawcze brzmi: w jaki sposób projekty Interreg odnoszą się do kwestii etniczności i integracji mniejszości? Postawiono trzy hipotezy: (1) etniczność traktowana jest głównie jako zasób kulturowy; (2) typ programu wpływa na sposób ujęcia tematyki etnicznej; (3) programy postkonfliktowe częściej zawierają komponenty edukacji obywatelskiej i dialogu. Badanie opiera się na analizie jakościowo-ilościowej 211 projektów zawierających odniesienia do etniczności, wyodrębnionych z bazy danych KEEP.eu. Projekty przypisane do typów programów (m.in. IPA CBC, PE-ACE, ENI CBC, Interreg CBC), zostały zakodowane tematycznie. Wyniki potwierdzają dominację narracji kulturowej: etniczność postrzegana jest jako element dziedzictwa i tożsamości. Zróżnicowanie podejścia zależy od charakteru programu i kontekstu geograficznego – bardziej polityczne w regionach postkonfliktowych, bardziej symboliczne wewnątrz Unii Europejskiej (UE). Wartości UE (równość, integracja, prawa mniejszości) są obecne, lecz najczęściej w formie deklaratywnej. Artykuł zawiera rekomendacje służące wzmacnieniu potencjału Interreg jako instrumentu spójności społecznej i równości.

Słowa kluczowe: współpraca transgraniczna, etniczność, mniejszości etniczne, integracja społeczna, polityka spójności, Interreg, wartości Unii Europejskiej, edukacja obywatelska, programy postkonfliktowe

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