



Executive summary:

Updated list of actions/projects of the Carpathian Strategy based on the results of the Carpathians 2020 Diagnosis, EU Strategy for the Alpine Region and analysis of stakeholder needs

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INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Transborder cooperation, understood as one of the forms of international cooperation, includes actions and measures aimed to reduce development barriers posed by the presence of state borders. In order to tap into transborder potentials and solve problems shared by the neighbouring countries and regions, four regional strategies have been formulated at the EU level: for the Baltic Sea region (2009), the Danube region (2010), the Adriatic and Ionian region (2014), and the Alpine region (2015). In September 2016, the Polish Ministry for Regional Development started preparatory work intended to devise yet another EU Macroregional Strategy for the Carpathian region. In 2018, a draft macroregional Strategy was drawn up in cooperation and consultation with other countries of the region. This led to the signing of the so-called Carpathian Declaration by representatives of Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary and Poland, which took place in the town of Krynica on 5 September 2018.

The overarching aim of this study is to verify the initiatives proposed in the draft Macroregional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, including their adaptation to the current internal and external determinants of the region's development. In particular, the report provides an evaluation of the rationale for the implementation of actions stipulated in the Strategy and suggests the types of projects which ought to be pursued first. The results of the analyses represent a contribution to programming the development of the Carpathians region for the 2030 perspective, particularly as regards the advisability of adopting a new Macroregional Strategy or updating the existing one. This is essential in the context of programming and implementing the EU financial perspective 2021–2027, which will be implemented in various forms in the Carpathians, and for the National Recovery Plans being developed by individual Member State governments.

The research completed in May and June 2021 employed three basic analytical methods: a) desk research of key diagnostic and strategic studies ("Analysis of selected social, economic and spatial determinants underpinning the development of the Carpathian macroregion", September 2020, hereinafter the "Diagnosis"; a set of documents making up a new strategic vision of EU's development hereinafter the "European Green Deal" and documents relating to the EU Next Generation fund and to the EU digital objectives), b) comparative analysis of the draft Carpathian Strategy and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, and c) questionnaire surveys to identify the needs and preferences of the Carpathian macroregion's stakeholders. As a result of these efforts, 310 completed questionnaires were returned. In terms of territorial distribution, the greatest interest on the part of the stakeholders could be observed in such countries as Romania, Poland, Ukraine and Slovakia and, to a lesser degree, in Hungary. In contrast, considerably fewer questionnaires were returned from Czechia, Moldova and Serbia.

PART 1. CONVERGENCE OF THE MACROREGIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE CARPATHIAN REGION WITH THE DETERMINANTS OF MACROREGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND HIGHER-ORDER STRATEGIES

During the first stage of the research, the types of projects planned for implementation in the Carpathian Strategy were modified and supplemented on the basis of the review of strategic documents. In particular, the developed list of 72 types of projects was assessed with respect to: (1) the 2020 Diagnosis of the Carpathian macroregion, and (2) the documents which currently map out the strategic directions of EU support to aid the recovery of the Member State in the wake of the Covid pandemic.

The first approach identified the types of projects which:

- address, fully or largely, the **potentials** offered by the natural environment and the cultural sphere, transport (excluding the Danube waterway and seaports), the social sphere regarding the presence of strong academic centres, and in the economic sphere regarding the significant role of industry in the macroregional economy (9 project types);
- can help overcome such development **barriers** as: degradation of forest resources and uneven use of mineral waters, development of transport infrastructure (roads in particular), better use of ICTs, more efficient use of the agricultural sector and increasing the share of renewable energy sources (RES) in energy generation (7);
- can strengthen positive **development trends** relating to nature protection and conservation, improving the condition of the water and sewage infrastructure and the water balance, increasing transport accessibility (road and air), development of broadband network, improving access to telecommunication technologies and increasing the number of residents using e-services (10).

However, no direct impact on the diagnosed **negative trends** in the social sphere was found (such as e.g. depopulation), nor on positive trends regarding the economy (GDP increase, higher employment). This is due to the superior status of these issues with regard to the objectives of transborder cooperation in the Carpathian macroregion.

The second approach brought an overall evaluation of the convergence with the priority policy areas of European significance, i.e. – in the present study – with the pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. In that regard, no less than partial relevance of all the thematic project types stipulated in the Carpathian Strategy was ascertained. This was particularly true for issues related to smart, sustainable economic growth promoting social inclusion, green transition and digital transformation. A detailed evaluation exercise was conducted for two EU policy priorities: the Green Deal and the digital transformation. The evaluation found that 18 project types were concordant with the policy areas defined in the European Green Deal, and that 36 project types can be associated with the digital objectives/DESI dimensions (Digital Economy and Society Index).

In the former case, this included issues associated with research and development, green economy innovations, in particular the circular economy, which can help attain climate neutrality in Europe, as well as ecosystem preservation and protection of biodiversity. In the latter case, digital objectives can be pursued above all in such areas as public administration, digital public services and digital services integration (digitalisation of enterprises).

PART 2. REVIEW OF ACTIONS AND PROJECTS IMPLEMENTED AS PART OF THE EU MACROREGIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE ALPINE REGION

In the second part of the Report, the EU Macroregional Strategy for the Alpine Region was used as the prism through which to analyse the objectives and actions of the draft Carpathian Strategy, in the form of the initial strategic documents, declarations and guidelines adopted by the participating countries for the duration of the Strategy, as well as specific initiatives on the ground through which the Strategy is implemented. Although there is a visible and significant **convergence in the scope of the thematic objectives** of the two Strategies, certain differences can be observed in some actions being more detailed or in certain issues being structured differently in one of the documents (e.g. three actions in the Carpathian Strategy could be ascribed to one action in the Alpine Strategy, *To increase the economic potential of strategic sectors* or two actions of the Alpine Strategy could be comprised by one action of the Carpathian Strategy 2.1 *Protection and sustainable management of natural resources*). The differences resulting from a different approach to horizontal areas, manifested in singling out in the Carpathian Strategy activities of a more tool-oriented character, do not mean the absence of such undertakings in the Alpine Strategy, but only their non-separation as separate activities in the document (e.g. transnational and cross-border cooperation and spatial planning – the latter included among others in the tasks of the Action Group for the protection of natural resources).

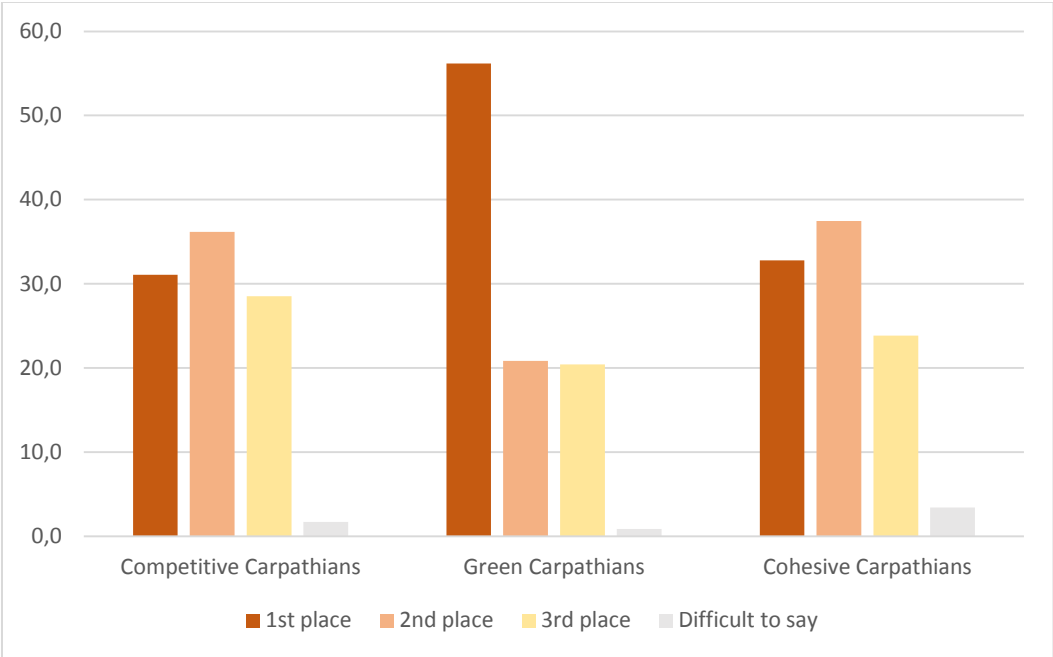
When the compiled databases on the EUSALP projects (including Interreg Alpine Space 2014– 2020 and the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund projects) had been ascribed to specific planned objectives and actions of the Carpathian Strategy, a tentative picture of the **implementation potential** was obtained, broken down into the **project potential** (associated with the number of implemented projects), **financial potential** (showing the budgets of the implemented projects) and **institutional potential** (indicating the number of partnerships among the project implementing entities and the partners' countries). With some caution in drawing specific conclusions from the observed distribution of the Alpine projects (due to the dissimilarities in the starting position, development determinants of the Alpine and Carpathian regions or the level of stakeholders' interest in specific areas of cooperation), it can be said that every action in the Carpathian Strategy does have some implementation potential. As regards the Alpine Strategy, it had the greatest share of projects thematically corresponding to Priority Area 1 *Competitive Carpathians* (European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) thematic objective 1. *Strengthening research, technological development and innovation* – project and financial potential, number of partnerships), with a balanced institutional potential in terms of the average number of project participants,

especially the number of countries represented by entities participating in the implementation of EUSALP projects in particular objectives/actions.

PART 3. PREFERENCES OF THE STAKEHOLDERS OF THE CARPATHIAN MACROREGIONAL STRATEGY REGARDING OBJECTIVES, ACTIONS, PROJECT TYPES AND TOOLS FOR THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

Priority Area 2 *Green Carpathians*, that is pursuit of a high quality of the natural environment, was regarded by the respondents as the overarching objective of the Strategy. This objective was listed as the first one twice as often (60%) as the remaining two, i.e. Priority Area 1 *Competitive Carpathians* and Priority Area 3 *Cohesive Carpathians*. The latter two were relatively similarly evaluated by the respondents, each being listed first by about 30% of the respondents (**Fig. 1**). The inclusion of the control variables indicated above for the country, type of organisation, type of activity and territorial level of a given type of action did not significantly affect the survey results in terms of the evaluation of the objectives, which means that they were not affected by the selection of the sample.

Fig. 1 Priorities of the Carpathian Strategy objectives

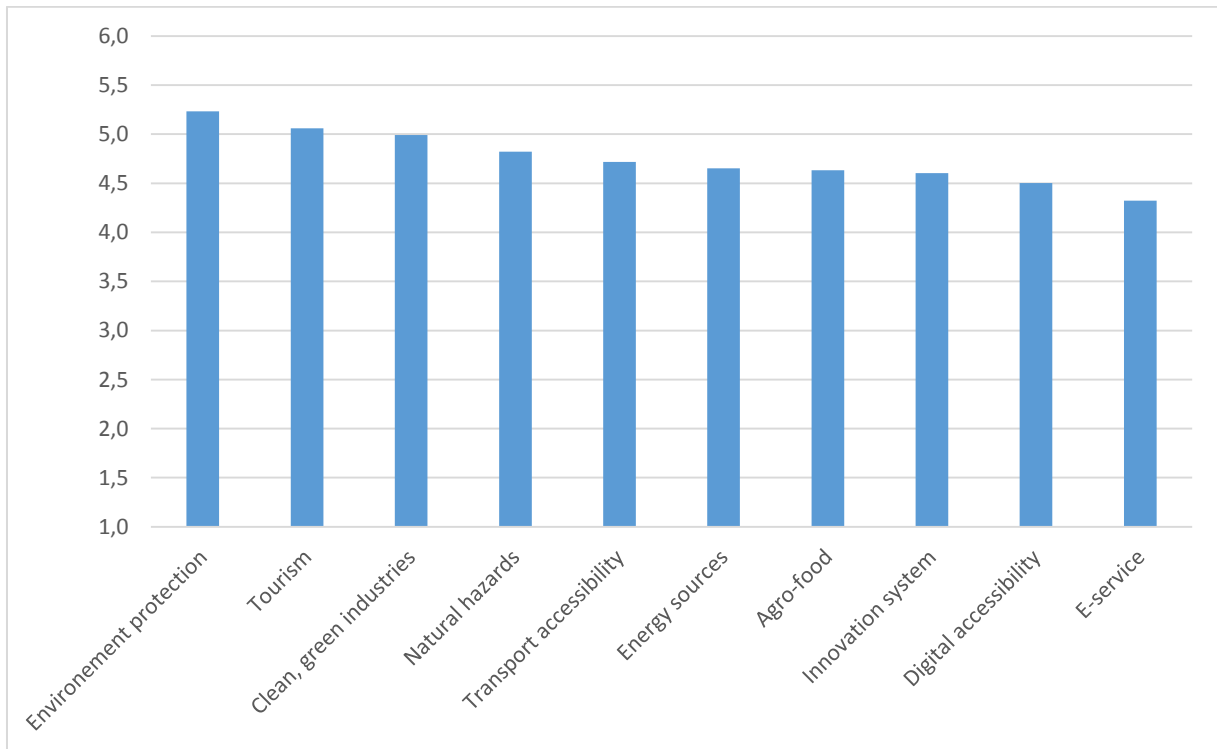


Source: own elaboration based on the questionnaire survey results.

Prioritisation of the objectives coincides with the most important actions which, in the respondents’ opinion, should be undertaken during the implementation of the Strategy. **Protection of natural resources** was definitely ranked first by the respondents (Priority Area *Green Carpathians*), followed by **sustainable tourism** (Priority Area *Competitive Carpathians*), which was slightly ahead of the **development of the clean, green industries** (Priority Area *Competitive Carpathians*). The second action may make a considerable use of the local natural resources, while the latter is by assumption intended to minimise the environmental impact of business activity. The actions which the respondents found important, but to a relatively lesser degree, included the **development of e-services**,

increasing the digital accessibility (Priority Area *Cohesive Carpathians*) and the **development of macroregional innovation ecosystem** (Priority Area *Competitive Carpathians*). As regards improving the macroregion’s competitiveness, external and internal transport accessibility was considered the most significant one, visibly surpassing the digital accessibility.

Fig. 2 Importance of the Carpathian Strategy actions*



* on the scale from 1 to 6, where 6 is ‘extremely important’, and 1 – ‘not at all important’.

Source: own elaboration based on the questionnaire survey results.

In addition to the differences resulting from various preferences associated with the activity profiles of the surveyed organisations and institutions, certain differences of opinion could be observed between countries. For instance, Romania was conspicuous among the countries concerned in the role it accorded to several actions, particularly to the agro-food sector (similarly Slovakia), or Ukraine with regard to the role of transport accessibility (contrary to Slovakia). On the other hand, the role of tourism was regarded as relatively the most important in the case of Poland, while natural hazards and crisis management were viewed as such in Hungary, and to a lesser degree so, in Ukraine.

As regards the project types which in the stakeholders’ opinion can potentially produce the most favourable outcomes and have the greatest potential for the development of transborder cooperation, these included:

- **Tourism:** Creation of a common Carpathian Brand system promoting the Carpathians as a global sustainable tourism destination
- **Environment:** Cross-border standards for nature conservation and heritage

- **Clean, green industries:** Development of food processing clusters based on local products (e.g. cheese, wine, organic food)
- **Natural hazards:** System for monitoring and assessing environmental risks and cooperation in information campaigns and mapping of environmental risks
- **Transport accessibility:** Improved road and rail accessibility of tourist attractions
- **Energy sources:** Supporting investment in the circular economy
- **Agro-food industry:** Supporting the creation of new agro-food sector clusters and producer groups, building the Carpathian food brands and promoting them abroad
- **Innovation system:** Supporting the development of an innovative environment in the Carpathian macroregion and supporting innovative development at local and regional levels based on cooperation between business and scientific centres
- **Digital accessibility:** Free access to ICT technologies and fostering the establishment of a Carpathian system of public Internet hotspots
- **E-services:** Developing and implementing the Carpathian Smart Village approach (digitalisation of rural communities)

The actions/tools under **Priority Area 4 Institutional cooperation and spatial development** were evaluated in terms of their usefulness for coordination and promotion of the development of the Carpathian macroregion. The respondents viewed transborder cooperation as the most important tool. However, it did not receive a much higher score than spatial planning and development programming, which quite clearly indicates that all types of tools need to be used to fulfil this horizontal objective.

With respect to transborder cooperation, in the respondents' opinion two project spheres deserved special attention: the social sphere, involving youth cooperation and exchanges, and the economic sphere: human capital development and attracting inward investment. As regards spatial planning, the respondents mostly pointed to the need to formulate a macroregional spatial development concept and, as the next priority, an integrated Spatial Information System.

With respect to programming macroregional development, the following initiatives were regarded as desirable:

- building the capacity of local and regional governments in order for them to better identify and address developmental challenges in the Carpathian macroregion
- establishing permanent cooperation platforms for the stakeholders
- adapting the existing financial programmes, policies and strategies to the needs and specific nature of the Carpathian macroregion, particularly given the absence of a new transnational programme for the Carpathian macroregion.

PART 4. RANKING OF PROJECT TYPES AIMED TO FULFIL THE OBJECTIVES OF THE CARPATHIAN STRATEGY

The **concordance ranking** of the analysed project types showing how they address the internal and external determinants was used to identify project types in terms of their significance for the implementation of the Carpathian Strategy; on its basis, the final relevance ranking was compiled. In effect, proposals of 51 project types were identified out of a list of 72 thematic project types which can be regarded as the most significant (crucial and important). Of these, a group of 13 projects was identified for implementation as the first priority; these projects to a relatively similar degree address the overarching objectives of the Strategy, i.e.: Priority Area 1 *Competitive Carpathians* (4 project types), Priority Area 2 *Green Carpathians* (5 project types) and Priority Area 3 *Cohesive Carpathians* (**Tab. 1**).

Tab. 1 Types of projects particularly well suited for pilot activities in the Carpathian Strategy

	Name	Ranking of compliance	Ranking of preferences	Ranking of relevance	Carpathian Brand	Green economy
Objective 1	Competitive Carpathians					
1.1.1.	Development of technologies of energy generation from renewable sources	1	7	1		X
1.1.4.	Development of food processing clusters based on local products (e.g. cheese, wine, organic food)	26	2	5	X	
1.1.7	Transformation of existing industries into circular economy industries	6	14	6		X
1.2.8.	Development of eco-tourism	20	1	4	X	X
Objective 2	Green Carpathians					
2.1.1.	Cross-border standards for nature conservation and heritage	26	3	8	X	
2.1.4.	New ecological corridors, including the Pan-European Carpathian Corridor	14	15	10	X	
2.1.6.	Promotion of water	5	8	2		X

	Name	Ranking of compliance	Ranking of preferences	Ranking of relevance	Carpathian Brand	Green economy
	saving, water recycling					
2.2.3.	Development of new green energy sources	6	12	3		X
2.3.2.	System for monitoring and assessing environmental risks	11	9	7		X
Objective 3	Cohesive Carpathians					
3.1.5.	Introduction of an integrated ticketing and information system	20	11	12	X	
3.1.2.	Cross-border public transport	4	26	9	X	
3.2.3.	Free access to the ICT technologies	6	36	14		
3.1.6.	Preference for clean transport modes	14	17	13	X	X

Source: own elaboration.

In the context of the preferences expressed by the stakeholders (Part 3.2), it can be said that the following types of projects have a strong potential to **build the Carpathian Brand**: (1) local products and eco-tourism, (2) environmental protection standards and building a pan-European ecological Carpathian corridor, and, potentially (3) an integrated system of ecological transborder public transport. In addition, many project types identified as the most **desirable** tally with the development of a **green economy**, ranging from (1) the development of renewable energy generation and diversification of energy sources, to (2) circular economy, particularly with regard to water resources protection, to (3) implementation of ecological solutions in such areas as tourism or public transport, and monitoring of environmental hazards. As regards the development of **digital economy**, special attention ought to be paid to projects enhancing access to technologies facilitating the digital transformation of the economy and of the public at large.

PART 5. TERRITORIAL ORIENTATION OF ACTIONS AND PROJECT TYPES IN THE STRATEGY FOR THE CARPATHIAN MACROREGION

Actions in the macroregional strategies are undertaken in a specific spatial context. Transborder cooperation is a particularly significant issue, especially when it goes beyond the border bilateral systems. Therefore, development of cooperation in tri-border areas (of which there are seven in the Carpathian macroregion) can produce special added value. At the same time, drawing on such areas, new partners from the remaining countries can potentially be included in the cooperation. In light of these results, three border areas can

be identified which have the greatest potential for pilot activities involving at least three countries. The first is the Polish-Slovakian-Ukrainian border area, the second – the Hungarian-Romanian-Ukrainian, and the third – the Hungarian-Slovakian-Ukrainian border area. A lesser though still significant potential for implementing pilot initiatives can be diagnosed for the Czech-Polish-Slovakian, Hungarian-Romanian-Serbian and Czech-Hungarian-Slovakian border areas. It should be stressed, however, that these findings do not necessarily indicate the actual range of interest in multilateral cooperation given an appropriate institutional and financial framework, but only identify those transborder regions where potential pilot activities stand the best chance of success in the present circumstances.

What is also of major significance is the territorial orientation of actions in the Carpathian Strategy, associated with the natural and socio-economic characteristics of the territorial systems involved. Many of the major project types in the Carpathian Strategy could not be territorially oriented, which means they could be implemented regardless of the determinants and conditions outlined above. Among the regions which manifested such orientation, those targeted at rural areas (e.g. supporting production of high quality organic food; Carpathian agro-tourism cluster), small and medium-sized cities (e.g. support for digitisation of small and medium-sized enterprises; development strategy and monitoring of social economy development), border (e.g. cross-border ski stations; development of cross-border energy systems) and mountainous areas (e.g. maintenance of traditional sheep grazing in mountain pastures and support for shepherding traditions; Carpathian Long Distance Trail) prevailed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The multi-criteria analyses conducted as part of the study identified those types of projects in the Carpathian Strategy the implementation of which best corresponds to the present determinants of the macroregion's development and the preferences of the macroregional stakeholders. As a result, the initial list of 72 types of thematic projects (composed of undertakings proposed in the draft strategy and expert proposals developed on the basis of the review of strategic documents) was verified and limited to 51 types in 10 actions. Of these, 13 project types were identified which have the greatest potential for implementation and which will also help fulfil the three overarching objectives of the Carpathian Strategy.

In a cross-sectional approach, the types of projects stipulated for pilot implementation can facilitate the creation of the **Carpathian Brand** based on the following three pillars: (1) local products and eco-tourism, (2) quality of the natural environment, and, potentially, (3) integrated ecological transborder public transport system. Also, these types of initiatives will foster the development of a **green economy**, one of the major pillars of the European Union policies. It should also be underlined that the stakeholders considered Objective 2 "Green Carpathians" to be the most important among the main objectives of the strategy, which is to improve the quality of the natural environment.

The evaluation of the concordance of the project types with the European Green Deal and the EU Next Generation/EU digital objectives, which was aimed to identify the projects most convergent with them, should facilitate the mobilising of EU funds for the financing of such ventures in the Carpathian macroregion. In turn, the carried out ranking of importance of particular types of projects will be favourable to implementation of those projects, which to the greatest extent may serve the use of development potentials connected among others with natural and cultural values of the macroregion, as well as overcoming development barriers concerning inter alia underdevelopment of technical infrastructure, as well as not very modern economic structure.

A review of actions and projects implemented as part of the **Alpine Strategy** identified some examples of good practices related to pilot project types recommended for implementation under the Carpathian Strategy (e.g. Boosting the Alpine local agri-food traditional value chains with the "100% local!" approach; ALPBIONET2030: Integrative Alpine wildlife and habitat management for the next generation; CrossBorder: Cross-border mobility in the Alpine Region) on the one hand, and on the other hand showed the popularity of projects convergent with 10 thematic actions of the Carpathian Strategy. In comparison with the preferences of the Carpathian macroregion, the Alpine Strategy revealed a higher number of projects/funds allocated to the creation of an innovation system, development of e-services and diversification of energy sources. In contrast, a relatively smaller number of projects – in comparison to the preferences of the Carpathian stakeholders – were pursued in the sphere of tourism, system for prevention against natural hazards and crisis management, and environmental protection. These differences can be explained by differences in the advancement of development processes relating to the socio-economic sphere and institutional cooperation in both macroregions. In particular, the funds in the Alpine macroregion could to a larger extent be earmarked for the financing of innovative actions aimed to fulfil the needs associated with e.g. development of tourism infrastructure, as well as natural environment protection and management.

It is worth emphasising that in the light of the analyses carried out, all of the proposed measures of the Carpathian Strategy have significant implementation potential. Therefore, there is no need to resign from or modify the measures proposed in the draft Carpathian Strategy. However, it is important to select appropriate projects for their implementation, especially taking into account the degree of innovation of the projects envisaged for implementation. At the same time, the implementation of these activities should involve the territorially wide cross-border cooperation networks. On the basis of the experience of the Alpine Strategy, there should be no obstacles to greater involvement of beneficiaries from one country in the management of implemented projects.

The survey revealed a varied potential for implementing pilot projects in a **territorial approach**. In particular, the greatest potential was diagnosed in tripartite structures including Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Romania, which also represent the geographical centre of the Carpathian macroregion. Moreover, initially the pilot activities

would be more oriented to the fulfilment of rural, border and protected areas, in addition to the development of small and medium-sized cities. It should also be noted that large cities and mountainous areas are not overlooked, as they can also choose from among the largest group of such types of projects which have no clear territorial orientation.

As regards the **tools for coordination, cooperation and programming** the development of the Carpathian macroregion, the following were listed by the stakeholders as those of primary importance: a) in spatial planning: macroregional spatial development strategy; b) in cross-border and transnational cooperation: youth cooperation and exchanges, and c) in programming: building the capacity of local and regional governments needed for the bottom-up execution of joint projects and programmes.