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The evolution of cross-border cooperation in Hungary

Abstract: *The present study gives an overview of the de-bordering processes around Hungary that have taken place during the last 30 years and their impacts upon cross-border relationships and cooperation in both economic and social terms. A synthesis is provided on some of the examples of Hungarian innovation in cross-border cooperation as well as on recent developments stemming from the border closures during the pandemic.*

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Introduction

One of the authors of this study grew up in the final decades of the Hungarian communist regime. His first visit to France was taken place in 1989, when as a member of a group of young people he had the opportunity to take part in the global youth festival celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Great French Revolution. The journey to Paris started at the Austrian-Hungarian border, where after spending two and a half hours in the queue, the passengers of their Lada (a typical communist-bloc car) were obliged to unpack everything from the boot and wait for their stuff to be precisely inspected; then they got the stamp in their passport, packed everything back into the car and continued their trip.

The second station was at Passau, at the Austrian-German border, where the scenario was the same: two and a half hours in the queue, unpack, reload, get the stamp and go. The group arrived at the border crossing of Strasbourg and Kehl at midnight. There was nobody there except for a French border guard sleeping in the cabin, with his hat pulled down over his eyes and legs crossed on the desk. Then, a lively but quiet dispute started in the car on what to do: if the passengers wake up the border guard, he would surely become very angry and the unpacking and reloading game will re-start; but without having a stamp in the passports it is forbidden to cross the state border and the group may be expelled. Finally, the driver just released the brake and the car rolled into the territory of France without any declaration...

Even though the other author of this study grew up two decades and a changeover later, her early border crossing experiences were still very similar; for younger generations it might be unimaginable how the border crossing was impeded and was characterised by hostile suspicions and a terrifying atmosphere in the communist countries before the regime transformation in 1990. Not only those borders shared with the neighbours along the Iron Curtain but also those between the allegedly friendly people's republics were guarded strictly. The access to a passport was administratively encumbered, the people crossing the border were suspected of performing something illegal, and very often, the passengers found themselves in humiliating and terrifying situations in order to discourage them from further travel.

With the transformation of the regime and the accession to the EU (and the Schengen zone), these phenomena became reminiscences of the past and the Hungarian borders have gradually been softened, movement became free (or at least much freer than before) and different forms of cross-border cooperation have been mushrooming along each border section. Until 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, it seemed that the era of closed borders would come to an end and the obstacles hindering integration of the Central European space would be eliminated.

In this study, we give an overview on the de-bordering processes around Hungary taking place during the last 30 years and its impacts upon cross-border relationships and cooperation. At

the end of the study, we reflect on the recent developments stemming from the border closures during the pandemic.

Changing macro-level conditions for cross-border cooperation

During the communist era, cross-border mobility was impeded in Hungary. After the end of WWII a strict visa regime was put in place, and the fact that the State Security Service (later on: the State Security Ministry) was assigned to issue passports for individuals clearly demonstrates the political aspect of the procedure. Besides the passport (whose utilisation was geographically limited), the passenger had to apply for specific travel authorisation for each journey signed by the local or workplace-based representative of the Communist Party. Local border traffic represented the only exception, enabling border citizens living in a distance of 15 km, later 20 km (in the case of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia) from the borderline or in the settlements defined by the bilateral agreement (in the case of the Soviet Union) to cross the border with a special traveller's certificate valid for half a year with restricted justification of travelling (*Bencsik* 2003; 2015).

After the uprising in 1956, the strictness of the border regime has gradually softened but travelling abroad, especially to the western European countries, was still hindered by different administrative procedures, e.g. the passports were valid only for one journey, for every further travel, the passenger had to apply for another exit visa; the communist parties hindered the development of shopping tourism with administrative measures in order to maintain the domestic budgetary balance (*Horbulák* 2017); the so-called blue passport allowing for western European journeys was denied to politically unreliable persons; the total amount of western European currencies to be carried was dramatically limited in order to prevent a longer stay in the capitalist countries; the state operated a broad network of spies targeting Hungarian emigrants and their guests, etc. At the same time, in the 1970s (1972 was when the citizens gained the right to travel) tourism among the communist countries began to grow; entry with the so-called red passport was allowed with a 30-day limit, although the border control remained very strict and humiliating. The right of travelling was incorporated in Hungarian legislation in 1978, and in January 1988 the government inaugurated the so-called 'world passport', by which the Hungarian citizens were enabled to visit every country in the world (*Bencsik* 2003).

Cross-border mobility and cooperation even with the 'brotherhood nations' was not promoted. Those initiating cross-border inter-organisational or inter-municipality partnership had to apply for preliminary approval of the national authorities and the approval was not automatically issued (*Rechnitzer* 1999).

The system transformation started in Hungary, among the first former communist states, in 1989. The first free elections were held in April 1990 and the new democratic government started its work in May. The country opened its borders to international trade and the Hungarian economy became one of the most open economies in the world. Thanks to milestones such as the EU and NATO accession processes started in 1994, the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, the joining of the EU (2004) and the Schengen zone (2007) along with some of its neighbours, new world of free movement and cooperation has been created. All the above developments resulted in a paradigm shift in border regimes. One of the most symbolic events of this paradigm shift affecting Europe as a whole was the so-called Pan-European Picnic, which was organised at the Austrian-Hungarian border in August 1989, where the border control was temporarily suspended and hundreds of East German citizens were allowed to escape through Hungary (*Hrzic & Brand* 2020, 1). This was an event which later was identified by the then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl as the one that 'knocked the first brick from the Berlin Wall.' (*Gioielli* 2020, 2)

Paradigm shift in practice in Hungary

Improvement of the physical permeability of borders

As *Hardi* (2001) claims ‘states, border regions, and the characteristics of the state border all influence each other’. When analysing borders, it is essential to keep in mind *O’Dowd’s* (2010) observation on “epochal thinking” which often tricks analysts into projecting the current state and status of the borders back to past times. However, one of the many compelling attributes of state borders is that while they exist, they seem eternal and unchangeable but in fact their exact location, their permeability, their functions and assigned regulations continuously change. This is especially true for Hungary and its neighbours. Even though the geographical location of the borders of Hungary has been more or less¹⁸ unchanged since the Paris Peace Treaties signed in 1947 (*Olti* 2008, 203), the number, the location and the type of the border crossings drastically changed since then. In some cases, even the states on the other side of the border have changed.

In 1990 Hungary had 51 border crossings altogether, meaning that on average every 43,4 km there was a border crossing (*Arcanum* 1992). A mere 3 years later, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, this number had risen by 15% and Hungary had 15 border crossings with Slovakia, 14 with Austria, 10 with Romania, 6 with Slovenia and 5 each with Croatia, Serbia and Ukraine respectively.

In the past three decades this tendency has been intensified. Currently, there are 127 operational road border crossings on the Hungarian borders, which is a 250% increase compared to 1990 (*Table 1*). Thanks to this, the average distance between border crossings has fallen to 17,4 km. Numerically, the largest number of border crossings can be found on the Slovakian-Hungarian and the Austrian-Hungarian borders (37 road and 9 rail in the former case and 39 road and 7 rail in the later), however, in terms of density, the border section with the most border crossings is the Austrian one (on average every 7.9 km), followed by the border shared with Slovenia with an average of 10.2 km.

Table 1: Number of road border crossings per border in 1990 and 2021

Country in 1990	Road border crossings (1990)	Country in 2021	Road border crossings (2021)
Austria	8	Austria	39
Czechoslovakia	16	Slovakia	37
Soviet Union	6	Ukraine	5
Romania	7	Romania	22
Yugoslavia	14	Serbia	8
		Croatia	7
		Slovenia	9
Total	51	Total	127

Source: own elaboration

The construction of the numerous new border crossings and the rebuilding of formerly existing ones were accompanied by a significant increase in the cross-border traffic. While in 1985 only 5 million Hungarian people crossed the border to travel abroad and 15 million foreigners travelled to Hungary, by 1993 more than 10 million travelled abroad and 40 million visited Hungary (*Tiner* 1995, 290). In 2004 36.5 million border crossings were registered, a number which continuously grew, by 2013 reaching 62.7 million. In 2019 from non-Schengen

¹⁸ Smaller modifications have been made based on bilateral agreements especially connected to water management investments, e.g. along the rivers Ipoly/Ipeľ, Sajó/Slaná and Ronyva/Roňava.

neighbouring countries 54.6 million people crossed the border, but the number of travellers from Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia is estimated to be much higher.

Economic impacts of system transformation

Due to the increased permeability of the borders seen above, the separating role of state borders was also weakened and the economic ties between Hungary and its neighbours have been strengthened. This paradigm shift “[offers] a particularly serious chance and alternative to the future of the peripheral border regions’ (Baranyi 2012, 108) especially through the intensification of cross-border trade.

While in 1938 Germany was the biggest export (27.4%) and import (30.1%) partner of Hungary, followed by Austria (export 18.3% and import 11.5%), Italy (export 8.5% and import 6.3%) and Romania (export 4.0% and import 9.8%) as the wheels of history turned, Hungary’s most important foreign trade partners also changed. In 1949 the Soviet Union was the biggest export (24.9%) and import (21.4%) partner, followed by Czechoslovakia (export 10.1% and import 10.3%) and the United Kingdom (export 8.1% and import 13.2%) (Köves 2003, 637).

In the decades of socialism, the Soviet Union and East Germany were the main trade partners, so much so that the small Comecon countries’ imports only amounted to 48.6% in 1970, 44.5% in 1980 and 49.5% in 1988, and export rates were at similar levels; 49.7% in 1970, 49.0% in 1980 and 42.7% in 1988 (Köves 2003, 639).

After Hungary and its neighbours switched from a planned to a market economy, autarchy was replaced by the liberalisation of international trade and the opening towards the world economy (Köves 2003, 640). The latter was manifested directly and above all in the intention of integration into the European Community and in the process of institutionalisation of integration that began almost immediately after the system transformation (Köves 2003, 640). This is a change that is visible in the territorial distribution and the amount of Hungarian foreign trade.

By the mid-1990s three-fourths of Hungary’s trade was already carried out with market economies. Meanwhile, the proportion of Hungary’s imports from the former republics of the Soviet Union fell from a peak of more than one-fifth in the early 1990s to less than one-tenth at the turn of the 21st century. Between 2003 and 2009 the share of foreign trade with neighbouring countries fluctuated between 15 and 18%, amounting to EUR 13.7–26.5 billion (Majoros 2010, 78). While in 2003 the highest share of export (41%) and import (38%) activities was with Austria, by 2016 the trends had changed and a more versatile and balanced picture was attained: among the neighbouring countries Hungary’s export rate to Romania was the highest (17.3%) with Slovakia (16.7%) and Austria (16.6%) coming very close (Table 2) (Szendi et al. 2017, 38).

Table 2: Hungary’s most important partner countries in terms of trade in 2019

Country	Import (EUR)	Export (EUR)
Germany	26.3 billion	30.2 billion
Slovakia	5.2 billion	5.6 billion
Italy	4.5 billion	5.6 billion
Romania	n/a	5.5 billion
Austria	6.4 billion	5.0 billion

Source: KSH 2020

To put it differently: of the top five, three are neighbouring countries. At the same time, as a consequence of the opening of the internal EU borders, the external borders became more closed, especially the Ukrainian one, where cross-border traffic even decreased due to the stricter rules between 2004 and 2014.

Social impacts of open borders

The political-economical-physical changes characterising the past three decades left a mark on the societies living in these areas as well, though the argument probably would stand the other way around, too. Hungary is in a unique situation since ethnic Hungarian minorities live in the neighbouring countries, often right on the other side of the border. Consequently, these Hungarian communities – as well as the Slovenian, Slovak, Serbian or Romanian communities living in Hungary, in smaller, but still important numbers – have the potential to form a bridge between the two relevant nations (*Komac & Vizi* 2019, 15).

According to the 2011 census, 131,951 German, 35,641 Romanian, 35,208 Slovakian, 26,774 Croatian, 10,038 Serbian, 7,396 Ukrainian and 2,820 Slovenian people lived in Hungary, for a total of 249,828. At the same time more than 2.2 million ethnic Hungarians live in the neighbouring countries: 1,227,623 in Romania (2011), 458,467 in Slovakia (2011), 253,899 in Serbia (2011), 156,600 in Ukraine (2001), 90,000 in Austria (2013), 14,048 in Croatia (2011) and 10,500 in Slovenia (2011).

These communities play a crucial role not only in terms of providing a good basis for people-to-people cross-border cooperation projects but also because they represent the core of cross-border commuters and relocating communities. The importance of cross-border commuting has rapidly increased with the enlargement of the European Union and the Schengen area. Although the extent of cross-border commuting is not comparable to that of certain Western European countries, it is remarkable in terms of its growing trend. In 2004, 16,790 people commuted to neighbouring countries (mostly Austria), while the number of incoming commuters was 14,089. However, as border interoperability increased, more and more people from border settlements began commuting to neighbouring countries. In 2011, more than 27,000 people commuted daily to neighbouring countries, 83% of them to Austria (*Kiss & Szalkai* 2018). In the case of Slovakia, the enlargement of the Schengen area and the abolition of border controls, the introduction of the euro and the rapid growth of the Slovak economy, and in the case of Romania, the unfavourable socio-economic conditions of the border settlements and the recovery of the Romanian economy in recent years may have contributed to the increase (*Kovács et al.* 2015, 244).

As a quite new phenomenon, several thousand Slovakian citizens re-settled in Hungary, around the two biggest Slovak cities, namely Bratislava and Košice (*Jagodič* 2010; *Lampl* 2010). Due to the huge differences between real-estate prices (*Balázs - Bajmócy* 2018) and the easy accessibility of these two cities from the Hungarian side, many Slovaks have bought or built a house there after selling their flat in a block in Košice or Bratislava (*Šveda et al.* 2019). The two cities whose urban influencing area was truncated by the nearby border may regain their territorial capacities thanks to the development of their cross-border suburban area (*Varga –et al.* 2018). A similar but much weaker example of cross-border residential mobility can be observed in the Hungarian neighbourhood of Oradea (Romania) as well as along the Austrian border.

Due to the peace treaties ending the two world wars, some 60 towns found themselves in similar situation as Košice, Bratislava or Oradea: by losing their 360-degree urban influencing zones, the maintenance of their services became uneconomical, meaning a gradual shrinking in the settlement hierarchy of the larger region (*Hardi et al.* 2009). The opening of the borders resulted in the partial rehabilitation of the former influencing zones and the cautious re-building of former intermunicipal ties – across the borders.

Main aspects of cross-border cooperation in Hungary

In theory, cross-border cooperation can take place on the state, regional or local level. However, in practice in Hungary it seems that the national level is the rarest form, since it is the most difficult type to realise due to its complexity (*Fejes* 2003, 104). In principle, the association of the local

and regional self-governments is a right laid down in the Fundamental Law (Article 32(1) (k)) according to which in the case of local affairs and within the confines of the law, every local self-government may (1) associate with other local governments, (2) establish interest representation alliance, (3) cooperate with local governments and (4) join international municipality organisations.

In relation to Hungary, the conditions for the development of border regions differ from country to country (*Balogh & Papp* 1998). In general, the leaders of the seven neighbouring countries (with a few exceptions) support cooperation in their political statements. However, since the majority of the neighbours, similarly to Hungary, have a rather centralised administrative system, this factor leaves little room for manoeuvre, and the diplomatic statements sometimes only remain statements (*Süli-Zakar et al.* 2001).

The manifestation of cross-border cooperation has a temporal dimension regarding how long the common pursuit of a goal persists. Usually, the shortest form is a cross-border project which mobilises at least two – but often more – partners from both sides of a border (*Rechnitzer* 1999). Most often the local actors join forces over an identified problem that is perceived on both sides of the border and come up with a joint potential solution which is mutually beneficial for both regions. A successful cross-border project (1) goes beyond a local problem that could be solved within the given state, (2) cannot be implemented without the involvement of partners from both sides of the border, and (3) its sustainability is also guaranteed by territorial proximity.

Cross-border projects are essentially carried out to weaken the separating effects of the borders and to contribute to stronger cohesion and more intensive cross-border cooperation. This can be done in several ways, through the establishment of stand-alone infrastructural elements or the organisation of ad-hoc events such as the exchange of experiences or people-to-people festivities. The organisation of regular events takes a longer time-line and ensures deeper and more persistent cooperation. The strongest integration can be achieved by implementing a cross-border infrastructural development project which, in parallel, introduces a permanent cross-border service. In the case of Hungary, cross-border projects were supported by the EU for the first time in 1995, within the framework of the so-called Phare CBC programme, thanks to Austria joining the EU. Originally, the fund was dedicated to the external borders of the EU but from 1996, the calls became available also for border regions situated between two accession countries, namely Hungary and Slovakia as well as Hungary and Romania (*Kruppa* 2003; *Lados* 2006). Between 2000 and 2020 more than 4,000 cross-border projects¹⁹ were realised targeting Hungary's border regions, focusing on preservation and valorisation of natural and cultural heritage; the construction of cross-border transport infrastructure; the improvement of conditions for business development in remote border areas; and the development of interinstitutional and people-to-people relationships. However, it is a common experience that the local stakeholders use these funds especially for their own purposes and the vast majority of them are missing a real cross-border character and impact. Numerous monitoring reports highlight that within the framework of cross-border projects 'the partnerships were maintained only for the duration of the projects' (*EC* 2016, 17), '[m]ost projects have been implemented in isolation from each other' (*EC* 2016, 24), 'the programmes had important impacts at immediate and intermediate levels, but low cross-border effects' (*EC* 2007, 13), because the beneficiaries 'tended to view CBC as simply another source of funding' (*EC* 2007, 19). Therefore, they have realised but domestic developments (*EC* 2007, 20). In order to ensure this aspect, institutionalised forms of cooperation are important (*Rechnitzer* 1999).

In the case of Hungary, the first wave of cross-border cooperation was dominated by the state level: the Hungarian government signed bilateral treaties on good neighbourliness and cooperation with the neighbours. These treaties identified those governmental bodies responsible for operating

¹⁹ Source: www.keep.eu a database built by the Interact Programme, with the support of the European Commission. The database covers the 2000–2006, 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 periods.

joint committees involving politicians and civil servants focusing on different topics of the treaties.

The second wave started in the mid-1990s, when the proliferation of twinnings between municipalities was observable. The majority of these twinnings were initiated between municipalities based on the same ethnic origin, the functional similarity (e.g. among large cities or border municipalities) or a shared historic background (e.g. the identical naming of the municipalities, the common legacy of the so-called ‘population exchanges’ following WWII, etc.). It is worth mentioning that intermunicipal cooperation is complicated by the diverse administrative grids of the participating countries: while in Hungary and Slovakia the municipalities usually are identical with the settlement level, a municipality may include several settlements: in Romania 4–6, in Croatia 5–10, in Serbia even 20.

The millennium brought about the emergence of euroregions along every border (*Figure 1*).

Although the Carpathian Euroregion, as the first one, was established in 1993 by Hungarian, Polish and Ukrainian regional authorities (Slovak and Romanian partners were allowed to join in 1997 only), the number of such structures saliently increased between 1999 and 2004, when they reached the number of 18 in total (*Kuthi & Nagy 2005*). The basis for the creation of the euroregions was given by the Madrid Outline Convention, signed and adopted also by the Central European countries. However, nowadays the Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa Euroregion is the only one which performs at European standards, implementing larger regional projects and playing a major integrating role at the Hungarian-Romanian-Serbian tri-border area. The DKMT Euroregion is also a model from the point of view of participatory governance, including in its structure the representatives of universities, chambers and civil associations. Other euroregions have been dissolved or developed further to an EGTC (*Medve-Bálint & Svensson 2013*).

Partly thanks to the involvement of the former MEP István Pálfi in its preparation, as well as his popularising activities, Hungary was among the first Member States adopting the EGTC Regulation in 2007 and its amendments in 2014. Since 2011, the Hungarian government financially and professionally supports the creation and operation of the groupings which currently amounts to approximately 500–600 thousand euros on a yearly basis. As a result of the above conditions, nearly one third of the groupings established so far in the EU have Hungarian members (*Figure 2*). More precisely, 25 groupings were established with Hungarian members (one of them has already dissolved, and the Hungarian member withdrew from another one), and 21 of them have their seat in Hungary. The groupings cover all the borders except with Austria and Serbia (in the case of Serbia, the legislative background for full membership is missing, so 8 municipalities take part in the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC as observers), and they implemented more than 100 projects, the total value of which amounts to more than EUR 80 million. At the same time, the performance level of the EGTCs varies: some of them have outstanding performance while others do not show any mark of existence (*Törzsök & Majoros 2015*). Currently two of them are in the dissolution phase while others are playing a pioneering role in terms of cross-border integration.

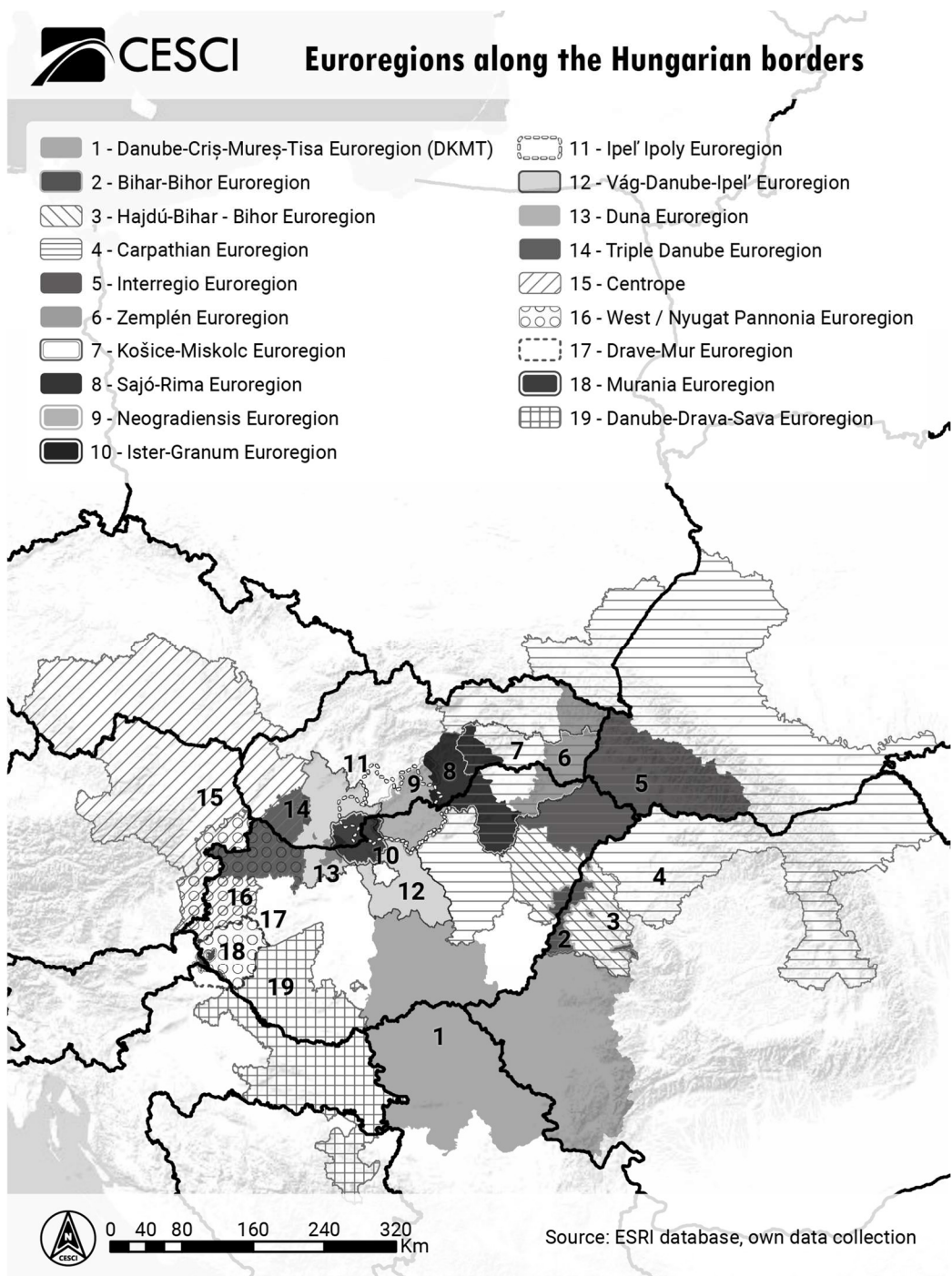


Figure 1: Euroregions around Hungary between 1993 and 2008

Source: CESCI (Viktória Jánosi)

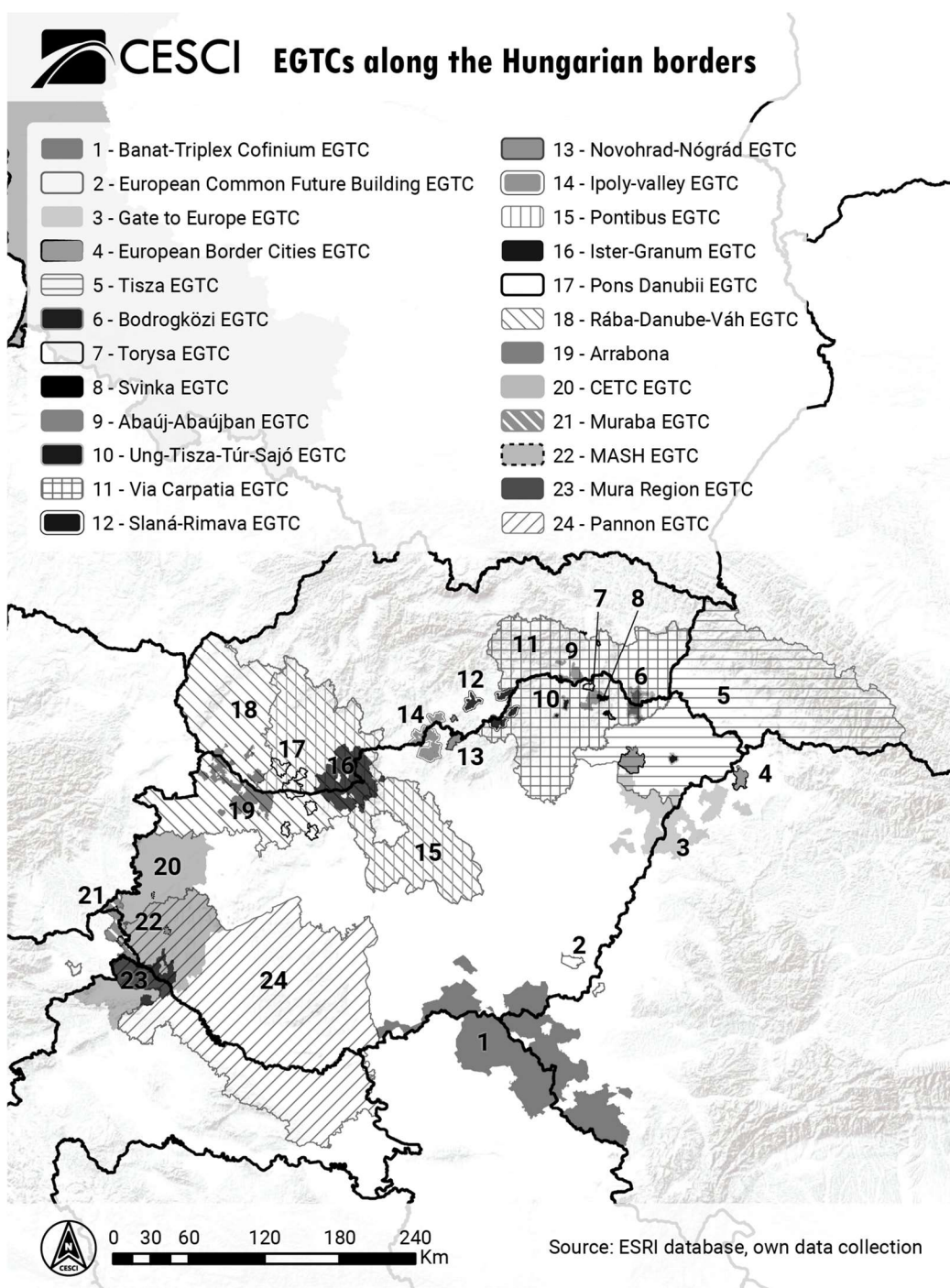


Figure 2: EGTCs around Hungary in 2020

Source: CESCI (Viktória Jánosi)

Examples of Hungarian innovation in CBC

During the years preceding the pandemic, Hungarian actors and their partners from abroad involved in CBC managed to pioneer in different fields.

The border that is the most frequented by EGTCs in Europe is the Slovak-Hungarian one, and these EGTCs offer several examples of organisational innovation. One representative of the groupings is an observer member of the Interreg CBC programme's Monitoring Committee (MC). The small project fund is managed by two regional level EGTCs: the Rába-Danube-Váh in the western and the Via Carpatia in the eastern border section. The total budget of the fund amounts to EUR 13.6 million and it is distributed based on the decision of the two regional level MCs established for the purposes of the fund (*CoR* 2020). The Ister-Granum EGTC, which has its seat in Esztergom (Hungary), takes part in the implementation of a ferry construction project as the Slovak (!) beneficiary, and it will be in charge of operating the ferry port in Slovakia after its inauguration. Since 2012, the same EGTC has been developing a cross-border network of local producers including nearly 600 partners, a cross-border retailing system and a cross-border label. The Pons Danubii EGTC has launched and operates a regional bike sharing system and takes part in the development of a smart and environmentally friendly integrated cross-border public transport system between Komárno and Komárom (*CoR* 2020).

The Novohrad-Nógrád EGTC was established with a view to managing one of the first cross-border geoparks labelled by the UNESCO. Although the grouping is under dissolution now, having implemented several infrastructural and soft projects it served as an example when setting up the Karawanken EGTC managing the Geopark Karawanken/Karavanke at the Austrian-Slovenian border.

The Tisza EGTC was the first grouping involving a third-country member, namely the regional council of the Transcarpathian region from Ukraine. Taking into account the incomplete legal background, the management of the grouping became one of the main engines of the Europeanisation of the relevant Ukrainian legislation. Currently, the grouping implements two quite large projects amounting to EUR 7.5 million in total. One of them aims at constructing the first solid waste management plant in Transcarpathia; the other targets the recultivation of the collapsed salt mines located in Solotvyno from where salt is washed into the second largest tributary of the River Danube: the Tisza (*CoR* 2020). This means that the EGTC not only plays an important role in the Europeanisation of the Ukrainian borders but actively takes part in the modernisation of the western borderland of the country.

In 2012, the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI) established the so-called 'EGTC atelier', convening the managers and directors of the Hungarian groupings 3–4 times a year. The meetings, currently organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, facilitate information sharing and exchange of experiences in order to improve the quality of the Hungarian groupings' performance. In 2021 CESCI launched the EGTC monitor²⁰, which is an information platform dedicated to the Hungarian groupings. The platform gives a comprehensive picture on the legal, economic and policy background and the performance of the EGTCs.

Thanks to the above innovations, the groupings have an increasing significance in cross-border integration around Hungary offering new perspectives for cooperation.

Impact of COVID-19 on CBC in Hungary

While 2020 was planned to revolve around the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement and the 30th anniversary of Interreg, designed for 'encouraging regions and countries to tackle challenges they can solve only by working together'²¹, now it is clear that the year passed

²⁰ <https://egtcmonitor.cesci-net.eu/en/>

²¹ As declared on the webpage of Interreg: <https://interreg.eu/interreg-30-years-together/>

entirely differently. The COVID-19 pandemic provoked a sudden, uncoordinated but universal closure of the borders of nation states within the EU. Even though the decision of closing the EU's external borders was at first made during an online meeting on the 17th of March 2020 where the leaders of the 27 member states were present, the decision of individual countries to close their borders was made in an uncoordinated way.

Hungary closed its borders that same day, however, by 26th March crossing the border had been made possible for cross-border workers and landowners. Since then, three waves have been fought which brought along a wide variety of measures in an attempt to stop the virus. These decisions directly and immediately affected the majority of those nearly two million commuters who cross national borders on a daily basis to work (though of course not only them), causing significant setbacks to their lives (*Medeiros et al. 2021, 1*). Undoubtedly, the pandemic seriously challenged cross-border cooperation along the Hungarian borders, too. Especially the implementation of cross-border developments and projects, particularly small-scale intermunicipal and interinstitutional ones, was dramatically hindered by the restrictions to free movement. The Managing Authorities of CBC programmes reacted in a flexible way, postponing joint events or organising them online and modifying the project budget. Although many events had to be postponed or cancelled, the effects of the pandemic have not endangered the sustainability of well managed cross-border structures. The achieved results can be considered a guarantee for future developments.

Conclusion

In our study we tried to give a panorama of the 30-year history of cross-border cooperation of Hungary. Obviously, this panorama must be superficial, due to the limits of an article. The daily work of the committed stakeholders on the ground generates a much more colourful picture. The main message of this article was the fundamental change of the conditions for cooperation following the collapse of the communist bloc. It is salient, to note how the energies repressed by the Communist Party until 1989 erupted from the 1990s and – equipped with the tools and advantages offered by the Euro-Atlantic integration – resulted in a lively world of CBC.

Due to their later commencement, the Hungarian examples of cooperation are not as mature as their western European counterparts; and the authors have to admit that the 4,000 projects implemented so far have modest results in terms of cross-border integration. At the same time, compared to the situation described in the starting anecdote of the article, the softening of the state borders contributing to the building up of mutual trust (at different levels, though) has resulted in a favourable atmosphere facilitating us in overcoming the traumas and bad memories of the past and in developing a real friendly environment in the heart of Europe. There is no need for anything else but to release the brake...

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