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Conference Proceedings

**Nemzetközi tudományos konferencia
a Magyar Tudomány Ünnepe alkalmából**
International Scientific Conference
on the Occasion of the Hungarian Science Festival

Sopron, 2022. november 3.
3 November 2022, Sopron

**TÁRSADALOM – GAZDASÁG – TERMÉSZET:
SZINERGIÁK A FENNTARTHATÓ FEJLŐDÉSSEN**

SOCIETY – ECONOMY – NATURE: SYNERGIES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Szerkesztők / Editors:

OBÁDOVICS Csilla, RESPERGER Richárd, SZÉLES Zsuzsanna, TÓTH Balázs István

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The Role of EGTCs and Euroregions in Economic Cooperation Across the Hungarian-Romanian Border Between the Period 2007-2020

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Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives

Absztrakt

A határon átnyúló együttműködés az Európai Unió központi pillére, mivel a határ régiók az EU integrációs laboratóriumainak is tekinthetők. Ez szükségessé teszi a határon átnyúló együttműködés támogatására használt elsődleges eszközök – az eurorégiók és az ETT-k – megfelelő megértését. Ebben a cikkben a rendelkezésre álló szakirodalom elemzése és interjúk elkészítése révén a magyar-román határszakaszon 2007-2020 közt működő struktúrák határon átnyúló gazdaságfejlesztő szerepének megértéséhez kerülünk közelebb. A kutatás azt mutatja, hogy az 1990-es és 2000-es években létrejött eurorégiók megnyitották az utat az ETT-k intézményesebb, jogilag erősebb eszköze előtt, míg a saját jelentőségük a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködés közvetlen mozgatórugóiként némileg csökkenni látszik. A vizsgált ETT-k ugyanakkor szintén nehézségekbe ütköznek a határon átnyúló gazdasági fejlődést javító képességükhöz fűződő elvárások teljesítésében, mivel a legtöbb ilyen jellegű kezdeményezésük előkészítő jellegű, sporadikus vagy kis léptékű.

Kulcsszavak: gazdaságfejlesztés, határon átnyúló együttműködés, kohéziós politika

JEL-kódok: O21, R58, R11

Abstract

Cross-border cooperation stands in the heart of the European Union as border regions are often regarded as the laboratories of the EU. This necessitates a proper understanding of the primary tools – the Euroregions and the EGTCs – used for supporting cross-border cooperation. This article focuses on the exploration of the roles these structures play in economic cross-border cooperation on the Hungarian-Romanian border section between 2007 and 2020 through analysing the available literature and conducting semi-structured interviews. The research shows that the Euroregions created in the 1990s and 2000s opened the way for the more institutionalised, legally more powerful tool of EGTCs while their abilities to be a direct driver of economic cross-border cooperation seems to somewhat diminished. At the same time the analysed EGTCs also struggle to fulfil the expectations attached to their capacity of improving cross-border economic development on the Hungarian-Romanian border section as their activities are either preparatory, sporadic or small-scaled.

Keywords: economic development, cross-border cooperation, cohesion policy

JEL Codes: O21, R58, R11

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1. Introduction

Cross-border cooperation in some sense is in the heart of the European Union as it is through it and the border regions where the four freedoms – the free movement of people, capital, goods and services – are primarily realised. This means that there is a need for properly understanding the complex system of territorial tools used in this process. This is why recently plenty of articles were written on the Euroregions and the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (hereafter: EGTC) presenting their history (Evrard & Engl, 2018), their theoretical foundation (Ulrich, 2020) and legal provisions (Medeiros 2020). Furthermore, it is also important to shed light on the topic through systematic case-studies focusing on different border sections. On the Hungarian-Romanian border there are already important materials published (such as Țoca et al., 2021; Jaschitz, 2020), however, the role of EGTCs and Euroregions in economic cross-border cooperation across this border section during the previous two financial cycles (2007-2020) has not yet been uncovered despite of the importance of the subject.

The term Euroregion means a transnational cooperation structure between at least two neighbouring territories from adjacent European countries. Euroregions usually are not identical with any legislative or governmental institutions and have no direct political power. The Association of European Border Regions formulated four criteria for a Euroregion to be identified: (1) it has to be formed by local and regional authorities on either side of the national border, sometimes with a parliamentary assembly, (2) it has to have a permanent secretariat and a technical and administrative team with own resources, (3) if it is of private law nature, then it has to be based on non-profit-making associations or foundations on either side of the border in accordance with the respective national law in force, and (4) if it is of public law nature, then it has to be based on inter-state agreements (Vassi & Salas-Olmedo, 2014).

The purpose of the Euroregions is to help the formation of a coherent space where the border does not pose any obstacle but rather appears as an endogenous resource inspiring development. The main activity of the Euroregions is the creation of a framework for cooperation by bringing together different actors along common policies and shared goals. The most frequently covered topics are regional development, transport, local economy, cultural activities and environmental protection (Medeiros, 2011).

Euroregions have a long history, the first being established in 1958 between the Netherlands and Germany. While in the 1970s there were 10 new registered Euroregions, it was only the 1990s when their popularity reached its peak with 39 newly established entities. In the 2000s the scale of newly established Euroregions started to decline with only 22 new formations and the 2010s only saw the creation of 2 new Euroregions. Currently, there are 81 Euroregions across Europe.

Probably, the decline in the popularity of the Euroregions has something to do with the introduction of the EGTC tool. The novelty of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation was that it made it possible for public bodies of different Member States to form a collective entity with full legal personality. The tool was established on 5 July 2006 by the Regulation (EC) 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council.

The objective of the EGTC is to facilitate and promote territorial cooperation in order to improve European economic and social cohesion. Specifically, the EGTC is dedicated to the management and implementation of territorial cooperation programmes or projects (Biot, 2012). Or in other words, EGTCs are “involved in wide-ranging policy development and strategy building” (Soós, 2013, p. 530.). An EGTC may carry out actions of territorial cooperation, with or without a financial contribution from the EU (Art. 7 of the EGTC Regulation). The added value of the EGTC tool was promoted by the Committee of Regions as it being threefold. Firstly, it strengthens territorial cohesion by helping the achievement of EU’s objectives as stated in the Treaty of Lisbon. Secondly, it pushes for results that support Europe 2020 by

boosting competitiveness and sustainability in Europe's regions. Thirdly, it promotes multilevel governance since the EGTC offers "the possibility of involving different institutional levels in a single cooperative structure", and thus "opens up the prospect of new forms of multilevel governance, enabling European regional and local authorities to become driving forces in drawing up and implementing EU policy, helping to make European governance more open, participatory, democratic, accountable and transparent (Committee of the Regions, 2011).

The main difference between an EGTC and a Euroregion is that the latter is perceived more like a "brand" and lacks the legal structure of the EGTC (Engström et al., 2011). However, the two structures do not necessarily have to be in a mutually exclusive relation, but they can co-exist and cooperate on the same or overlapping territories. This is also the case on the Hungarian-Romanian border section, the topic of this paper, which examines in more details the role of the Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion, the Carpathian Euroregion, the Biharia Euroregion, the Banat-Triplex-Confinium EGTC, the Gate to Europe EGTC, the European Common Future Building EGTC and the European Border Cities EGTC in cross-border economic cooperation between 2007 and 2020.

2. Methodology

In order to best assess the role of EGTCs and Euroregions in economic cooperation across the Hungarian-Romanian border between the period 2007-2020 a mixed methodological approach was put together consisting of three main types of sources.

Firstly, the international literature has been reviewed to find out what are the main school of thoughts regarding the role of Euroregions and EGTCs in economic development. In the article only those sources were cited that has a direct relevance to the topic and the Hungarian-Romanian border section. Regarding the EGTCs' projects and results a main source was the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives' publication called "Snapshot of EGTC's with Hungarian Participation" which offers an "overview of the situation and performance of the EGTCs with Hungarian participation" (CESCI, 2022). The publication relies on the project database created for the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade by the EGTCs, which contains data on nearly 440 projects of the groupings, as well as the results of a survey among the EGTCs, conducted by CESCI.

Secondly, the paper also extensively used the materials published on the EGTC monitor³ platform. The EGTC monitor was developed by the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives in 2021 to offer a comprehensive information platform of the EGTCs and it contains their interactive maps, basic data, detailed list of projects as well as recent news presenting their activities.

Thirdly, in order to fill the gaps from the literature review and project and document analysis, interviews were also carried out for the sake of this article with the directors and managers of the most active Euroregions and EGTCs of the analysed border section. The semi-structured interviews were helpful in understanding the underlying dynamics behind the role these structures can and do play in cross-border economic development.

Following the logic of the topic, the article is structured in a way that it begins with the general introduction of the topic, followed by the presentation of the methodology. After this the three Euroregions and the four EGTCs of the Hungarian-Romanian border section are analysed in details from the point of view of the role they play in the cross-border economic development. The conclusion chapter summarises the results of these analyses.

³ <https://egtcmirror.cesci-net.eu/en/>

3. Overview of the EGTCs and Euroregions in the Hungarian - Romanian border

3.1. Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion

The Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion (hereafter: DKMT Euroregion) was established in 1997 in Szeged with members from three countries: Bács-Kiskun, Békés and Csongrád-Csanád counties from Hungary; Arad, Hunedoara, Caraș-Severin and Timiș counties from Romania and the Autonomous Province of the Vojvodina from Serbia. Altogether the Euroregion comprises 71,879 km² and 5.3 million people. The aim of the cooperation was stated by the signatories in a way that “it should develop and broaden relationships among local communities and local governments in the field of economy, education, culture, science and sports – and help the region to join the process of the European integration” (DKMT, 1997).

The Euroregion has established 10 workgroups which compose of initiatives, projects, programs, recommendations in different professional fields of the cooperation. These workgroups are: economy, infrastructure and tourism workgroup; urbanism, nature and environmental protection workgroup; culture, sports, non-governmental organisations and social issues workgroup; international relations, information and mass communication workgroup; catastrophe prevention workgroup; national health workgroup; healthcare workgroup; industrial park workgroup; tourism workgroup; agricultural workgroup.

Following from the DKMT *raison d'être*, the Euroregion is primarily involved in “promoting projects of regional interest and playing a role as a forum for information and advice on cross-border issues” (Rieser, 2010). This also involves the development of economy-related initiatives.

However, the aspiration of being a real driver of economic cross-border cooperation is not without its challenges. Even though the DKMT Euroregion is one of the most important and active areas of Europe by its position in the eastern border of the European Union at the crossroads of Trans-European and Pan-European corridors, the intensity of the cooperation is lower than in Western Europe because homogenisation processes are significant barriers to the development of the border regions (Dudă-Dăianu & Abrudan, 2017). Despite the fact that there are some positive tendencies, the cooperation concerning the Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion (...) can still be characterized by developmental tendencies of the peripheries (Pál, 2014, p. 26.).

3.2. Carpathian Euroregion

The Carpathian Euroregion was established in 1993, by the representatives of the regional administrations of Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia and Hungary. Romanian counties requested their acceptance in 2000. Its total area is about 160,000 km² and it is inhabited by over 15 million people. The Carpathian Euroregion was created to bring together the people from the region of the Carpathian Mountains and to facilitate their cooperation in the fields of science, culture, education, trade, tourism and economy. Even though economic development was mentioned as one the main goals, the Euroregion is mostly praised by being the most successful Euroregional initiative in this part of Europe mostly due to the achievements in the sphere of environment protection, cultural exchange, institutional networking and promoting a peaceful coexistence (Tanaka, 2006; Chabanna, 2013; Borshch, 2014).

Nevertheless, the Euroregion had several initiatives and activities targeting economic development. Firstly, the growing number of border crossings in the region can be considered as a major achievement of the Carpathian Euroregion as regards to the strengthening of economic cooperation (Borshch 2014). This was “a preliminary step that allowed a more intensive exchange on the local and regional levels and thus also the development of a more sophisticated structures of cooperation” (Smętkowski & Rok, 2016).

Secondly, the Euroregion has been carrying out various promotion and networking activities in order to enhance economic cooperation. These mostly include the organisation of trade fairs providing a meeting point for business entities from different parts of the region to display their offer and establish business relations. However, the establishment and later the activities of the Carpathian Association of Chambers of Commerce can also be considered as a step towards this direction.

Thirdly, the active presence of the Euroregion also made it possible for the appearance of 'institutional spin-offs', i.e. "new institutions that use the potential and capabilities of the existing Euroregion structures to serve complementary goals, focusing also on enabling cross-border economic cooperation" (Smętkowski & Rok, 2016). For example, the Carpathian Agency of Regional Development or the Centre for Cross-border Cooperation.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that even though economic integration is visible in the Euroregion it is mostly limited to trade indicating that the stage of cross-border cooperation development is not particularly advanced.

3.3. Biharia Euroregion

Biharia Euroregion is the only Euroregion which only has members from Romania and Hungary. It was established in 2002, as a "newly created structure within a diversified area in terms of ethnic-confessions, culture and not least of cross-border cooperation" (Țoca, 2013). It is formed by two counties: the Romanian Bihor County and the Hungarian Hajdú-Bihar County. The reason behind the establishment of the Euroregion is that even though the two counties do not have a homogenous structure, they experience challenges that can be solved together more easily. Moreover, "the differences of resources make it possible and somehow necessary for a certain economic cooperation between Bihor and Hajdú-Bihar" (Buda, 2016, p. 5.).

The local authorities from the two counties clearly intended to "significantly enhance the number of bilateral projects" (Cismaș and Sabău 2012, 97) through the establishment of the Euroregion. In the early 2010s the economic potential of the area was perceived to be an increased one and "the key to a balanced development of the border territory will be to attract important sums of European money by means of structural funds (Ibid). In order to attain this goal, the establishment of the Biharia Euroregion was a welcomed step by many scholars and practitioners, claiming that "nowadays, and more accurately after 1989, the cooperation at the Romanian-Hungarian border at the level of Debrecen and Oradea communities and of Bihor-Hajdu Bihar Euroregion has been more dynamic than ever" (Țoca, 2013, p. 7.).

As opposed to the initial praises the initiative received, it seems that Biharia Euroregion lost most of its relevance in the past years as currently it even lacks a working webpage, which might mean that the number of its active projects are converging to zero. However, this might be the result of an organic and more general process, since as early as 2016 authors were already raising the idea that Biharia Euroregion could learn from Western examples and it would be wise to implement the EGTC project as "this could bring advantages on the long term, it would give a stable legal framework and financial autonomy for the Euroregion. It could be established axis for better cooperation and priorities" (Buda, 2016).

Consequently, it could be perceived that the Euroregion made way to the EGTC which is a very important instrument for interregional cooperation also promoted and supported by the European Union, which might be more efficient in realising "socio-economic development and a new dimension of interregional cooperation" (Ibid).

3.4. Banat-Triplex-Confinium EGTC

The Banat-Triplex-Confinium EGTC (hereafter BTC EGTC) is the first EGTC established on the Hungarian-Romanian border section and it was registered in 2011. It brings together 76 municipalities from the Homokhátság, Tisza, Maros/Mureș and Banat regions. The total operating area of the EGTC is 8,374.4 km², with a population of 444,570. Its headquarters is located

in Mórahalom, Hungary. The general and specific objectives of the Banat-Triplex-Confinium EGTC are (1) promotion of the harmonious development of its territory by strengthening the economic, social and territorial cohesion through cross-border cooperation; (2) elaboration and implementation of the joint, coordinated development strategy of the EGTC; (3) development of cross-border economic, social and environmental activities through joint strategies for sustainable territorial development; (4) comprehensive social catching-up of the border regions on the basis of partnership, with the application of regional and local resources and the efficient use of the state budget tender funds of the Community, Hungary and Romania.

The BTC EGTC carried out several activities in the Hungarian-Romanian border region to promote cross-border economic cooperation. Firstly, between 2012-2013 it implemented the project called COOP-Banat to strengthen cooperation and network resources in favour for achieving economic growth. The project which had a 75,771 euro budget from the Hungary-Romania Cross-border Co-operation Programme intended to improve the cooperations between the South-Plains regions and the West-Romanian regions. The idea was that cross-border cooperations may help the local governments, the companies and the local stakeholders to implement a joint concept and to draw up a successfully strategy.

Another initiative that aimed to increase the economic cross-border cooperation aimed to do so through enhancing cross-border mobility. The E-transport project (carried out from a 779,715 euro budget) externally managed by the BTC EGTC provides passenger transport between Jimbolia (Romania) and Mórahalom (Hungary) using environmentally friendly e-buses. The project was also completed with 12 cultural and touristic events on the two sides of the border to strengthen the link between the involved localities.

Whereas the BTC EGTC created a business partner finding portal and EXPO in order to link together the small and medium businesses of the region and to promote networking as well as created development plans to catch up with international market trends, boost entrepreneurship and develop competitive businesses, of small and medium-sized enterprises, these projects were only available on the Serbian-Hungarian border and not the Hungarian-Romanian border.

3.5. Gate to Europe EGTC

The Gate to Europe EGTC was registered in 2012 and incorporates 35 municipalities from the Hungarian-Romanian border area. The operating area of the EGTC covers a total of 2,617.9 km², partly affecting the southern part of Nyírség, Érmellék/Valea Ierului, Berettyó and the Hajdúság Landscape Protection Area. The seat of the EGTC is located in the Hungarian city of Nyíradony, the total population of the Group is 190,023. The general objective of the Gate to Europe EGTC is to strengthen economic and social cohesion among its members in the framework of cross-border cooperation. The specific objectives of the EGTC are the following (1) elaboration of regional development plans, project development and implementation of projects; (2) elaboration of regional development plans, common project development and implementation of projects; (3) cooperation for the development of tourism: joint product development, development of tourism infrastructure, joint marketing; (4) joint tourism management.

Based on the profile of the municipalities building up the Gate to Europe EGTC, the entity approaches the topic of economic cross-border cooperation through supporting agriculture. The EGTC mostly improved the collaboration of farmers by regularly organizing farmer clubs, trade fairs and field trips, where the participants can exchange their experiences. For instance, in 2014 the EGTC had a project with a budget of 1,600 euro to organise agricultural forums. The aim of the project was to deepen the relationships between the farmers working in the operational field of the Gate to Europe (EGTC monitor, 2022).

Furthermore, the Gate to Europe EGTC supported farmers and municipalities by establishing a marketplace, farmers' market, the construction of a processing plant (wine, pellet) and

a storage building, as well as by purchasing other equipment (wood chipper, tractor) organized by externally managed tenders (CESCI, 2022).

3.6. European Common Future Building EGTC

The European Common Future Building EGTC was registered in 2012 and involves 8 municipalities on the Hungarian-Romanian borderland. The operating area of the EGTC covers a total of 575.6 km², involving the area of the Békési-hát and the eastern part of Arad County. Since 2016 the registered office of the EGTC is located in the Hungarian city of Battonya, while the total population of the grouping is 34,254. The general objective of the EGTC is to strengthen the economic and social cohesion among its members in the framework of cross-border cooperation. Specific objectives of the EGTC in its field of operation are: (1) elaboration of joint regional development plans, common project development and implementation of projects; (2) the establishment and operation of joint institutions facilitating cooperation and the maintenance of projects; (3) cooperation for the development of tourism: joint product development, development of tourism infrastructure, joint marketing; (4) joint tourism management.

The European Common Future Building EGTC is one of the less active cross-border bodies in the region. According to its website and several sources analysing the EGTC's activities on this border section (such as for example CESCI's EGTC Snapshot), this EGTC did not yet have the capacity or opportunity to place enough emphasis on cross-border economic development. Its Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme project between 2018-2020 called COMSPORT supported with 80,000 euro aimed to create an active social group in the area. The two members of the EGTC, the municipalities of Curtici and Pusztaotlaka submitted a joint tender to organise events, through which the citizens and organisations on both sides of the border can get closer to each other and establish a better connection despite the cultural and language barriers. This can be viewed as a prerequisite for economic cooperation, but in itself is not that yet.

3.7. European Border Cities EGTC

The European Border Cities EGTC is the youngest on the Hungarian-Romanian border section as it was registered in 2014. The EGTC brings together the municipalities of Nyíregyháza and Satu Mare along the Hungarian-Romanian border. The EGTC covers a total of 411.3 km² with a total population of 236,695. The registered office of the EGTC is located in the Hungarian city of Nyíregyháza. The general objective of the EGTC is to strengthen the economic and social cohesion among its members in the framework of cross-border cooperation. Specific objectives of the EGTC in its field of operation are (1) elaboration of joint regional development plans, common project development and implementation of projects; (2) cooperation for the development of tourism: joint product development, development of tourism infrastructure, joint marketing; and (3) joint tourism management.

Similarly to the European Common Future Building EGTC, the European Border Cities EGTC is also not at that development stage yet where it can directly and efficiently affect the economic cross-border cooperation. Rather it has projects that "prepare the ground" for that, such as the project called CultDialogue and Kultaction which were implemented in order to address similar cultural challenges. The CultDialogue took steps to increase the capacity of cultural organisations and to establish a methodology for cooperation in the field of culture, while Kultaction has been active in organising new traditional events, strengthening cooperation between institutes, increasing the range of programmes and creating the possibility for exchanging experience (CESCI, 2022).

4. Conclusion

Since the late 1990s the Romanian-Hungarian border section was the scene of buoyant cross-border cooperation initiatives. First the Euroregions appeared which through their pioneering symbolic activities usually encompassing larger territorial units opened the way for the more institutionalised, legally more powerful tool of EGTCs. Consequently, in the analysed period of 2007-2020, the Euroregions competencies to be a direct driver of economic cross-border cooperation seemed to somewhat diminish, while at the same time the potential of the EGTCs were assessed to be bigger.

However, the analysed EGTCs were to some extent unable to fulfil the expectations attached to their capacity of improving cross-border economic development on the Hungarian-Romanian border section as their activities mostly fell under one of three categories. Firstly, they focused on grounding activities that prepared the circumstances for creating more direct and effective cross-border economic initiatives by connecting the relevant actors together or creating strategies that these actors can follow. Secondly, the majority of these projects were sporadic, lasting for a very limited time (usually one to three years) which meant that the changes they provoked did not have enough time to really take root and blossom into a long-lasting practice. Thirdly, these endeavours more often than not were quite small-scale concentrating on to a limited territorial or thematic scope. This might be contra-productive since most of the economic processes are complex and involve several actors from different industries and settlements to work together, but if a project is only focusing on one segment these necessary synergies cannot develop properly.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly, all these activities were important and contributed to the incremental improvement of the cross-border economic cooperation, but it is probably not too far-fetched to say that their direct impact is not high enough. The reasons behind this could be manifold and more than likely structural, stemming from the endogenous characteristics of the territory, at the same time the exploration of the potential remedies could be gap-filling research in the future. Furthermore, another potential avenue for future research could be a systemic statistical analysis of the sustainability of the cross-border economic projects.

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