

Glosses on the Ister–Granum EGTC research

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Abstract

This article outlines the geographical framework of the results of our research in this collection of studies. It consists of three main parts. The first part discusses the history of scientific studies conducted in relation to the Ister-Granum EGTC that evolved from a Euroregion after the turn of the millennium. Its focus is the physical and social geographical characteristics of the EGTC area as well as its historical and administrative changes. The second part is essentially of a complementary nature concentrating on the historical dimension by presenting the paths which can be obtained from the historic-statistical data for the population of settlements. It covers the changes in the region's historical geographical situation over a period from the mid-19th century to the present. The third and final part is a compilation on the history of the EGTC from its first attempts of cooperation when Esztergom and Štúrovo (Párkány) became twin towns, through the present operation procedures to its project-generating activities. Thus, this article establishes the points of contact and spatial allocations for the subsequent studies.

Keywords: Ister-Granum EGTC, changes in the administrative structure, development paths

Introduction

Before elaborating on the conclusions of our research presented in this publication it seems worthwhile to take a brief look at the region under scrutiny. In our papers we call it the Ister–Granum Region, a topographical designation that appeared as late as the early 2000s. It denotes the wider region of the junction of the rivers Danube and Hron, once called Ister (Ἰστρος) by the Ancient Greeks and Granum (or Granua) by the Romans, respectively. In the geographical sense, it encompasses the functional catchment area of Esztergom, a once-significant city of the Carpathian Basin. Until the first decade of the 20th century, the administrative core of the region was the County of Esztergom, together with the fringes of some neighbouring administrative units.

The new border drawn after World War I cut through the region and its established socio-economic ties. The division was further exacerbated by the political situation prevalent in East–Central Europe during the inter-war decades as well as the destruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge during World War II. The separated parts of the region ran diverging development courses until the rebuilding of the Mária Valéria Bridge in 2001 despite that the two towns, central to regional co-operation, Esztergom in Hungary and Štúrovo in Slovakia, established a partner-town relationship in 1991.

The re-opening of the bridge made it possible for those living in the region to establish daily contacts again, which in turn triggered a process of deeper integration between the two sides of the border. This development culminated in the establishment of the Ister–Granum Euroregion in 2003, and its transformation into an EGTC in 2008. Although, the prime function of EGTCs is specifically provide a legal background for regional cross-border co-operation, ironically the very opportunity has been spawning various social, economic and sometimes political tensions. We attribute this for the most part to the almost 100-year-long separation. Our team, representing various disciplines, attempted to delve into the nature of these “phantom borders” lurking beneath the surface. The objective of our introductory study is therefore to describe a sociological, socio-geographical and cultural-geographical framework in which our research findings fall into place.

Methodology

Our introductory study rests on three pillars: the first one is a summary of the findings of the research projects in the region followed by a natural and socio-geographic description of the Ister–Granum Region along with a brief insight into its history and administration. The second pillar expands on the history of the region with population evolution trajectories derived from historical statistical data; and the third one is a history of the Ister–Granum EGTC, which provides useful links to the subsequent studies in this publication.

Our methodology is, in essence, a status report focusing on the above-mentioned aspects. At the same time, we applied a cluster analysis of the population data to gain an insight into the development of the region’s settlements and to discover their demographic trajectories. This statistical method has been used before, in various works of social science, including social geography (Beluszky, Sikos 2007; Bottlik 2007; Ritgasszer 2009; Fábián, Tóth 2013). At its heart lies dimension

elimination, by which series are classified into more homogeneous data groups or clusters. The elements are classified into a cluster, because they are close to each other in some relevant dimension and this separates them from the elements of other clusters. In clustering we used the Euclidian distance and the non-hierarchical K-mean method which are the most popular approaches.

The base map in the collection of figures shows the present administrative borders of the region on account of the temporal comparability of changes. This map does not reflect the separations and unifications in the settlement system over time, though it allows us to compare the phenomena over different periods.

Preliminaries to the Research

One concept that must be mentioned with respect to earlier research is that of the “phantom border” (*Phantomgrenze*). The term was coined by Hirschhausen et al. and introduced in their 2015 publication. They studied regions along and around former borders located in a single country today. Their approach sheds new light on historical determinism in regional differences and idiosyncrasies. Their declared objective was “to facilitate the understanding of a region that has been formed by many instances of border shifting during its recent history”. The main question is this: what is the explanation for the existence of phantom borders and phantom spaces, and what determines their existence more: old structures or rather the current political, scientific and social discourse?

In our case, although the premises are similar, the situation is somewhat the other way round as the Hungarian–Slovakian border was actually created only in the 20th century, and the two countries’ accession to the European Union and then to the Schengen zone promises a resolution to that division. As the former economic and social relations are being revived the social differences between the two sides become palpable despite that no language barrier at all exists in many cases. Borders remain within the cognitive realm for many people, formed and re-formed by day-to-day events, as well as political and administrative interventions.

This is the backdrop against which the studying of the social fissure lines in this region takes place. In the focus of our research are the borders and barriers that prevail in these national-separation-line communities, and that remain chaotic despite the trends seen in Western Europe. “Border Studies”, as they are generally referred to in Western literature, inquire into similar problems. Such research has a seminal influence on projects in Hungary even though the discipline of

Border Studies in that sense has not yet taken root in this country. It is our aim to facilitate that process with our publication.

The subject of our study, the Ister–Granum EGTC, got into the focus of attention of scientific research in the field of cross-border relations sometime around the turn of the millennium. What gave momentum to the restoration and re-interpretation of cross-border relations here was the rebuilding of the Mária Valéria Bridge (2001), which offered a physical link across the river border again, after almost 60 years. It allowed new spatial interactions to be created and existing ones to be re-organized. The re-development of spatial interactions between Esztergom and its extended catchment area across the border has been a unique phenomenon and opportunity along Hungary's borders and it has attracted ample research over the past fifteen years. The European Institute, a research outfit of CESCI, and its research profile with the Ister–Granum EGTC as one of its focal points of interest, provide a support framework for such studies (Cross Border Review 2014; 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Research projects into the Ister–Granum region involve varied and complex scientific approaches. Numerous studies have focused on integration and (economic) co-operation, offering suggestions as to the potential strategies thereof (e.g. Kulcsár L. et al. 2005; Baják Z. et al. 2006; Megvalósíthatósági tanulmány az Esztergom – Párkány között létesítendő teherhídhöz 2006; IGVLO Ex-ante 2014; etc.). It is predominantly the status-analysis chapters in those studies which sought to explore how cross-border co-operation could promote the European integration, not least with a view of paving the way for obtaining EU funding. The proposed strategies apply complex approaches to describe and analyse this cross-border region. The focus of the research is in most cases on cross-border movements, often described in the context of the historical and social embeddedness of co-operation and the existing economic and social relations. One core feature of cross-border relations is the existence and intensity of movements. Some of the involved aspects have attracted several research studies. For instance, Bartal and Hardi (2005) studied cross-border employment, while Jaschitz (2010) attempted to draw up the theoretical boundaries of Esztergom's catchment area. Others examined the cross-border social-relationship networks of the region – from the point of view of the interaction between the various ethnic groups (Sikos & Szarka 2008) and in the context of non-governmental organizations (Bartal & Molnár 2006). It is, therefore, quite safe to conclude that the concept of 'border' manifests itself in a rather complex fashion in the Ister–Granum EGTC, and it calls for similar complexity in research into the subject.

The Studied Area

The Ister–Granum Region can be defined as the settlements comprising the EGTC, or – alternatively, and perhaps more accurately – as a gravitational field around the dual-core urban centre of Esztergom and Štúrovo. The attraction of the centre, however, diminishes with distance from it and therefore it would be inconvenient to use this method to decide which settlements belong to this particular region and which to some other (Jaschitz 2010).

The region could be defined as the area extending up to 25–30 km from and around Mária Valéria Bridge. It includes all the settlements which are economically and/or socially closely connected to either Esztergom or Štúrovo. But, at the same time, this definition is highly subjective, and it requires constant adjustment as time goes by. Since, however, the region is by no means much larger than the 1,800 km² Ister–Granum EGTC with its 81 settlements and a population of 170,000. For practical purposes, we decided to consider this objectively-defined area with its readily available figures.

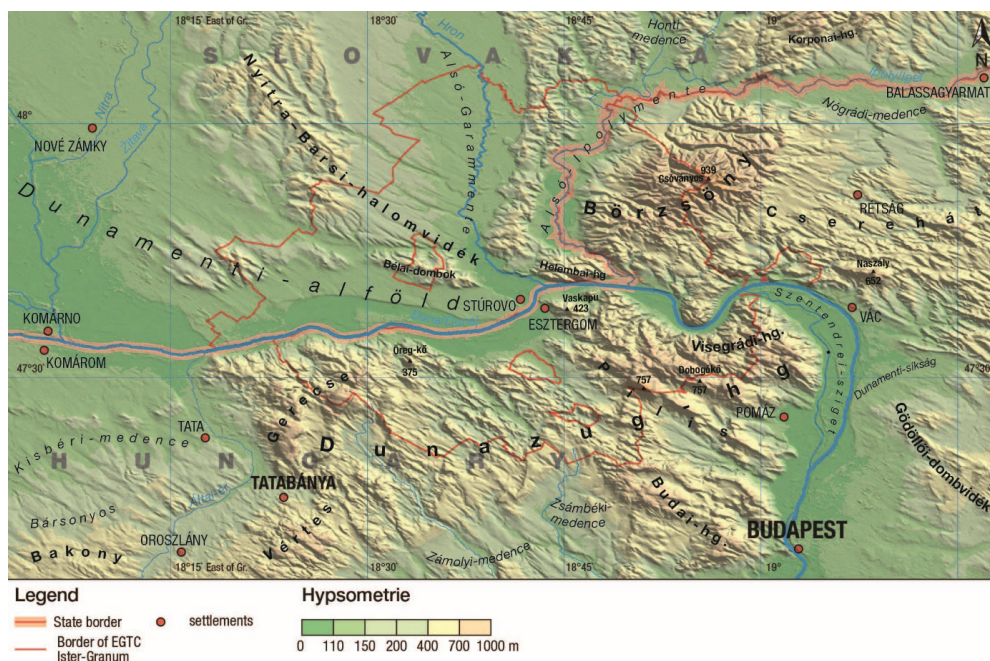
The central role of the two towns derives from, and is underpinned by, their natural and constructed environments: they are situated in the centre of a basin surrounded by hills and mountains, and the main roads of the region radiate from there in all directions.

That said, the topology of the region is far from homogeneous as it lies in the meeting point of three major geographical formations of the Carpathian Basin. To the west there is the *Raab Basin*, or – more precisely – the valley of the Danube and two of its tributaries (the Hron and the Ipoly/Ipeľ). The Danube provides communication to the west and to the south, the Hron to the north, and the Ipoly/Ipeľ to the north-northeast (Figure 1).

This predominantly lowland landscape is dotted with the Hron Hills and the Ippeľ Hills. The plains are bordered by the north-eastern parts of the Transdanubian Hills range: the Gerecse, the Pilis and the Visegrád Hills in the south and a part of the inner volcanic arc of the *North-western Carpathians*, the Börzsöny, in the north.

From the socio-geographic point of view the two sides of the region, divided by the Danube, present different characteristics. While the southern, or Esztergom, part underwent industrialization thanks to its coal mines in the 19th century, the northern part has remained a rural, agricultural area. The Lábatlan-Dorog-Esztergom triangle remains one of Hungary's important industrial bases to this day, even though several of the industrial plants established here during the 20th century have put up the shutters during the past fifteen years.

Figure 1: Physical geographical map of the Ister-Granum EGTC area



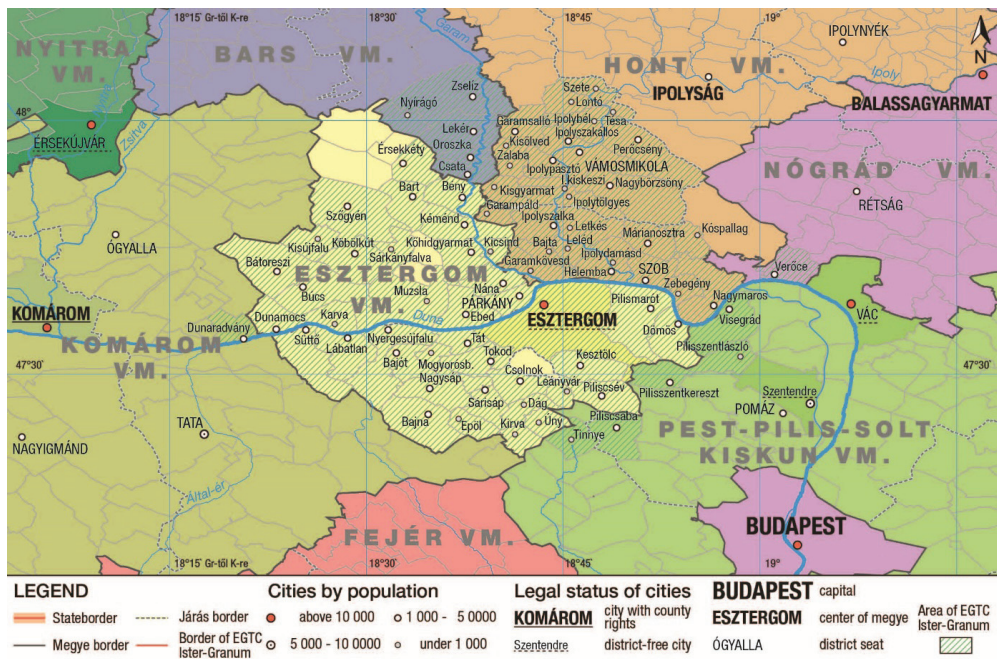
The same division is reflected in the population geography of the region. While on the Hungarian side the population density is 124 inhabitants per square kilometre, higher than the national average of 107, the Slovakian side features just 64, more consistent with a predominantly rural way of life. Settlement sizes reinforce that picture. While on the Slovakian side the biggest towns are Štúrovo with its 11,000 inhabitants and Želiezovce (7,500) on the northern fringes, on the Hungarian side Esztergom boasts a population of almost 30,000 and there are another four towns (Dorog, Nyergesújfalu, Tát and Lábátlan) with more than 5,000 inhabitants each (Ocskay 2008).

From all this it seems the centre of gravity of the region is on the Hungarian side, as it always has been, although in the absence of a physical link this attraction was not fully expressed for decades after World War II. This impediment was removed with the rebuilding of Mária Valéria Bridge in 2001. Both spontaneous and institutional relations between the two sides sprang into blossom and settlements relegated earlier to a peripheral role received fresh impetus to start on a more promising path.

Administrative Changes from the 19th Century until Today

One of the biggest rivers of Europe, the Danube, has been a strong barrier throughout history, and this shows the evolution of the administrative units alongside it. Looking at the historical maps, one can see that the Danube served as a natural border between the most important subnational administrative units in many cases: the counties, in the Hungarian Kingdom. But not in the region under scrutiny: here the river ran right across two counties and nearly in the middle of another. This was obviously made possible by the important “bridge towns”: Komárom, Esztergom, and the capital Pest-Buda (later Budapest), which had exerted an attractive force on both sides of the river.

Figure 2: The administrative structure of the present Ister-Granum EGTC area in 1910



An analysis of the administrative system reveals that the core of the region is the historical Esztergom County, all the settlements of it, except for five, are members of the Ister-Granum EGTC today. This county came into existence in the earliest days of the formation of the administrative system of the Hungarian Kingdom, probably because of the special place occupied by the city of Esztergom at the time. The county would encompass all settlements in Esztergom’s sphere

of influence, both north of the city (between the Danube and the Hron) and south-west of it (south of the Danube). The geographical extent of the county changed on several occasions, mostly owing to mergers with other administrative units, until the situation shown on the map (Figure 2) was created by the 1876 reorganization of the public administration. It was mainly due to physical geography reasons that the county was subdivided into two districts: one north of the river, the Párkányi járás (District of Párkány), with Muzsla (Mužla) and later (1908) Štúrovo (Párkány) as its administrative centre, and another along the other side of the river, the Esztergom District, governed from Esztergom.

Initially the subdivision of, and interconnections between, the neighbouring counties would also be determined by their physical geographic conditions. From the current EGTC point of view, the situation of the settlements alongside the Ipoly is of importance. These were organized into two districts: the Szob District and the Vámosmikola District. They were part of Hont County with Ipolyság to the north-east along the Ipoly river as its centre. Given the transport technology of the time, this area, squeezed between the natural obstructions of the Börzsöny Mountains and the Hron river to the east and west and the Danube to the south, had been somewhat neglected. The Lévai járás (the District of Léva), in the south-east of Bars County, otherwise not particularly confined by geography, found itself in a similar situation. Its settlements would have been inconveniently far from Esztergom in terms of contemporary transport and more attracted by Léva (Levice), further up to the north in the river valley.

The other five settlements included in the EGTC today once belonged to Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County (one to the Budakeszi District and four to the Szentendre District) while another one (Verőce) belonged to Nógrád County and to Rétság District touching on the Danube. Except for this latter, all occupied a buffer-zone position on the fringes of the contemporary county and now the EGTC, and thus it is difficult to tell which centre would have attracted them more: Buda or Esztergom.

This system of administration and the economic ties linked to it were significantly changed when, after World War I, the territories north of the Danube and west and north of the Ipoly became part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia, while south territory of the above rivers remained in Hungary, and they saw several administrative reorganizations during the 20th century.

Since the new national border cut Esztergom County and neighbouring Komárom County in half along the Danube, the parts remaining in Hungary were united in what was called Komárom and Esztergom 'administratively united temporary

county' (Hungarian abbreviation: k. e. e. vm.). Similar was the formation of Nógrád and Hont k. e. e. vm. on the left bank of the Ipoly. In 1938 however, the First Vienna Award, implemented under the auspices of Germany and Italy, enabled a peaceful partial revision of the Treaty of Trianon in favour of Hungary. In consequence, Hungary was granted the annexation of about 12,000 sq. km of Czechoslovakian territory, mainly borderland areas with Hungarian majority. The border changes affected the hinterland of Esztergom as well.

After the territorial revision in 1938 Esztergom County with its two districts was restored and the Szob District and the Ipolyság District were separated from Nógrád and Hont k. e. e. vm. and added to the newly established Bars and Hont k. e. e. vm. After World War II the pre-1938 borders, drawn in 1920, were again restored and, in 1950, the Hungarian part of the territory under scrutiny was organized into two counties: Komárom and Pest. At the same time the settlements of the long-defunct Vámosmikola District between the Danube and the Ipoly of former Hont County, together with Verőce of Nógrád County, were transferred to Pest County.

The northern, Slovakian part of the Ister-Granum EGTC too has seen several administrative reorganizations. Initially, Czechoslovakia would use the county system inherited from the Hungarian Kingdom with some changes: the districts of Komárom County and Esztergom County north of the Danube were united into a single administrative unit while the Czechoslovak parts of the counties Bars and Hont were preserved as separate units for some time. In the 1920s a new administrative unit, the *župa* ('greater county') was created. The affected part of today's Ister-Granum region belonged to two counties, that of Nitra, stretching to the Danube, and Zvolen. In the 1930s, Czechoslovakia was divided into four 'lands', one of which roughly corresponded to today's Slovakia. There were no intermediate administrative levels. The settlements on the Slovakian side belonged to three district units, titled as 'okres', namely Štúrovo, Želiezovce and Komárno. In 1960, the new districts of Levice and Nové Zámky were created in the territory, and the EGTC settlements belonged to these as well as to the district of Komárno to the west. The districts were organized into higher territorial units, called as 'kraj', which were abolished in 1990 and re-created in 1996. These changes had little effect on the districts though, and the settlements of the EGTC now belong to the same three districts mentioned above.

The entire Slovakian part of Ister-Granum now belongs to Nitriansky kraj (Nitra Region). Its southern territory on the Danube is part of the Okres Nové Zámky (the District of Nové Zámky) and the Okres Komárno (the District of

Komárno), while the northern territory is part of the Okres Levice (the District of Levice). The Hungarian part of the EGTC belongs to two counties, namely Komárom-Esztergom and Pest. (Figure 3).

Historical causes for demographic changes in the Ister-Granum region

After the brief overview of changes in the region's administrative structure, we now review the direct and indirect effects of historical events on the observed region with the help of a general social indicator, the population number as well as its changes since population data is available over a relatively long-time interval.

Figure 4 outlines the region's population number and changes in this number between the population censuses of 1880 and 2011. These censuses provide official, settlement-level data for our research. The map also shows significant changes in several parts of the region in those 131 years.

In general terms, these changes follow the overall tendencies in the Carpathian basin, thus they are mostly influenced by the negative or positive developments in the local economy and the related attractiveness, or lack of it, of living, working or doing business here. Overall, population number in most settlements (in total in 43) grew, even if slightly, during this time interval. Significant growth was typical in the southern, Hungarian part of the EGTC. More specifically, it was observed mainly in Esztergom and in other settlements in the Danube region that are characterised by intense industrial activity (e.g. Nyergesújfalu, Tát, Dorog, Tokod, Lábatlan). North of the Danube, however, the population number considerably increased only in the central districts, like Štúrovo (Párkány), Želiezovce (Zselíz), and in some bigger (and more important) settlements (e.g. Gbelce (Köbölkút), Bátorové Kosihy (Bátorkeszi).

Population number decreased in those areas, where the above-mentioned favourable conditions did not exist or where border changes largely contributed to a status of shadow zone of low circulation which generated emigration from these mainly “rural” settlements. The physical geography situation of these settlements is unfavourable even in these days due to their location mostly in mountain reliefs.

By using the data at our disposal, we grouped the settlements of the EGTC area based on the cluster method, already mentioned above. This method enables us to separate six groups. Figure 5 and Figure 6 present the paths and the pattern

Figure 3: The administrative structure of the Ister–Granum EGTC area in 2016

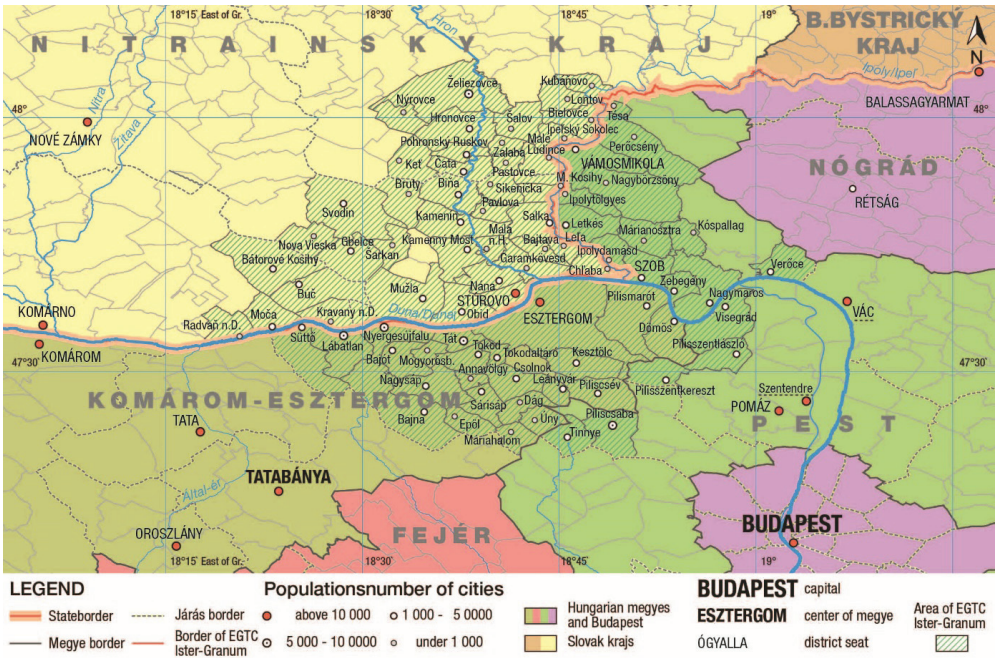
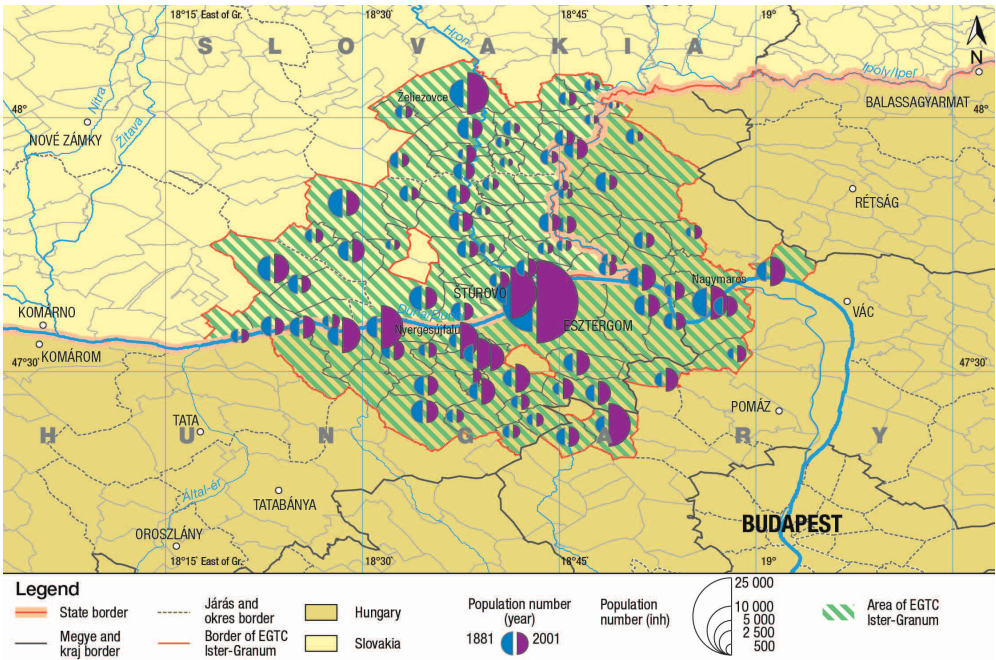
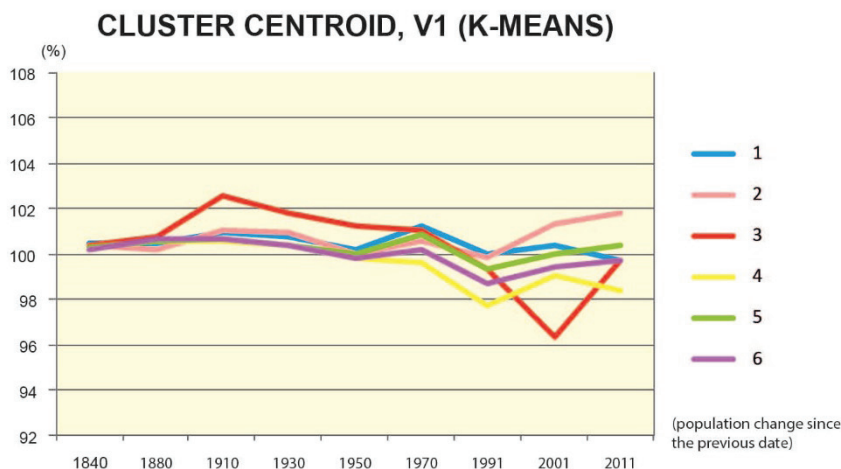


Figure 4: Demographic changes in the settlements of the Ister–Granum EGTC between 1910–2011



of settlements belonging to different groups. In general, the population in different settlements is roughly on the same level in the beginning, suggesting more or less equal settlement sizes (in terms of population) and the existence of a nearby centre (urban settlement) with relatively small excessive population, therefore it implies greater significance in a field of economic activity, namely in agriculture. Even though there were a few deviations, the paths described above continued to move together until the 1950s. Significant differences emerged in the period of economic prosperity following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Changes in the 1970s consolidated the dissimilarities that later (after the change of regime) revealed the existing differences in the situation of these settlements (*Figure 5*).

Figure 5: The path of demographic changes in the Ister-Granum EGTC area between 1840 and 2011



The following social, economic, and political-historical backgrounds can be considered as characteristics of the six possible paths:

- Cluster 1: Settlements in this group are characterised by a steady increase in population numbers. The growth rate was not excessive until 1910, which may be explained by their favourable transport geography situation. Population changes came to a halt between the two World Wars. Significant growth in population numbers was induced by the migration profit resulting from industrialisation during the initial period of the so-called Socialist system after World War II. This tendency was reversed

after the change of regime in 1989-1990 and, after some dynamism, it adjusted itself to the Hungarian trends, which was decreasing population due to emigration. These settlements, except for Štúrovo, are all located on the Hungarian side of the EGTC.

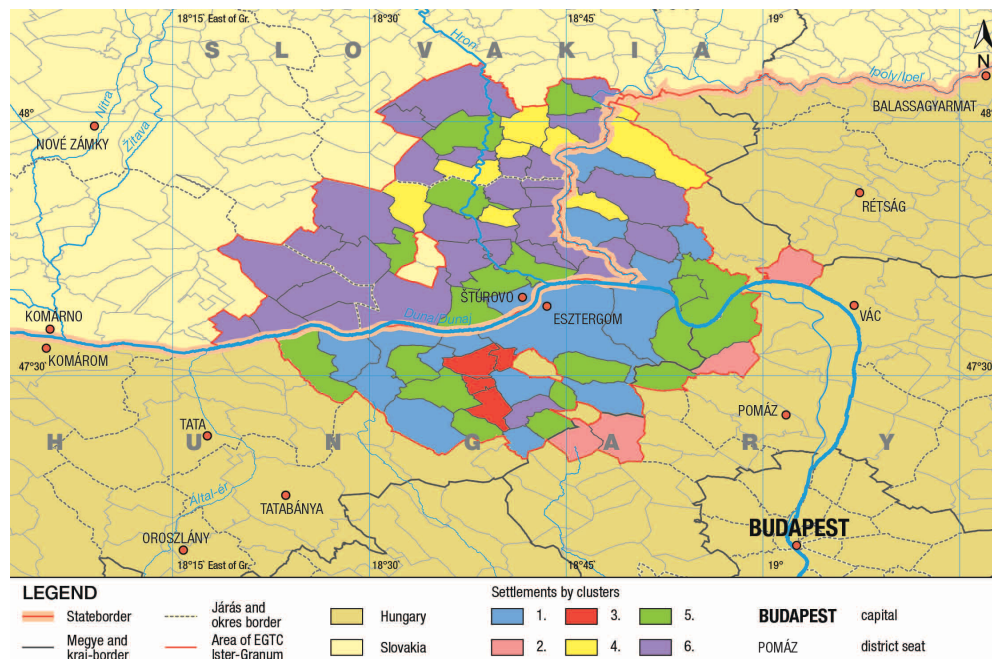
- Cluster 2: The second group had similar characteristics until the change of regime, however, without a similarly strong growth in the 1950s. Since the change of regime, the population of these settlements has been (intensively) growing though with declining intensity. The favourable demographic situation is likely to be the result of their location in Pest County which is in a favourable transport geography situation, and the fact that the emergence of the Budapest-agglomeration and its increasing growth is an attracting factor for population movements.
- Cluster 3: The third group consists of two miner settlements in the Hungarian part of the EGTC, Sárísáp and Tokod. There was a boom in this group's population after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (1867) when a highly favourable economic period began, namely the opening of the coalmines. The growth rate started to slow down in the 1920s (the population number was already stagnating at this time). The loss of economic importance of mining soon led to a population decline. It should be noted that the reason why their growth came to a halt after the change of regime is the separation of their former miner colony (Annayölgy and Tokodaltáró).
- Cluster 4: The fourth group was characterised by slow, natural and inner growth in population before 1910. From 1910, the population began to decline, first at a slower, then later at an accelerated rate. These settlements without any significant industry were losing their inhabitants in parallel with the decline of agriculture. Furthermore, traffic situation also negatively affected the vitality of settlements after the change of regime thus breaking the positive growing path again after the 1990s. These settlements are mostly located in the northern part of the EGTC, in the Ipoly Valley.
- Cluster 5: Settlements in this cluster also have a distinctive history. They are located sporadically in the EGTC area. Initial stagnation was not followed by a drastic decline in the 1970s and population growth has been linear in the period after the change of regime. Villages with a local peculiarity that presumably affect population number are mostly (with only a few exceptions) located in the neighbourhood of settlements that

are in a more favourable position. However, geographic allocation only shows signs of clustering around Štúrovo and in the Danube Bend.

- Cluster 6: This group covers most of the settlements. Changes in population number (similarly to the fourth group) were predominantly characterised by stagnation but without the drastic effect of the general population decline in the 1970s. The population number has been growing since the change of regime. Most of these settlements are in the northern part of the EGTC.

To conclude the territorial patterns of the six clusters, one can claim that there are significant differences between the settlement groups, located on the two sides of the border. Processes after the demarcation of present borders are crucial in this respect. The northern part is clearly dominated by Cluster 6, while settlements on the southern part followed mainly the model of Cluster 1. “Membership” in other clusters is due to distinctive local features. This is especially true for the villages of Clusters 2 and 3.

Figure 6: Territorial distribution of settlements according to their clusters



The history of the Ister-Granum EGTC

The Ister-Granum EGTC covers 81 settlements and brings the activities of Hungarian and Slovak settlements together under one legal framework. Its history well demonstrates the genesis of a cooperation: their relationship evolved from town-twinning to a wider, more intensive cooperation, moreover, they were continuously filling, even sometimes pushing the limits of, the possible legal frameworks. Therefore, it is worth to briefly present this process.

It is possible to establish EGTCs since a 2006 regulation by the European Council and the Parliament. The purpose was to enable a form of cooperation which provides resource-management for European Territorial Cooperation. An EGTC functions as a framework for cross-border cooperation among the EU members and their authorities, institutions and associations with the aim of jointly achieving their cross-border goals.

1. The beginnings

In the beginning of the reconstruction of the bridge, before October 2000, partly as a preparatory step after its rebuilding, the mayors of the two bridgehead cities (Esztergom and Štúrovo) signed a joint declaration of intent. Their initiative was followed by other forms of cooperation among cross-border sub-regions, the Esztergom-Nyergesújfalu Sub-Region Development Association and the Southern Region Association (Združenie obcí Južný región) with Štúrovo as its centre.

The organisation was named as “Ister-Granum” in 2001. At the same time, eight technical committees were established (Industrial Development and Logistics, Agriculture, Culture and Sport, Education and Youth Policy, Environmental and Nature Protection, Tourism, Healthcare and Social Policy, Transport) with the participation of Hungarian and Slovak professionals in the region. Moreover, the joint perspective of cooperation in the broadest economic and social dimension also became clear. Most committees did an outstanding job in setting up databases, organising joint technical events and in developing actual project proposals. Their work was assisted by foundations for regional development (Eurohíd and Budúcnosť 2000) on both sides of the border.

Their activities and the systematic promotion and coordination of professional plans has given impetus to many events and bilateral town-twinning forms of cooperation. Some events are worth to be highlighted. The Ister-Granum folklore

festival first took place in 2002, and it has been an annual showcase of various ethnic cultural performers and craftsmen of the region ever since. 2002 was also the first year when amateur theatre groups first met and competed with one another. More and more events took up the name 'Ister-Granum', like football tournament, gliders' day, poetry recitation contest and drawing contest also bears the name of the Euroregion.

The unfolding cooperation consisted of an increasing number of target-related activities and thanks to the high level of activity, the number of participants was also growing and thus the consultative council decided to establish a more stable institution.

2. The "Euroregion" period

The Ister-Granum Euroregion evolved from the above-mentioned cooperation. It was established by 100 mayors in November 2003. Initially, it only meant consultative work under a single cooperation framework.

The Regional Parliament became the main decision-making body of the Euroregion. Its members were the mayors of municipalities and they met twice a year. The core activity of their work was done by the 8 board members who prepared the decisions. The president was the mayor of Esztergom, the vice-president was the mayor of Štúrovo. Half of the committees had Hungarian heads while the other half had Slovak heads. They regularly reported on the work in their committee before the Regional Parliament. Members of the technical committees were not members of the General Assembly, still they were often invited to their meeting as guests when proposals with related fields were discussed. Committees were completed with additional non-regional experts.

In the meantime, civil initiatives continued. In 2003, the Civil Parliament of the Euroregion was established. In 2004, the Ister-Granum Order of Knights of Wine was founded by Hungarian and Slovak wine makers. The greatest success of the organisation was related to healthcare when the Kolos Vaszary Hospital in Esztergom began to function as a regional institution. This enabled medical treatment in Hungary for people living in Slovak settlements insured by Dôvera (SK) insurance company, which had a contract with the hospital, since the closest hospital in Slovakia is further in Nové Zámky.

In 2006, the cooperation appeared on several media platforms. They started to publish a bilingual quarterly newspaper ("Civil Newsletter") which was sent to 1100 civil society organisations operating in the Euroregion. They also launched

their website in the same year. There was a plan in 2007 to establish a regional joint television channel by local production studios in Esztergom and Štúrovo, but it was unfortunately not supported by the targeted fund. Apart from having the above-mentioned media presence, the Euroregion published, for example, tourist brochures and several other papers and studies on the border region.

This period was also characterised by a number of realised projects. Some of the proposals were submitted by Esztergom being the main contractor, other proposals were led by two foundations promoting development (Eurohíd in Hungary and Budúcnosť 2000 in Slovakia). Euroregion municipalities provided the own contribution needed for the plans to build (or rebuild) bridges across the Ipoly/Ipeľ. The subregion supervised the proposal. Some of the proposals came to a halt due to lack of legal-institutional frameworks. The realisation of the development plan in 2005 also encountered difficulties regardless the approval of all municipalities and its presentation before the Regional Policy Committee at an information day in the European Parliament. It was impossible to establish stable cross-border institutions in this period.

3. Activities of the EGTC

On 6th May, 2008, the Ister-Granum EGTC was founded in Esztergom with the participation of 46 Hungarian and 39 Slovak settlements. In line with the previous form of cooperation, the EGTC promotes regional interests in several fields of expertise and it intends to achieve certain development goals, too. EGTC activities offer assistance to enhance physical cohesion in the border area (transport, economic development) and to improve the overall economic situation (agriculture, tourism) as well. The latest activities focus on the 2014-2020 EU programming period. The EGTC was actively involved in the formation of the settlement and county-level developments during the initial planning stage and has applied for several projects in the first call of Interreg V-A Slovakia-Hungary Co-operation programme.

In the field of *transport*, the EGTC's most significant 'lobbying' activity was relating to the road development of the M10 highway (Hungary) and the completion of the V/c North-South transport corridor. For this purpose, the EGTC invited regional stakeholders and transport professionals and organised numerous meetings, produced various publications and created TWGs as well. They still follow the developments of the transport corridor by participating in conferences and in the preparation of strategic planning, even in negotiations

related to its process and the track design of the expressway between Esztergom and the M1 motorway.

In 2008, the Ister-Granum EGTC tendered to build a network of cycling roads. Although they did not win the tender, the project is still important for the region. The building of a cycle lane between Ipolydamásd and Letkés and the distribution network connecting 82 settlements were parts of this project. The plans can be realised with the support of the INTERREG V-A Hungary-Slovakia Co-operation Programme launched in the summer of 2016. They expect the building of cycle roads connecting Kravany nad Dunajom – Štúrovo, Szob – Ipolydamásd, and Esztergom – Esztergom-suburb. In addition to this, after some road maintenance, and placement of traffic signs, a network of 5 to 6000 kilometres could be established in the framework of their project called “the Bikers’ Paradise”.

In addition to the above, Ister-Granum made attempts to strengthen cohesion in the field of *environmental protection and energy*. The establishment of an energy agency is one of the oldest plans, it would be instrumental in reducing energy consumption in settlements, exploiting local opportunities, or creating new jobs (e.g. opening a biogas plant near a chicken farm).

An additional attempt to strengthen cohesion in the field of *economic development*, was the creation of a working group in the spring of 2013 with the aim of establishing the Ister-Granum Enterprise-Logistics Zone Integrated Territorial Investment. This plan was rescheduled over the past two-three years. The principal aim was the connection of the untapped logistical potential of the railway in Štúrovo with the capacity of the industrial park in Esztergom. This would also enhance the unfavourable transport opportunities of Esztergom. The industrial park of Štúrovo is also part of the development plan. This project was planned to be realised as an integrated territorial investment, and its ex-ante evaluation has already been completed. Soon, a consortium is expected to be formed involving the interested parties. This could further facilitate the realisation of the projects. The development of the industrial parks in Štúrovo, Obid, Nyergesújfalu is also planned.

The General Assembly of the EGTC has already declared that an Ister-Granum local product cluster should be established to support *agriculture*, more precisely, the activities of the local producers, thus helping them to get out of their peripheral situation. To implement this plan, the EGTC tendered numerous projects.

In August 2013, with the contribution of the Hungarian National Trading House, the region's invited stakeholders (representatives of LEADER Local Action Groups, producers, mayors, regional development professionals, members of the purchasers' community) participated in a study trip in Romania. They visited a self-sustaining village, a cooperative fruit-processing plant, an organisation supporting family farmers and self-sustaining farms. Furthermore, they produced an almost 100-page-long colour publication which gives a taste of the local products, presents the most active producers and some traditional recipes of the region.

A two-day conference (in Žilina and in Esztergom) was organised by the EGTC with the support of the Visegrad Fund. Polish, Czech and Slovak partner organisations participated at this conference. The Žilina leg of the conference addressed the marketing issues of local products, while the Esztergom one focused on the national legal frameworks in the four countries and how the legal barriers can be removed (e.g. how can Hungarian producers sell their products in Slovakia). The EGTC's additional effort is the registration of the Ister-Granum local product trademark and the planning of its marketing. A database was also created containing every local producer and organised two cultural, family-friendly events were organised which concentrated particularly on addressing potential buyers. In addition to this, two training sessions were organised for local producers with a focus on legal marketing and two workshops with the participation of local authorities. The development of the Ister-Granum local product cluster continues to make a good progress. The project area is planned to be further developed in the framework of the cross-border programme. The goal is to reduce the distance between producers and buyers, making the actual purchase direct, involving more producers and opening up the market. After having the Ister-Granum local product trademark registered, it is planned to use it and make it available on the market in the near future.

As for the field of *tourism*, the EGTC's major development plan is to establish an organisation for regional tourism destinations. The formation of an Esztergom DTM also fits into the concept and it has the potential to serve as a basis for further regional cooperation. Ister-Granum received a grant of 500 000 Euros to realise this project. Unfortunately, soon after the project was launched, the partners faced difficulties with pre-financing and the grant had to be repaid, the project to be cancelled. A project named "Borderless Destination" was initiated with the aim of establishing a tourism destination with Esztergom-Štúrovo as its centre. To this end, not only the necessary strategic documents and projects were planned to be elaborated, but the organisational and institutional frameworks as well; and

information kiosks with touch screen and information signposts, booklets on tourism and a four-language tourism portal should have been launched.

Despite the unsuccessful project, the EGTC is still planning to realise a tourist development initiative covering the whole region. The main reason for this purpose is that tourists visiting the region for several days would benefit from package holidays that meet their needs and Esztergom with its 30-kilometre radius provides excellent opportunities to launch such an initiative.

The history of the grouping points at the fact that the EGTC is a potential legal framework for the re-articulation of economic and social relations between the villages on the two sides of the Danube (the present border). Thus, further and more intensive cooperation may ultimately show the way out of the largely unfavourable conditions of these mostly peripheral settlements after a difficult past.

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