The effects of institutionalisation on cross-border relationships in the Ister-Granum region – from the perspective of local actors

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Abstract

Cross-border regionalization has gained importance in Central and Eastern Europe mainly from the 1990s onwards and contributed to the emergence of lively cross-border functional zones in multiple spaces. Interactions across the border are facilitated, managed and in many cases stimulated by an institutional background, being active on both sides of the border. However, these institutions are destined to face a wide range of obstacles in the course of their daily work, either of legal and administrative nature, stemming from the different political structures of the neighbouring states, or due to the differences of the economic and social context, such as traditions, collective mindset, welfare conditions, etc. between the distinct sides of the border. The study targets this set of problems when analysing the notions of local residents on the role and significance of the cross-border institutional framework in the Ister-Granum area. According to the results of interview series, carried out with local stakeholders, it becomes obvious that the sense of 'borderlessness' in the minds of the residents of the region is still yet to be achieved. The study reveals that not even the most advanced institutional form is able to fulfil the integration of the two sides of the border, as certain spheres of social and economic life fall far beyond the scope of the competences of these regional initiatives. Ultimately, this sheds negative light on the institution itself.

Keywords: cross-border regionalization, euroregion, EGTC, infrastructural power, interview

Introduction

The ideal of a 'Europe without borders' and the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries to the Schengen Area have significantly transformed the geographical potential of borderland areas, and thus their development prospects too. The opening of borders brought along a wide range of excellent examples, proving that increased cross-border flows, as well as the establishment of cross-border institutions all over Europe, were able to contribute to the dynamic development of the border regions in question. These examples include the Öresund Region, the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, as well as the cross-border functional urban areas of Strasbourg, Basel, Geneva, Bratislava, etc.

At the same time, however, contrary to the frequently cited EU slogan 'borderless Europe', the continent still tends to have borders even within the highly integrated community area. These borders continuously affect cross-border cooperation when hindering the implementation of cooperative investment projects, the supply of cross-border services or the organisation of other joint events through administrative and regulatory barriers. The removal of these barriers has yet been incomplete and seemingly problematic despite the newly established cross-border institutional forms and the continuous legislative harmonisation promoted by the European Union.

This present study targets the analysis of the social dimension of this above issue, namely, how different social spheres are concerned with the regulatory barriers, on the one hand, as well as the activities of cross-border institutions aiming at reducing them, on the other hand. High importance is attached to the different social attitudes not only for the present but also for the future of cross-border cooperation and interactions since negative experiences may cause negative stances, which might even lead to the stagnation or even to the setback of cross-border processes. To this end, we aim at introducing the attitudes, their coming to existence, and their diversity through a profound analysis of an empirical study carried out in the Ister-Granum region.

A geographic space shaped by state borders

Before turning to the evaluation of cross-border institutionalisation, it is worth to have a brief overview on the existing political context in which they fit in. Essentially, it is the Westphalian system of territorial states of which the 'gaps', the national borderlines area supposed to be filled in by institutionalised cross-border cooperation. This political-geographical framework is considered as

given attribute as people born with it. However, with regard to its fundamental characteristics, the system has a relatively short history.

Different forms of state organisations have already existed since antiquity, but sovereign territorial states based on a geographically contiguous area only exist since the birth of the modern state system. The emergence of this regional administrative form is estimated to have begun in the 11th (Agnew, J. 1994) or 12th (Taylor, P. J. 1994) century. In this era, political rule was not organised on a territorial basis but on interpersonal vassals' contracts, and had only an indirect territoriality through land ownership. In feudalism, the ruler himself represented the unity of state power, while his supremacy over territories was represented by the sum of the lands which were in the possession of his vassals. Consequently, state structures were often in the lack of a contiguous territory, and vassals were often bound by multiple overlapping and multi-layered feudal oaths of allegiance, such as the Dukes of Burgundy, who were in a feudal relationship to the king of France, to the Holy Roman Emperor, and to the Pope at the same time (Diener, A. C. – Hagen, J. 2012). It all resulted in territorial overlaps of political rule. As a result of the weakening of imperial and papal power due to the Investiture Controversy (in the 11th and 12th centuries), the emerging power vacuum and in parallel the ongoing struggle of landlords for the expansion of their lands through fights and marriage jointly enabled the concentration of political power in fewer hands. The most classical form of such a process took place on French territories (see Elias, N. 1982), and the emerging centralised power of the French kings went on to become an ideal model for other rulers and thus spread, with the incorporation of local characteristics, all over Europe.

In general, it took several centuries until feudalist, decentralised power structures were taken over by a centralised state model as a result of the ongoing attempts of centralisation from the predominant power centres. Blaut, J. (1993) aptly describes these transitional centuries as a clash between the feudal inland areas and the proto-capitalist mercantile-maritime cities. The two systems were running in parallel with each other for centuries, hence some territories were ruled by feudal framework and other territories by the new emerging proto-capitalist structure. Nevertheless, this latter progressively overshadowed the former, and the feudal constellation of state and political system was eliminated.

Modern Great Britain for example, emerged in the wake of an almost 600-year-long period of struggle and dynastic succession of English rulers' who initially relied on a limited regional power basis (Agnew, J. 1994). Rulers in possession of sufficient resources, gradually developed geographically compact dominions

through land exchanges, conquests and dynastic marriages, in parallel with the reinforcement of the internal cohesion of these territories through the gradual development of centralised state systems. Eventually, those were territorially centralised states which could benefit from the use of resources such as professionally managed and well-trained regular armies, which enabled them to prevail over other forms of territorial political rule such as grand duchies, prince-bishoprics, or city leagues (Mann, M. 1984).

By the early modern ages, centralised territorial state, legitimised by the Peace of Westphalia (1648), became the normative organisational category at the international scene of political territorial rule (see Spruyt, H. 1994; Hurrell, A. 2007; Olsen J. P. 2010). Through defining three important cornerstones, the treaty laid the grounds for Europe's and subsequently (through the colonisation) the world's new political-geographical division. One of these cornerstones was the canonisation of territorial states, as they mutually recognised each other as the sole legitimate actors in international diplomacy, thereby squeezing out other forms of state organisations. According to Chakrabarty, D. (2007), Western ideas on sovereignty and state structure were not universal, but they were different in other parts of the World; however, the European colonial centuries eliminated other (non-Western) forms of sovereignty. Subsequently, the only viable sovereignty concept which has remained is the Western one.

On the second hand, territorial states mutually recognised each other's exclusive rights over their own territories. Finally, on the third hand, definitely for the exercise of this full sovereignty centralised territorial states clearly and unequivocally defined the spatial delimitation of their own territory through the imposition of linear borders, avoiding therewith any overlaps between different territorial rules.

Once the new political-geographical boundaries stabilised territorial states from the outside, against the external rival actors, the establishment of internal cohesion was also necessary. According to Taylor, states applied and promoted four strategies through which they were seeking to consolidate internal cohesion, namely (1) waging war, (2) managing the economy, (3) giving national identity, and (4) providing social services (Taylor, P. J. 1994). The declaration of non-interference into each other's internal affairs ensured the conditions of state centralisation, thus gradually eliminating all rival power centres within the country; owing to mercantile economic policies, states also became fields of wealth accumulation; the promotion of national and cultural identity reinforces the affective link between state territory and its inhabitants; and lastly, the establishment of welfare societies and social order resulted in the emergence of

modern societies, literally meaning the sum of all people living in one state (e.g. British, French, American society). As strategies of territoriality, these activities led to the acquisition of control over political power, wealth, culture and society, and turned territorial states into 'containers' of political, economic, cultural and social life (Taylor, P. J. 1994).

The consideration of territorial states as *a priori* existing containers for society, combined with the view that state territories are fixed and eternal (thus disembedding state territory formation and dissolution from its context and historicity), on the one hand, and the repetitive use of national/international and domestic/foreign dualities (thus giving secondary importance to processes on other levels), on the other hand, jointly resulted in the 'territorial trap', the long-time dominance of a state-centred approach in the field of social sciences, especially in the realm of international relations (Agnew, J. 1994).

States were seeking to adapt the above described guiding principles in everyday life through various techniques. Mann highlighted four organising techniques that were supposed to tighten intra-state bonds whilst targeting the exclusion of extra-state actors in parallel (Mann, M. 1984). These techniques are (1) centrally coordinated division of labour between the state's activities; (2) literacy through centralised educational system, enabling that messages (e.g. laws) are transmitted throughout the state's territories; (3) coinage and standardization of measurements, creating adequate conditions for exchange of commodities on state territory; and (4) physical infrastructure enabling internal communication and the transport of people and resources, through improved roads, ships, telegraphy, etc. Mann refers to the management system based upon these techniques as *infrastructural power*.

By means of these techniques, states can create their economically and socially compact territories on which they can exist and operate. Once the state territory is established, various techniques of power are employed by the state to repeatedly inform both inhabitants and those entering the territory of its existence. What is more, it is in fullness of its absolute sovereign power and nothing can happen without its knowledge and approval. In his study on the 'prosaic geographies of stateness', Painter, J. (2006, p. 753) notes that nowhere have states intended to reduce their control over their citizens, territory and resources. In industrialised countries, the infiltration of the state in everyday life is well traceable. "*Giving birth, child rearing, schooling, working, housing, shopping, travelling, marrying, being ill, dying and countless other activities all involve us, to a greater or lesser extent, in relations with state institutions and practices, often in ways that are so taken for granted they are barely noticeable.*"

In this way, over the last three centuries, states solely exercised their authoritative power over a well-demarcated geographic area and the population living on, or attached to it. Nevertheless, an increased number of state competences cannot be solely and completely exercised by states themselves, and completely independent decisions cannot be made anymore without taking into account other supra-state and sub-state levels and actors (Bohman, J. 2007). The globalisation of the world economy narrowed the states' role in economic governance, while supranational political institutions and organisations took over some of their political-administrative competences. In Europe, the political integration process of the recent decades resulted in the allocation of certain competences not only to the supra-state level, but also to sub-state levels, as promoted by the notion "Europe of the Regions". Thus, political power over certain areas and policies was redistributed, as a consequence of which brand-new structures and institutions, largely inconsistent with the Westphalian context, came to be established.

New governing models, multilevel governance

The gradually and, in part, newly emerging supranational and especially subnational institutional levels have increasingly gained importance in areas like cross-border interactions and cooperation that had been difficult to interpret within the Westphalian context. As described above, the emergence of the centralised state resolutely defined the orientation of the development of spatial relations of the distinct geographic entities. In the state centralisation process borderland areas found themselves in a particularly adverse situation as their spatial relations could only be established asymmetrically, i.e. toward the domestic centre, whilst in the other direction, toward the areas beyond the border, relations were considered as a domain of foreign affairs, falling thus within the sole competence of central state authority. Even though the territorial sovereignty of nation-states has never been completely exclusive in practice, its ignorance was only limitedly possible in terms of exceptional instances, established within the framework of international diplomacy e.g. the institution of diplomatic immunity (Taylor, P. 1996). Hence, border regions were particularly constrained in the heyday of sovereign statehood. Changes in the second half of the 20th century, such as the development of supranational integrations, or the emergence of decentralisation/regionalisation, both of which questioned the hegemony of state administration, have had a clear and observable impact on the development perspectives of border regions (Blatter, J. 2004). In this study we focus on the latter, the local/regional level,

while fully understanding that the emergence of the regional level cannot be definitely separated from macro-scale processes.

A major step toward the establishment of cross-border relationships at local level was the development of cross-border institutional forms, for which the foundations were laid down by the European integration process. The principle of productive factors' free flow (Four Freedoms) as well as balanced territorial development have already appeared in the Treaty of Rome (see: Treaty establishing… Title I, III, and XIV) as long-term objectives of the European integration process. In practice, however, 1958 already marked the year when the first institutionalised cross-border cooperation initiative (EUROREGION) was established on the Dutch-German border, followed by other ones in the subsequent years (Perkmann, M. 2003). Later in the 1970s, these institutions received community financial grants, largely as result of the lobbying activity of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), an association established in 1971 to represent the common interests and problems of border regions at a European forum.

Further support from the side of the European integration was provided through the signature of the Schengen Treaty (1985), targeting the removal of physical and administrative barriers between Member States, and the adoption of the Single European Act (1986), aiming to bring about a European common market in a foreseeable time. These agreements conceived state borders through their dividing functions between national economies, whilst their primary objective was to promote the integration of these economies. As a result of the above, the identification of borders as economic barriers and the policy targeting the elimination of these barriers explicitly emerged as one of the priorities of the European Communities' intervention areas by the second half of the 1980s.

Before the end of the eighties, as noted by Wassenberg, B. and Reitel, B. (2015), European integration and cross-border cooperation were following separate paths. Their priorities had already been different since the 1950s: while the European integration intended to get the people of the continent closer to each other, and bring about peace and prosperity in general, cross-border cooperation focused on border regions and was seeking for practical solutions to everyday problems of local people. Accordingly, their toolkits were of different nature. European integration, working in a supra-state dimension, continuously shaped the playing field for itself, e.g. through the establishment of the *acquis communautaire*, which then became the basis for uniform regulation systems and policies throughout the whole territory of the Communities. By comparison,

cross-border cooperation initiatives could not operate according to a joint scenario in all the different countries of the European Community: instead, each one of them had to adhere to the actual national regulation systems as well as to the relevant bi- and multilateral agreements and thus find the most adequate form of joint work for themselves.

From the mid-1980s onwards, however, the European integration and cross-border cooperation tended to work more firmly interconnected. After the 1988 reform of the regional policy, the European Commission attributed a more significant role to cross-border cooperation in the process of European integration. In this regard, the launch of the INTERREG Community Initiative (1990) was a major milestone. Its declared goal was the elimination of borders as social, economic, and cultural barriers by providing support for different forms of cross-border cooperation initiatives, mainly on the level of local and regional entities in border regions (and in part on transnational and interregional levels as well). The initiative turned out to be successful in the upcoming years – not least, because its funds, unlike those of the regional development policy, were also available for relatively more developed regions in the European Community – therefore its significance continuously increased during the following programming periods. Moreover, from the 2007-2013 budget period INTERREG is built into the European Union's regional (cohesion) policy as European Territorial Cooperation. The semantic switch from *cross-border* to *territorial* cooperation clearly put the emphasis on the cooperation between neighbouring territorial entities and their political institutions (Wassenberg, B. – Reitel, B. 2015). Ultimately, the European Union promotes the intentions for the establishment of long-lasting regional partnerships.

Cross-border references of multilevel governance

As presented above, cross-border cooperation has gained major importance in EU policies during the past decades. Indeed, whilst partnerships based on geographical proximity (e.g. town twinnings) already existed in the 1950s, it was the sudden mushrooming of Euroregional organisations in the 1970s, which gave a momentum to the reconfiguration of the normative framework, linking up the success of the supra-state body with the development of sub-state territorial organisations.

The establishment of organisations holding a legal personality was a major step in this reconfiguration. Typical forms of cooperation during the earlier decades,

such as partnerships and Euroregions did not have a distinct legal personality acknowledged on both sides of the border, but mostly operated on a consultative basis. The joint work, however, presumed the establishment of certain institutional frameworks, under which a regulated and more permanent operation is enabled. The first adequate response was given by the Council of Europe as the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (also known as the 'Madrid Convention') was launched in Madrid in 1980, thus providing legal status within the framework of international law for the institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation.

A number of bilateral or multilateral inter-state agreements were signed with reference to the Madrid Convention (e.g. Benelux Agreement 1986; Treaty of Bayonne 1995; Karlsruhe Agreement 1996), facilitating the establishment of cross-border initiatives. Nevertheless, these agreements did not provide with new institutional forms, but allowed foreign actors to join the already existing institutions of the respective country. Examples include working communities, established to coordinate the cooperation of larger territorial entities, Eurodistricts that are frequent in cross-border urban agglomerations, and Euroregional cooperation groupings (ECGs) – though this latter form has not seen any initiatives yet.

The breakthrough in the establishment of stable regional institutional forms was reached by the introduction of a cooperation framework under community law, namely the legal institution of the EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation). The novelty of the EGTC, compared to other models, lies in its distinct legal capacity in all countries concerned, it is therefore able to establish and maintain independent institutions (schools, hospitals, social funds, etc.) and non-profit organisations on both sides of the border. Even though authorities of the respective countries must approve the accession of members from their state territory to the EGTC, its introduction is a binding regulation in all EU member states and the refusal of approval is only possible under exceptional circumstances (threat to public security, public health, or public interest). In this way, the EGTC regulation has been brought about with fundamental changes to the relationship between regional and state levels as in principle, transboundary entities can be established over which states have limited sovereignty since Community Law guarantees the rights of EGTCs.

In recognition of this, the European Union designated a significant role for the instrument of EGTC in the implementation of multilevel governance, a model already pursued by the Community in the last few years, to strengthen

integration. This is reflected by the Committee of the Region's *White Paper on Multilevel Governance* (2009, p. 5.), where open governance is seen as the key for a strong Europe. Furthermore, the document sees the guarantee of the emergence of multilevel governance in the participation of local and regional authorities as genuine partners in the European integration process as well as in the "*complementary balance between institutional governance and partnership-based governance*" (p. 5.). Putting it slightly polarised, one can see an effort at Community level to the reinforcement of local and regional levels for the offsetting of centralised state power, on the one hand, and another to make these new local and regional institutions recognised as equal to state institutions, on the other hand.

The White Paper states that strengthening territorial cooperation is vital in order to meet the objectives of economic, social and territorial cohesion (p. 29.), highlighting thus the EGTC as the most adequate tool for territorial cooperation (p. 29.). The document also envisages increased support to existing as well as newly established EGTCs, and the backup of the (then) planned revision of the EGTC regulation, while also urging member states to promote the instrument and to cooperate with regional and local authorities when EGTCs are being set up.

As of July 2018, 72 EGTCs have already been established in Europe and additional ones are now being set up. Despite the fact that this number includes network, project and programming EGTCs, the majority of them are classic territorial EGTCs of cross-border regional development. These organisations, usually referred to as the 'newest generation of Euroregions' are both legal and geographical category at the same time, connecting more or less contiguous border areas interlinked by active social and economic ties and, what is more, with common development perspectives. This 'spatial thinking', based on the Euroregions' traditions is significant, because it builds on geographic proximity and its resulting similarities, as much as on differences produced by the borders. Moreover, what is also decisive for the success of partnerships is the faith in a common destiny which may contribute to the emergence of a certain regional identity resulting in emotional bonding with cross-border relations and the institutions supporting them.

In the followings, we aim at introducing a chosen cross-border initiative an EGTC and its geographic context, which has indeed contributed to the emergence (or revival) of such a regional identity. The present Ister-Granum region covers an area which had belonged together for long centuries, before having been divided for decades during the 20th century, to see the reorganisation of its internal ties across the border from the 1990s onwards. Aside from historical

traditions, the region has largely benefited (and still does) from the most adequate institutionalised forms of cooperation – initially, it was a partnership, later it turned into a Euroregion, and today it embodies the EGTC structure. Through the involvement of regional actors and implementing joint projects, these frameworks largely contributed to the emergence of the region's common identity and awareness, strengthening thereby the faith in common thinking. In spite of this, not any institutional frameworks, including the EGTC, were able to fulfil all expectations and needs regarding cross-border partnership, which turns enthusiasm into scepticism from time to time.

Research aims

In this study, though investigating from the point of view of the existing frameworks of cross-border cooperation, we focus our research on the societal notions of cooperation. We consider this aspect as the least explored one regarding the borders' effects and their role, as well as the significance of cross-border interactions for the Hungarian borders, hence, a substantial research gap is present within this subdomain. What is more, academic literature on the Ister-Granum region mostly highlights the improving economic indicators and the establishment of new institutions as ‚success stories', beside which the everyday reality of people living in cooperating border regions is often overlooked. The in-depth investigation of the effects of nation state borders in the spaces of everyday life (administrative, social, individual, mental, etc.) is less advanced. However, these are non-negligible aspects: the development or the non-development of cross-border relations depends as much on people-to-people contacts, shifting identities, and popular trust in institutions and governance as on economic success (Brunet-Jailly, E. 2005).

Research methodology

The development of economic relations can be relatively well traced through statistical indicators (if they are available of course), yet this is only partially true for social, psychological and institutional processes. These processes are more difficult to be mapped clearly, examined and interpreted through quantitative indicators. Qualitative methods are more useful in such analyses, therefore, the methodology of this study will mostly be based on soft data.

The main pillar of this qualitative study is embodied by the sequence of structured interviews where the interviewees are stakeholders from the EGTC

region; political, social, or economic leaders with an overview on institutionalised cross-border relations as well as on spontaneous interactions through their daily work. From the realisation of these interviews we expected to gain comparable longitudinal images on the temporal development of the region's cross-border relations, on the main trends of certain shorter periods, as well as on the specific goals, motivation, results and problems of different spheres regarding cross-border interactions. The ultimate objective is of course to outline a complex image on how the changes of the frameworks of cross-border partnerships affected the intensity of interactions themselves and vice versa: how the intensification of interactions created new needs for the alteration of the actual frameworks.

We especially focus on the information retrieved from the semi-structured in-depth interviews which reflect on the role of an institutionalised cross-border cooperation initiative, in this case the Ister-Granum EGTC, in the region's everyday life. Additional focus is on the question, to what extent are the two urban centres of the border area, Esztergom and Štúrovo, able to provide the necessary political-authoritative background for the institutionalised cooperation.

Introduction of the structured interview series

The interviews were conducted between April and June 2014 within the Ister-Granum region, with a focus on those settlements that were indeed active in cross-border interactions. Consequently, as a matter of course regional actors who live or work in the direct neighbourhood of the border are somewhat overrepresented. Nonetheless, we intended to compose the list of interviewees with regard to achieving a likely even territorial coverage as far as possible.

We endeavoured to interview local and regional actors who have a deeper insight into cross-border interactions through either their full-time position or their voluntary work, and are even personally involved in such interactions. A total of 25 interviews with 26 stakeholders were conducted (one interview involved two interviewees). The Slovak side of the border is somewhat overrepresented due to their greater involvement in cross-border interactions. Accordingly, 15 Slovakian and 11 Hungarian interviewees were asked. Figure 1 displays the settlements and spheres of activity they represent.

Figure 1: Interviewees' attachment to different settlements and spheres of activity
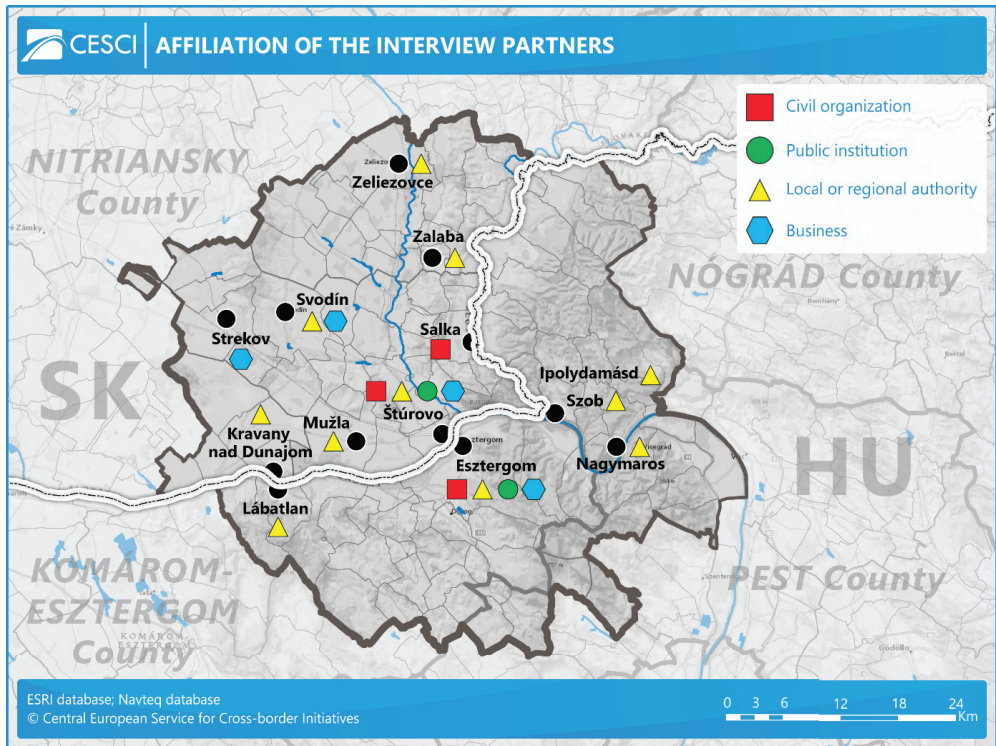
The necessity of cross-border relations

As introduced above, cross-border contacts within the Ister-Granum region permeate each sphere and thus, all areas of social life. Taking part in such relations was a prerequisite during the selection of the interviewees, and the interviews also confirmed the large number and variety of active relations.

Local governments have the longest history of such (predominantly formalised) relationships. Establishing town twinning partnerships was already possible in the Socialist era, though maintaining frequent contacts was barely feasible. Aside from geographical proximity, twinning schemes in the Ister-Granum region developed on the basis of some kind of historical linkages, such as the presence of the Slovak minority on the Hungarian side, population transfers between settlements in the past, common cultural roots, etc. Thus, intermunicipal contacts slightly contributed to the dissolution of the border even in times of Socialist isolation. From the 1990s onwards, as liberalising border regimes were taking place, the most significant barrier to intermunicipal cooperation was the lack of

physical connections, at least until the reconstruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge. Although many of the settlements have twin cities outside the Ister-Granum region and the two countries, proximity is of particular importance: several of the leaders of smaller localities told that due to their tight budgetary situation, regular physical relationships are only possible with their closest twin cities. Consequently, the closest twin city was also the most reasonable project partner when applying for calls in cross-border cooperation tenders, an opportunity that opened up in the past decades. Successful (and even unsuccessful) projects strengthen the feeling of similarity and interdependency between these settlements, thus further downplaying the significance of the physical distance and the border between themselves.

The relation system among social organisations across the border is more recent, but it is also of significance. In general, these are associations organised alongside a narrow range of issues, hence, their interaction mostly relates to common thematic issues, whilst geographical proximity is also of major importance, similarly to the cooperation of local governments. This is particularly true in the case of Esztergom and Štúrovo partly due to their extreme geographical proximity, and partly because similar cultural institutions (secondary schools, municipal libraries, etc.) can be found in both urban centres, for the successful operation of which, just as for the implementation of organised events, a critical mass is necessary.

Compared to local governments and social organisations/institutions, cross-border interactions are less significant for the activities of economic organisations and state institutions. While it is true that there are examples for partnerships in these spheres as well, close connections are less common; the existing ones usually play a complementary role and barely affect the day-to-day operation of the partners. In these two spheres it can be illustrated as follows:

- The economic sphere's daily operation focuses on markets, more precisely on regulated markets. Production and sale, as well as providing services in the case of non-manufacturing branches are primarily regulated at national level. Business registration and the related administrative duties such as taxation, distribution, or even consumer protection is also regulated at the same national level, even though higher levels of administration and authority, such as the European Union, also have some influence, e.g. through community regulation and directives. Therefore, crossing the border for such activities goes beyond the scope of a mere physical act, meaning also the operation in a different regulatory environment, which

may cause increased (in many cases excessive) administrative tasks for mainly smaller enterprises, thus counteracting border crossing, whilst larger enterprises consider the country-level as more adequate for entering a market rather than on regional level.

- State institutions exercise their functions predominantly within the state borders. Education, healthcare and administrative cases, as well as the scope of activity of these institutions extend only to residents at the territory of the respective country. Although in given cases, all these institutions may serve people arriving from across the border, and can make contact with similar institutions in the neighbouring country, this is not part of their daily operation duties. At the same time, day-to-day operation is countrywide uniformed and little attention is paid to the peculiarities of border regions. To cite an example: if residents from the other side of the border wish to use the domestic healthcare, educational or administrative services, they are considered as foreigners, no matter if they are from the closest village or from the most distant part of the neighbouring country.

Among such circumstances in the economic and state institutional spheres, local stakeholders – either of their own choice or for external reasons – are less likely to participate in cross-border interactions as other spheres, which can also be perceived in the Ister-Granum region. This, of course, does not mean the complete lack of interactions, but obstacles for such cooperation initiatives can be clearly identified. Slovakian students attending Hungarian schools need to pay (at least in theory) tuition fees; services of the hospital in Esztergom are only available for those citizens from Štúrovo who have insurance contract with one specific company in Slovakia; vegetables or fruits grown in Slovakian gardens can only be sold in the market of Esztergom after complex administration procedures; Suzuki factory workers from Slovakia can only purchase the cars produced in Esztergom through the Slovakian distributor, etc.

Accordingly, the options for crossing or overcoming the borders vary greatly in different spheres; in the context of Mann's theory, we may claim that infrastructural power affects each sphere differently. Varying from case to case, state regulatory systems hinder more or less strictly the opportunities of leaving behind national frameworks; consequently, spheres will have widely varying expectations regarding the positive effects deriving from cross-border interactions. As we shall see, this is a decisive factor for the motivation, interests and expectations of different groups towards cross-border institutionalisation.

Assessment of the institutionalisation in cross-border relations

As a consequence of the above, the institutionalisation process of cross-border cooperation affected the spheres of social and economic life differently, which then showed mixed attitudes towards the newly established organisations, too. The assessment of the institutionalisation process in itself is complicated as the establishment of the Euroregion as a formalised body coincided with the time of the rebuilding of the Mária Valéria Bridge, thus these two important cross-border links mutually amplified each other's effect, though there is no doubt that, as mentioned in the introduction, the reconstruction of the Bridge had greater influence. Overall, the interviewees could draw a clear distinction between the two projects in the sense that while the Bridge was an inter-state project, the Euroregion, – and the EGTC that later replaced it – was a regional institution; even so, the latter received more criticism.

The formation of attitudes towards the Euroregion and the EGTC is closely related to the previously introduced competences as well as with their deficiencies. Even the EGTC, which is a compulsory institutional-legal form in the national legislation of the EU Member States, is characterised by limited opportunities for intervention in different fields of expertise; this same applies exponentially to former less regulated forms of cooperation such as a Euroregion or town twinnings. The opportunities of the EGTC are further limited by its financial means: regular revenues mostly come from membership fees, whilst more significant sources come from tenders; still, both are uncertain items in the annual budget, thus the EGTC can only maintain a small permanent capacity.

Due to the limited competences and financial capacities, the EGTC can only be actively involved in smaller projects that are mostly adequate for local governments and social organisations. In particular, mayors of smaller settlements reported projects of greater significance that were supported by the EGTC, but also smaller (often single-member) civil associations received direct or indirect support from the grouping. These supports enabled the realisation of certain infrastructure projects of critical importance, along with the creation of community spaces, and the organisation of community-building events. The whole financial contribution however was not always covered by the EGTC's own funds, but from domestic and community tenders, as well as the strongest local governments standing behind the EGTC, especially Esztergom, also provided funds. Not surprisingly, these spheres are not fully satisfied either: social organisations and local governments raised numerous complaints regarding

the increasingly difficult prerequisites of the tenders, especially relating to own contribution and pre-financing. Many interviewees considered Esztergom's financial difficulties as a backdrop for themselves as well: earlier, Esztergom was able to provide financial support for many settlements primarily from its business tax income, but the city came close to bankruptcy in the late 2000s, which heavily affected the initiative, too. The most disappointing project for the local governments was that of the reconstruction of bridges over the Ipoly/Ipeľ River: the project stuck at interstate level despite the intense lobbying activities of local governments and the EGTC. Although respondents were fully aware of the fact that the task was beyond the EGTC's competence, many of them felt that the new bridges would have given a boost to the cooperation after the decrease in activity in previous years.

The operation of the EGTC was less perceivable in the economic sphere and in the state institutional system. Although the majority of respondents from these spheres reported active contacts between their institution/enterprise and the EGTC, hardly any joint projects were implemented within formalised cooperation frameworks. Local leaders and/or representatives of both economic organisations and state institutions equally participated at the EGTC's relevant events, but their role was mostly limited to mere consultation. In the case of the economic sphere, for example, respondent winemakers also participated in the project of the EGTC promoting local products; furthermore, in the freight ferry project the EGTC also aimed to involve the potentially interested companies from the Esztergom Industrial Park, especially Suzuki. Unfortunately, no significant progress has been achieved in the local product project, as the establishment of a cross-border distribution network is not feasible due to the previously mentioned difficulties with regard to cross-border sales. The ferry project was also only slightly attractive for industrial companies, as the most decisive aspect for them in transportation is cost and time efficiency; these indicators of the ferry were largely unknown in that time. In the sphere of state institutions, the EGTC has so far been unable to provide efficient help to the implementation of concrete regional ideas in the field of education and healthcare:

- In the field of education, only twin town partnerships provide a framework for formal cooperation between institutions; nevertheless, the number and intensity of these partnerships is low, and in general, they are firmly interconnected with town twinning agreements, thus they may be directly or indirectly eligible for EGTC funds. In recent years, the local 'room for manoeuvre' of primary and secondary schools has been significantly narrowed because of the increasing centralisation of public education on

the Hungarian side, therefore it is administratively more difficult for the Hungarian schools to participate in regional cooperation projects. Daily interaction in this field nowadays consists largely of the cross-border movement of students and teachers, this commuting however takes place spontaneously, in line with the opportunities provided by schools and domestic education systems beyond them.

• In healthcare, the greatest potential for cross-border regional interactions is offered by the hospital of Esztergom. The only hospital in the Ister-Granum region is the closest major healthcare institution not only for the Hungarian, but also for the Slovakian part of the region. Slovak residents however, beyond those being registered employees in Hungary, cannot automatically use its services unless it is the case of emergency treatment or they have a contract with one specific Slovak insurance company (Dôvera). At the same time, the hospital of Esztergom has significant overcapacity, it means that they could give admission to more patients from across the border and thus their income would increase as well. Still, the number of people arriving from across the border is low. The hospital has attempted to increase the number of patients with the help of the EGTC, but with no significant result, yet. The main reasons of failure are mostly external circumstances. On the one hand, Slovak central healthcare administration was not absolutely motivated to cooperate by fear of losing patients from the Slovakian system which would lead to financial losses. On the other hand, the attractiveness of the hospital in Esztergom is not so obvious despite its proximity chiefly because of the unfavourable features of the Hungarian healthcare system in general (e.g. bad infrastructural conditions, lack of available workforce, widespread gratuity, etc.). These mostly structural problems have a crucial impact at local level, too.

Expected and real role of the EGTC in regional relations

It can be concluded from the above that different spheres made different experiences concerning cross-border interactions in relation to the EGTC. These experiences predominantly influenced the attitude towards the EGTC as well as its predecessor, the Ister-Granum Euroregion, and the Esztergom-Štúrovo partnership in general. As suggested by the above discussed facts, a characteristic duality can be revealed concerning the attitudes:

- A significant number of the interviewees consider the EGTC as something of essential importance, they appreciate its work and therefore they try to actively participate in its activities or at least benefit from the opportunities it affords. Although, it is difficult to generalise on the basis of the relatively limited number of interviews, the above suggests that this attitude is mostly typical in the sphere of the institutions of local governments and in the civil sphere.

- By contrast, certain other interviewees were more distanced from the work of the EGTC. Although, they follow its activities more or less, they do not consider them too valuable for their interests whilst in some cases they are highly critical about the issues covered or not covered by the EGTC. Again, it is difficult to generalise, still, it suggests that this attitude is mostly prevailing in the economic sphere and in the sphere of public institutions.

Cross-border cooperation and its institutionalisation thus substantially divides the actors of social and economic life of the region. Typically, stakeholders with fewer competences think more positively of the cooperation, whilst more strictly regulated sectors do not see many benefits of the new institution.

Hence the process of institutionalisation, although having largely contributed to the establishment of a development perspective for the region's cross-border relations, is not actually capable to turn into reality the idea of this coherent approach. While certain spheres can rely more on the help and support of the EGTC, other spheres face the difficulties of the external, primarily the regulatory environment, and they need to select which projects to realise in the light of their interests and possibilities. Of course, this selective project implementation may also be beneficial, but it does not serve the integrated territorial approach for which the EGTC, as an institutional form of cooperation, was intended to be established. This paralysis in the application of inclusion-based integrated cross-border spatial planning may further deteriorate the chances of regional cooperation and the efficiency of expenditure on such cooperation. Ultimately, it may give a negative feedback for the European integration.

Summary

Being acquainted with the research background and the information gained from the interview series allows us to see that cross-border cooperation and relations are in constant transition, and they keep on addressing new questions and challenges to experts and researchers. It is also visible that certain contextual peculiarities do not change; they simply exercise their influence on territorial processes in a different way.

Through our empirical case study, the Ister-Granum EGTC, it is clearly observable that despite the European and regional integration processes of the last decades, state affiliation is still of decisive importance and not even the near revolutionary breakthrough of the past years in the evolution of institutional forms could change it. This fundamental change, the establishment and the recognition (by national legislative systems) of the EGTC as an institutional and legal form in the European Union's legislation has still been unable to solve all the actual problems of border regions. Cross-border communication, harmonised actions and the joint tackling of problems and challenges are still hindered by many obstacles, which runs the risk of undermining the faith invested in cross-border institutions during the past decades.

In this study, we aimed at demonstrating how cross-border cooperation institutions fit within the system of global political geography, and what role they take in this system. Through the case study, however, one could see that not even the most advanced institutional form is able to fully play the integrating role it is supposed (and expected) to do. Certain spheres are still outside of the scope of regional cooperation and this state of affairs is unlikely to change in the near future.

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