The analysis of social cohesion on the Slovak-Hungarian border - from the perspective of local actors[1]

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Abstract

There has been an increasing research interest on borders and border regions since the end of the 80s and beginning of the 90s of the 20th century. The Ister-Granum region, received high attention and focus in scientific research on cross-border relationship at the turn of the millennium and this was principally influenced by rebuilding and reopening of the Mária Valéria bridge. The analysis builds on the implemented interviews, where the local authorities were questioned. Their explained their approach and opinions towards cross-border cooperation within the Ister-Granum region. The study applies content analysis methodology and it looks at the implemented interviews through the prism of that methodology and it detects the most commonly used words and phrases which are characterised as keywords and which fully portray the analysed region, border, border area and relationship across the border.

Introduction

In our institute, we have been working with the economic problems of the underdeveloped regions, with its causes and opportunities for further development. In our wider region, not only in Hungary, peripheral areas are generally border spaces which are located outside of the metropolitan centre. Hence, these areas are in a shadow of development and many attempts have been made to structure them. The idea of a borderless Europe, as well as the accession of the Central and Eastern European region to the Schengen area have significantly shifted the positional energies of these areas; nevertheless, local societies have rarely been able to utilize this constellation. Situation of the border regions is an important issue in the EU cohesion policy, as well as providing

of (not only financial) support and some future strategy of development for those people who live in border areas. Consequently, exploration of the relating problems cannot be indifferent for sciences. We examine the social aspect of the issue, namely, how does the administrative elimination of border frames bring the divided societies together.

Research History

There has been an increasing research interest on borders and border regions since the end of the 80s and beginning of the 90s of the 20th century. This interest is mainly represented by the stream of social geography and the increasing attention is illustrated by the dynamic expansion of the relevant scientific publications over the last two decades on this specific issue (e.g. Anderson 1996; van Houtum 2000; Newman 2003; Brunet-Jailly 2006). Social geography explores the impact of boundaries on geographic space and it looks at society from new angles. Henk van Houtum (2000) outlined three main directions of border studies before the millennium. The three approaches do not represent different stages of specific development process and they are not sharply separated from each other.

- The approach of flows focuses primarily on the economic role of the borders: it typically understands the border as a barrier within the realm of economic flows; it primarily appears as a certain extra cost, which reduces cost efficiency.

- The cross-border cooperation approach is closely linked with the second half of the 1980s, when borders were principally identified as an economic barrier; subsequently, the European community policy, which aimed to overcome this barrier, explicitly appeared within the intervention areas of the European Communities. According to Houtum, the relative number of studies that underlined the importance of cross-border co-operation became such increased in the 90s that it appeared as a new mainstream within border studies. The growing weight of the EU financial resources and support for cross-border regional initiatives also played a major role.

- The approach of people towards the borders focused on reproduction of borders by society, hence aiming to understand the changing nature of borders, focusing on mental and real spatial imagination of borders, as well as emphasizing symbolic reforming of the borders. These studies are often implemented within an interdisciplinary framework, hence establishing connections among many disciplines. In this way, the reaction

of individuals and groups becomes comprehensible vis-à-vis economic and power aspirations of cross-border integration.

Division of approaches was published by Houtum one and a half decade ago, but scientific outputs which have been published since fit well into one of these groups. For example, the first approach is well represented by the articles published by Annekatrin Niebuhr (2004; 2006), Markus Perkmann (2003; 2007a; 2007b) and his scientific output mirrors the second one, while Anssi Paasi (2002; 2005) pushes forward the third approach. Central and Eastern European region reacted with a little delay. The number of scientific materials dealing with the topic started a strong expansion at the turn of the millennium. This is well illustrated by the bibliography of selected border research, compiled by Tamás T. Sikos and Tibor Tiner (2009), dealing with Central and Eastern European border areas.

Despite the delay, Houtum's finding proved to be true regarding the literature dealing with Hungarian borders, hence the approach of cross-border cooperation dominated the angle of scientific outputs. Subsequently, articles and publications, dealing with possible cross-border co-operation along the borders of Hungary, appeared in large numbers. These articles mainly explored border sections (e.g. Hardi – Mezei 2003; Mezei 2005a; 2005b; 2008; Sikos – Tiner 2008; Hardi 2008; Mezei – Tóth 2008). On the other side, those studies that followed the two remaining approaches have remained significantly underrepresented. The flow approach focused primarily on cross-border labour movement (e.g. Hardi – Lampl 2008), while the social approach focused mostly on historically existing social relations at local level (e.g. Sikos – Tiner 2007).

Our research area, the Ister-Granum region, received high attention and focus in scientific research on cross-border relationship at the turn of the millennium. This was principally influenced by rebuilding and reopening of the Mária Valéria bridge. This meant that the seven decades long separation became overcome and physical connection between the two border sides was re-established. Subsequently, it enabled the development of new cross-border spatial relationships and the reorganization of the existing ones. The reorganization of spatial relations between Esztergom and its cross-border catchment area[2] was a unique and unparalleled example along the Hungarian borders. As a result, the cross-border region became a much-researched border space in the last one and a half decade.

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2   For further analysis of this issue see the chapter of Mátyás Jaschitz, *'Re(birth) of a twin city hinterland analysis in the region of Esztergom*-Štúrovo› in this book.

In contrast to the previously described disproportion within the main scientific direction, the Ister-Granum region shows a much healthier distribution of scientific approach. Cross-border co-operation is represented by a number of co-operative ideas and strategies (e.g. Kulcsár et al. 2005; Baják et al. 2006; Megvalósíthatósági tanulmány az Esztergom–Párkány között létesítendő teherhídhoz. Összefoglaló kiadvány 2006; IGVLÖ Ex-ante 2014; etc.); however, this approach is only slightly different from the other two. The mentioned strategies mostly explore cross-border flows, cooperation and social relations in a complex way. There are several publications in which the flow approach is dominant, like the research of cross-border employment by Bartal and Hardi (2005) or the analysis of the catchment area of Esztergom (Jaschitz 2010). The social networks of the region were also examined, either from the side of individual nationalities (Sikos – Szarka 2008) or from the side of civil organizations (Bartal – Molnár 2006). To conclude, it can be expressed that borders appear in a very complex way – as it is suggested by the multitude and versatility of research – on the territory of the Ister-Granum EGTC.

Objectives

The short overview underlines that the issue was mainly explored from the economic point of view. The third type approach, namely social dimension, which was outlined by Houtum, remained overshadowed. Subsequently, we intend to apply the social approach in examining the appearance of the nation-state borders in everyday (administrative, social, public administration, individual, mental, etc.) spaces. This is especially important because borders played very strong separating role within the region after the Second World War and afters its historical cataclysm and backwardness of the border regions emerged as a consequence. However, it is difficult to dissolve this barrier function of the borders even after the political changes of 1989 and even after the EU accession.

We chose an area that is crossed by natural boundaries (rivers), but these natural boundaries have always been crossed by traditional urban catchment areas and spatial organization of society. The region along the Hungarian-Slovak border, centred around Esztergom and Štúrovo, has experienced several changes within the boundary lines and shifts within border effect, namely strengthening or weakening of the separating functions during the past century[3]. The spatial

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3   For further analysis of this issue see the chapter of Bottlik et al. *'Glosses on the Ister–Granum EGTC research'* in this book.

consciousness of this region mirrors certain ambivalence, namely felling of traditional togetherness, while the century long separation is also present at the same time. The region was organised into the EGTC institutionalised structure which was filled with content after the initial difficulties. Consequently, a framework has been established that might administratively help to bring closer people on both sides of the border.

The backbone of our approach is the social spatial research based on local interviews. In our research, we aimed to explore the meaning of the border for local citizens. We also reflected the following questions, if there is a meaning of borders, then where are the contours of their mental borders; are there any spheres, where the administrative separating functions still palpable after their cessation? If yes, which are these areas? We evaluate the obtained mental mapping information in the light of dynamic governance interaction between nation-state spatial organization and local cross-border cooperation.

The explored area: the Ister-Granum region

The name Ister-Granum appeared on the maps around the millennium. The area encompasses a wider environment that is surrounded by the Danube (Ister as its Roman name) and the Hron (Granum). This meant Esztergom and its catchment area for centuries. It was also equipped with administrative framework as it was part of the same county for centuries. Nevertheless, the region with organically formed social and economic relations was strictly separated for decades by strict border regimes, political climate of the wider region and by the destruction of the Mária Valéria bridge during the Second World War, thus connection between the two banks of the Danube was substantially broken[4]. Rebuilding of the bridge and its opening to the public (2001) embodied the basic impetus for the region that triggered a long process of integration between the two sides of the border. Cooperation and cross-border approach was also institutionalized by the establishment of the Ister-Granum Euroregion in 2003, but mainly by application of the EGTC frame (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation; the legal form enshrined in the legal system of the European Union and its Member States) in 2008.

The current area of the EGTC can be defined by a circle of 25-30 km radius around the Mária Valéria bridge and the roads of the region largely directed

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4   For further analysis of this issue see the chapter of Bottlik et al. *'Glosses on the Ister–Granum EGTC research'* in this book.

towards the centre of this circle. Geomorphological features also strengthen this centralism: Börzsöny, the Visegrad mountains, Pilis, Gerecse, as well as Nagysalló hills demarcate the space of developed cooperation.

In terms of social geography, the two sides are highly complementary to each other: the Esztergom side started its industrialization already in the 19th century because of local coal seams. The triangle of Lábatlan-Dorog-Esztergom is still one of Hungary's most developed industrial areas. Nevertheless, the left bank of the Danube has traditionally been an agricultural area. Some of the industrial plants, which were settled here during the 20th century, were significantly weakened over the past one and a half decades.

Geographical distribution of population also reflects these conditions: the population density of the Hungarian side exceeds 124 people/km² (the national average is 107 persons/km²), while distribution of population on the Slovak side is only 64 persons/km². The situation is similar in the case of the settlement structure. This means that the most important centres on the Slovakian side are represented by the cities of Štúrovo with 11 thousand inhabitants and by Želiezovce in the north of the region with 7,500 inhabitants. Although, cities are more dominant on the Hungarian side. The most dominant city is Esztergom with 30,000 inhabitants, but there are other four more towns (Dorog, Nyergesújfalu, Tát, Lábatlan) which have more than five thousand inhabitants (Ocskay 2008). If we take into account these circumstances, the attractive effect of the Hungarian side is clear. However, the Second World War disrupted the region and the attractive effect of the Hungarian side could not be realised in the absence of physical connection. Reconstruction of the Mária Valéria bridge in 2001 once again re-established physical connections and it unleashed a large number of self-organizing space processes between the two sides. Subsequently, we want to scientifically contribute at this point.

Content analysis of the interviews

Content analysis methodology is one of the most popular and frequently applied method in contemporary social science research. In a broader sense, content analysis embodies a complex research technique that 'allows us to draw repeatable and valid conclusions about data from their context' (Krippendorff 1995). According to the narrower definition, 'content analysis is a process which draws conclusions on the basis of methodological and objective procedures based on the returning features in communication and messages. These conclusion are

not explicitly stated, but they can be deduced on the basis of the message, its structuration coding, and these conclusions may be verified by other means (other than content analysis)' (Antal 1976). This means that the method is basically a semantic study that examines the typical explicit or latent content appearances in the texts, for example themes like identity, striking lack of a specific text element or a conspicuous recurring feature of the text. Therefore, content analysis is a specific 'method to explore the symbolic meaning of communication' (Krippendorrf 1995).

We speak about content analysis in today's sense since the 18th century, when religious content was studied with this method. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, the method was applied to study media news, while its applicability for military purposes was discovered during the Second World War (for more information, see Krippendorff 1995) and this significantly increased the acknowledgement of this research method and it contributed to its later expansion. We have been living in the age of information and we have access to unlimited quantity of information via the web; consequently, the method has become particularly valorised as it provides a broader range of analytical options for large and unstructured materials. Further advantage of this method is that it is not an intervention research technique, thus the subject - at least directly - cannot deceive or influence it. What is more, the research method is context sensitive and it has a capacity for processing symbolic forms, too (Antal 1976).

One of the most often used technique of content analysis is the detection of the most commonly used words and phrases which are described as 'keywords'. This approach is considered as the most quantitative side from the toolkit of content analysis, as it principally aims to identify the thematic focal points of texts. The weight of each keyword, relative to each other and to the text, can be graphically visualized through the so-called tag cloud which has become very widespread in recent years, especially thanks to the increasingly sophisticated and accurate online tag cloud editing software (e.g. Wordle, Tagxedo, etc.).

The following tag cloud (Figure 1) contains those terms that occurred in the texts of the interviews with a relatively high frequency and they related to cross-border interactions and cooperation. They were divided into three major groups, depending on whether they are nouns, verbs expressing change of a state, or modifier structures:

- Names of places occur very frequently among nouns, especially the two neighbouring countries, Hungary and Slovakia, as well as the two border towns, Esztergom and Štúrovo. However, the Hungarian city and

the Hungarian side appear many times which can be attributed to their predominant role in the Ister-Granum region and cross-border interactions. The word *bridge* is also very frequent because of its central role, but the word *border* is less frequent. This is consistent with the experience that the two sides have very strong historical and functional connection and the border is not considered as a truly separating element. Interestingly, the Danube which was previously a separating element is not among the frequently used terms. The background of this is the following one, the approach that the river is no longer an obstacle has become widespread since the reconstruction of the Mária Valéria bridge (2001), accession to the European Union (2004) and entrance into the Schengen zone (2007), hence "it is possible to cross freely", while linguistic and cultural differences do not exist between the two sides of the border.

Figure 1. The most frequently used keywords during the interview series

The other large group of nouns is represented by the words that are associated with the acts of interactions. The following expressions frequently appeared, like c*ooperation* and its tools [primarily *money (noun)*, as well as *tender, project*], actors [*mayor, county (noun), state, city, settlement*], subjects (*person/people*) and their accompanying (*opportunity, problem*) nouns. These nouns appeared as determining elements of interactions. Some social-community groupings, separations, location-based identities were also discovered (*they/them, there, at us*).

- Many of the frequently occurring verbs that expressed change of a state are closely related to interactions. The appearance of spatial flows [*(he/she) came, (they) come, they go/go*] may be highlighted which refer to spatial dynamics within the region. Besides, such expressions are often used that relate to the success of the initiatives (*succeeded*).

- There are many terms among the modifier structures which regularly appeared and which referred to well-defined communities. Among these, the separation between *Hungarian* and *Slovak* is quite prominent; however, they rather appear with reference to institutional system, comparing the two frameworks that are provided by the two states, instead of personal content. Other community categories also appeared (*local, civilian, together, common*). Moreover, many modifiers appeared that characterized the types of cooperation (*cultural, economic*) and its quality (*hard, important, different*). Terms like *somehow, something, many, naturally* mirror a positive, as well a proactive approach toward the interactions. The former two refer to the eagerness that is characteristic to all the interviewed spheres. It encourages to take advantage of all the opportunities for their settlement and region, even in those cases when the possibilities are scarce and limited. The latter two indicate the social embeddedness of the interactions which widely affect society and it is self-evident among the local people who live here.

Content analysis, based on searching for the most common keywords, explored some of the key elements and features of cross-border relationships, as well as the surrounding social perception. In addition to the frequent occurrence of these terms during the interviews, there is a further interesting aspect, specifically the composition of the word and context. This makes it possible to understand the relation of individuals and spheres to these terms. Co-occurrences express more information than sheer frequencies (Antal 1976). This is illustrated by examining the context of the selected expressions in the followings.

We investigated ten keywords (border, relationship, crossing, cooperation, problem, difficulty, possibility, experience, bridge and obstacle) and we finally chose the phrase, *crossing*. There were two reasons for this. On the one hand, this is a phrase that is very closely related to cross-border interactions and it did not appear, in opposition to other phrases, in other contexts. On the other hand, this phrase appeared most proportionally in each interview from quantitative point of view: its most appearance was 10 times, while its average appearance was two in the interviews and it completely was missed out only from six interviews.

The keyword that indicated crossing appeared as a form of *cross-border* word composition without any exception. It mostly related to the following terms:

- cooperation (11)
- project (5)
- tender (5)
- program (2)
- contract (2)
- nature (2)

After a thorough research of the context, we can see that the expression usually appears in a positive context and it indicates some kind of cooperation that creates significant added value.

Nevertheless, if we look at the context of the term that indicated a *crossing*, we can see that it embodies ideas by which the actors hope to achieve some progress and development (to be implemented) or ideas which are in the early stages of implementation. In many cases, this progress aims to solve local socio-economic problems and it relates to cross-border interactions only indirectly. Occasionally, it is also difficult to communicate the substance of the initiatives towards the local society.

In some cases, cross-border (inter)action appeared with negative context within the interviews. Many of the original ideas are not feasible in this way or they are not an adequate form of organization. It can be expressed on the basis of content analysis that cross-border interactions are highly organized and institutionalized, but this does not necessarily mean progress at the level of the Ister-Granum EGTC region.

Summary

During the interview series, the authors gained insight how cross-border interactions could affect wide range of actors in the region. It became apparent that information provided by each actor is fairly and properly consistent, or complement to each other, on the basis of general and largely sketchy interpretation of the obtained information during the interviews. The existence of many regional features is already well established. Furthermore, we will be able to explore further the deeper layers of interactivity and its social background through a more detailed understanding of the opinions of individual actors and spheres.

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