The institution of Euroregions: Prerequisite for success?

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Hungary is in a special situation regarding cross-border co-operation

- by having seven neighbouring countries,
- by being so small that each of the – now planned – regions (7) are border regions,
- by having significant Hungarian minority in almost every adjacent regions (this factor differentiate the situation from the one of Austria and on the other hand is a very important one since this makes the co-operation more sensitive).

During the 1990s – according to this important role – each level of administration (Government, the formulating regions, counties, districts, municipalities) set clear objectives in their spatial development concepts regarding cross-border co-operation emphasising the ever popular connecting feature of borders.

Under the socialist regime borders had a dividing, even isolating character, they were difficult to cross – in some cases regarded almost as forefronts – and in the centralised states permission from the capitals were needed even for the limited and occasional co-operation.[7]

At the beginning of the previous decade parallel to the political détente some promising processes had begun. These were however concentrated mostly on the Austrian border. The Austrian–Hungarian Spatial and Land-use Planning Committee, established in 1985 on governmental level played a significant role. One of the subcommittees, the Cross-border Co-operation Work-Group – where Burgenland, and the Hungarian Gyr–Moson–Sopron and Vas counties were represented

[7] Situation was better even after the Trianon Treaty in the 1920s. Despite losing 2/3 of the country's territory and being surrounded by hostile governments – except for Austria – cross-border co-operation and contacts were

on the highest level – served later as a basis for the Interreg–Phare CBC programmes (35 Million ECUs for the 1995/99 period on the Hungarian Phare CBC side), and the establishment (1998) of the West–Pannon Euroregion.

At other Hungarian borders the development was not so organic. This was mainly the result of different political agendas leading to disinterest in co-operation (Slovakia, Romania), the war conflict on the Balkan (Serbia, Croatia), or simply the different directions of interests (Slovenia, Slovakia – Austria). Differences in the state of development can be the overall explanation for the differing impetus of cross-border activities (work, shopping, tourism). Where there have been big differences (Austria – Hungary, and relatively big ones between Hungary and Romania), traffic and trade flows between the adjacent border regions have been more frequent. If the neighbouring regions are on a similar, relatively poor level state of development, the relations are just about to evolve. Although in this latter case the local actors (mayors, county officials) are trying to intensify the co-operation as well. They are hoping to achieve this goal through establishment of the institutional frameworks in the form of Euroregions.

Although the idea of concentrating and co-ordinating efforts and resources – or even of increasing chances of achieving potential EU money – can be respected, some critical aspects should be taken into consideration. Some of them are based on Dutch–German and German–Polish experience relevant for Hungary, while the other part comes from the characteristics of Euroregions with Hungarian participation.

Economic benefits can be expected only in the long run and in the presence of favourable conditions.[8] In the Euregio Maas-Rhein after 20 years of co-operation those economic and social relations are formed which could have characterised the region without the borderline, but

more frequent and normal than in the communist era often characterised by the co-operation of friendly socialist countries.

[8] For example in the Dutch-German border region Maas-Rhein there were no significant political and social differences. The partners had similar environmental and social problems, their economy had been characterised with the same structural weaknesses. The EU and NATO had supported the co-operation from the very beginning. The first euroregions were able to establish very important informal ties among the co-operating bodies and with important lobbying organisations (i.e. EUREGIO – AEBR Association of European Border Regions; Scott, 1996).

according to surveys the majority of borderland companies still go for economic services to the central Randstad and Ruhr regions, and only up to 2% to the adjacent border regions (Hamm, 1996).

Regarding the German-Polish border and the transfer of the model of Euroregions we can suggest that on the one hand the significance of social contacts, common sport and cultural events are sometimes underestimated, on the other hand too powerful marketing of the regions can cause disappointment for the „consumer» – nice package, poor content (Grimm, 1996). The features are: step-by-step renewing of former cross-border agglomerations, town partnerships, services for adjacent border regions but missing informal cross-border networks (Rodeman, 1997), poor share of information, lack of strategic thinking, management and communication skills (Scott, 1997; Perkmann, 1997). Critics suggested that there are too many Euroregions with the possibility of harmful rivalry, and lack of co-ordination (Church–Reid, 1995).

Euroregions in Hungary are facing similar problems regarding the missing informal ties. Fortunately, most of the officials from different administrative bodies (regions, counties, municipalities) have realistic long term expectations regarding the development of a transborder social and economic space. This kind of thinking is understandable since in some cases there are even bigger differences in development on a lower living standard compared to the Euroregions of the EU's eastern border (i.e. understanding and accepting the formal ways of co-operation, and possibilities for co-operation of participating territorial administrative bodies.) Unfortunately, however there is a new feature: Euroregions with Hungarian participation tend to become too big, with too many members (Carpathian Euroregion, Duna–Maros–Tisza Euroregion) or with members without a common border.[9] Of course it is extremely difficult and politically risky to exclude any of the potential partners wishing to participate. However at the current state of development the formal institutional model of Euroregions with so many partners is not appropriate for enhancing cross-border co-operation. So the Euroregions cannot play their original role: serving as a framework for significant cross-border projects, and as a mediator between local initiatives, objectives, and those set by regional, central authorities, and the EU.

They are solely the necessary instruments for attracting potential EU and central government funding.

In order to have real cross-border projects with measurable social and economical impacts informal communication networks, frequent cultural relations are vital prerequisites. Ratti (1993) stressed the importance of two factors:

- **the strategic behaviour** of actors[10],
- and the role of **supporting space**[11]

In this supporting space the institution of Euroregions is an important but not the only element, and especially not at the beginning phase of the cross-border co-operation.

I plan to provide illustration (figures and tables) to the article later on.

Further research

- International e-mail survey of the activity of Euroregions (if possible with the support of AEBR)
- Survey of the economic and social relations and expectations in Hungarian and in their neighbouring border regions (Significant difficulties are expected).
- Interviews with officials dealing with border related tasks, projects (Ministries, Chambers, Research Institutes – i.e.Vienna, Institute for City and Regional Research –, Interreg, Phare CBC offices).

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[9] Carpathian Euroregion: Poland – Romania, Hungary; Slovakia – Romania. Duna–Dráva–Száva Euroregion: Hungary – Bosnia.

[10] "A strategy in terms of a co-operation network is the most efficient approach to overcome persistent and residual obstacles and uncertainty situations typical to a border context" (Ratti, 1993, 66.)

[11] Ratti considered the border context from an economic point of view and defined the strategic spaces of an enterprise as determined by three functional spaces: production space, market space and the supporting space. As the most important one he describes **supporting space** comprising of three types of relations: the qualified or privileged relations at the organisational level of the production factors (Capital origin, information source, technological ability, particular ties at the human capital level); the strategic relations of the enterprise with its partners, suppliers, or clients (privileged information exchange, co-operation, partnership, alliance, partial integration); the strategic relations with the territorial environment parties (public institutions, private or semipublic associations. Ratti, 1993)

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