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*The Diversity of Euroregional Initiatives  
in Central and Eastern Europe*

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## 1. Introduction

After the collapse of the communist regimes Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has witnessed a remarkably quick proliferation of local cross-border cooperative initiatives, including Euroregions. In spite of this phenomenon, there are still relatively few academic works that systematically compare them (Johnson 2009; Keating 2003; Medve-Bálint forthcoming; Turnock 2002).

Cross-border cooperation features high in the European policy agenda and is also financially promoted by the European Union (EU). However, recent research shows (Celata & Coletti 2011) that European policy documents view cross-border regions as having naturally given common characteristics instead of recognizing their diversity. "[T]he existence of homogenous border areas that require a joint management is justified on the basis of presumed objective criteria identifying a common geographical, economic or cultural heritage. The problematic operation of setting the boundaries, however, is weakly problematized. Policy documents do not present the methodologies by which border regions have been delimited, but, on the contrary, present the definition of border regions as unproblematic, self-evident and guided by objective criteria" (Celata & Coletti 2011).<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to fill in the gap in the literature in two ways by focusing on a single NUTS 3 level region<sup>2</sup> in Hungary where three Euroregions with remarkably different trajectories are present. First, the paper aims to evaluate which factors influence the organizational paths taken by Euroregions and how differences in their membership structure (internal power relations) and in the members' motivational background affect both the level of institutionalization and the functioning of these initiatives. Second, by demonstrating the organizational and functional diversity of these Euroregions within a single territorial unit, the paper also challenges the notion of Euroregions as being rather homogenous institutions, a view that is frequently conveyed in European Union policy documents as demonstrated by the quote above.

The paper builds on a previous study of the authors which addressed the question of why local governments join or not join Euroregions (Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming). In this current work we take a further step and aim to discuss what happens to the Euroregions once local governments join them. The empirical data was collected in the Komárom-Esztergom region located at the Hungarian-Slovak border. Along many dimensions, this region can be considered as a typical one among CEE border regions and that is why we chose it for the case study. We did personal interviews with the representatives of the Euroregions and with the highest political representatives of all local governments that are Euroregion members on the Hungarian side.

Our findings demonstrate that there is great diversity across Euroregions in terms of their level of institutionalization and functioning, even within a single border region, where the same external factors are supposed to influence Euroregion formation. The analysis suggests that this is due to variations in their membership structures and motivations, which in turn both affect and are affected by organizational goals of the Euroregions. We therefore argue for the significance of a number of local factors that play a crucial role in cross-border initiatives and which have been to a great extent neglected by European policy makers.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2 we define the key concepts, elaborate on the methodology and restate our findings from the previous study in order to set the ground for the current analysis. Section 3 briefly discusses the historical background and core attributes of the Komárom-Esztergom border region and introduces the three Euroregions present there. In section 4 we analyze the variables at play based on the comparison of the three cross-border initiatives. The final section concludes and outlines the potentials for further research in this topic.

## 2. Why do local governments join Euroregions and what happens after?

Studying local cross-border cooperation initiatives in general and Euroregions in particular involves a number of difficulties especially regarding the definition of the terms that are applied. For instance, the region as a spatial concept has been the target of multiple, sometimes conflicting approaches (Hettne 1994, pp.136-137; Keating 1998; De Blij &

<sup>1</sup> Celata and Coletti build their analysis on documents related to the 2000-2006, and 2007-2013 programming period of the European Union. The quote is from an English version published online (Celata & Coletti 2008). An extended version is published in Italian in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The European Union's territorial statistical system NUTS ('Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics') is used widely in European policy discourses, and has become one of many acronyms that are frequently used without knowledge about what it stands for.

Murphy 2003, p.17). The main difference is between those functionalist interpretations that consider regions as primarily politico-economic spaces (e.g. Losch 1975, p.97) and those constructivist ideas that emphasize the shared perceptions of belonging and identity as the main constitutive features of regions (Keating 1998, p.11; Paasi 2009).

In our study we adopt a rather instrumental approach and define regions as NUTS 3 level territorial units.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, we refer to border regions as those NUTS 3 units that are located at the country border. Accordingly, those neighbouring border regions constitute a border area, which are situated along the border of two countries.

The definition of a Euroregion is as challenging and problematic as that of the region. For the purpose of this paper we define Euroregions as formalized cooperation initiatives between sub-national authorities (such as local or regional governments), often including private and non-profit actors, located close to a border in two or more countries. A Euroregion is therefore usually established within a single border area (in some cases two or more). How these Euroregions emerge and what factors determine their institutionalization and functioning constitute research questions that still lack persuasive answers. This field of inquiry is especially relevant for Central and Eastern Europe where borders have long been contested along cultural, ethnic, political and economic lines (Balcsók et al. 2005; Hardi & Mezei 2003; Hardi 2007; van Houtum & Scott 2005; Eriksonas 2006). Moreover, after WWII until the collapse of the communist regimes borders posed almost impermeable barriers to cross-border exchange (Kennard 2004; Turnock 2002). This resulted in economic decline and led to the marginalization of many CEE border regions (Turnock 2002; Mezei 2004). In addition, the decades of isolation also indirectly reinforced existing fears and stereotypes towards ethnically different inhabitants living across the border (Yoder 2003).

Nevertheless, the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the proliferation of local cross-border cooperative initiatives all over Central and Eastern Europe, which also involved the quick spread of Euroregions. Although Euroregions are present everywhere along the state borders of CEE, their ability to attract local governments varies to a great extent (Medve-Bálint forthcoming). There is considerable diversity in terms of the number of local governments participating in Euroregions and consequently, in their territorial coverage as well.

In a previous work (Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming), we addressed exactly this question: why do local governments join Euroregions while others abstain? Based on a case study on the Komárom-Esztergom border region in Hungary, we found that both instrumental (in other words materialistic) and normative factors play a role in determining local government membership in Euroregions. As for the instrumental factors, besides the availability of external funding for cross-border cooperation, the administrative embeddedness of local governments also matters. This aspect means that groups of local governments belonging to a single administrative sub-regional unit (for instance a micro-region) are more likely to enter a Euroregional initiative together as they are more capable of solving a collective action problem within the micro-regional framework. Furthermore, converging project plans of local governments also pose a significant incentive to join the cooperation, while conflicting plans appear as serious obstacles. Concerning the normative factors, a common ethnic background of the inhabitants across the border and the presence of strong historical socio-economic and cultural ties also facilitate local government membership in Euroregions. However, cognitive distance, which does not necessarily correspond to physical distance from the border, is also a key normative element. The perception of how 'close' the border is and the significance that is attributed to cross-border cooperation varies by local government and this variation cannot be fully explained by the geographical distance of the local government from the state border.

It is important to note that the above factors (summarized in Annex A) jointly determine local government membership and as such, the territorial coverage of Euroregions. In short, the instrumental and normative factors affect Euroregion membership in conjunction with each other.

After having identified the reasons why local governments tend to join Euroregions, the next question to pose is that what happens to these initiatives once they are established? There is an abundance of micro-level case studies of Euroregions that usually focus on 'key stakeholders' such as representatives of the organizations themselves, regional administrative and/or political bodies and major urban centres. Unlike these works, we argue that it is necessary to study a broader scope of local actors in order to gain a better insight into the mechanisms driving cross-border cooperation at the local level. In order to investigate this issue, but also to fill in the gap in the literature in terms of available data sets, we conducted an in-depth study of the Komárom-Esztergom border region in Hungary looking at three different Euroregional initiatives present in that area. The region was selected because of the multiplicity of Euroregions within a relatively small area, thereby holding most external factors constant that could influence differences.

The methodology of the present study to some extent relies on document analysis and secondary literature analysis, but we collected the core of the data through interviews. We interviewed the highest political representatives, the mayors of

<sup>3</sup> NUTS is the territorial statistical system of the European Union. In this paper we deal with the NUTS 3 level regions and with local governments as the lowest level of state administration, represented by the NUTS 5 or LAU 2 (Local Administrative Unit) level.

all local governments that are Euroregion members on the Hungarian side and we also talked to current and past Euroregion leaders and managers. Altogether, we did 31 interviews, out of which 22 were done in person and 9 over the phone. The semi-structured interviews with mayors took place at the seats of the local governments and generally lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. In two cases high-level administrative officials received us, but the mayors subsequently approved their answers. All the interviews, except one, were carried out during the spring and summer of 2010 (see the full list in Annex B). The large number of face-to-face meetings at the premises of the mayors also allowed for follow-up questions and ventures outside the immediate topic.

The dataset is virtually complete in that it contains all the local governments (except one) that are members of the Euroregions. The comprehensive information enables an informed comparison of the three Euroregions. We shall add here that outside the framework of the current study, we have also conducted similar – if more limited – fieldwork on the Slovak side and the information gained from those interviews does not contradict our argument outlined in this paper. The data allows for both qualitative and quantitative analysis, but for the present paper and research question, it proved most useful to apply qualitative analytical techniques.

### 3. The research site and its Euroregions

#### 3.1. The Komárom-Esztergom region

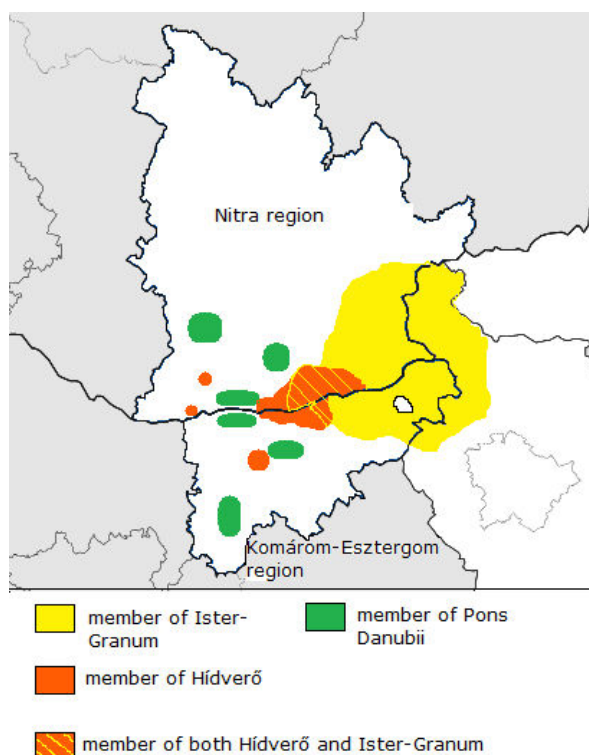
Komárom-Esztergom is situated in Hungary along the Danube on the north-west border with Slovakia. The county is divided into 76 local governments and seven micro-regions. The micro-regions were created in the 1990s for developmental purposes and upon the realization that numerous individual local governments were unable to effectively provide services they were required to offer. The county also belongs to the larger NUTS 2 region of Central Transdanubia. Given the substantial inflow of foreign investments, the regional economy has developed substantially in the 1990s and 2000s. However, Komárom-Esztergom was hit hard by the global financial crisis, with unemployment rising from a low 5.5 % in early 2008 to 9.9 % by the third quarter of 2009 (Hungarian Statistical Office 2010).

The bordering Slovak region of Nitra, especially the three districts (*okres*) adjacent to Hungary, have a slightly different character with fewer urban centers and a regional economy more relying on agricultural production than in Komárom-Esztergom. Overall, the Slovak region has 350 settlements and 15 of them bear town status. The three districts (or micro-regions) closest to the border have 192 settlements<sup>4</sup>. The major urban centre of the Nitra region is the city of Nitra in the north, whereas the towns of Komárno and Štúrovo are the largest settlements located right next to the Hungarian border.

Before WWI Komárom-Esztergom was part of a larger Hungarian-inhabited area within the territory of 'Great Hungary', which included the current Nitra region as well. Now much of this zone, including the Nitra region that has a significant presence of ethnic Hungarian population living next to the Hungarian border, belongs to Slovakia. However, Hungarians in Komárom-Esztergom still refer to the villages and towns on the other side of the border with their Hungarian names, for instance the town of Štúrovo is referred to as Párkány, and the villages Zlatná na Ostrove, Sokolce and Marcelová as Csallóközaranyos, Lakszakállas and Marcelháza, respectively. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the recent tensions between Slovakia and Hungary regarding the Slovak government's policy towards the Hungarian minority.<sup>5</sup> However, we should note that from the perspective of local cross-border cooperation the historical past implies that there are strong external normative forces serving both as incentives (cultural-linguistic affinity) and obstacles (conflicts).

<sup>4</sup> source: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/nuts\\_nomenclature/local\\_administrative\\_units](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/nuts_nomenclature/local_administrative_units)

<sup>5</sup> In 2009 the tensions centered around a controversial Slovak language law, that among other things aimed at enforcing increased use of Slovak geographical names. This is an ongoing story with few academic references so far, but see for instance an article in Spectator for a somewhat longer reflection: [http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/36140/2/hungary\\_continues\\_to\\_criticise\\_slovak\\_language\\_law.html](http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/36140/2/hungary_continues_to_criticise_slovak_language_law.html), accessed September 8, 2009.



**Figure 1: Membership of the three Euroregions**

Within Komárom-Esztergom there are also numerous villages that preserved their Slovak or German character from the past: due to settlement policies during the Habsburg Monarchy, many villages of ethnic Slovak or German population were established in the 17th and 18th century. Currently, 10 settlements have Slovak while 22 have German 'national self-governments' in Komárom-Esztergom and in 3 of these both minorities have established their own self-governments<sup>6</sup>. Events related to the wars of the 20th century greatly influenced the ethnic composition of many villages. Some German villages were affected by forced migration following WWII, and some experienced an influx of ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia who were resettled within programs aiming for achieving ethnically more homogeneous territories. It should be noted, however, that contrary to the Hungarians living in Slovakia, both the German and Slovak minorities in Komárom-Esztergom are largely assimilated and very few of their members use the Slovak or German language on a daily basis.

We now turn to the three Euroregions that exist in Komárom-Esztergom: the Ister-Granum EGTC<sup>7</sup>, the Hídverő/Danube Association and the Pons-Danubii EGTC. In the next subsection we briefly describe the origins and structures of these organizations before we move on to section 4 where we analyze these three Euroregions in order to establish the relation between organizational goals, motivations, membership structure, level of institutionalization and functioning.

### 3.2. The Euroregions

In parallel with many other cases of cross-border cooperation across Europe, the origin of the Ister-Granum Euroregion is largely determined by the (re)construction of the bridge that features in its logo. For more than half a century there was no permanent connection across the Danube between the twin cities of Esztergom in Hungary and Štúrovo (Párkány) in Slovakia, as the major bridge - destroyed during WWII - was not rebuilt due to political reasons, fully in line with the climate of distrust described above. When in 1999 the Slovak and Hungarian governments reached an agreement to rebuild the bridge, it was perceived as not only the necessary precondition for setting up a regional cross-border cooperation framework, but also as an important symbol of unity.

The first declaration of intent to set up a local cross-border co-operation was signed in 2000 by the Slovakian Juhny micro-region and the Hungarian Esztergom-Nyergesújfalu Microregional Development Association, which together covered 35 local governments across the border. After the preparatory stage, the Ister-Granum<sup>8</sup> Euroregion was established in 2003 with more than 100 participating local governments from Komárom-Esztergom and the neighbouring Pest region in Hungary and the Nitra region in Slovakia. At the time Ister-Granum covered an area of 2,200 km<sup>2</sup> and had 220,000 inhabitants (Eck et al. 2007), which made it small in an international perspective. However, in 2009, when the Euroregion adopted the legal personality of an EGTC, a dozen local governments mainly from Slovakia left the cooperation, thus its territory shrank a bit. While among the remaining members support for the historical region features as an important motivation for joining (and staying) in the cooperation, the dominant expectation of the local governments still was to quickly benefit from financial returns through Ister-Granum (Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming).

The Euroregion has a small secretariat located in the Esztergom town hall, consisting of a manager and a couple of assistants, depending on the number of active projects. The Euroregion has been leading, or taking part in, several project initiatives. The managing director considers the making of the plans for rebuilding the bridges and the

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by the German and Slovak National Self-governments 2010.

<sup>7</sup> European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation

<sup>8</sup> As it is the case with numerous Euroregions, a Latin name was chosen to avoid giving preference to the Hungarian or the Slovak language. In this case Ister refers to the Danube, and Granum to the Garam river.

construction of fish stairs on the river Ipoly (Ipel) and the support for the creation of a cross-border wine tourism area as the most successful projects to date. (Interview 8 June, 2010). The town of Esztergom has frequently subsidized Ister-Granum and is generally acknowledged as the most important actor within the organization (Interviews with members March-August, 2010). As expressed by the mayor of Lábattlan: *"Esztergom has an important role to play ensuring that this region is held together, so that we feel good inside it."*

Although the Ister-Granum is a small Euroregion in an international comparison, the Hídverő/Danube Euroregional Association is even smaller with only 60,000 inhabitants settled over 421 km<sup>2</sup> (Eck et al. 2007). Co-operation dates back to the early 1990s when villages located along the Danube on both sides of the border began to organize annual cultural events called *'Hídverő napok'* ('Bridge building days'), but a formal cross-border organization – the Danube Euroregion – was registered only in 2003. Nevertheless, the membership and territorial coverage of the Euroregion has taken several turns. The formal membership was held together by Neszmély, the lead partner in the Tata Microregional Development Association and by the Slovakian *'Združenie Obcí Priateľ'stva'* or *'Hídverő Társulás'* ('Bridge-Building Association') (Eck et al. 2007). Even though all local governments of the Tata micro-region in Hungary were formally members, some were significantly more active in the co-operation than others. The Euroregion was subsequently tainted by allegations of corruption towards the mayor of Neszmély who in the end resigned in April 2008 (Neszmély General Assembly Protocol 2008; Népszava 2008). The Euroregion organization has been drawn into a criminal investigation, and is by any practical definition defunct. However, the bonds joining the active members did not dissolve and the immediate solution was to create an organization hybrid, a combination of a Slovak-registered NGO with five Hungarian settlements being honorary members (Almásfüzitő, Dunaalmás, Kocs, Neszmély and Süttő). These Hungarian local governments mainly motivate their continued engagement by expressing the importance of supporting the cohesion of the ethnic Hungarian population across the border (Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming).

The Hídverő/Danube Association is characterized as a flat and slim organization. It neither maintains a secretariat nor a webpage, but still manages to pull together well-attended monthly meetings, the location of which rotates among the members. There is little initiative in terms of policy collaboration and project development and to the extent it exists; it relies on external organizations, such as regional development agencies. However, it does provide a forum for active policy monitoring as especially the Hungarian mayors gain a close insight into daily practices and problems of the Slovak local governments.

Pons Danubii, meaning 'bridge over Danube' in Latin, is the latest one in the family of Euroregions in Komárom-Esztergom. The discussions about this initiative began in 2006 among Hungarian towns that were close to the border, and whose mayors aimed to strengthen bonds with Slovakia, but at the same time did not want to succumb to the leadership of Esztergom within the Ister-Granum Euroregion. Unlike the Ister-Granum and the Hídverő/Danube Euroregions, the motivation to reunite the Hungarian people played a less pronounced role in determining the coverage of the Euroregion. Instead, the key actors focus on economic development and try to gain a better access to European funds (Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming). In order to deemphasize the Hungarian ownership of the project, the six members<sup>9</sup> decided that they would register the initiative in the form of an EGTC in Slovakia and that Komárno would serve as the administrative center.<sup>10</sup> The EGTC was registered in December 2010, and is currently developing its working structures.

#### 4. The observed differences and their possible causes

The three Euroregions and their constitutive elements, the local governments in our study, have been subjects in equal measure to a set of external factors usually thought to influence the development of Euroregions. First and foremost, local and regional actors here, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, realized that the European Union promoted cross-border cooperation initiatives, and allocated financial resources for this purpose. In addition, many transnational entities, such as the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) did advocacy work in favour of cross-border cooperation and examples of other cross-border initiatives were also there to follow. Hence, there have been both external material and normative incentives favouring institutionalization of Euroregions in Komárom-Esztergom. Ethnic and linguistic homogeneity across the border appeared mainly as a further incentive or a catalyzing factor. There was also no shortage of policy problems – not the least the general need for economic development – that could have been favorably addressed through cross-border cooperation. This is true even if local constraints such as the lack of necessary financial, human and technical resources might have overshadowed the opportunities for joint interventions through cross-border cooperation.

<sup>9</sup> Three on the Hungarian side Komárom, Kisbér and Tata, and three on the Slovak Kolárovo (Gúta), Komárno (Révkomárom) and Hurbanovo (Ógyalla)

<sup>10</sup> While Pons-Danubii fulfills our definition of a Euroregion (a formalized cooperation initiative between sub-national authorities in adjacent European countries), it does not form a geographically cohesive territory due to the deliberate exclusion of smaller settlements located in the neighbourhood of the six towns. For a discussion at length on the crucial issue of whom to include (and exclude) in the formation process of the Euroregion, see Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming.

Given that the three Euroregions studied in this paper were created within a short time period and are situated along a limited part of a single state border, it significantly reduces the internal variation that might still exist in terms of financial resources, local policy problems or linguistic and ethnic particularities. In fact, our analysis shows no differences among the members of the three Euroregions in terms of perceived immediate policy problems or current financial constraints. Yet, the striking diversity of these Euroregions in terms of what they are, and what they want to become, can be discerned even by a superficial review of how they operate. As this variation cannot be accounted for by external factors, we have to look for explanations at the local level. In the next section we first discuss the similarities and differences of the three Euroregions regarding their level of institutionalization and functioning and then we analyze the possible explanatory factors responsible for the variation in the outcome.

#### *4.1. The outcome: institutionalization and functioning of the Euroregions*

The study seeks to identify the factors that may influence the institutionalization and functioning of the Euroregions. Hence, these are our dependent variables. By (1) institutionalization we refer both to (a) the extent to which the Euroregion has formalized its operations; and (b) whether it has become a major vehicle for its members in terms of policy coordination and cooperation. A high level of institutionalization at the local level involves regular policy coordination aiming at economic development, which may, for instance, also trigger increased business cooperation within the area. By (2) functioning we refer to the scope and type of activities and projects the Euroregion has undertaken, and whether it functions in a consensual or conflictual mode.

In terms of the level of institutionalization, Ister-Granum has the most formalized operation, which also follows from the requirements of establishing an EGTC. It collects membership fees, holds regular assemblies, and has a governing senate and thematic working groups and a secretariat responsible for the day-to-day management. Since Pons Danubii has only recently been registered as an EGTC<sup>11</sup> it has yet to establish a fully-fledged organizational structure. Still, it has a secretariat and a recently elected director responsible for the daily management. However, coordinating the activities of the 6 local governments involved in Pons Danubii may be a far easier task in the future than it is in the case with Ister-Granum. In contrast, Hídverő has little in terms of organizational structure, lacking for instance a secretariat and a website as well. It is very lowly institutionalized as its only formal attributes are the elected presidency (currently, the mayor of Patince performs this role) and the rotating monthly meetings.

True policy coordination has not developed in any of the Euroregions, although it should be noted that Hídverő Euroregion does not even have such aspirations. As for Ister-Granum, most of the interviewees claimed that the communication between the secretariat and the members is rather one-sided, although at the same time few members take an active part in shaping the Euroregion. Projects are approved by the regular assembly meetings, but are usually initiated by Esztergom. Pons Danubii is still in its infancy and is in the process of developing its policy coordination mechanisms.

Regarding the functioning of the initiatives, Ister-Granum has actively applied for funds and engaged in relatively costly activities, as described in section 3, whereas Hídverő has not pursued this at all. Pons Danubii has yet to demonstrate its functional capacities although the successful and relatively smooth establishing of the EGTC may provide a good start for the cooperation. This also shows that conflicts, which would divide the members, have not yet emerged. Even though Ister-Granum demonstrates the most impressive list of accomplished projects, the functioning of the cooperation is characterized by tension and conflicts. The abstention of several former members from the EGTC was only one sign of these internal conflicts. Most mayors that expressed their discontent referred to the lack of projects directly benefiting their settlements. On the one hand this makes them passive in the organization, on the other hand their passivity may not generate such projects that their settlement could benefit from.

#### *4.2. The differences in inputs: motivational background expectations, power relations and organizational goals*

In the previous section we briefly described the level of institutionalization and the functioning of the Euroregions. Now we turn to those factors that may determine these outcomes. First, we analyze the differences and similarities in the motivational background and the expectations of the members of the three Euroregions. The reasons why local governments decided to join one of them show significant variation. Although administrative embeddedness played an important role in each case (those local governments that belong to the same sub-regional entity were more likely to join a cross-border initiative together), the stated motivations for joining vary across the Euroregions, but much less so among the members of a single Euroregion.

<sup>11</sup> <http://portal.cor.europa.eu/egtc/en-US/news/Pages/PonsDanubii.aspx> (accessed on 2 April 2011)



Members of Hídverő are primarily motivated by maintaining and nurturing the common Hungarian heritage and identity. They expect that the cooperation will help to reinforce Hungarian identity across the border and will facilitate cultural exchange between Hungarians living on both sides of the border. In the words of the mayor of Süttő: *"We did this for the sake of the Hungarians in Slovakia. The Euroregion can help a lot to maintain and nurture the historical roots, to make sure that this connection continues to live and build up, and does not break."* Although this ethnically grounded motivation also often appeared in interviews with mayors of Ister-Granum, in their case this view was nearly always accompanied by more materialistic expectations towards the cooperation. Most of the mayors expressed their expectations about direct material gains for their settlements arising from the membership in Ister-Granum. This sentiment was echoed by the management of Ister-Granum emphasizing local economic development as the primary aim of the initiative, and not to reinforce Hungarian ethnic identity in the region. These mixed motivations can be illustrated by contrasting the statement that *"Hungarians on the other side of the border need this"* with the statement that *"we saw some opportunities and fantasy in this – best practice exchanges, building connections, perhaps there is something in it for us as well."*

Pons Danubii is the Euroregion that most visibly seeks to become such a vehicle that would enable greater access to development grants offered by the European Union. *"Every local government wants to show itself, and we thought this could have joint advantages. It was important for application purposes. You can reach real achievements only through cooperation."* *"EGTC offered such an opportunity that when there is something important for the people living here, they do not have to turn to the government, but can turn directly to Brussels."*

The expectations of the members are therefore closely related to the reasons that motivated their joining. Pons Danubii identified economic development as its principle organizational goal and the members uniformly internalized this aim. It is too early to tell whether the strong anticipation of financial benefits will backfire on the cooperation in case it is unable to deliver the desired results. The expectations of the Ister-Granum members about the future financial returns have not been fulfilled to a great extent. The growing discontent has triggered tension and evoked conflicts inside the organization: many members stopped attending the assembly meetings and withhold the membership fees. As for the case of Hídverő, it is doubtful whether the stated support for the Hungarian 'cause' has been fulfilled. However, Hídverő members are convinced that the cooperation helped developing closer ties between the Hungarians in Slovakia and in Hungary and their overall evaluation of the cooperation is rather positive.

Regarding the membership structure and the power relations that arise from it, the role of the organizational goals has to be examined first. At the time of establishing Ister-Granum, the founding members formulated the goals of restoring historical ties across the two sides of the border and of enhancing economic development of the entire border area under the leadership of Esztergom and Stúrovo. Given that the organizational goals implied a relatively wide territorial coverage, most local governments in the broad neighbourhood that identified with these goals joined the cooperation. As Ister-Granum membership grew in numbers, asymmetrical power relations between the lead partners, Esztergom and Stúrovo, and the other members have become more and more visible as well.

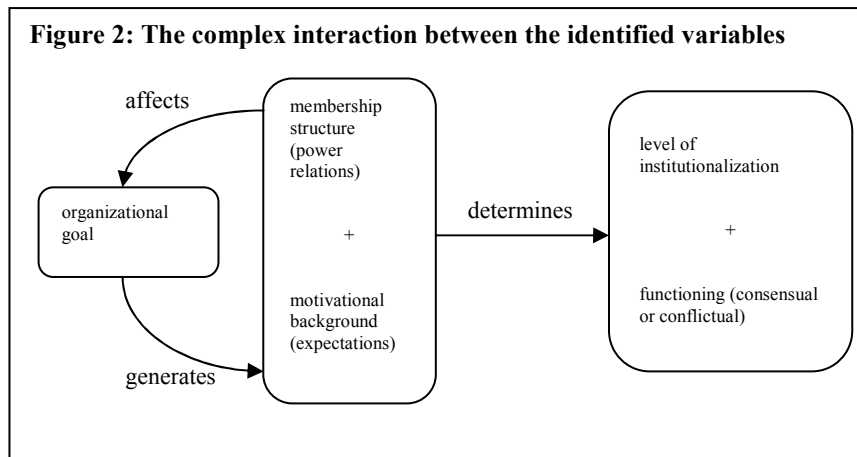
Power asymmetries to this extent are missing from Hídverő and Pons Danubii as they both lack a dominant actor. While both organizations have a limited number of members, their socio-economic characteristics are also similar: 18 small and middle-sized villages form Hídverő and 6 small towns compose Pons Danubii. Although Hídverő in spirit is open to new members, there are technical obstacles to extending its membership. On the one hand, the Slovak law does not allow for Hungarian settlements to formally join the Hídverő Association (which is a registered NGO in Slovakia), on the other hand, the by-laws of the organization contain the exact list of members and any changes to it involves the restart of the whole registration process. Since it is possible to promote the ethnic cohesion of Hungarians in other forms, too, Hídverő's membership has not grown. In the case of Pons Danubii, it was the firm purpose of the founding members to have a homogenous membership structure and limited membership of towns of similar size. For instance, they intentionally did not send an invitation to Tatabánya, which is the biggest city in Komárom-Esztergom, as its inclusion would have created power asymmetries similar to the extent present in Ister-Granum. In the end, both Hídverő and Pons Danubii have remained small cooperations with rather homogenous membership structures lacking explicit power asymmetries among their members.

### 4.3. Causal mechanisms

We argue that the organizational goals initially defined by the founders of the cross-border initiatives influence both their membership structure and the motivational background of the members. The membership structure then directly translates into internal power relations, while the motivational background determines the expectations of the members towards the cooperation. Once the Euroregion is established, power relations and members' expectations may affect and modify the initially set organizational goals over time. These three factors (expectations, power relations and organizational goals) jointly determine both the level of institutionalization and the functioning of the cross-border



initiatives. In short, the complex interaction between the members' expectations, power relations and the organizational goals over time determines the long-term evolution of the Euroregions.



We further argue that Euroregions enhancing and promoting cultural cohesion and identity are less likely to be characterized by conflictual operation, also because they tend to focus on rather low-cost cooperative activities. However, those Euroregions that emphasize the promotion of economic development as their primary goal are more likely to invite members that expect direct material benefits from their participation. On the one hand, this implies the initiative's engagement in more costly activities, on the other hand, internal conflicts are also more likely to emerge once financial and economic interests are involved. The table below offers a general overview of the main characteristics of the three Euroregions.

	Ister-Granum	Hídverő/Danube	Pons Danubii
Total number of members (local governments)	89	18	6
Established in (year)	2003	2003	2009
Territorial coverage	Contiguous	Non-contiguous	Non-contiguous
Common ethnic background of the members	Yes	Yes	Yes
Current sub-regional administrative ties connecting the members	Yes	Yes	No
Socio-economic character of the members	Dissimilar	Similar (villages)	Similar (towns of similar size)
Promoting cultural cohesion and identity	Yes	Yes	No
Aspiration to promote economic development	Yes	No	Yes
Aspiration to secure external funding	Yes	No	Yes
Dominant expectation of members	Direct material benefits	Strengthening ties with ethnic Hungarians	Direct material benefits
Power asymmetry among members	Yes	No	No
Level of institutionalization	High	Low	Low
Conflictual functioning	Yes	No	No
Evaluation of the Euroregion by the Hungarian members	Partially negative	Positive	Positive

**Figure 3: Characteristics of the three Euroregions**

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Our inquiry has been guided by the assumption that delimitations and emergence of border regions and their accompanying cross-border initiatives are neither unproblematic nor self-evident. We have previously demonstrated the complexities behind both the Euroregions' capacity to attract local governments and the local governments' decisions to join them (Medve-Bálint & Svensson forthcoming). The aim of this paper has been to go beyond this and look into the functioning of these initiatives. The study constitutes an ambitious effort to shed light on how Euroregions become what they are, and what may influence where they are going.

Within a small border region we found empirical evidence for the diversity of cross-border initiatives in terms of their institutional outcome (level of institutionalization and functioning) and how this could be attributed to two contrasting ways of entering the cooperation: one that primarily focuses on the economic dimension and one for which common ethnic roots are considered more important. Hence, we believe that the study may be of value for further research due to its hypothesis-generating capacity. Comparative research involving several border regions, or a contrasting case study from another part of Central and Eastern Europe would constitute valuable steps towards testing the above suggested causal mechanism.

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**Annex A: The analytical framework for the purpose of explaining decisions of local governments about joining Euroregions in Central and Eastern Europe.**

<b>Incentives for local cross-border co-operation</b>	<b>Instrumental</b>	<b>Normative</b>	<b>Obstacles to local cross-border co-operation</b>	<b>Instrumental</b>	<b>Normative</b>
<b>Internal</b>	<p>need to overcome economic decline</p> <p>attract investments</p> <p>common environmental problems</p> <p>converging project plans</p> <p>more efficient use of local resources</p>	<p>participating in European integration ("return to Europe")</p> <p>strong historical socio-cultural and economic ties</p> <p>distinct regional identity</p> <p>common ethnic background</p> <p>cognitive distance</p>	<b>Internal</b>	<p>fierce competition for resources</p> <p>lack of sufficient own funds</p> <p>lack of know-how and management skills</p> <p>conflicting project plans</p> <p>language barriers</p>	<p>historical tensions, conflicts (border as symbol of identity and distinction)</p> <p>existing stereotypes and prejudice towards the population across the border</p> <p>fear of competition posed by the other side (labour market, real estate market)</p> <p>cognitive distance</p>
<b>External</b>	<p>availability of transnational funds (PHARE CBC, INTERREG)</p> <p>availability of national financial support</p> <p>established legal framework (governmental ratification of the Madrid Convention; bilateral treaties)</p> <p>administrative embeddedness</p>	<p>advocacy work of transnational organizations (AEBR, Committee of Regions, European Commission)</p> <p>learning from best practices or models of other cross-border initiatives</p> <p>supportive policy of the central government</p>	<b>External</b>	<p>lack of established legal framework for cross-border co-operation</p> <p>inappropriate external financial resources</p> <p>incompatible political-administrative structures</p> <p>lack of supportive bilateral governmental agreements</p> <p>administrative embeddedness</p>	<p>unsupportive policies of the central government</p> <p>conflict or tension at the governmental level between the neighbouring countries</p>

## Annex B - Interviews

<p>Almásfüzitő: Lukács Karánsebesy, August 12, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Annayölgy: József Bánhidi, April 9 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Bajna: Tibor Pallagi, August 3, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Bajót : Zoltán Tóth, July 20, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Csolnok: József Bérces, August 4, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Dág: Tamás Steiner, May 18 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Dömös: Lajos Novák, May 19, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Dunaalmás: Péter Lévai, July 26, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Epöl: Imre Muszela, July 26, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Esztergom: Tamás Meggyes, June 3, 2010 (in person*)</p> <p>Keszthely: Lajos Gaál, June 11, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Kisbér: Dr. Erzsébet Udvardi, June 7, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Kocs: Bódis Jánosné, April 8, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Komárom : János Zatykó, June 16, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Lábatlan : István Török, June 3, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Leányvár: Janos Tóth, June 16, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Márialom: Kálmán Murcin, August 4, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Mogyorósbánya: Tibor Havrancisik, August 24, 2010 (via phone)</p>	<p>Nagyigmánd: Ferencné Szijj, August 4, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Naszály: István Maszlovér, April 12, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Neszmély: Béla Horváth, June 3, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Nyergesújfalú József Miskolczi, August 4, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Piliscsév Mária Nagy, August 2, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Pilismarót: László Benkovics, May 19, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Sárisáp: Károly Kollár, August 3, 2010 (via phone)</p> <p>Süttő: János Czermann, March 16, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Tát: Lajos Szenes, May 19, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Tata: József Michl, August 30, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Tokod: Mihály Pánczél, March 11, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Tokodaltáró: József Petrik, June 7, 2010 (in person)</p> <p>Úny: József Pósfai, July 28, 2010 (via email)</p> <p>Manager of Ister-Granum EGTC: István Ferencsik, 2010.06.08.</p> <p>Former manager of Ister-Granum EGTC: Gyula Ocskay, 2011.11.24.</p>
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\*answers subsequently approved by mayor after having provided by an administrative official on the indicated date at the premises of the local government