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11 The rebirth of the concept of the Carpathian Basin in Hungarian political language after 1988

Zoltán Hajdú

Introduction

By their nature geographical terms and spatial categories are historically and politically contingent. Their heterogeneity is most obvious in regions that have undergone several regime changes and numerous territorial shifts. This is particularly relevant for Central Europe – a mosaic of several nations and nationalities that have experienced 'glorious eras' during the past and various forms of political-territorial dominance or domination. Each national community has applied more or less particularistic notions of regional geographic space and state territoriality based on their specific historical experiences. Inevitably, this has led to a plethora of spatial approaches and nomenclatures that have not always harmonised.

The Carpathian Basin exemplifies Central Europe's experience with frequent and fundamental transformations of state borders. Empires and small state formations alternated within this space throughout the twentieth century. As part of historically contingent processes of nation-building, each national community developed its own perspective of interpreting territorial shifts as well as conceptualising Central European landscapes and geographies. In the case of Hungary, the geographical concept of the Carpathian Basin has been of particular significance as well as a source of controversy as it expresses a sense of Hungarian centrality within Central Europe. Indeed, the idea of the Carpathian Basin gained prominence within a context of interwar political rivalry and nationalism and was partly informed by revisionist political agendas that sought to re-establish Hungary's pre-1920 borders or at least re-claim lost territory. During the period of state socialism, the concept of the Carpathian Basin was primarily employed by physical geographers who were thus able to skirt state territorial questions and avoid accusations of revisionism. From 1988 and following decades of neglect, however, the Carpathian Basin again became a widely used term in Hungary within the politically and socially charged context of post-socialist transformation. Meanwhile, the emerging states surrounding Hungary, i.e. Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, developed their own geographical perspectives and

partially new nomenclatures in tandem with gaining independence. For these states the Carpathian Basin was not deemed an appropriate geographical frame of reference.

This chapter contributes to the discussion of conceptual change in border studies by demonstrating how the genealogies of geographical notions such as Carpathian Basin, Danube Region and Central Europe have been and remain closely intertwined. In addition, the evolution of these concepts has reflected political contexts that have shifted dramatically during the past century. Deeper analysis of conceptual change also reveals the often problematic nature of much geographic and geopolitical thinking in Central Europe, which has oscillated between regional cooperation and antagonistic national exceptionalisms. The present situation, which gives evidence of a redoubled assertion of the Carpathian Basin's Hungarianness, will be dealt with at some length. The present government of Viktor Orbán has embarked on an ethno-political exploitation of the concept that does not bode well for improved interstate relations in Central Europe.

Regionalisation from a Hungarian perspective – the historical development of Hungarian political–spatial concepts

The mountain ranges of the Carpathians, the Alps and the Dinaric Mountains, all of which are widely accepted geographic categories, encompass a unique territory and basin in a geomorphological sense. This has been generally recognised as such, although the definition of this space has included terms such as the Carpathian, Pannonian, Hungarian, and Central Danube Basins. This basin forms a geographical area with an objective existence, not only depicted by maps but satellite images as well. However, political stakeholder and popular perceptions of this objectively 'real' area have evolved with changing historical contexts, and the co-existence of heterogeneous approaches has been the rule rather than the exception. The Carpathian Basin, initially presented in Hungarian geography as a natural geographical–morphological unit, progressively evolved into a more complex spatial category. It established a permanent presence in the public consciousness relatively late – textbooks and research literature in earlier periods mentioned it as the Pannonian or Hungarian Basin. In reality, the term crystallised into a distinct spatial concept during the period between the two World Wars (Hajdú 2004).

The relationship between the geographic landscape of Hungary as a state and the physical–geographic environment have been the subject of numerous debates in modern Hungarian geography (Hajdú 1996). Until 1920, Hungarian geography had prioritised the analysis of political territories, such as the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Natural landscape structures were presented as elements of state spaces. It

was only after the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920, which reduced Hungary's territorial dimensions, that the study of the Carpathian Basin as a natural macro-region became an essential element of geographical research. From then on physical geography, and orographical and hydrological features in particular, were juxtaposed with theories of state formation and political geography (Figure 11.1).

This figure is both interesting and significant as it depicts the baseline situation where historical Hungary with its supposed natural borders and the territory of the Central Danube Basin did not overlap. In our view both historical Hungary, which was an existing territorial and political category before 1920, and the Carpathian Basin, an existing geographic macro-region, are legitimate categories although their interchangeability and synonymous use are still a source of confusion.

As background research was performed in anticipation of the Trianon Peace Treaty, a significant shift occurred in Hungarian geography (Anon 1918), in which an objective territorial framework for defining the



Figure 11.1 The natural borders of Hungary.

Source: Bátky and Kogutowicz (1921).

Hungarian state and cultural space was targeted. And it is within this context that the term Carpathian Basin achieved dominance in academic endeavours and public education, superseding the less nationally coloured idea of a Central Danube Basin (Teleki 1923). In fact, during the interwar period, territorial revision became the central *raison d'être* of Hungarian geography. Under the terms of the 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty, the Kingdom of Hungary lost 71.4 per cent of its territory (325,411 km²), and 63.5 per cent of its population (20.8 million), as well as about one-third of the ethnic Hungarian population. These changes marked a fundamental structural break in the development of Hungary. It was thus no longer the Hungary of the Trianon era that constituted the primary territorial framework of geographical analyses and educational materials but rather the historical territory of Hungary. By scientifically underpinning the geographical unity of the Carpathian Basin, geography at the same time strived to demonstrate the necessity of restoring the unity of historical Hungary (Veridicus 1934).

Before and during World War II, that is between 1938 and 1941, the Axis powers decided – in the Vienna Decisions – on several territorial changes that partially returned lost areas to Hungary, and for many people, the concept of a 'Greater Hungary' symbolised an ongoing process of historic Hungary's rebirth. Within this context, territorial and population growth produced a particular form of political subordination of the geographical idea of the Carpathian Basin as a natural Hungarian space. The journal *Carpathian Basin*, which appeared between 1941 and 1944, was a major vehicle for helping the Hungarian political, economic and cultural elite outside the strict disciplinary boundaries of geology and geography to gain a more profound understanding of the historically evolving problems of the Carpathian Basin (Hajdú 2005; 2008). However, instead of focusing on the actual state territory of Hungary the emphasis shifted to the entire Carpathian Basin and historical Hungary. In his historical-philosophical monograph, the historian Tibor Baráth (1943) provided an exhaustive survey of the issues of both nation- and state-building, illustrating the historically evolving spatial-political position of the Carpathian Basin through presenting parallel international examples. Baráth held that the purpose and meaning of the entire historical development of Hungary was the creation of a Carpathian Basin state. It bears noting that this approach was reductive because Hungarians only recognised the basin character of their country relatively late. For a long time, the Danube valley was viewed as the geographic area of the country. In reality, the project of Greater Hungary was directly subject to German influence and was dealt a fatal blow by the Wehrmacht's occupation of the area in March 1944 and the conflict that ensued.

The Danube river basin

During and after World War II, the country's geographical situation was re-evaluated in ways that referenced a potentially more neutral regional common denominator. In this way, the Danube River became a potentially 'integrative' factor due to the almost uniform application of the term to a landscape element across countries. The Danube has not been associated with geographical, linguistic or emotionally laden divisions and was thus consciously and effectively incorporated into diverse national geographies. The hydrological and morphological division of the Danube into an Upper, Central, and Lower Basin was already well established by the nineteenth century. According to the hydrological literature, within the 817,000 km² surface of the Danube's drainage basin, the Central Danube Basin occupies an area of almost 445,000 km². Only minor differences of delimitation could be detected even in terms of the size of this area.

Anticipating momentous political changes, Lajos Jócsik (1910–1980), during the final phase of World War II, prepared a monographic review of the historical evolution of economic issues in the Central Danube Basin (Jócsik 1944). A lawyer by profession, an economist based on his professional activities and a left-wing politician, Jócsik started to re-evaluate the situation of Hungary, its neighbourhood relations and spatial positions in an almost absolute awareness of the defeat of Germany and its allies, and hence Hungary. The Central Danube Basin designated by Jócsik did not fully coincide with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (which it fundamentally encompassed) or the partial watershed of the Central Danube Basin. Nevertheless, his analysis referred to historical Hungary in most respects, which he considered as a kind of framework for co-existence and development.

Central Europe

Disputes over the category of Central Europe have emerged in Hungarian scientific life frequently and with varying content. Accordingly, the Central Europe 'question' was analysed in its historical, geographic, political, economic and sociological aspects. The first major wave of debates was initiated in 1915 by the publication of Friedrich Naumann's (1915) *Mitteleuropa*, which suggested a reorganisation of Central Europe under enlightened German tutelage. This was of course a divisive political issue despite the context of a joint war effort and Hungary's privileged national status within the Dual Monarchy. Neither liberal nor conservative circles (even amongst themselves) could come to terms with or find common ground regarding the issue. The problematics of Central Europe was thus frequently understood as creating domestic political divisions. Between 1934 and 1939 the Central European humanist journal *Apollo* was published in Budapest with the aim to promote the Central European idea

even against the backdrop of volatile political conditions. András Rónai (1906–1991), a disciple, colleague and follower, and later the faithful keeper of the legacy and intellectual heir of Pál Teleki – believed that the Central Europe concept was well suited to capture objective geographical specificities and, hence, to facilitate the analysis of the situation and wider (continental) environment of Hungary. This belief was reflected in his 1943 French-language publication, *Tableau ethnique du Bassin des Carpates*, in which Rónai analysed the ethnic composition of the Carpathian Basin on the basis of French milieu theory. The supplement map of the Carpathian Basin (Figure 11.2) was conceptualised ‘in the French style’, i.e. without drawing linear (state) borders. Still, the notion of Central Europe was not acknowledged universally in either Hungarian geography or Hungarian society between the two world wars.

It bears mentioning that Central Europe was important to many Hungarian scholars because it expressed the idea of a north–south and east–west transition in terms of population densities, settlement systems and networks, languages, ethnicities, religions, levels of industrialisation, etc. However, prominent geographers, such as Gyula Prinz (1882–1973), who had a predominantly German scientific background, considered this new concept as a ‘greenhouse product’ of German science, and deemed its application to the Hungarian context inappropriate. As a result, scholars such as Radisics (1946) became very much concerned that competing geographical concepts, such as East–Central Europe or Southeast Europe, would be limiting the idea of Central Europe to encompass only German-speaking areas.

The Danube Region as a geographically inclusive concept

The results of two decades of work carried out by the Institute of Political Science under Rónai’s leadership were summarised in the *Atlas of Central Europe* (Rónai 1945). It is not accidental that Rónai considered the completion and publication of the work imperative, even and especially under war conditions. The large-scale atlas was in fact conceived as a basis for preparing peace talks after the war. Even after 1945, the thinkers of Hungarian geography held that natural geographical and landscape assets had a significant impact on political processes, hence their invention of the Danube Region as the spatial framework of friendly cooperation between nations. The Danube Region Working Community was founded immediately after the war with the objective of reducing the effects of the post-war tragedies and contributing to the development of a Hungarian standpoint for the coming peace talks. The engine of the Working Community was Elemér Radisics (1884–1973), a lawyer, political thinker foreign policy and analyst. From 1931 to 1940 he worked at the department of public information of the general secretariat of the League of Nations in Geneva; actually, he formed a link between the League of Nations and the Hungarian

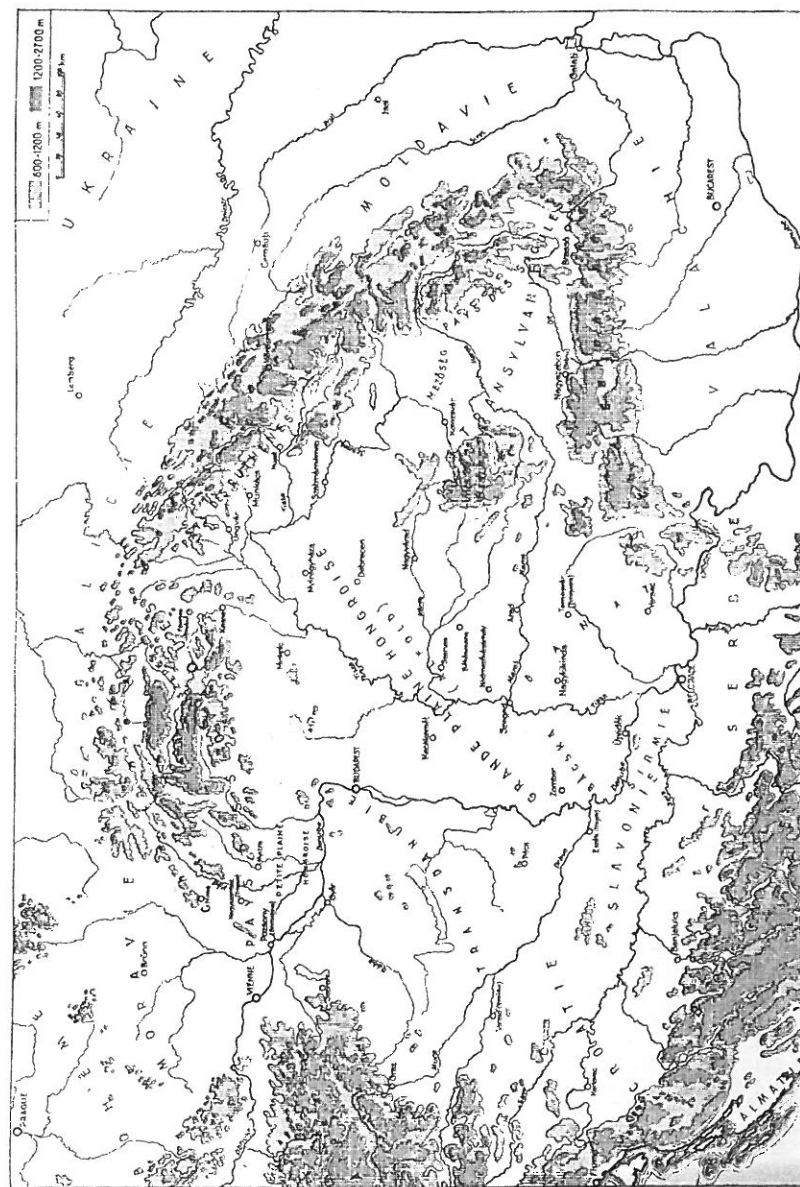


Figure 11.2 *Le Bassin des Carpates*.
Source: Rónai (1943).

government. After 1943, he became an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He continued to be employed by the ministry between 1945 and 1947 as a staff member in the archives and scientific division.

The gigantic work published under the title *Danube Region* consisted of three volumes (Radisics 1946) and was completed during his tenure at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, the ministry as such is not mentioned in the books although it is likely that the authors were given considerable access official government data, as the preparations for the peace talks were underway. The authors leave us in no doubt with regard to the designation of the research area: 'The centre of the European continent is the Danube Region, i.e. the Carpathian Basin and its environment' (ibid.: 1). The Carpathian Basin is not featured in isolation but as part of an Inner Europe which, in its historical development, culture and economy, has many common features. The basin and its environment form almost exactly the geometrical centre of Inner Europe. Thus, in this interpretation, Central Europe, Danube Region, and Carpathian Basin are complementary geographical frames of reference of which the Danube constitute the most inclusive geographical space. There are significant historical, geographical, social, economic, and political disparities among

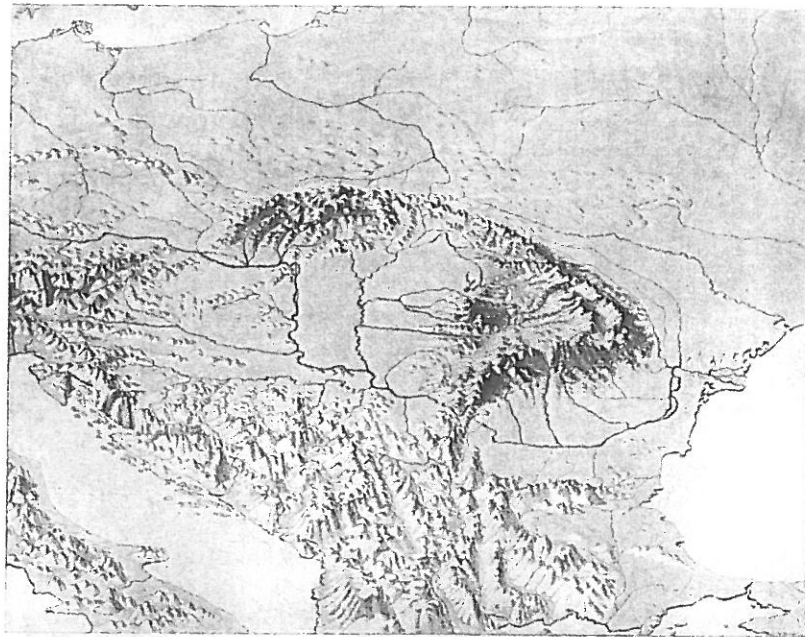


Figure 11.3 The geographical designation of the Danube Region.
Source: Radisics (1946).

the countries of the Danube Region (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Romania); nevertheless, they can be considered a territorial group, in fact, a spatial unit. The dominant traits of the European continent are manifest in part through the geographical specificities of the Danube Region, albeit in a unique combination.

The Carpathian Basin as a Hungarian landscape

Work on the monograph *Geography of the Carpathian Basin*, written by Béla Bulla and Tibor Mendöl (1947), had already begun before 1945. Although the publication is a synthesis of research conducted on the Carpathian Basin during the interwar years, the analyses contained therein were adjusted to the new (geo)political situation. They felt it necessary to explain their perspective in the preface, stating that:

Our state territory is made up of various natural landscapes whose boundaries do not contain integral but fragmented landscapes organised into a unified political entity.... The Carpathian Basin is the smallest geographical unit whose broad framework may accommodate the territory of the Hungarian state as well as neighbouring peoples en bloc.

(Bulla and Mendöl 1947: vi)

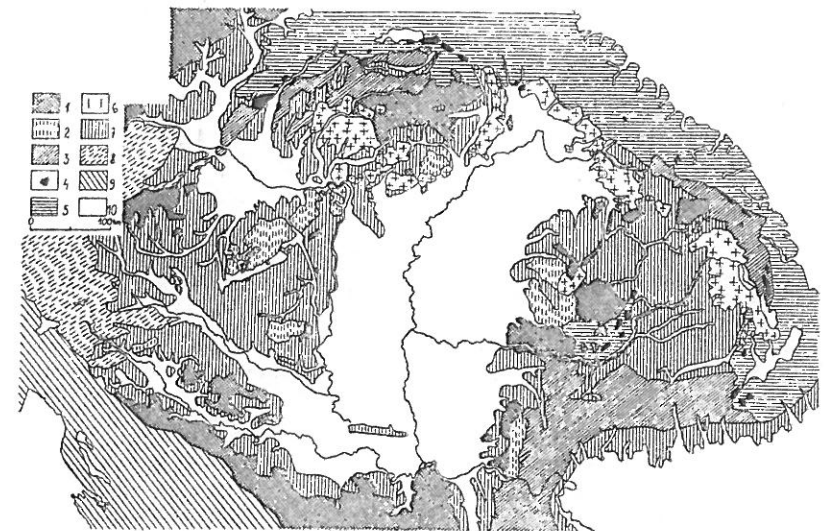


Figure 11.4 The designation of the Carpathian Basin.
Source: Bulla and Mendöl (1947).

The authors presented views both on the continuity and fragmented nature of historical and spatial development, arguing that state formations and spatial features of the Basin could only be understood in the context of their historical evolution. This also applied to the spatially determined role of the Hungarian people in transforming and shaping landscapes. They demonstrated, in line with previous traditions and received knowledge, the almost all-encompassing unity of the Carpathian Basin – except in terms of the spatial structure of power and the state. This unity was projected on physical, or natural, and artificial landscapes alike. Mendöl defined the basic objective and value of the monograph as analysing the 'Hungarian landscape'. In this approach, the Hungarian landscape coincides with the territory of historical Hungary (Bulla and Mendöl 1947: 73). The authors were cautious not to advocate the future identity of the Carpathian Basin with the territory of the Hungarian state, yet certain ideas in the monograph are indicative of this tentative hope. The regional analyses reveal that the authors of the volume were well aware of the changing conditions:

Throughout centuries, the destiny of Northeastern Upper Hungary (the highlands) was not so much to unite but to divide.... The fact that this territory came into the possession of the Soviet Union completely alters its previous dividing role, and the shared interest which is manifest in the economy of the area may contribute to cementing closer ties with the Soviet Union.

(Bulla and Mendöl 1947: 452)

The two geography professors applied an approach which was fundamentally and essentially of a geographical nature while pointing out that future regional processes would not be exclusively or even predominantly influenced by geographical factors. This notwithstanding, the conclusion of the volume is optimistic:

A better exploitation of the potential opportunities is guaranteed by the peaceful labour of the peoples populating this area. The discernment of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin will decide if a durable period of peaceful creative labour is on the horizon. We must hope that the future will pave the way of mutual understanding.

(Bulla and Mendöl 1947: 588)

One might observe that Hungary, partially relying on its own sources and partially through its participation in the preparations for the peace talks, had only scientific tools at its disposal in its attempt to review the situation and to provide politically relevant interpretations of historical processes of state development in the region. For this reason, geographical concepts such as Central Danube Basin, Carpathian Basin, Central

Europe and the Danube region, were all mobilised. This included an analysis of economic processes between the two world wars and the economic situation in the immediate aftermath of the war. Instead of grandiose development policy strategies and concepts, emphasis was put on country analyses with the objective of encouraging mutual understanding.

After 1948, however, political realities dictated another trajectory. Instead of targeting a regionally holistic view, most of the states within the region were forced to re-orient themselves towards the Soviet sphere of influence and national autarchy. The exclusion of Yugoslavia from the socialist bloc in the summer of 1948 and the subsequent establishment of COMECON in 1949 set the whole region on an entirely new path. As a result, the notion of Carpathian Basin as a political category or cooperation space rapidly lost favour. While the concept continued to be used in the area of geology, hydrology, phytogeography and physical geography, it was no longer the subject of comprehensive analyses or monographs.

The rebirth and development of the Carpathian Basin concept after 1988

During and after the 1988–1990 regime change, Hungarian geography, reflecting more general domestic societal transformations taking place, was faced with three fundamental possibilities for reformulating its *stricto sensu* spatial approach. The first involved a return to the interwar period when the Hungarian state was still largely identified with historical Hungary. An example of this is the historical–geographical volume published by Sándor Frisnyák (1990), which featured on its front cover the juxtaposed contours of present-day and historical Hungary. A second choice led to a revival of Bulla and Mendöl's legacy, that is claims that the Carpathian Basin was to be the *stricto sensu* geographic environment of the Hungarian people as well as an implicit identification of the basin's territory with historical Hungary. The republication of Bulla and Mendöl's 1947 monograph supported this line of reasoning. Finally, there remained the option of focusing attention on Central Europe as the spatial category par excellence to represent the immediate neighbourhood of the Hungarian people. Accordingly, the Atlas of Central Europe compiled by Rónai was also re-issued.

Hungarian geography (and wider Hungarian society) set out in all three directions, and current examples of each approach exist (see, for instance, the Greater Hungary concept, which does not only appear in electronic materials, but also in a journal published under this title). Scientific and geographic research on the Carpathian Basin now enjoys the full legitimacy it did in the past. The career of the category outside the disciplinary boundaries of geography and the evolution of its wider societal significance, however, are issues of an essentially political and not geographical nature (Frisnyák 1996).

In 1988, Károly Kocsis' geographical study of Hungarian minorities played a significant role in reviving the Carpathian Basin concept. He and his wife (Kocsis 1990; Kocsis and Kocsisné Hódosi 1991; 1998) subsequently wrote several essays that documented the situation of ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries and in doing so contributed, wittingly or not, to politicising kin-state relations. By 2000 it had become apparent that a common regional geography of the Carpathian Basin based on scientific cooperation was not possible. In order to facilitate a dialogue with neighbouring countries, Kocsis and Tátrai (2013) suggested the use of more neutral spatial categories, such as the Carpathian-Pannon Region, a term very likely inspired by the Central Europe concept framed by András Rónai.

Nevertheless, the more general use of Carpathian Basin to suggest a Hungarian social and cultural space flourished. The chief goal of Danube Television, founded in December 1992, was to specifically broadcast news to Hungarians especially in the Carpathian Basin as well as elsewhere. The television station also had a remarkably large audience within Hungary itself. Despite its inability to achieve a community of values, Danube Television greatly contributed to preserving the unity of the Hungarian language. Similarly, the share of broadcasts targeted at audiences abroad, especially those relating to the Hungarian community in the Carpathian Basin, gradually increased in public radio programmes. Radio broadcasts have heavily influenced the public's awareness and knowledge of the Carpathian Basin. The Danube Television and public radios played an essential role in the widespread adoption of the term Carpathian Basin.

Within the discipline of regional studies, the *Regions of the Carpathian Basin Series* under the main editorship of Gyula Horváth (Horváth 2003–2011) undertook an analysis of the internal structures of the region. Large regions (according to the EU-defined NUTS-2 level) were meant to serve as the basic analytical framework, an approach that was, however, already abandoned in the first volume on Székely Land and Slovakia where 'region' referred to the southern part of the country populated by Hungarians. Over the past two decades, the Carpathian Basin concept has gradually gained momentum both in the discipline of geography and in the social arena. The contribution of the academic field of geography is best summarised in *Geography of the Carpathian Basin* (Dövényi 2012).

Politicising the Carpathian Basin concept

With the systemic changes initiated in 1988, new political contexts of fully regained national sovereignty necessitated a reassessment of neighbourhood relations and forms of interstate cooperation in Central Europe. Amidst these changes, a variety of geographical terms in addition to that of Carpathian Basin were either introduced or re-emerged in academic and political discourse; these included Central Europe, Central Eastern

Europe, East Central Europe, and the Euro-Atlantic Region. Indeed, the rehabilitation of the Carpathian Basin as a reference to political and social spaces was instantly controversial. Regime change and the 1989 Amendment to the Constitution generated a consensus that the Republic of Hungary would assume responsibility for ethnic Hungarians living abroad and encourage closer relationships between the diaspora and the mother country. This constitutional modification provoked negative reactions, particularly in former Czechoslovakia and in Romania.

During his 1990 inauguration ceremony, József Antall, the first democratically elected prime minister, expressed his desire to become the 'prime minister in spirit of 15 million Hungarians', referring to Hungarians all over the world. While this declaration was unanimously rejected by neighbouring countries, a comprehensive review of the political activities, parliamentary speeches, statements and writings of József Antall reveals that he did not favour the application of the controversial term Carpathian Basin.¹ For Antall, Central Europe provided a more suitable spatial community framework. At the same time, the concept of transborder Hungarians was institutionalised during the consolidation of the Antall government. In 1990, the Secretariat for Hungarians Abroad in the Prime Minister's Office was established, which became the Government Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad in 1992. Its primary objective was to improve the situation of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring states.

The most striking example of the complexity and problematic nature of the Carpathian Basin question is the 1992 volume on national policy edited by Péter Nahimi. The volume's title which evoked 'Chances and Hopes in the Carpathian Basin' contains an explicit reference to the possibilities and hopes associated with the Carpathian Basin, its front cover displaying the 'truncated' map of the Carpathian Basin, and the only missing element in the collected lectures, studies, declarations and analyses is the term Carpathian Basin itself. The parliamentary representatives and transborder Hungarian elites are likely to have refrained consciously from using this geographical term. Substantive references to the term were only found in the analysis of Géza Szcs, a Romanian contributor, and Miklós Duray, a Czechoslovakian author. The expression 'neighbouring countries' is frequently used, which explains why Central Europe is represented as the smallest spatial scale of neighbourhood par excellence.

Nevertheless, official government use of the concept subsequently increased. The 1995 Act on Environmental Protection and the consecutive 1996 Act on Nature Protection incorporated the concept of Carpathian Basin into Hungarian legislation. Shortly afterwards, the Act I of 2000 on the Commemoration of the Saint Stephen's State Foundation and the Holy Crown further promoted the use of the term. This indicates that the concept Carpathian Basin and its adoption in legal texts was accepted by left- and right-wing governments alike. More dramatically, the Hungarian Status Law of 2001 defined a number of privileges granted to Hungarian

communities in neighbouring countries (excluding Austria). The law was forcefully rejected by the neighbouring states, especially Romania, which appealed to the European Council. Following the inspection undertaken by the Venice Commission, Hungary and Romania achieved a consensus on the implementation of the law. The real novelty of the law was that it did not demand neighbouring countries to grant rights to Hungarians (since it was not about the protection of minority rights); instead, within the framework of its own provisions, the mother country chose to grant special favours to Hungarians living beyond its borders. It thus had a crucial significance from a national policy aspect. Certain privileges could be accessed at the place of residence, others in Hungary.

The spatial category of the Carpathian Basin therefore gained momentum in political discourse, leading to its adoption in references to organisational integration. It was not accidental that the Forum of Hungarian representatives of the Carpathian Basin (FHCB) came into existence in 2004 following Hungary's accession to the European Union. The primary objective and function of the FHCB was to continuously re-evaluate the opportunities offered by a changing situation. The organisation was attacked because it was regarded as a Hungarian Parliament of the Carpathian Basin. In Slovakia and Romania, it was held that the socialist-liberal Hungarian government realised a form of political integration beyond its borders by setting up this organisation.

From 2004 EU regional policy, bi- and multilateral relations between Carpathian Basin states, the problem of strengthening cross-border relations, and, in addition, issues of Hungarian-Hungarian relations all at once began to dominate social, economic and political processes. The idea of a supranational union of nations was pervasive during the period of EU-accession and the campaign directed at the membership referendum. Almost each pro-EU political group highlighted that Hungarians would profit massively from the cessation of border controls and free movement within the EU, which would entirely restore previous family, inter-settlement and other relations. At the same time, the drive for greater ethnic cohesion generated its own political agenda – and problems. The Hungarian referendum of 5 December 2004 on granting ethnic Hungarians dual citizenship is regarded as a dark day in the history of 'Hungarian-Hungarian' relations. The referendum's failure generated a fundamental split within Hungarian society and created discord between Hungarian minorities abroad and Hungarians at home.

Nevertheless, the ethno-political momentum continued and, in 2006, the Government Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad was closed. From then on, a single state secretariat was charged with the affairs of minorities. In the area of legislation, the Committee of Foreign Affairs and Hungarians Abroad was established. Thus, the institutional integration of the domains of foreign affairs and Hungarians abroad was realised. Similar, the Reformed Church experienced a fundamental change in 2006 with

the creation of the unified Reformed Church of Hungary in the Carpathian Basin. For the first time in history, the Reformed Church considered itself a national church and institutionalised a uniform organisation of its communities living in the region.

The Carpathian Basin as a regional cooperation framework

Largely based on the example of the Alpine Convention, the Carpathian Convention (Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians) was established in May 2003 with the participation of the seven involved countries. The convention, which only affects the mountainous area, did not extend to the Carpathian Basin, nor did it contain any reference to it. This situation changed after May 2004, with the EU accession of Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia, and of Romania in 2007. As a result, almost the entire Carpathian Basin became part of the EU. Thereafter, the new member states also contributed to shaping and implementing regional policy. Between 2000 and 2006 (and especially after 2004), Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia received massive amounts of financial aid the EU's Structural Funds. During this period the INTER-REG III B CADSES programme was the most significant spatial policy process for the Carpathian Basin and new member states. CADSES was a transnational cooperation area comprising regions belonging to 18 countries. Those areas of the Carpathian Basin which joined this cooperative project were thus integrated into a vast territory within which they did not form an autonomous and integrated subentity in any respect. For Hungary, however, the development of cross-border relations became of the highest importance (Banai and Lukács 2010; Ádám 2011).

The area developed a single development policy for the 2007–2013 programming period. At the time, the EU's territorial approach and cohesion policy contained simultaneously:

- the funding of national spatial development projects, supporting the catching-up of areas facing natural or other specific constraints within each country;
- a programme for the development of cross-border relations, in the framework of which Hungarian border areas became eligible to participate to some degree in calls for proposals and development projects between 2007 and 2013;
- transnational programmes, in the process of which the vast CADSES area was divided into two parts, making Hungary simultaneously a part of the programming and project space of Central Europe and South-Eastern Europe.

The EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60) which entered into force in December 2000 has generated significant tasks and opportunities

related to the Carpathian Basin and macro-regional cooperation. The major objective of the directive has been to achieve a satisfactory condition of surface and underground waters by 2015 – curiously, the accompanying map does not present the area of the Carpathian Basin as a single water catchment area. Although the EU WFD was adopted before the EU accession of Hungary, it is in harmony with the most fundamental interests of the country, which is just as concerned with the rehabilitation of the water catchment area of the Danube as by the global improvement of water quality in the Central Danube Basin. Hungary – recognising its interests – played a significant role in the preparation of the EU's Danube Region Strategy (EUDRS) and its adoption during the six months of its EU presidency. The Danube area could constitute a key element of the integration of the Carpathian Basin (Central Danube Basin) into Europe, particularly if its special status is preserved in the long run. The EUDRS is not about the river, but the areas connected by the river. The priorities of EUDRS are in total accordance with Hungarian interests and involve almost every element of the macro-regional integration of the country (Billo 2011; Borsa *et al.* 2009).

Carpathian Basin ethno-politics redoubled

The major political actors of the conservative coalition of Young Democrats and Christian Democrats (or FIDESZ-KDNP) that regained power in the 2010 elections immediately began reconceptualising and reshaping policies for Hungarian communities abroad through strengthening governmental positions – with the president of the KDNP and deputy prime minister made responsible for the National Policy for Hungarian Communities – and setting up the institutional system and R&D background infrastructure of the new government. In 2010 a modified National Citizenship Act, simplified the (re)acquisition of Hungarian citizenship and the naturalisation procedure. The settlement of the issue of citizenship did not affect only Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin, but all over the world, provided that their countries of residence did not forbid the acquisition of a second citizenship. Meanwhile, an amendment to the Voting Rights Act gave birth to a new Hungarian political nation which empowered Hungarian citizens living abroad to influence the internal affairs of Hungary.

The new Hungarian Fundamental Law adopted on 18 April 2011 declares in the Avowal of National Faith: 'We commit ourselves to cherishing and preserving ... the natural and man-made riches of the Carpathian Basin.' Here the Law does not refer either to present-day or historical Hungary, but the natural macro-region. Slovakia and Romania expressed their vehement opposition to the inclusion of the Carpathian Basin in the Fundamental Law. The Hungarian ambassadors were summoned and fierce political and public polemics developed. Neighbouring states viewed

with suspicion the renewed focus on this spatial concept in Hungary. None of them were favourable towards its adoption in their own scientific approaches. In 2001 this gave rise to the question: 'Are we alone in the Carpathian Basin?' (see Fejes 2011).

More generally, the regime changes and the consecutive new state formations entailed a reframed spatial approach and a modification of geographical denominations in the newly formed states. The East Central and South-East Europe Division (ECSEED) of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) held its 20th session in Zagreb in February 2011, and one of its key topics was the uniform use and interpretation of the region's geographical names. Even though the entire territory of Slovakia is situated within the Carpathian Basin, the prevailing political considerations which promote the rejection of this spatial category have not disappeared. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that it would be impossible for Slovakia to accept being named 'Upper Hungary' within the context of a Hungarian-dominated Carpathian Basin. Hungarian-speaking members of the Slovak political elite have continued to use spatial categories such as Carpathian Basin and Upper Hungary, provoking strongly hostile reactions from various Slovak-speaking politicians. Indeed, Prime Minister Robert Fico and party leader Jan Slotka, addressing the entire Slovak people, made the convincing argument that Slovakia was not a part of the Carpathian Basin and that such a spatial category would but serve as an instrument of Hungarian revisionism. History and geography textbooks for secondary school students published in Slovakia (as well as their translated Hungarian versions) naturally reflect the specific views of the Slovak majority.²

An examination of country and geographical names contained in Hungarian legal texts in force in the spring of 2015 leads to the following conclusions:

- Quite obviously, apart from Hungary, the number of occurrences of the term European Union is the highest (1345).
- The number of occurrences of the related categories of Central Europe, Eastern Europe and East Central Europe are respectively 30, 22, and 16 (without taking into consideration the areas specifically referred to).
- The number of occurrences of the other related terms are as follows: Carpathian Basin (30), Pannonia (29), Danube Basin (9), Middle Danube Basin (1), and Pannonian Basin (2).
- As regards the three mountain chains relevant for the macro-structural delimitation of the Carpathian Basin, the Carpathians appears 13 times, the Alps 7 times, and the Dinaric Alps 3 times.
- Among the principal units of the basin-centred and historical Hungarian spatial approach and nomenclature, Upper Hungary appears 9, Transylvania 7, and Lower Hungary 3 times.

- As to the main rivers of Hungary, the legislative corpus contains 391 references to the Danube, 190 to the Tisza and 98 to the Drava, while Lake Balaton is mentioned 239 times.

The surfacing of the European refugee crisis in 2015 sharpened the conflicts surrounding issues of national policy in the Carpathian Basin in a unique way. The President, the Minister in Charge of the Prime Minister's Office and other members of the government made open and harsh remarks on the situation of Hungarian communities living in the Carpathian Basin.

According to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Budapest is the heart and centre of the Carpathian Basin and the Hungarian nation has a mission to fulfil in this area. His speeches in Transylvania, his lecture given to Hungary's ambassadors, and his negative stance on supporting efforts by Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries in favour of more autonomy all produced declarations of refusal in Romania and Slovakia. The Speaker of Parliament, László Kövér, issued press releases whose tone was reminiscent of populist statements characteristic of the period following World War I. Among other things, he stated: 'If we do not deliver enough babies to fill the Carpathian Basin, others will come and replace us.' In response to these declarations, made as a member of parliament and not as a party politician, Hungary's ambassador was repeatedly summoned to the Slovak and Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ruling party, in addition to considerations of ideology and national policy, wishes to give the concept of the Carpathian Basin an economic content as well (www.fidesz.hu/.../a-karpat-medencei). Hungarian visions of the Carpathian Basin as an economic space, however, did not gain the sympathy of either the Romanian or the Slovak political elites (Erdélyi Magyar Nemzeti Tanács 2011; Karátsony 2010; Stefan 2009).

In one of his numerous domestic and foreign statements, Minister Zoltán Balog (2015), in 2015 expressed that 'the Carpathian Basin, in many respects, forms a unique Hungarian national area' (<http://felvidek.ma/2015/05/balog-zoltan-akarpat-medence-toobb>). According to Balog, the Hungarian government would be prepared to apply a policy of force for the benefit of Hungarian-populated areas severed from Hungary. The present Hungarian government considers the Carpathian Basin to be a single national area in terms of education, economy, health care and culture. However, the most strident statement by far was proclaimed by the Minister in Charge of the Prime Minister's Office, János Lázár, which encountered a special general resonance in both neighbouring countries and Hungary. On 24 February 2016, Lázár (2016), during a political debate conducted with party leaders of the opposition, spoke explicitly of need of 'preserving the hegemony of Hungary in the Carpathian Basin' (http://index.hu/belfold/20016/02/24/lazar_schiffer_vona_lmp_josz_ter).

Concluding observations

This chapter has discussed several aspects regarding the development of the concept of the Carpathian Basin. In conclusion, it can be said that there exists no general objective definition of this geographical space, particularly from a political standpoint. To an extent, the heterogeneity and diverging levels of acceptance of the concept are logical consequences of the basin's multicultural and multi-state nature. However, at another level, the controversial nature of the concept is symptomatic of the problems the Carpathian Basin is facing, and which include extreme core-periphery imbalances and a lack of forceful interstate cooperation. Moreover, these problems remain unresolved despite the many incentives and opportunities for cooperation provided by European integration. Furthermore, Hungary, situated at the lowest point of the basin and sharing common borders with all countries, is not only most vulnerable to environmental threats, such as flooding. Rather, a more enlightened policy approach could serve to functionally reconnect urban networks within the region. However, a basic problem lies in reconciling Hungarian ethno-political interests with more integrated economic and environmental development. The pronouncements of Hungary's present government have generated wide press coverage in Hungary and abroad – much of it negative. The will to preserve Hungary's hegemony in the Carpathian Basin within the framework of the EU constitutes a highly eccentric agenda from a theoretical, pragmatic and diplomatic perspective. This agenda also collides with an objective obstacle: although the majority of the population of the Central Carpathian Basin is comprised of Hungarians, the latter constitute a minority within the total area of the geographical basin. Between 2001 and 2011, the Hungarian population decreased by one million and thus its proportion correspondingly diminished.

If the 'organic' development of the Carpathian Basin as a coherent territorial unit within the European Union is to be taken seriously, joint legitimation on behalf of all constituent states is required. Rather than the nationalistic scenarios of a natural Hungarian stewardship for the region, alternatives oriented towards multilateralism need to be explored more fully. Here, the Danube Strategy, neighbourhood relationships, cross-border sub-systems and cooperation between Hungarian settlement areas as well as EU-inspired regional cooperation could provide a realistic possibility for the future.

The ruling Hungarian governments should always keep in mind the lessons of the twentieth century and the fact that the Hungarian people has frequently emerged as a loser in Central Europe's territorial struggles. The EU provides numerous opportunities for cooperation and can assume an even more important role in creating the conditions for more beneficial economic and social relations within the region. This includes strengthening local autonomy and linguistic rights for ethnic Hungarian

communities. Cooperation and not conflict is the means by which a certain degree of integration can be achieved within the Carpathian Basin.

Notes

- 1 These materials are available through the database of the Society of the Friends of Antall József, available online at www.antalljosef.hu.
- 2 Slovak textbooks (particularly of history and geography) consider Slovakia to be a country of the Carpathians and do not accept its denomination as the Carpathian Basin or are not willing to share a common space with it.

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