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Bridging the Gap: Cross-border Integration in the Slovak–Hungarian Borderland around Štúrovo–Esztergom

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ABSTRACT

One of the main narratives of border studies in recent years has been that cross-border interactions rarely result in a thorough integration, with the border remaining a strong dividing line. While not questioning that grand narrative as a whole, this article contributes to nuancing the picture. Through the four analytical lenses proposed by Brunet-Jailly (2005. *Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. *Geopolitics* 10, no. 4: 633–649) we investigated the Slovak–Hungarian borderland around Štúrovo and Esztergom, where substantial developments towards a thorough integration of the two sides have actually taken place. The empirical material is based on personal interviews with 26 local elites, statistical data, field observations, etc. Two dimensions emerge as particularly important behind this integration. One is related to market forces: a long-lasting severe economic situation including high unemployment on the rather agriculture-dominated Slovakian side has pushed thousands to daily commute to work on the industrially oriented Hungarian side, where demand for labor has been high. The other key dimension is related to the local cross-border culture, where shared identities and common languages on both sides have led to intensive cultural and educational exchange. These developments were also facilitated by the policy activities of multiple levels of government and the local political clout. Our case contradicts the now common idea that increasing cross-border integration coincides with decreasing cross-border mobility.

1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance, Aim and Questions

The past few years have seen a vast number of studies of borderlands that emphasize the difficulties and continued hindrances to cooperation despite—at least until very recently—increasingly open borders within the European Union (EU). One can even say that one of the main grand narratives to have emerged in border studies is that even the physically open border continues to be a significant dividing line, reinforced by new-old ways of

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marking it (Donnan 2010; Brym 2011; Amilhat Szary 2012). Cross-border contacts can also be contested (Klatt 2006; Balogh 2014); formal cooperation may diminish once resources subside (Perkmann 2007); and top-down cross-border cooperation may not necessarily lead to increased local-level human contacts (McCall 2013, 203–204). Even the presence of trans-border ethnic groups does not automatically lead to intensive cross-border cooperation, but may even lead to fears of hidden agendas (Klatt 2006, 246). It has been noted that “cross-border labour movements are still exceptions”, as “[t]he social border produces a difference in the imagination of belonging and as such it produces an attitude of indifference towards the market on what is perceived as the ‘Other side’” (van Houtum and van der Velde 2004, 100). Even an “increasing cross-border integration (e.g. in the form of regional ‘homogenisation’) could coincide with decreasing cross-border mobility” (Spierings and van der Velde 2008, 497) as the level of unfamiliarity with the other side decreases and incentives to cross diminish. Finally, local industries or even the entire development of border areas can, somewhat paradoxically, suffer from the building of transport infrastructure that allows passing them faster (Sidaway 2002, 154–155; Amante 2013, 38).

In light of the above, the relatively few cases where a growing cross-border integration can actually be testified deserve more attention and explanation. These tend to be larger and more affluent border cities such as Luxembourg, Basel, and Geneva (Sohn, Reitel, and Walther 2009). In other cases, cross-border flows are largely limited to specific processes such as residential mobility, for instance around Bratislava (Hardi 2012; KSH 2015a, 19) or parts of the Dutch-German borderland (van Houtum and Gielis 2006). Our case concerns a particular section of the Slovak-Hungarian borderland (see Figure 1), the

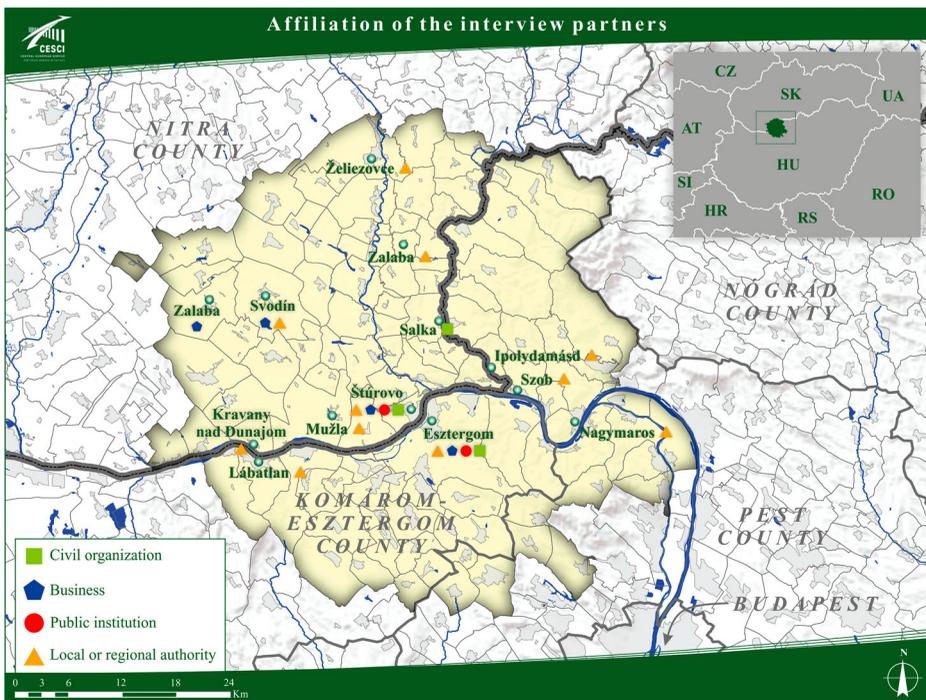


Figure 1. The location and organizational affiliation of the interviewees in the Slovak–Hungarian borderland around Štúrovo–Esztergom. *Source:* created by Éva Gangl at CESCO.

area of Ister-Granum European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC¹). While as many as 13 EGTCs existed along the 680 kilometer-long Hungarian–Slovak border in 2015 (Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 9), this micro-region has been showing a particular intensity of cross-border interactions (Nagy 2014; Svensson and Nordlund 2015, 375; Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 72). Yet the factors behind have not really been explained, or focused on formal cooperation alone (Medve-Bálint and Svensson 2013). Our article takes a more holistic approach towards cross-border integration (see 1.3) and asks: in what ways has the borderland around Štúrovo and Esztergom become more integrated, and which factors explain such a development? How can we explain the higher level of integration being achieved here, as compared to other areas along the Slovak–Hungarian border and elsewhere in Europe?

1.2. Sources and Data

Much of the empirical material is based on 25 interviews conducted with a wide range of local elites on both sides of the border (14 on the Slovak and 11 on the Hungarian), complemented by observations and further sources. A list was first prepared with 35–40 potential interview partners. Out of these only four rejected to be interviewed, on the grounds of not knowing enough about cross-border cooperation. A few persons—mostly in businesses—were simply too difficult to reach. The altogether 26 anonymized interview partners (in one case two persons were interviewed at the same time) included 11 mayors, two representatives of regional authorities, four other public officials (working at a municipality, a library, a hospital, and in education, respectively), four persons from NGOs (active mostly in the cultural sector), and five business managers (from small and large companies alike). [Figure 1](#) presents a map of the study area and the location of the interview partners, including their organizational affiliations. Márton Pete personally conducted the interviews in May and June 2014, ten years after both Slovakia and Hungary joined the EU. Most of the encounters took place at the interviewees' workplace, five at cafés proposed by them, and two at our former office in Esztergom. The conversations typically lasted 60–90 minutes, and all were recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were conducted in Hungarian, which is the dominant language on both sides of the border (Markuse 2011, 364), with 82% native speakers on the territory of Ister-Granum (Ocskay 2008, 129). A total of 72% declared Hungarian as their most frequently used language at home on the Slovakian side in the latest, 2011 census (SOSR 2015a). Hungary then has a much smaller community of Slovaks, but three small-towns on the Hungarian side of Ister-Granum (Piliscsév/Čív, Pilisszentkereszt/Mlynky, and Kesztlóc/Kestúc) have a particularly large ethnic Slovak minority. On the one hand, it can be seen as a drawback that no interview was conducted with persons who do not speak Hungarian. Márton Pete is a Hungarian from Hungary, and responses to a Slovak researcher could possibly have been slightly different, or at least been presented somewhat differently. On the other hand, there are few persons in this borderland who do not either speak or at least understand some Hungarian. Moreover, respondents often reflected on interethnic relations despite rarely being explicitly asked to do so (cf. Brubaker et al. 2006). Most questions instead revolved around the development of their communities and organizations. More specifically, the interviewees were asked about the cross-border contacts and partners of their communities, the reasons behind and

effects of commuting, the effects of the reconstruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge across the Danube (2001), and of joining the Schengen Area (2007) and in Slovakia's case the Eurozone (2009). Reflections on the pros and cons, opportunities and challenges of these processes were always sought after. In this article the interview material is used to give a picture of cross-border contacts, rather than to see how respondents present such realities. This does not mean that the answers gathered are uncritically taken for granted. Instead, we complement our data with alternative sources (including statistics) as well as field observations. Additionally, we take note of the few cases of contradictory statements.

1.3. Analytical Framework

Based on the position that all borders are unique, very few border scholars have attempted to develop an overarching theoretical framework to analyze cross-border integration. A notable exception is Brunet-Jailly (2005), who suggested four equally important analytical lenses. The first, *market forces and trade flows*, refers to the flows of goods, people, and investments spanning the border. The second element is that *the policy activities of multiple levels of government* and governance transgress the border to link local, regional, provincial, state, and central governments, and task-specific public and private sector organizations. The third lens analyzes *local cross-border culture*, namely whether senses of belonging, common languages, or ethnic, religious, socio-economic backgrounds span the border. The fourth group of aspects is related to the *local cross-border political clout*. It takes into account to what extent active local civic and political organizations (local-level relations, policy networks and communities, symbolic regime, and institutions) and individuals initiate and expand beyond the border. According to this theoretical framework, “[i]f each analytical lens enhances or complements one another, what emerges is a borderland region that is culturally emerging and is integrating” (Brunet-Jailly 2005, 645).

A particular strength of the analytical framework described above is that it links structure and agency well, a connection often overlooked or at least treated with imbalance. Further, the framework fits well with our holistic approach towards cross-border integration. Following a brief presentation on the background of the area, we therefore divide our rich empirical material along the analytical lenses described above. The paper then ends with a concluding analysis, similarly along the same dimensions.

2. Background of the Area

For centuries Slovakia was part of the Kingdom of Hungary or of Austria-Hungary without any territorial autonomy. After Czechoslovakia was established following the First World War, the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 marked the new state's border to Hungary 10–50 kilometers south of the Slovak–Hungarian linguistic border, mostly along the rivers Danube and Ipoly/Ipel' (Kocsis and Váradi 2011, 598). Bilateral relations have known uneasy episodes (Markus 2011, 365); although most of the time they were officially good yet not intensive during the period of “socialist brotherhood,” with the border largely remaining sealed or restricted to formal and highly controlled forms of exchange. Since Slovakia's independence in 1993 ethnic Hungarians have made up around one tenth of its population, represented by political parties and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) alike. In Hungary, Slovaks are one of the 13 officially recognized national minorities, thus having their own national self-governmental bodies. In 2011, in total 35,208 persons were associated with any significant element of a Slovak identity (KSH 2014, 15)—i.e. including not just persons declaring a Slovak ethnicity but also those “only” using the language at home—equaling 0.35% of Hungary’s population.

Slovak–Hungarian bilateral relations have been more intensive yet rather mixed in the past three decades (Hamberger 2008; Markusse 2011), but improving over the last 5–6 years. Both countries joined the EU in 2004 and the Schengen Area in 2007, contributing to a flourishing of daily commuting and shopping tourism between these two economically similarly developed countries especially in the western parts of the border zone (Kocsis and Váradi 2011, 598–599). Yet while significant cross-border movements have in the past years been triggered in the agglomeration of Bratislava (Hardi 2012), these are mainly limited to residential mobility. Despite its proximity to the Slovak capital, from the whole of Győr–Moson–Sopron County no more than 1,201 persons were commuting to work in Slovakia (KSH 2015a, 18). The central parts of the Slovak–Hungarian border area are the most peripheral socio-economically (Máliková et al. 2015, 36), and it is also here that the political border overlaps with ethno-linguistic boundaries to the highest extent. The eastern borderlands are similarly poor and still lack proper cross-border transport infrastructure (Michniak et al. 2015, 18). The central and eastern border areas virtually lack any signs of an emerging cross-border labor market (KSH 2015a, 18).

At the same time, our study area—the Štúrovo–Esztergom borderland (see Figure 1)—is strongly characterized by asymmetries in a multitude of ways. Komárom–Esztergom County stretching along the border on the Hungarian side belongs to the more developed parts of the country, not least due to its automotive and other industries (KSH 2015b, 14). Agriculture-dominated southern Slovakia on the other hand saw comparatively few investments during state socialism (Kocsis and Váradi 2011, 599). An earlier thorough study emphasized that peripheral industrialization in the region “prior to 1989, in attempting to reduce economic differences among various ethnic groups, resulted in the establishment of branch plant economies which have had difficulty in surviving since 1989” (Smith 2000, 151).² Additionally, “agricultural activities remain significant ... but have similarly seen the break-up of the state-run farming systems and the collapse of livelihoods and employment possibilities” (Smith 2000, 168). Thus “the general tendency towards regional economic convergence during the 1948–89 period has clearly been replaced by a serious erosion of the potential for transformation in a large number of regions” (Smith 2000, 164), and so despite its small size Slovakia was characterized by huge regional inequalities already in the 1990s (Smith 2000, 162).

The situation described has changed little, if at all, over the past few years. In fact, a recent comparison of 22 OECD-countries found regional disparities to be the largest in Slovakia (Kyriacou and Roca-Sagalés 2014, 190). Another study including 30 European countries showed that only Ukraine and Latvia display larger spatial inequalities than the Slovak Republic (Lessmann 2014, 38). Southern Slovakia in particular continues to be a peripheral region within the country (Ocskay 2008, 122). As an example, nearly all municipalities on the Slovak side of the study area experienced a natural population decrease in 2014 (SOSR 2015b, 30). Relatedly, population density on the Hungarian side is almost twice as high as on the Slovak side (Ocskay 2008, 123). Whereas the infrastructural and functional relations of the borderland are embedded in a lowland area

(Markusse 2011, 353), its rivers have been dividing more than connecting as bridges were heavily damaged during both world wars. Of all pre-Second World War bridges crossing the Danube that were rebuilt so far, the one in our study area—the Mária Valéria Bridge between Esztergom and Štúrovo, first opened in 1895—was completed last, in 2001. While still the only fixed physical link across the Danube in this part of the borderland, “the bridge”—as it is thus often referred to by locals—has since provided a number of opportunities.

3. Cross-border Contacts around Štúrovo–Esztergom

3.1. Market Forces and Flows of People and Goods

The overall poor economic performance of the Slovak side of the study area was mentioned by several interviewees, with no one claiming the opposite. This was partly linked to a lagging transport infrastructure, including a poor road network, and the fact that the vast majority of the old bridges across the Danube and Ipoly/Ipel’ were not rebuilt during the time of “socialist brotherhood,” and far from all even thereafter. Importantly, however, the reconstruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge at least was jointly propagated, according to a mayor on the Slovak side. This was a very significant achievement as a huge bilateral infrastructural project a decade earlier—the Danube hydroelectric plants at Gabčíkovo and Nagymaros (Hamberger 2008, 58)—was largely a failure from the perspective of the two countries’ relations.³ Hence, 13 years after its (re-)opening, the interviewees unanimously confirmed the utmost importance of “the bridge.” One additional observation made was that “there was actually more [formal] cooperation before and during the reconstruction of the bridge,” although this might be less of a surprise given that such a project requires intensive exchange. One informant on the Hungarian side judged that the Slovak side has benefitted more, but even this does not say that the Hungarian side has not. Thus overall, the rebuilt bridge is seen as providing great opportunities for cross-border contacts.

To substantiate that such visions have been turning into reality, we are—besides other sources—drawing on a large quantitative study (Farkas 2016) conducted on four consecutive working days between July 7 and 10, 2014. This counted 16,609 vehicles crossing “the bridge” in both directions (Farkas 2016, 31), averaging 4,152 per day. Given that 86% were cars (with two persons on avg.) but the rest included minibuses (7.86%) as well as buses (1.3%), and that the survey was limited to a daily average of ten hours (around 8 am–6 pm), we estimate that at least 10,000 persons per day were crossing “the bridge” during that period. As the two cities Esztergom and Štúrovo have around 39,500 inhabitants in total,⁴ this indicates very intensive cross-border movements. Further, 23.64% crossed “the bridge” once or several times a day, with another 39.11% once or several times a week (Farkas 2016, 51).

As many as ten of our interviewees on the Slovak side named unemployment as one of the key problems in their localities, which is mirrored in statistical data from the region. In 2011 (the latest year from which we have data on the local level) unemployment rate among the active population of the largest towns on the Slovak side was 18.7% in Želiezovce, 17.1% in Štúrovo, and 13.2% in Nové Zámky (SOSR 2015c) located further north. Even the whole of Nitra Region—in which the Slovak side of the study area is

located—had an unemployment rate of 13.2% in 2013, and 11.9% in 2014 (SOSR 2015b, 6). This can be contrasted to the figure of 4.3% in 2014 for Komárom-Esztergom County (KSH 2015b, 6) on the Hungarian side. In addition, while most interview partners were very positive about the dismantling of border controls, the mayors of two border towns (one on each side) mentioned the side effect of disappearing workplaces at the toll offices and some other employers. Yet the reduction of staff at the region's biggest firms since the 1990s was largely unrelated to the border's opening. In Štúrovo, for instance, the paper factory was gradually cut back and finally shut down in 2014 due to a lack of competitiveness, whereas the freight station that once indeed thrived from its border location has recently regained its important role without the extensive manpower it once required (IGVLÖ 2014, 110–111).

The increasingly cross-border labor market is one of the key (economic) features of this area, confirmed by a good number of respondents. According to a board member of one of the largest employers in and around Esztergom, both sides benefit due to the labor surplus on the Slovak side and a high demand for labor on the Hungarian side. In 2005, Suzuki in Esztergom employed 1,300 Slovak citizens; two years later 2,700 (Sidó 2007), or 43% of its workforce. Many have been commuting daily on employer-operated buses from distances up to 45–50 kilometers. During the 2008–2009 economic crisis, the temporary termination of some of the bus links for commuters unintendedly hit distantly living employees worse, not least on the Slovak side. But even though the crisis reduced Suzuki's staff, according to a board member still around 35–40% of the workforce comes from the Slovak side, where the company also sells some of its cars. Relatedly, as Farkas's study (2016, 31) shows 86% of traffic across “the bridge” takes place by car, with 19% crossing for work (Farkas 2016, 50)—and this in a holiday-period. Hundreds from the Slovak side also work in the industrial towns of Látatlan and Dorog, for instance at suppliers to the automotive industry. But labor from Slovakia is not just employed in cycle-sensitive sectors. The Hungarian side's thirst for teachers—especially in science subjects—has to some extent been alleviated by employing (Hungarian-speaking) educators from Slovakia, where demand for them is lower partly due to changing demographics there. Slovak citizens also work in the hospital of Esztergom. True, two or three interview partners mentioned that the Hungarian side is less attractive for labor than a few years ago due to the decreased salary gap and the weakness of the Hungarian currency *vis-à-vis* the euro. Yet Slovakian residents earning and spending their salaries in Hungary—which is very common—are relatively unaffected by currency fluctuations.

Selection as well as prices on the two sides continue to differ and have also contributed to vibrant cross-border shopping and trade (Kocsis and Váradi 2011, 598–599), seen as very intensive by most interviewees on both sides. In Farkas's study, 41.58% of respondents crossed “the bridge” for shopping purposes. This can also be evidenced by the growing presence of written and spoken Slovak on the Hungarian side; at bazars, in restaurants and pubs, and in advertisements of local newspapers. Whereas the Slovak side has already had a bilingual character for some time, advertising in Slovak in local newspapers on the Hungarian side is a recent phenomenon. In addition, some (commercial) local newspapers from Štúrovo are also available in Esztergom, and vice versa. Last but not least, due to the lower real estate prices on the Slovak side a number of people from Hungary have bought family houses there, mostly as second homes.

Emigration is not always easy to distinguish from commuting, but some patterns can clearly be identified. Most interview partners agreed that the reconstruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge meant huge changes by bringing many opportunities and triggering mobility. True, the latter is not always perceived as beneficial to the whole border area, let alone to all individual localities. It has for instance been strengthening the already on-going emigration of the young from the countryside, and large cities are partly outcompeting micro-regional centers. One respondent estimated that among those migrating or commuting outside Ister-Granum, around half go to Bratislava and Prague, and the other half to Budapest, for studies and work. The latter has become so “close” thanks to “the bridge” that people from the Slovak side are now commonly attending cultural events there in the day or the evening. This was extremely difficult—not to say impossible—before the reconstruction of “the bridge,” when only a small ferry for personal traffic operated across the Danube from dawn till dusk. Relatedly, two interview partners also feared a brain-drain from southern Slovakia to Hungary, including Budapest. Some people on the Slovak side also commute to Bratislava and Galanta on a weekly basis, for work. Three informants also mentioned the emigration of especially young people to Western Europe. Still, substantial commuting is taking place within the border area, and not just among grown-ups. Several interviewees mentioned that pupils on various levels from the Slovak side attend public schools on the Hungarian side. The exact number of these pupils is unclear as formally their parents or some authority in Slovakia would have to pay for these studies. Yet local schools and Hungary’s centralized educational system apparently turn a blind eye to the phenomenon. At least one respondent on the Slovak side nonetheless raised concerns about pupils attending schools in Hungary, which contributes to the further decline of Hungarian and other schools in Slovakia.

People also cross the border for healthcare. On the Slovakian side Štúrovo and its vicinity lacks a hospital, with the closest one located in Nové Zámky (Nagy 2014, 196) about 50 kilometers inside the country. Especially since the opening of the border and “the bridge” many citizens from the Slovak side have been visiting the hospital in Esztergom, with which at least one health insurance company in Slovakia (called Dôvera) has reached a collaborative agreement.⁵ A number of especially elderly Hungarians—who tend to be less bilingual than the young—also prefer the Esztergom hospital as they can more easily communicate there. Unfortunately, a deepened collaboration is partly blocked by some doctors and managers of the Nové Zámky hospital (some of whom are also involved in local or regional politics), which has been losing patients and thus resources allocated. Nevertheless, the closer Esztergom hospital can save lives by treating emergency situations as well as complicated interventions that affect patient mobility. In addition, there is also a number of private providers on both sides. Of note is that 2.62% of Farkas’s (2016, 50) respondents crossed “the bridge” for healthcare services.

Illustrative of local demand to cross the border, due to the lack of sufficient bridges on the Ipoly/Ipel’ people often cross it by small boats and when frozen, even on foot. At the time of large Catholic festivities in particular, we noticed a good number of Slovak-registered cars parked in front of the large Esztergom Basilica. It should be noted that some of these cars are owned by residents of Hungary, who due to the lower related costs choose to register their vehicle in Slovakia—itself a peculiar but nevertheless existing cross-border phenomenon.

3.2. Policy Activities of Multiple Levels of Government

A brief overview of Slovak–Hungarian bilateral relations, including the gradual opening of the border, has already been presented in section 2. What should be added here is that the reconstruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge was in the end an intergovernmental decision, taken in 1999 (Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 20).

The study area is also involved in EU-supported cross-border cooperation, coordinated by Ister-Granum, an organization founded in 2003 as a euroregion⁶ and since 2008 working as an EGTC. The EGTC was the second one to be established in the EU, and the first one along the Slovak–Hungarian border (Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 16). In their comparative study of the now 13 existing Hungarian–Slovak EGTCs, based on their publicity, resources, regional development, and satisfaction of members, Törzsök and Majoros (2015, 72) ranked Ister-Granum as the second most mature organization.⁷ This evaluation is supported by most of our interviewees, who were positive on Ister-Granum and cross-border contacts; although taking into account all responses and experiences somewhat nuances the overall picture. Several mentioned the difficulties for especially small actors (including municipalities) to realize larger projects, which required substantial pre- and co-financing. One respondent lamented the strict rules regarding territories that fall under Natura 2000 (a network of nature protection areas in the EU), resulting in limited possibilities for industrialization and job-creation. A few interview partners noted the EGTC's varying level of engagement, which is dependent on its incumbent leadership as well as on bilateral relations. Another group of critical remarks regarded Ister-Granum's territorial structure. One mayor said that “cross-border projects could not overcome a number of administrative burdens caused by the state border.” Another mayor, from the Hungarian side, mentioned the difficulties to reach consensus among the 82 settlements composing the EGTC, and shall have proposed to work out spatial development plans for smaller regions comprising 12–15 localities instead.

In spite of the above challenges, very few doubted the important role that Ister-Granum has been playing in coordinating formalized cross-border cooperation. Accordingly, most interviewees listed a number of projects that they actively participated in, created, or managed. Some of these are summed up on the webpage of the EGTC (Ister-Granum 2016). A particularly touching project called AquaPhone (DCC 2016) commemorates the difficult period of the 1950s, when due to a lack of any physical link between the two sides people would stand on the Danube's banks on windless evenings to communicate to each other, with the water carrying their voices. For 11 years in a row now, music artists have been invited to a cultural festival every June to perform a musical dialogue on the river banks, with the audience listening from the Mária Valéria Bridge. Our interviewees did not lack ideas for future cross-border cooperation either, including larger and smaller projects. The former include connecting the train stations of Esztergom and Štúrovo at least by bus, but more ideally by rail; a shared development of the lacking accommodation facilities; building more bicycle tracks; and common marketing of touristic potentials. Ideas for smaller projects include a shared entry system for the three differently profiled spas in Esztergom and Štúrovo, which also have diverging opening hours and dates; and developing a network of information kiosks throughout the borderland, with digital screens guiding visitors and residents.

Tourism-related investments have been playing a key role for Ister-Granum (cf. Ocskay 2008, 122), and were cherished by at least ten interview partners. This included the cross-border planning and building of tourist routes, including bike paths; the restoration of castles, mansions, and religious itineraries; shopping tourism; as well as promotion of local food. The most common theme was wine tourism and a number of projects related to wine routes and markets have been realized, even a cross-border wine equestrian order was established. The crucial role of tourism, leisure, and culture in the region is evidenced by Farkas's (2016, 50) respondents, 20.27% of whom were crossing "the bridge" for this category of purposes in 2014.

Yet another noteworthy aspect of cross-border relations in the study area is the involvement of Polish actors and organizations in Slovak–Hungarian encounters, named by as many as seven interviewees. The engagement of Polish partners has typically taken place in cultural and people-to-people contacts. These included cultural festivals as well as the commemoration of historical events, such as unveiling a statue in Štúrovo of Polish king Jan Sobieski who fought the Ottomans in the region in the late 17th century. A president of a regional cultural association explicitly uttered that "active Polish participation has successfully served as a bridge between ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians, whose relations have occasionally been burdened by history and politics" (with Poles, both Slovaks and Hungarians have traditionally maintained good relations). Indeed, some of these trilateral projects are also supported by the Visegrad Fund. This way, the Polish and Czech governments have also contributed to local cross-border cooperation in Ister-Granum.

3.3. Local Cross-border Political Clout

Perhaps most interestingly, and less typically for a number of EU border regions, significant cross-border cooperation has also emerged in the study area without financial support from the EU or the national level. Such initiatives have instead mostly come from individual actors and grass-root cultural organizations, with some support from the rather modestly endowed local municipalities at best. As an important example, whereas rebuilding "the bridge" was an intergovernmental decision (see 3.2), a civic initiative called *Hidbizottság* (Bridge Committee) emerged for the cause already in the mid-1980s.

In 2014, more than ten of our interview partners reported on recent and mostly successful bottom-up cross-border activities that have not been financed from higher levels. They include commonly organized sports events (e.g. football), music or dance performances, as well as cooperation between local museums and galleries. Importantly, two mayors informed us that while cross-border contacts have initially often consisted of cultural encounters, some later resulted in establishing businesses (cf. Hidegh and Miklós 2005, 143). Moreover, some settlements on the Slovak side indicated that their libraries are in a bad condition and have thus received substantial help (with enlarging and updating stocks as well as with staff work) from libraries in Hungary. The arrangements facilitating the use of the Esztergom hospital by residents on the Slovak side shall also have developed from bottom-up articulations of demand.

3.4. Local Cross-border Culture

At the very heart of cross-border and interethnic relations lies the issue of how various groups with partly or possibly distinct identities relate to one another, therefore this aspect deserves to be dealt with at length. As Smith (2000, 166) observed, “the fact that in certain regions, such as those in southern Slovakia, economic marginality is shot through with issues of ethnicity further complicates the situation.” Given that the religious affiliation among much of the study area’s population is the same (Roman Catholic), it has not been a dividing fault-line within the region (the level of religiosity is also similar on the two sides). Also, since we are dealing with a post-socialist context and in Slovakia’s case at least with a relatively young state, it is perhaps less surprising that (ethno-)national identity is the primary factor of collective identification.⁸ Given the complex ethnic structure of the area (see section 2), interethnic ties need to be analyzed both between and within the two sides of the borderland. As already mentioned in the introduction, interviewees were rarely asked in an explicit way about these relations—the focus was more on contacts across the physical border—but reflections on them emerged nevertheless, as could be expected.

An aspect that as many as seven interviewees lamented was that while Slovakia as a whole has seen a good number of large investments over the past 10–15 years, these have largely avoided its southern and Hungarian-dominated regions. If we take a look at where the big investments landed, we can indeed recognize some bias towards the metropolitan regions in the country’s west and northwest. For instance, Slovakia’s increasingly developing network of motorways and clearways have up until today largely avoided the southern regions. A similar pattern can be observed regarding the location of automotive producers and suppliers (i.e. the backbone of Slovakia’s economy) across the country, with very few investments made in southern Slovakia (SARIO 2015, 4–6). At the same time, this may be related to the industrial character of the northwest and the traditional agricultural orientation of the south (cf. Smith 2000, 170) rather than to a deliberate (ethno-)territorial bias. Nevertheless, interviewees maintained that industrial parks have been operating in southern Slovakia as well, and two specifically mentioned that for instance SARIO, the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency, could have done more to attract FDI also to this region. Further, a representative of the Nitra Region lamented the developmental bias towards the Slovak-dominated northern parts of this territory, despite a weaker economy and a higher unemployment in the southern and Hungarian-dominated sub-regions. Whether such positions more reflect identity politics (Calhoun 1994) or the city of Nitra’s (the homonymous region’s center in the north) dominance is difficult to say, but the poorer performance of the southern areas has, as described, long been a reality. Relatedly, the Slovakian “eight county model of north-south (rather than east-west) organization has been seen to weaken the electoral power of Hungarians within each county” (Smith 2000, 159). Finally, a large survey from 2014 found that 46% of Slovakia’s population prefers the country’s ethnic minorities to assimilate rather than to keep their distinct customs and traditions (Podstupka 2015), up from 30% in 2004 (uj szo.com 2015). It must be added though that Slovak attitudes towards Hungarians tend to be more positive in ethnically mixed southern Slovakia than in the much more mono-ethnic regions of the country (Hamberger 2008, 58).

Perhaps a result of local dissatisfaction with the above-mentioned conditions, we encountered a number of bordering and othering⁹ attitudes *vis-à-vis* Slovaks among at

least five Hungarian interview partners, mostly on the Slovakian side. It emerged that for some people at least there is a certain frustration over the growing Slovak presence in these largely Hungarian-dominated areas, where the share of ethnic Hungarians has slowly but steadily decreased in the past decades (cf. INFOSTAT 2009; SOSR 2015a). In his now older study Smith (2000, 161) noted that no ethnicity-related physical violence had recently taken place in Slovakia, which to the best of our knowledge is still true—with the possible exception of one debated case in the 2000s (cf. Macháček, Heinrich, and Alekseeva 2011, 50). Thus othering practices have largely remained on the attitudinal level so far. Yet attitudes can result in policies and preferences sometimes leading to tangible outcomes. Increased land or real estate ownership for instance is seen by a few at least as a conscious strategy by ethnic Slovaks to strengthen their presence in the area, even though—as mentioned—Hungarians from Hungary have also bought houses there. Relatedly, a local industrial park manager expressed his preference to attract investors from abroad, and among Hungarian business managers in Slovakia. A leader of a culturally focused NGO lamented that “local history booklets are mostly written by Slovak historians, or not even historians” as she put it, who tend to downplay the Hungarian heritage of these territories and over-emphasize their Slovak features. Two mayors criticized the ethno-centrism of Slovakia’s developmental policies (already discussed above). Five interviewees complained about the strongly centralized structure of the Slovak state, which leaves little manoeuver for local and regional actors. Lastly, and unclear to what extent a conscious choice, when speaking about Slovakia or the Slovak side of the borderland two persons repeatedly used the label *Felvidék* (lit. Upland), the obsolete and unofficial name of Hungary’s historical northern regions that today largely constitute Slovakia. It needs to be mentioned that both these respondents lived in Hungary (i.e. they were not ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia).

At the same time, we also came across very positive attitudes towards Slovaks and Slovakia among our interviewees. A mayor of a Hungarian-dominated town on the Slovak side emphasized that “there are no problems with Slovaks at all; they are well integrated and have learned the Hungarian language very well.” Another mayor, this time on the Hungarian side of the border, emphasized the richness of both cultures, adding that “for instance Slovak music is unbelievably beautiful.” Both these mayors also talked about the importance of existing contacts between not just Hungarian but also Slovak communities across the border, which they showed clear aspirations to support further. Also, a leader of a regional cultural organization mentioned the role of the *Palóc* (a Hungarian-speaking ethnographic group in the border area with certain Slavic influences on its dialect and traditions) as a connecting link between the two countries, through their cultural events etc. Importantly, yet another mayor on the Slovakian side maintained that “mental borders, to the extent they remain, are more typical among elderly and middle-aged inhabitants.” Last and not least, as many as seven interview partners, including three from Hungary, experienced that Hungarian bureaucracy is (even) worse than Slovakian, which is of course a hindrance for implementing projects. According to a mayor on the Hungarian side “project implementation is stricter, more efficient, and punctual on the Slovak side”—although one respondent there expressed a very similar judgment about the Hungarian side.

Interview partners transmitted a number of additional observations concerning Slovak–Hungarian relations that are very much worth mentioning. At least two (one

from each side of the border) blamed Hungarian decision-makers as much as Slovak ones for having neglected the development of the borderland. A concrete example concerns the slow pace of rebuilding bridges on the narrow Ipoly/Ipel' as there are today only six bridges crossing the border, even if more are planned (cf. Nagy 2014, 197). This can be compared to the total number of 47 bridges across the river up until the First World War (uj szo.com 2012). A related element is that from a number of Hungarian settlements on the eastern bank of Ipoly/Ipel' river, Esztergom and Budapest can be reached faster by crossing through Slovakian territory and the Mária Valéria Bridge (instead of crossing the Danube Bend, which has a more complicated geography). Last but not least, an important question regarded the nature of the national curricula. On the Slovak side of the border, Slovak- and Hungarian-language classes teach both nations' history for instance, although the former, perhaps unsurprisingly, focus less on Hungarian history. According to one interviewee "controversies do occasionally emerge around the perceptions of history," although he did not provide any details.¹⁰

4. Concluding Analysis

This study aimed at investigating the recently observed, but so far unexplained, comparatively high level of cross-border integration in the Slovak–Hungarian borderland around Štúrovo–Esztergom. For this goal, the four analytical lenses provided by Brunet-Jailly (2005) have proven to be a relevant framework.

One of the most important dimensions behind this integration is namely related to *market forces* and economic structures, not least to the severe peripheral status of the Slovak side, in a multiple sense. Despite its physical location not far from Budapest, Bratislava, and Esztergom just across the Danube, a lagging transport infrastructure has long sustained the area's poor accessibility. Most importantly from the perspective of material livelihood, due to the Slovak side's decades-long low economic performance and high unemployment several thousands have been commuting to work onto the Hungarian side on a daily basis, which is unparalleled along the remaining sections of the long Slovak–Hungarian border (KSH 2015a, 18). Adding to this for instance the pupils and students attending schools and college in Hungary, one can understand there is some concern on the Slovakian side that the since 2007 completely open border has strengthened the migration of young and active people in their region, contributing to a partial weakening position of the Hungarian community in Slovakia. Yet increased contacts with the Hungarian side serve to strengthen the Slovak side, too, where local citizens now have far more opportunities in their own vicinity and can thus avoid long-term and far-distance migration so characteristic of the central and eastern parts of the Slovak–Hungarian borderland. Whereas the side effect of certain types of jobs disappearing related to the border's opening has been noted in other regions as well, such as between Portugal and Spain (Sidaway 2002; Amante 2013), their number pale into insignificance when compared to the thousands of new employment opportunities that are now being taken advantage of.

The *policy activities of multiple levels of government* have also played a key role in facilitating integration. In the overall improvement of Slovak–Hungarian bilateral relations over the past two decades, the single most important element has been the presence of will to rebuild old bridges over the Danube and Ipoly/Ipel', which has been dependent

on the commitment of the national administrations. The reconstruction of the Mária Valéria Bridge over the Danube in 2001 turned out to be a crucial first step for the region, setting in motion a wide range of cross-border flows, and followed by a number of further bridges reconstructed on the Ipoly/Ipel'. This can be contrasted to the story of non-cooperation along the Portuguese–Spanish border, where the ruined and unpassable bridge at Ajuda is sometimes seen as a metaphor for the wider trajectory of Portuguese–Spanish bilateral relations (Sidaway 2001, 761–762).

At the same time, “the bridge” may not have been rebuilt without the *local cross-border political clout* in Esztergom and Štúrovo that already emerged in the last decade of state socialist rule. Similarly, the fact that this area came to form the first EGTC along the border (and the second one in Europe), and still is one of the most efficient such organizations, is telling. In its occasional involvement of Polish partners in common activities, Ister-Granum can in a way be compared with for instance Euroregion Pomerania along the German–Polish border, where Swedish partners have been acting as a kind of intermediators between the two adjacent countries (Balogh 2014, 31). Yet while a dilemma between nature preservation and economic development is similarly present in Ister-Granum, this has not hampered economic and infrastructural investments to the extent it has in for instance German–Polish euroregions (cf. Balogh 2014, 33).

A particularly significant dimension behind the integration of the Štúrovo–Esztergom borderland is its *local cross-border culture*. There are strong similarities in the language, ethnicity, and culture on the two sides, not least in the form of a trans-border Hungarian but also Slovak identity. While the presence of ethno-national minorities spanning the border has not necessarily resulted in increased cross-border interactions in a number of cases, like between Denmark and Germany (Klatt 2006) or Spain and Portugal (Sidaway 2001), it has proven to be a key element in our study area. This shows some parallels to Bulgarian border regions with significant Turkish minorities, where “[e]fforts to create any kind of defense against the economic crisis ... have forced residents of peripheral regions to draw on whatever cultural resources are at their disposal and deepen them wherever possible” (Begg and Pickles 1998, 139). As in Ister-Granum, the rise of cross-border ethnic entrepreneurial networks in the Bulgarian–Turkish borderland has partly alleviated economic difficulties (Smith 2000, 154). The Hungarian side needs and generally welcomes the increased presence of people from the Slovakian side. Yet if our interviewees as well as a recent large study on Slovak public attitudes (Podstupka 2015) are representative, it is clear that occasional othering attitudes among members of both groups to some extent keep hampering inter-ethnic and thus inter-regional relations, not least within (southern) Slovakia. In a few cited spatial development reports one can notice some patterns that could potentially to a certain degree be interpreted as a partial neglect of the Hungarian-inhabited regions by investors and development policy in Slovakia, but we found no evidence to support the assumption of some of our respondents that this would be a conscious strategy. It is at least equally likely that such utterances are also made as a means of conducting identity politics, which is a common and self-legitimizing strategy by politicians and other actors representing ethnic groups (Calhoun 1994). Hence, our analysis is more in line with Smith’s (2000, 173) finding that “regional decline has not been the explicit result of discriminatory policies ... but has been associated with the historical pathways that these regions have taken through branch plant industrialization and state-run agriculture.”

In conclusion, the borderland around Štúrovo–Esztergom has been integrating in a multitude of ways to a degree unseen along the remaining parts of the Slovak–Hungarian borderland. This also stands in contrast to many other border regions in Europe, where the opening of the border has not led to increasing cross-border integration (Paasi and Prokkola 2008; Donnan 2010; Brym 2011). Neither has in our case an increasing cross-border integration coincided with decreasing cross-border mobility (cf. Spierings and van der Velde 2008). Instead, the combination of market forces, policy activities of multiple levels of government, and the local cross-border political clout and culture all point to a thorough integration of the two sides. Needless to say, this development is still vulnerable to any changes affecting the openness of the state border.

Endnotes

1. The EGTC is a legal and governance tool established in 2006, conceived as a substantial upgrade for multi-level governance and “beyond-the-border” cooperation. According to Spinaci and Vara-Arribas (2009, 5), these Groupings are truly new governance “contracts” of multilevel cross-border cooperation, which can become creative engines for local development and deeper European integration.
2. Such plants were during late socialism in Czechoslovakia “integrated into the economic space of core enterprises in core regions, and many developed the characteristics common to branch plant firms – limited managerial autonomy, non-existent research and development activity, subcomponent production for core plants, and limited technological development” (Smith 2000, 170–172).
3. The agreement was signed in the late 1980s, but Hungary withdrew in the early 1990s due to heavy country-wide environmental protests, with Slovakia nonetheless unilaterally completing the plant at Gabčíkovo.
4. The whole of Ister-Granum EGTC has altogether approx. 170,000 inhabitants (Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 17). 78% of those Farkas (2016, 41) surveyed in 2014 had their residence on the territory of the cross-border region.
5. Interestingly enough, according to an interviewee such an arrangement already existed in the interwar years, otherwise a period widely associated with national protectionism.
6. Euroregions can be defined as “small-scale groupings of contiguous public authorities across one or more nation-state borders and can be referred to as ‘micro-CBRs’ [i.e. micro-cross border regions] (Perkmann 2007, 861).
7. Only Arrabona EGTC was ranked higher but this entity hosts a significantly larger population, over half of which living in the city of Győr alone (Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 41). Nevertheless, most cross-border movements do not take place around Győr but form the already mentioned cross-border residential mobility between Bratislava and a small number of villages in Hungary (cf. Hardi 2012; KSH 2015a, 19).
8. In Central and Eastern Europe, national identity largely follows the principle of *ius sanguinis* more than that of *ius soli*, thus it is based more on ethnicity than on citizenship (cf. Lundén 2014, 65).
9. Bordering implies “the continuous (search for the) legitimization and justification of the location and demarcation of a border, which is seen as a manifestation of one’s own claimed, distinct, and exclusive territory/identity/sovereignty” (van Houtum 2010, 959). Othering then implies the making of others, and “the production of categorical difference between ours and theirs, here and there, and natives versus non-natives” (van Houtum 2010, 960).
10. This approach can be seen as a strategy observed in other multi-ethnic areas, where members of different ethnic communities cope with each other in everyday life by avoiding controversial issues (cf. Brubaker et al. 2006).

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