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Explaining coverage: why local governments in Central Europe do or do not join Euroregions?

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ABSTRACT

It has been extensively discussed whether Euroregions – here defined as formalized cooperation initiatives between sub-national authorities, often including private and non-profit actors, located close to a border in two or more countries – constitute an example of newly emerging governance structures at the local level. As the number of these initiatives have grown rapidly in the last decades, discussions around what may influence their chances for long-term viability and institutionalization have intensified. The paper addresses one dimension of institutional success, the ability of Euroregions to attract local governments (understood as the municipalities comprising the lowest level of state administration) in the area where they are operating. Building on the various explanatory factors derived from the literature, the main argument is that while normative incentives and obstacles on all political levels matter for the willingness of local governments to engage in international and/or cross-border relations, the extent to which regional cross-border initiatives can rally support among local governments on the territory they seek to represent is mainly dependent on local interests in combination with the existing administrative and personal networks among local governments. The analysis is performed on two levels. First, the paper brings new empirical data to demonstrate that the degree of willingness of local governments to join these institutions varies greatly across NUTS 3 regions in four countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A statistical correlation is established between local government involvement and the amount of funding from previous EU support programs for cross-border cooperation. However, as the several outlier cases indicate, there is a more complex interaction between other facilitating and hindering factors. Second, since most of these suggested variables do not vary within a regional unit and hence would not explain the variance of local government involvement within a single region, the paper also tries to address this aspect and brings empirical data through a case-study performed in the Komárom-Esztergom county in Hungary. In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of a randomly selected sample of local governments, including an equal share of those that have and have not joined the three overlapping Euroregions existing in this region. The variables that are usually put forward to explain cross-border cooperation (financial incentives, socio-economic pressure to overcome obstacles for economic development or reduce costs for service provision, cultural proximity, externally induced ideational support for European integration, etc.) are assessed by local representatives and set against the local context of other conditions determining decisions. The findings of the paper have immediate policy-relevance for the public and non-governmental organizations seeking to support cross-border initiatives.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades formalized cooperation initiatives between sub-national authorities in adjacent European countries have transformed from a relatively rare phenomenon mainly associated with a few well-known areas (Basel, the Dutch-German border, some Scandinavian examples) to a virtually omnipresent institution. Including both larger working communities and micro-regions (Perkmann, 2003), there are currently about 190 such initiatives¹. Much of the growth is due to a process of institutional diffusion and transfer from the 'West' to the 'East' in the decade following the collapse of the communist bloc, although the trend encompasses Western and Southern Europe as well.

While this increased number is easily observable, the interpretation of what this stands for is contested. Do these Euroregions – here defined as formalized cooperation initiatives between sub-national authorities, often including private and non-profit actors, located close to a border in two or more countries – constitute an example of newly emerging governance structures at the local level? In a debate with certain normative overtones, some authors have argued that this is the case (Leresche and Saez, 2002), while others state that “cross-border areas are not ‘governed’ in a conventional, territorial sense” (Perkmann and Sum, 2002:15) or emphasize the rather marginalized role of these organizations (Kramsch, 2002; O’Dowd 2003). At the same time, discussions around what may influence their chances for long-term viability and institutionalization have intensified. This discussion is of special importance for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), with the highest number of new, and hence vulnerable, cross-border cooperation institutions. The overall objective of the paper is to synthesize various factors that have been suggested in the literature into one comprehensive theoretical framework and assess the relative weight of these factors in CEE. The focus is on one dimension of institutional success, the ability of Euroregions to attract local governments in the area where they operate. While the cohesion of a cross-border region in terms of membership in the Euroregion may be unproblematic in many places of Western Europe, this seems to be less so in CEE which has seen many cases of overlapping or even competing Euroregions. In spite of the rich academic literature on boundaries (e.g. Rumley and Minghi, 1991; Paasi, 1999 and 2005; Kolossov, 2006; Newman, 2003; Jessop 2002), little has been said on what defines the limits of a cross-border region in comparison with the amount of effort devoted to discussing the constructed nature of national borders.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section two, we present a refined version of Medve-Bálint’s (2008) typology of incentives and obstacles to cross-border cooperation, drawing on the works of Gabbe and von Malchus (2008), Greta (2008), Johnson (2009), Novotny (2006) and Osekowski (2000). In section three we discuss its relevance for the current enquiry by mapping

¹ Estimation based on merging the records of the Association of European Border Regions with the listings of Perkmann (2003) and Deas and Lord (2006).

the membership of local governments in Euroregions in four CEE countries, (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) commonly referred to as the Visegrad group or V4. We demonstrate that the greatly varying membership rates cannot be explained by the geographical size of the border regions neither by differences in external influences, such as the availability of transnational funding for cross-border co-operation. Since the external factors and most of the local factors included in the theoretical framework do not vary within a border zone and hence would not explain the variance of local government involvement, the paper also tries to address this aspect and brings empirical data through a case-study performed in the Komárom-Esztergom county in Hungary. In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of a randomly selected sample of local governments, including an equal share of those that have and have not joined the three overlapping Euroregions existing in this region. In the final analysis, we argue that while normative incentives and obstacles on all political levels matter for the willingness of local governments to engage in international and/or cross-border relations, the extent to which regional cross-border initiatives can rally support among local governments on the territory they seek to represent is mainly dependent on local interest or disinterest towards engaging in cross-border co-operation in combination the existing administrative and personal networks among local governments.

While the analysis is based on CEE and includes contextual variables, the findings may be transferable to other parts of Europe.

2. A typology of incentives and obstacles of cross-border co-operations

The membership of a Euroregion defines the geographical coverage of the cross-border region. However, the delimitation of 'border regions' is even more elusive than those of domestic regions or nation-states, since they lack recent administrative institutionalization that tend to enforce socially constructed perceptions of geographic, demographic, cultural or even political cohesion.

In those cross-border areas that have only lately been opened up to organized cultural and best-practice exchanges, as well as joint policy-making for enhanced service provision and economic competitiveness, local governments cannot be expected to join Euroregions by default. Instead, their willingness to join may show significant variation. In other words, there is a broad range of potential incentives and obstacles that may jointly determine the extent of territorial coverage that Euroregions may reach. In turn, the external (geographical) and internal (organizational) cohesion of the Euroregional network may be a crucial factor for successful and

meaningful local cross-border cooperation. For this reason it is highly relevant to discuss how the complex interaction of incentives and obstacles may determine local government participation in these co-operation initiatives.

The many potential goals of Euroregions can be divided into two main categories. On the one hand they try to enhance social cohesion while on the other hand they also aim at fostering economic development. Euroregions generally seek to contribute to these by simultaneously promoting cross-border cultural exchange and cross-border economic integration. While the cultural objective is related to different normative arguments for cross-border co-operation that members of a Euroregion may subscribe to, the materialism of the economic domain would relate to instrumental interests of the members.

In principle, behaviour in general and decision on joining the cross-border co-operation in particular can be based on a goal-oriented, utility-maximizing logic, which can be broadly described as instrumental, or it can be norms-based, when certain social expectations and norms are internalized and followed in practice (Risse, 2000). This differentiation between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1989) can be applied to cross-border cooperation, whereby a distinction is made between normative and instrumental incentives reflected in the cultural and economic spheres of activity. In other words, local governments may formulate their expectations towards cross-border initiatives along instrumental and normative lines: they may expect to realize material benefits arising from the co-operation or they may identify with a certain norms-based mission of cross-border cultural exchange. Nonetheless, both types of motivations can be present simultaneously.

Besides distinguishing between normative and instrumental incentives, factors that facilitate the formation of Euroregions also have a territorial aspect. There are incentives that are present or generated locally, within the border zone; while there are those that are externally created or determined as they either have a transnational origin or come from the central government.

The discussion has so far revolved around the incentives to cross-border co-operation. However, the same typology can be adapted to define the obstacles: there are instrumental as well as normative hurdles to co-operation and these may be rooted locally or have an origin that goes beyond the regional level. With this typology we rely on the one offered by Medve-Bálint (2008), although we apply it with some modifications based on the works of Gabbe and von Malchus (2008), Greta (2008), Johnson (2009), Novotny (2006) and Osekowski (2000), who discuss various factors that have contributed to the emergence of Euroregions, mostly within the Central European context.

Figure 1 summarizes incentives that may play a role in the decision of local governments about joining Euroregions. Although it is specifically designed for conditions in Central and Eastern Europe, the basic structure is valid for other parts of the continent as well. The local instrumental

incentives mainly refer to environmental or economic problems such as the underdevelopment of the border zone, which might be possible to cope with in a more efficient way if efforts and resources are joined together within and across the border. The local normative incentives partly pertain to such legacies that are specific to the historical development of the borderland: in many cases they arise from the fact that the border was created after such historical events that separated territories previously belonging together. In Central Europe, however, there is another, more recent aspect, which gained its salience in the context of European integration: after decades of isolation from Western Europe by the Iron Curtain, the transformation from communism to democracy and the integration of the post-communist countries to the European Union triggered a wide-ranging sentiment of “return to Europe”. This also involved the adoption or the imitation of “European” norms and rules to differing degrees, local cross-border co-operations being one of them.

Incentives for local cross-border co-operation	Instrumental	Normative
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> need to overcome economic decline attract investments common environmental problems more efficient use of local resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> participating in European integration (“return to Europe”) strong historical socio-cultural and economic ties distinct regional identity common ethnic background
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> availability of transnational funds (PHARE CBC, INTERREG) availability of national financial support established legal framework (governmental ratification of the Madrid Convention²; bilateral treaties) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advocacy work of transnational organizations (AEBR³, Committee of Regions, European Commission) learning from best practices or models of other cross-border initiatives supportive policy of the central government

Figure 1. Incentives for local cross-border cooperation

² European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Authorities or Communities’ also referred to as the ‘Madrid Convention’ adopted by the Council of Europe in Madrid, 1980. The document was the first to establish the international legal background of sub-national cross-border co-operation. (Council of Europe Treaty Office)

³ Association of European Border Regions

One of the most important external, instrumental incentives is also the product of European integration: in the mid-1990s the European Union committed itself to extend its internal support scheme for cross-border co-operation to the border zones of the then candidate countries and launched the PHARE CBC program (EC, 1994). After the candidates joined the EU in 2004, this program was replaced by the INTERREG framework. National financial support for cross-border co-operation and national legislation setting the legal background for these organizations are other external, instrumental incentives. Finally, transnational organizations (such as the Association of European Border Regions), other Euroregions and the national governments may all offer external, normative incentives in several forms ranging from a mere rhetorical support to concrete policy recommendations and the promotion of the exchange of best practices.

The next table lists factors functioning as impediments for cross-border co-operation. Local instrumental hurdles arise from financial constraints as well as the lack of know-how and management skills, but at the same time local conflicts of interest about the agenda of co-operation and cross-border language barriers also belong to this category. Local normative obstacles mirror the local normative incentives to a great extent. Essentially, they are the two sides of the same coin: whether historical legacies become assets or threats depend on how they are interpreted at the local level.

External instrumental obstacles may arise from insufficient or inappropriate external funding opportunities but a missing legal background and the lack of supportive governmental agreements may also pose obstacles to cross-border initiatives. The incompatible political-administrative structures, which are often the case in a cross-border perspective, may also prove difficult to overcome. Lastly, we consider those factors as external normative obstacles that emerge at the governmental level but their effect trickle down to the local level and render the institutionalization of cross-border co-operation more complicated. Conflictual relationship between the central governments or general governmental objection to local cross-border initiatives belong to this category.

Obstacles to local cross-border co-operation	Instrumental	Normative
Local	fierce competition for resources lack of sufficient own funds lack of know-how and management skills conflicting project ideas language barriers	historical tensions, conflicts (border as symbol of identity and distinction) existing stereotypes and prejudice towards the population across the border fear of competition posed by the other side (labour market, real estate market)
External (national or transnational)	lack of established legal framework for cross-border co-operations inappropriate external financial resources incompatible political-administrative structures lack of supportive bilateral governmental agreements	unsupportive policies of the central government conflict or tension at the governmental level between the neighbouring countries

Figure 2: Obstacles for local cross-border cooperation

3. Euroregions in Central and Eastern Europe

Borders usually widen the perception of distance between locations across the border thereby triggering their peripheralization (Perkmann and Sum, 2002). In Central and Eastern Europe this used to be a remarkably strong mechanism due to the decades preceding 1989, when borders towards the “West” were impermeable barriers to cross-border contacts while local cross-border co-operation was very limited even within the communist bloc (Kennard, 2004; Turnock, 2002). As a consequence, most Central and Eastern European border areas have become economically marginalized and underdeveloped (Böhm, 1995; Mezei, 2004; Turnock, 2002). Besides the economic decline that borders induced in this region after WWII, in many cases they also cut

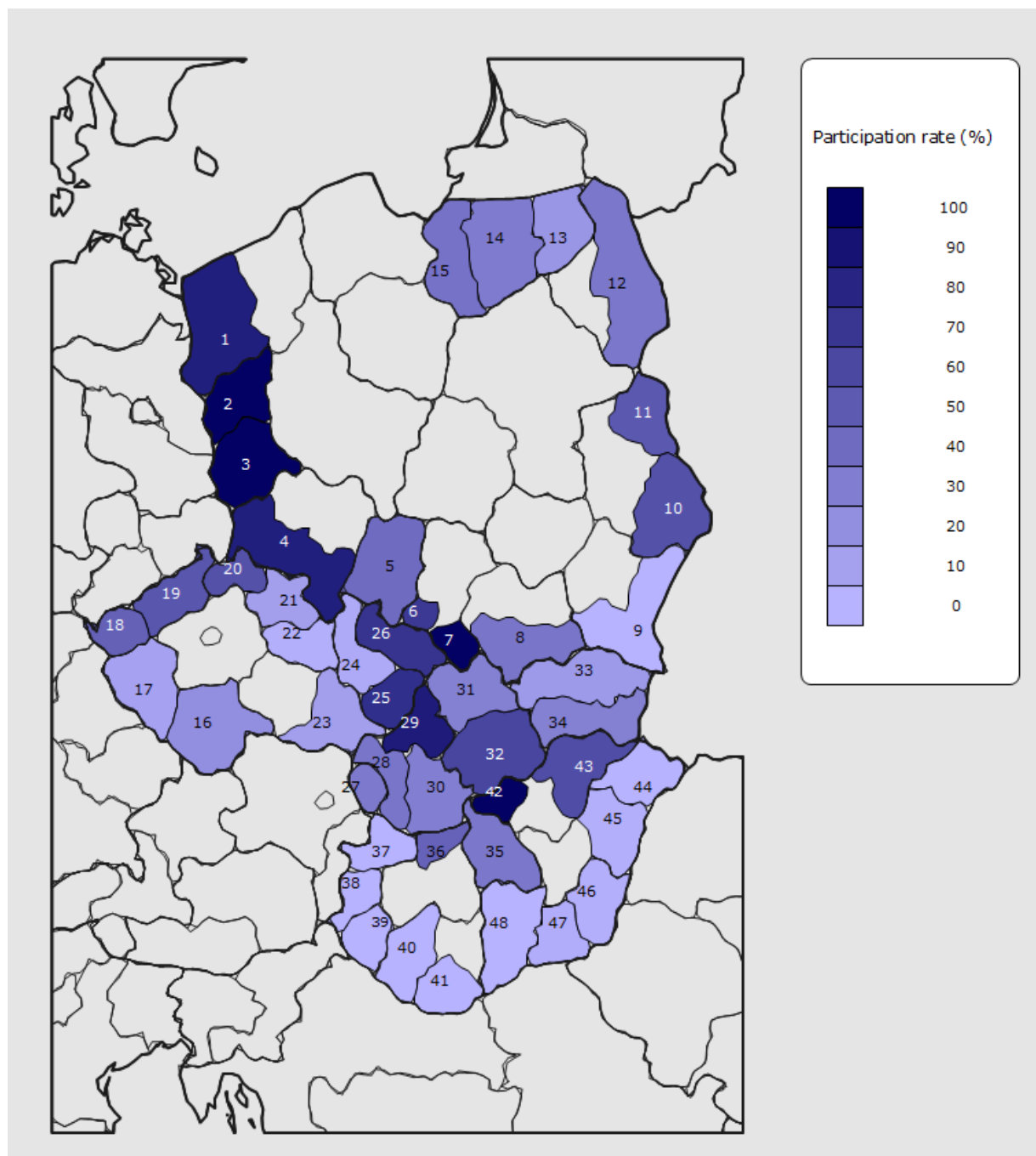
through ethnic, economic and geographic entities bringing an abrupt end to centuries old socio-economic relationships. The frequent changes of state borders in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century made them contested frontiers heavily burdened with conflicts (Hardi, 2005; Van Houtum and Scott, 2005). This was further complicated by the ethnic cleansing through which millions of people were driven from their homes in the pursuit of a 'one people one country' principle that was deemed to fail (Eriksonas, 2006). This massive forced cross-border resettlement of a sizeable Polish, German, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Ukrainian population after WWII further aggravated already existing ethnic tensions and reinforced several fears and stereotypes that posed a cognitive block towards cross-border relationships (Gorzalak, 2006; Mezei, 2004). In short, the opening up of borders after the change of regime was a near-perfect example of the classical 'policy window' (Kingdon, 1984) allowing for the re-institutionalization of cross-border cooperation.

The presumably strong presence of both incentives and obstacles to establishing institutionalized cross-border contacts in Central Europe makes this region therefore an ideal case to study in terms of local governmental participation in Euroregions. This paper focuses on those Euroregions that involve the land border zones of Visegrad countries (V4). This choice is motivated by the fact that they inherited rather similar institutional legacies from the communist regime (Bohle and Greskovits, 2007) and throughout the period of transition transnational organizations like the European Union treated them as a homogeneous group. In this sense, these countries were exposed to rather similar transnational influences.

Soon after the regime change, Euroregional initiatives began to penetrate the border zones of the V4 and by the turn of the millennium most border areas have been co-opted by them. However, Euroregions show a great variety and diversity in terms of the degree of institutionalization, internal cohesion and geographical coverage as well. As mapped out in Figure 3, participation rate of local governments show a pattern of variation on two levels. First, there are differences across border zones, defined here as the NUTS 3 regions along a single national border. Second, within border zones at the regional level⁴ we also find high degrees of variation. These are the 'facts on the ground' leading up to the questions driving the research: why do we observe variation in local government participation in Euroregions between different border zones, furthermore, why is there cross-regional variation in membership within a single border area?

⁴ We consider a single border an area comprising NUTS 3 regions separating two neighbouring countries. The regional level pertains to the NUTS 3 land border regions of the Visegrad countries. NUTS is the statistical nomenclature of territorial units (comprises 5 different levels) of the European Union developed by the EUROSTAT in the 1980s with the purpose of collecting comparable statistical data. In many countries NUTS 3 regions also bear administrative functions. This is the case in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, while in Poland they only serve statistical purposes.

Figure 3: Local governmental participation rate in Euroregions in the NUTS 3 level land border regions of the Visegrad countries as of November 2008



1	Szczeciński	13	Elcki	25	Zlínský	37	Győr-Moson-Sopron
2	Gorzowski	14	Olsztyński	26	Moravskoslezský	38	Vas
3	Zielonogórski	15	Elbląski	27	Bratislavský	39	Zala
4	Jeleniogórsko-wałbrzyski	16	Jihočeský	28	Trnavský	40	Somogy
5	Opolski	17	Plzeňský	29	Trenčianský	41	Baranya
6	Rybnicko-jastrzębski	18	Karlovarský	30	Nitrianský	42	Nógrád
7	Bielsko-bialski	19	Ústecký	31	Žilinský	43	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén
8	Nowosądecki	20	Liberecký	32	Banskobystrický	44	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg
9	Krośnieńsko-przemyski	21	Královéhradecký	33	Prešovský	45	Hajdú-Bihar
10	Chełmsko-zamojski	22	Pardubický	34	Košický	46	Csongrád
11	Białskopodlaski	23	Jihomoravský	35	Pest	47	Békés
12	Białostocko-suwalski	24	Olomoucký	36	Komárom-Esztergom	48	Bács-Kiskun

source: authors' editing. For Poland the system of 45 NUTS 3 regions were used that existed before reorganization into 66 NUTS 3 regions effective from January 2008.

We now turn to the typology developed in the previous section, and examine the variation in the incentives and obstacles present at the national borders. First we begin with the external incentives, among which the financial support schemes of the European Union, as external instrumental incentives have played a crucial role. According to Perkmann (2002), the availability of these funds contributed to a great extent to the appearance of Euroregions in Central Europe while others emphasize that this was indeed the goal since “the EU has virtually no way of compelling regionalism other than financial incentives” (Johnson, 2009: 186). Through the PHARE Cross Border Cooperation (from 1994 to 2004) and later the INTERREG program the EU intended to trigger institutionalized cross-border co-operation along the borders of the former candidates (EC 1994; EC 1998). However, the availability and distribution of funds allocated for this purpose have been highly and persistently uneven across border zones, as demonstrated by Medve-Bálint (2008). The following table estimates the relationship between local government participation rate in Euroregions in the border zones of the V4 and the total EU funds allocated for them between 1994 and 2006.⁵

border zone	number of local governments	local governments in Euroregions as of November 2008	total allocated EU funds in € (1994-2006)	total allocated EU funds available per local government in €	local governmental participation rate in Euroregions (%)
Poland					
Polish – German	211	193	729 011 533	3 461 593	92
Polish – Czech	157	118	98 057 032	624 965	75
Polish – Slovak	150	57	38 083 021	254 736	38
Polish - non-EU members*	360	127	33 146 334	92 073	35
Czech Republic					
Czech – German	1219	504	332 572 977	272 802	41
Czech – Austrian	949	117	95 613 961	100 719	12
Czech – Polish	1644	359	73 322 248	44 608	22
Czech – Slovak	586	289	26 393 842	45 049	49
Slovakia					
Slovak – Austrian	121	74	49 788 374	412 155	61
Slovak – Hungarian	1308	579	27 193 713	20 790	44
Slovak – non-EU members*	154	2	7 702 678	50 050	1
Slovak – Czech	478	314	17 851 978	37 356	66
Slovak – Polish	806	149	27 071 104	33 570	18

⁵ Since several NUTS 3 regions have borders with multiple countries, their local governments were divided up and assigned to the corresponding border zones proportionally to the length of each border. For this reason the above figure gives a close estimate only. If local governments in these NUTS 3 regions were members of Euroregions representing multiple countries, they were assigned to each corresponding border zone. Figures on the distribution of PHARE CBC funds are available at the border zone level (PHARE Annual Reports 1995-2005). However, the distribution of INTERREG funds between 2004-2006 is available at the NUTS 3 level only (SWECO 2008), therefore in case of a NUTS 3 region bordering multiple countries the INTERREG funds for this region were assigned to each of the corresponding border zones similarly to the calculation of local governmental membership in multicountry Euroregions.

Hungary					
Hungarian – Austrian	309	3	100 284 242	325 070	1
Hungarian – Slovak	848	442	23 843 359	28 134	52
Hungarian – Romanian	420	15	54 202 225	129 207	4
Hungarian – Slovenian	129	2	17 025 515	131 981	2
Hungarian – non-EU members*	828	11	7 605 369	9191	1

* only INTERREG funds between 2004 and 2006 as these border zones were not eligible for the PHARE CBC program
source of data: authors' calculation based on own data, Medve-Bálint (2008) and SWECO (2008)

The correlation coefficient between total EU funds available per local governments and their participation rate in Euroregions is reasonably high ($r = 0.56$) and statistically significant ($p = 0.05$). Thus the more EU funds allocated for cross-border co-operation, the higher the participation rate in Euroregions. Although this seems to be the general tendency, there are many outliers to this rule, which highlights the influence of other key incentives (and obstacles) apart from the transnational financial resources.

The Polish-German border stands out from the other border zones in terms of participation rates of local governments in Euroregions. Although by far the vast majority of transnational funds have been allocated to this area, all the Euroregions in this zone had been established by 1995, (Medve-Bálint, 2008) the funds therefore fell on fertile ground: local cross-border co-operation had been already institutionalized. Considering it as a way of quick reintegration to Europe (Malendowski and Szczepaniak, 2000), the Polish government treated the establishing of cross-border contacts as a priority (Szczepaniak, 2000). However, these instrumental and normative external incentives ran parallel to the fact that this border has been highly burdened with historical conflicts, which is reflected in the locally still present and deeply rooted fears and stereotypes towards people across the border (Yoder, 2003). Moreover, the incompatible political-administrative structures, language barriers, and the different profile of regional economies have rendered co-operation more difficult (Bertram, 1998; Kocwin, 2000; Osekowski 2000). This often caused that the rather weak Polish local governments (comparing their powers to the German side) "have been relegated to a position of junior partners in German-Polish relations" (Kepka, 2004: 173). In sum, at this border zone both instrumental and normative external incentives have been strongly present while external obstacles were limited. At the local level though one finds a complex mix of both local incentives and obstacles. This may also explain why Polish-German Euroregions have primarily been top-down, elite-driven projects (Adamczuk, 2000).

The Hungarian-Romanian and the Hungarian-Slovakian border zones pose a counter-example to the Polish-German case. These borders have also been contested in the 20th century as both the current Slovak and Romanian territories adjacent to the Hungarian border belonged to Hungary before WWI and many ethnic Hungarians still live in those areas. However, unlike in the case of the Polish-German border, substantial amount of transnational funds were not targeted to

these border zones until very recently. In addition, significant external obstacles to cross-border co-operation were present at the governmental level in the 1990s as both the Slovak and the Romanian central governments blocked attempts of institutionalized local cross-border co-operation (Krivy, 1997; Kruppa, 2003) due to fears from potential Hungarian secessionist movements (Hardi and Mezei, 2003). Euroregions appeared at these borders only towards the end of the 1990s and with highly differing regional participation rates.

The Polish-Czech and Polish-Slovak borders also benefited relatively little from transnational funds and other significant external incentives were not present there either, although external obstacles also did not impede the establishing of cross-border ties. Even though these borders show an overall high level of local government participation in Euroregions, cross-regional variation in membership within each border zone is also significant. This suggests that varying local incentives and obstacles have determined local governmental involvement. Finally, the Czech-Slovak border is a rather peculiar case since this is the newest border of all as it exists only since 1993. External funding to this area has been very limited but it still demonstrates one of the highest local government participation rates in Euroregions within the V4. It goes without saying that local incentives to co-operate were also among the highest here and the already established pre-1993 linkages have played a crucial role in the institutionalization of cross-border contacts.

The above examples imply that the framework introduced in the previous section offers a useful guide to the many variables affecting cross-border co-operation, but it cannot by itself explain variation in local government involvement in Euroregions. Moreover, many of the suggested factors do not vary within border areas, making the second question (why do local governmental participation rates in Euroregions vary within a single border area) more puzzling. Based on the discussion so far, our expectation is that the relative weight of these factors, or the balance between the various local and external incentives and obstacles, will explain the variation, and that micro-level research is fundamental for arriving at an answer. This is why a case-study at the regional level should clarify how these factors actually influence the decision of local governments in joining Euroregions. In the next section, we introduce the Hungarian county of Komárom-Esztergom as an appropriate case for the micro-level research.

4. The case of Komárom-Esztergom, Hungary: a small region with historical cross-border links and a multifaceted track record of institution-building

There is an abundance of micro-level case studies of Euroregions that usually focus on 'key stakeholders' such as representatives of the organizations themselves, regional administrative and/or political bodies and major urban centres. Unlike these works, we argue that it is necessary to study a broader scope of local actors in order to gain a better insight into the mechanisms driving cross-border cooperation at the local level. What is to be gained by joining a Euroregion as

opposed to non-engagement or fostering bilateral contacts such as village partnership, school cooperation or civil society exchanges? Seeking to answer this question, but also to fill in gap in the literature in terms of available data sets, we conducted an in-depth study of one specific region bordering a neighbouring country, collecting data both on local governments that are members of Euroregions and those which are not.

The Hungarian NUTS 3-level county of Komárom-Esztergom was selected because its relatively high local governmental participation rate in Euroregions (55%) was still low enough to offer considerable variation on the dependent variable (membership in Euroregions). There were also several other reasons speaking in its favour. In larger regions, it could be argued that a main reason behind membership would be distance to the border. This factor is controlled for by selecting Komárom-Esztergom, since all local governments are located less than 55 km from the Slovak border. The case also offers an abundance of data, since there are currently three Euroregions and one in the making within its territory. Finally, the large portion of ethnic Hungarians living across the border in Slovakia, and the small pockets of historical minorities (Slovaks, Germans) living in Komárom-Esztergom enable us to examine the 'ethnic card' that is present at so many of the CEE borders.

Komárom-Esztergom is situated along the Danube on the north-west border to Slovakia. The county is divided into 76 local governments and seven micro-regions. The micro-regions were created in the 1990s for developmental purposes and upon the realization that the local governments are small when it comes to providing many services expected in a modern welfare state. The county also belongs to the larger NUTS 2 region of Central Transdanubia. Given the substantial inflow of foreign investments, Komárom-Esztergom has been faring relatively well economically in the 1990s and 2000s. However, the county has been hit hard by the financial crisis, with unemployment rising from a low 5.5 % in early 2008 to 9.9 % by the third quarter of 2009 (Hungarian Statistical Office 2010). While the current study focuses on the Hungarian region, it should be mentioned that the bordering Slovak region of Nitra, especially the three districts ('*okres*') adjacent to Hungary, have a slightly different character with fewer urban centers and a regional economy more relying on agricultural production than in Komárom-Esztergom.. Overall, the Slovak district has 350 settlements, out of which 15 have gained town status. The three districts closest to the border have 192 settlements. The major urban center is the city of Nitra in the north, whereas Komárno and Štúrovo are the largest towns right at the Hungarian border.

Before WWI Komárom-Esztergom was part of a larger Hungarian-inhabited area within the territory of 'Great Hungary', which included the current Nitra region as well. Much of this zone today belongs to Slovakia. Hungarians in Komárom-Esztergom still refer to the villages and towns on the other side of the border with their Hungarian names, for instance the Slovak town of Štúrovo is referred to as Párkány, and the villages Zlatná na Ostrove, Sokolce and Marcelová as

Csallóközarányos, Lakszakállas and Marcelháza. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the recently intensified tensions between Slovakia and Hungary regarding the Slovak government's policy towards the Hungarian minority.⁶ Nevertheless, this conflict at the governmental level matches with the theoretical framework's external normative obstacle to cross-border co-operation.

Within Komárom-Esztergom there are also numerous villages that preserved their Slovak character from the past: due to settlement policies during the Habsburg Monarchy many villages of ethnic Slovak population were established in the previous centuries. Currently, nine settlements in the county have a so-called Slovak 'national self-government' (Slovak National Self-government 2010). In our sample the town of Dorog is one of these, although the village of Annavölgy also considers itself a 'Slovak' village without having this body that has been designed for the preservation of ethnic language and cultural heritage. It should be noted, however, that the Slovak minority is largely assimilated and very few use the Slovak language on a daily basis.

By our definition, three Euroregions are operating in the area, the Ister-Granum Euroregion, the Danube Euroregion and the Vág-Duna-Ipoly Euroregion. The latter operates only at regional level and does not have local governments as members. It has therefore not featured in the fieldwork. In addition, one Euroregion is currently in the making, the Pons Danubii Euroregion.

The idea of the Ister-Granum region was conceived in connection with the plans to rebuild the bridge, destroyed during WWII, connecting the city of Esztergom in Hungary with Štúrovo in Slovakia. Three months after the prime ministers of both countries had signed an agreement in 1999 to rebuild the bridge, the mayors of Esztergom and Sturovo agreed to set up a regional cross-border cooperation framework. A declaration of regional co-operation was subsequently signed in 2000 by representatives of the Juzný microregion in Slovakia, and the Esztergom-Nyergesújfalu Microregional Development Association together with the settlements of Tokod and Tokodaltáró in Hungary. The declaration of intent to set up the Ister-Granum Euroregion was signed in 2003 and the first Euroregional assembly gathered in 2004. In 2009 the Euroregion took up the legal personality of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), among the first Euroregions in Europe (Ister-Granum Euroregion 2010). As it is the case with numerous Euroregions, a Latin name was chosen not to give prominence to neither the Hungarian nor the Slovak language. In this case Ister refers to the Danube, and Granum to the Garam river. The Euroregion covers an area of 2,200 km² and has 220,000 inhabitants, which makes it a true micro-region (it is one of the smallest Euroregions operating in Hungary). It has 102 local

⁶ In 2009 the tensions centered around a controversial Slovak language law, that among other things aimed at enforcing increased use of Slovak geographical names. This is an ongoing story with few academic references so far, but see for instance an article in Spectator for a somewhat longer reflection: http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/36140/2/hungary_continues_to_criticise_slovak_language_law.html, accessed September 8, 2009

government members, approximately evenly distributed between the Slovak and the Hungarian side (Eck et al., 2007).

The Danube Euroregion is even smaller with only 60,000 inhabitants settled over 421 km². This Euroregion was founded in 2003, but co-operation dates back to the early 1990s when villages located along the Danube on both sides of the border began to organize annual cultural events called '*Hídverő napok*' ('Bridge building days'). Based on this co-operation, the Danube Euroregion was born in 2003 when the Hungarian local government of Neszmély as leading partner together with the Tata Microregional Development Association from Komárom-Esztergom county and the Slovakian '*Združenie Obcí Priateľ'stva*' or '*Hídverő Társulás*' ('Bridge-Building Association') as partners signed the founding charter (Eck et al., 2007). The Euroregion was subsequently tainted by allegations of corruption towards the mayor of Neszmély who in the end resigned in April 2008 (Neszmély, General Assembly Protocol 2008; Népszava, 2008).

5. Why do local governments join Euroregions? Assessing the relative impact of the different factors

For the study we made a random selection of six local governments that are members in either the Ister-Granum or the Danube Euroregion, and six local governments that are not members in any of these. Interviews were carried out with the mayors of these settlements. The response rate was 100% as all mayors agreed to give an interview. Questions were designed to capture all four dimensions of the theoretical framework (local instrumental, local normative, external instrumental and external normative) and included inquiries about the international agreements the local government has (especially with partner settlements), when and why becoming a member in a Euroregion was considered or reasons for not becoming a member. They were asked to evaluate the significance of various potential policy fields of cross-border cooperation, with which we intended to assess their attitudes, experience and knowledge on how cross-border cooperation can take place in various policy areas. A further inquiry concerned knowledge of and participation in events organized by Euroregions, as well as projects funded by the European Union. The mayors were also asked to assess the levels of trust among the inhabitants towards other local inhabitants and institutions both in the settlement and in the county, and towards similar institutions on the Slovak side.

Among the six local governments that are Euroregion members five are villages (Annayölgy, Dorog, Kocs, Naszály, Süttő and Tokod) and one has a town status (Dorog). Their population ranges from 475 to 7,300. The six non-members (Ács, Bakonyársarkány, Csém, Kerékteleki, Mocsá and Szomor) likewise include one town and five villages. Their number of

inhabitants ranges from 1,000 to 12,600. A problem that emerged during the interviews was that a mayors of one town and one village (Dorog and Naszály) that had been listed as a member insisted that the local government did not participate in any Euroregions, while another mayor claimed to be a member although according to our records the settlement was not (Ács). This information was taken into account in the analysis of the two groups.

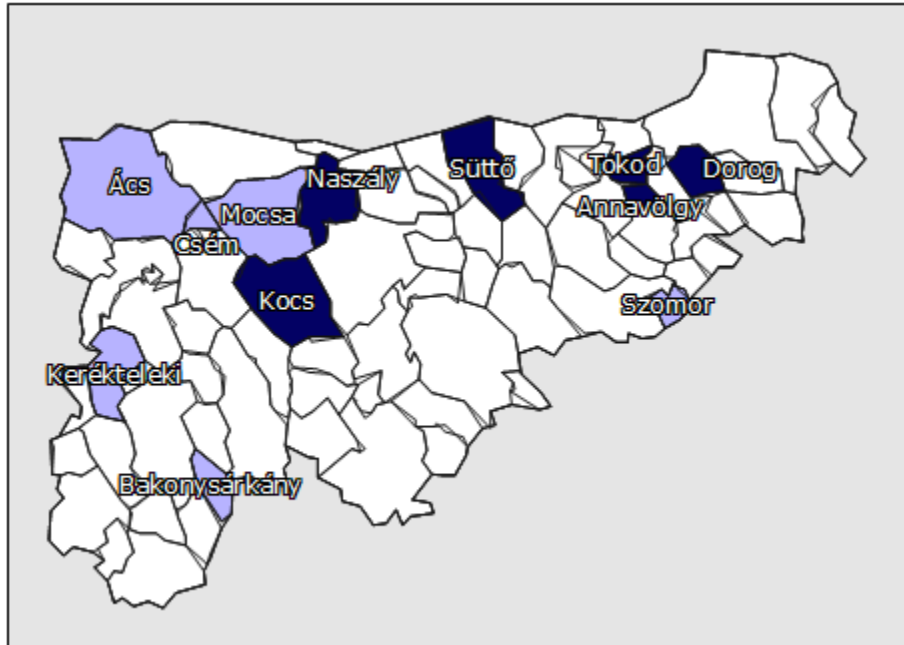


Figure 4: Local governments of Komárom-Esztergom county in the random sample⁷
 source: author's editing

Most of the interviewed mayors were politically independent as they were not affiliated with any political parties. However, many of them openly demonstrated their political preferences.⁸ As can be expected from a random selection, the geographical position of the settlements varied from being situated along the Danube which constitutes the border to Slovakia, to the hilly lands characterizing the part between the Danube and the major highway crossing the county. Surprisingly, settlements south of the highway, which passes the county from East to West at a distance varying from 10 to 20 km from the Slovak border, generally saw themselves as far located from it. A couple of the mayors had been in office without interruptions since the first democratic elections in 1990, when a system of independent local governments were re-institutionalized in Hungary. There were also some mayors who assumed their office for the first time in the previous elections in 2006. Nevertheless, the attitudes towards joining a Euroregion or having other international engagements did not vary with the length of the period spent in office.

⁷ Local governments indicated with dark blue are Euroregion members according to our records, while those in light blue do not participate in Euroregions.

⁸ The interviews took place in March and early April 2010, immediately before the election on April 11 and April 25, which led to a shift in power in the central government.

Several of the villages had been affected by the re-settlement of ethnic population in the aftermath of WWII or were characterized by an ethnic minority culture that could be traced back to the 18th century or earlier. For instance, two villages had a sizeable German minority ('Schwab') until WWII (Bakonysárkány, Szomor), but in one of them virtually the whole German population was expelled immediately after the war. Another village (Annavölgy) had a historic Slovak minority, but surprisingly did not establish any partnership agreements with a Slovak village but only cooperated with other villages of fully ethnic Hungarian population on the Slovak side. Some of the villages also had ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia settled after WWII.

The average road distance from the border between members and non-members did not differ significantly, 17 km for members and 25 km for non-members. However, non-members often expressed that they did not take part in any organized cross-border cooperation activity since they were not located 'close' to the border, or 'at the Danube', although some of these villages were located only about 10 km from the nearest border crossing point which is accessible on an excellent road connection. Mayors of local governments that lied further away from the border (between 30 and 40 km) perceived their settlement as not having any geographical proximity to the border, although they expressed cultural affinity towards their 'ethnic brethren' on the Slovak side.

In terms of the value attributed to the importance or need for co-operation in different policy areas, the similarity between members and non-members was striking. Based on their answers, the need for co-operation around infrastructural, cultural, or environmental issues does not explain why some local governments join a cross-border co-operation and others do not. The only area with some detectable difference in attitudes between mayors of members and non-members was the importance of creating a common regional identity: some more inclination to support this idea could be traced among Euroregion members. Furthermore, mayors of member local governments tended to attribute somewhat higher values to the extent to which people trust people and institutions both on their own side of the border and on the other side, although the differences were marginal and the sample is too small to allow for any statistical inferences. However, the qualitative data support that some higher level of general trust seems to be discerned among members. It is difficult to decide, though, whether this reflects true levels of trust or the mayors' own sense of what is 'appropriate' to say when representing a village that is a member of a Euroregion.

The research found that the value attached to cultural co-operation in order to protect Hungarian heritage and Hungarian ethnic interest was a strong predictor of the inclination to seek international co-operation with ethnic Hungarian villages and towns across the border. However, the same attitude did not predict the inclination to join a Euroregion in spite of the overrepresentation of ethnic Hungarian villages on the Slovak side in both the Danube and Ister-Granum Euroregions.

The economic dimension of co-operation was generally not considered important, neither for joining a Euroregion, nor for having other international contacts, such as partner towns. Overall, the local instrumental incentives could neither explain the inclination to join, nor the willingness to engage in other international co-operation. On the other hand, local instrumental obstacles did serve as explanatory factors for not entering into an institutionalized cross-border co-operation. The mayors often referred to the „lack of sufficient own funds“ and „lack of know-how and management skills“ or language barriers. However, it should be noted that we did not find a link between the economic situation of the village and that of its inhabitants (as declared by the mayor) on the one hand, i.e. the lack of funds, and engagement with a Euroregion on the other hand. Hence, local instrumental obstacles might be used as an 'excuse' or pretext that hide the mere disinterest in establishing cross-border linkages.

As for normative incentives, especially the feeling of ethnic belonging and the perception of historical injustice, they seem strongly to predict the inclination to form international bonds, although less so when it comes to joining, and taking active part, in a Euroregion. Instead, other factors, not commonly discussed in the literature on cross-border cooperation seem to determine local governmental willingness to join Euroregions.

Among those a highly significant role is played by strong actors that capture the process of creating the cross-border network. They seem to determine both the geographical scope and the agenda of co-operation, thus the flow of information among Euroregion members becomes unidirectional. This creates centrum-periphery relations within the organization: small local governments with limited financial resources and human capital are 'peripheric' members of the Euroregion and their benefits arising from the co-operation are also limited. In short, local power relations seem to play a decisive role in the co-operation.

This is reinforced by the finding that domestic administrative borders also seem to matter in the creation of Euroregional networks: the local government that takes the lead and initiates cross-border co-operation is much more likely to attract those local governments as members that are in the same microregion. In other words, already existing local networks, which develop within the confines of a microregion are the primary bases of both the Ister-Granum and Danube Euroregions in Komárom-Esztergom county. This also implies that despite being cross-border organizations, these Euroregions are more oriented to the domestic members and the maintenance of cross-border relations with the Slovak partners remains in the discretion of the 'lead' local governments.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the research suggest that local governmental involvement in Euroregions is strongly determined by local factors and less so by external ones. Local normative incentives,

particularly the weight attributed to the importance of fostering historical socio-cultural ties, especially those pertaining to ethnicity rather than the creation of new links across the border with another ethnic group, featured prominently. However, this disposition can be satisfied by initiating bilateral partnership agreements primarily based on cultural exchange, and hence it serves as an explanatory factor only in combination with other local factors. The personal and administrative networks in which the local government is embedded would constitute the most important of these, a factor that has so far been neglected by the literature.

At the same time, local normative obstacles such as stereotypes, conflicts and tensions did not appear as significant impediments, which is consistent with the finding that the primary driver of co-operation is cultural proximity or similarity. However, when referring to the national level, external normative obstacles, such as the ongoing conflict between the Slovak and the Hungarian governments, were often mentioned as serious hurdles. As one of the mayors expressed this, 'local efforts of establishing cross-border ties may become futile attempts because the central governments can ruin everything'.⁹ The interviewees also confirmed that external normative support from the governmental level could provide a firm background for local cross-border co-operation, in as much as it would set the broad guidelines and strategy to follow.

Surprisingly, neither external instrumental incentives nor obstacles, such as incompatible political-administrative structures at the local governmental level, were mentioned as highly relevant for local governments joining Euroregions. Given that until very recently EU funds for cross-border co-operation have been very limited in Komárom-Esztergom, their expected effect of triggering cross-border networks have not fully realized in this area. However, the mayors also pointed to a paradox concerning the role of transnational funds: although they are expected to generate more cross-border co-operation, funds can only be secured by those who had already established co-operative relationships. In other words, transnational financial assistance for cross-border co-operation may work only in those cases where such co-operative arrangements are already in place. This seems to reinforce the previous finding on the relationship between the availability of external (EU) financial support at the Central European border zones and the participation rate of local governments in Euroregions. While EU funds may strengthen an already existing co-operation (like it has been the case at the Polish-German border), alone they are hardly sufficient for generating sustaining cross-border co-operation. Since at the same time flourishing cross-border organizations may develop even without substantial transnational funding (like along the Czech-Slovak border), EU funds seem to be neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for cross-border co-operation to emerge.

Finally, local instrumental objectives appeared as the most important impediments for co-operation. The lack of sufficient own resources in terms of finance, human capital, know-how and managing skills together with communication problems due to language barriers (in case of co-operating with ethnic Slovak settlements) were all considered as the major hurdles to establishing and maintaining cross-border contacts. This suggests a vicious circle at work: the need for more

⁹ Interview with the mayor of Annavölgy, 9 April 2010

efficient use of local resources, and the need to overcome local economic problems would presumably pose a strong instrumental incentive for co-operation. However, precisely the problems arising from the lack of sufficient own resources prevent local governments from joining their efforts in a cross-border setting. This circularity may be partly attributed to a structural factor: the size of many settlements is so small at the Hungarian side that it is economically not feasible to have their independent local governments being responsible for the provision of a number of public services. Therefore they are overburdened with coping with day-to-day challenges and unable to commit resources for cross-border co-operation, which they anyway consider as not beneficial in economic terms. However, it should be emphasized that the perceived lack of financial and administrative resources did not differ between members and non-members. Moreover, some of those local governments that are better off may also demonstrate little inclination to join cross-border projects. This disinterest reflects the inward-looking attitude of their leaders, which in many cases is not counterbalanced by civic initiatives that are generally rare or weak at the local level.

All things considered, the plethora of cross-border cultural projects of ethnic character at the expense of economic co-operation coupled with closed, exclusive cross-border networks captured by a limited number of leading actors may not allow for the creation of a broader cross-border area and deeper cross-border integration along the Hungarian-Slovak border in the near future. In order for this current situation to change, the local factors have to undergo a fundamental transformation. Since external interventions may have limited impact upon them, change may take longer than expected.

Interviews

Ács: Imre Csöböneyi, 11 March 2010
Annavölgy: József Bánhidi, 9 April 2010
Bakonysárkány: István Weilandits, 8 April 2010
Csém: István Aranyosi, 9 April 2010
Dorog: János Tittmann Dr., 12 April 2010
Kérékteleki: István György, 8 April 2010
Kocs: Jánosné Bódis, 8 April 2010
Mocsa: József Áy, 8 April 2010
Naszály: István Maszlavér, 12 April 2010
Süttő: János Czermann, 16 March 2010
Szomor: György Nagy, 12 April 2010
Tokod: Mihály Pánczél, 11 March 2010

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