

AN ANALYSIS OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BIHOR (RO) – HAJDÚ-BIHAR (H) EUROREGION

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Analyse du développement de l'Eurorégion de Bihor (Roumanie) et Hajdú-Bihar (Hongrie). L'inefficacité et la désintégration de l'ancien système administratif de l'Europe Centrale et de Sud-Est, combinées avec la configuration institutionnelle de l'Union Européenne ont conduit certaines régions, différentes comme structure démographique et développement socio-économique, d'établir des relations de coopération transfrontalière. Dans cette acception, le but de cette étude est fourni par les caractéristiques communes du développement régional et, aussi bien par les provocations communes dues au phénomène de cohésion territoriale, culturelle, sociale, que par les politiques d'environnement menées par les deux proches autorités administratives-territoriales, pour lesquelles la seule séparation qui existe est la frontière. Les pays participants, la Roumanie et la Hongrie, à travers le temps, ont déployé leurs propres plans nationaux de développement. L'intention de ceux impliqués dans le plan de développement régional au niveau de la frontière roumano-hongroise n'est pas de concurrencer les documents nationaux, ni de mêler les procédures de mise en application, mais de les compléter et les améliorer au niveau local, afin que se développe une région efficace et, de plus, se réduisent les différences sociales et économiques existantes dans les deux départements.

AIMS, MATERIALS AND METHODS

The term cross-border cooperation describes the collaboration between two or more adjacent local and regional entities situated in different, but neighbouring, states. These associations can be based on short-term structures, which are usually built for a single purpose, or can be permanent long-term structures, in which case they address various issues. Most of these permanent cross-border associations are named Euroregions. A Euroregion can broadly be defined as follows: "A Euroregion is a transfrontier institution, with or without legal personality, involving public and private participants, which establishes transfrontier relations of a promotional nature between local, regional or national authorities, always with the approval, or under the auspices, of the central government."

This generic definition covers diverse forms of cooperation which differ in terms of actors, organizations and fields of cooperation. Because of these differences, it is difficult to determine what exactly can be called "standard model" of a Euroregion, which makes it necessary to revert to such a broad definition. The level of integration of transfrontier regions varies considerably from case to case, being conditioned by internal factors, such as historical background, geographical and demographic dimensions, as well as the relationship with the central state, on the one hand, and with external factors, on the other hand.

Despite these differences, Euroregions have some characteristics in common which can be summarized as follows:

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At organizational level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involvement of regional and local authorities on both sides of the national border; • cross-border organizations; • bi- or multilateral agreements between the respective national states or informal cooperation agreements between local and regional actors.
Areas of cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • economic, infrastructural and cultural collaboration; • concrete action areas: regional and economic development; transport and traffic; environmental protection; culture and sports; health-care; tourism and leisure; agricultural development; innovation and technological transfer; schools and education; communication, emergency services and disaster prevention.
Working methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elaboration of cross-border development strategies; • exchange of information, coordination of measures and common initiatives; • participation of other local and regional institutions, such as chambers of commerce, or education and research institutions, for developing some programmes or projects.

On the basis of these data, the study makes a SWOT analysis of a border cooperation model initiated in 2002 between the local councils of two adjoining Romanian - Hungarian administrative - territorial units: Bihor County Council (RO) and Hajdú-Bihar Self-government (H).

Using some social and economic data, most of which were obtained from the national statistics centres of both regions, specific development level and economic potential indicators in this area are being discussed (Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristic indicators of the Euroregion's development level

INDICATORS	REGION	COUNTIES		STATES	
		Bihor	Hajdú-Bihar	Romania	Hungary
I. Population, occupancy, unemployment					
Total population	1,142,606	593,606	549,000	21,680,974	9,981,334
Urban population (%)	120	57	63	54.9	36.3
Rural population (%)	80	43	37	45.1	33.7
Migratory balance (%)	12	5	7	7.2	11
Active population per total (%)	90.70	56	34.7	38.8	18
Unemployment balance (on 13.12.2008) (%)	5.8	2.7	3.1	5.9	7.7
II. Economic development					
Foreign direct investments (2008), in mill. euro	24,441	7,069	17,372	21,885	500
Industrial parks	6	1	5	44	200
No. of SME* / 1,000 inhabitants	8,587	2,897	5,690	22	70
Attractiveness level (%)	57	34	23	76	44
III. Infrastructure					
Transport – public roads density (km)	3,758.7	2,247.7	1,511	79,454	116,000
Transport – upgraded public roads (2008), %	59	22	37	26.4	52.3
Drinking water network (%)	83	71	12	61	24
Sewage network (%)	15	5	10	22	37
Education (No. of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, high schools, universities)	2,372	1,001	1,371	11,865	13,000
Health-care (No. of state and private hospitals)	35	17	18	433	179
Tourism – accommodation	121	85	36	4,226	2,527

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Bucharest and Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, Budapest.

* Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.

Looking at these indicators and interpreting them clearly reveals important differences between the economic situation of the two administrative-territorial units, caused by their peripheral position from national centres, highlighting their social and economic characteristics. The intention to redevelop and rethink what type of common actions could be good for the region is welcome. Thus, the economic situation of the Hungarian county is more favourable than that of other counties in Hungary. At the same time, Hajdú-Bihar County is better known due to Debrecen municipality, which is Hungary's second largest city. Bihar County in Romania, a medium-developed one, has attracted the interest of foreign investors. Besides, Oradea, the capital of Bihar County, a second-rank city in Romania's urban hierarchy, pushes the county to the first place among regional centres.

That socio-economic indicators in the Romanian county are lower is indicative of population tendencies. Thus, except for a few settlements located at the foot of mountains and hills, which are heavily losing their population, Bihar County is confronted with population ageing, likely to end up in the gradual loss of population, despite the faster growth of settlements. In the case of the Hungarian county, there is a growing population increase yet not so significant. These minor differences indicate another similarity between the two counties, which could be a good point for mutual relationships, that anyhow have a long-standing tradition. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons for cooperation between both counties that have developed a complex system of cross-border relations in place for many years now. The relations are being stimulated by people on either side of the frontier, moreover so as Romanian and Hungarian ethnics live on both sides of the line.

The starting point of cooperation between those two administrative-territorial units is the Carpathian Euroregion (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 – The Carpathian Euroregion (*source: www.tradecarp.com*).

The Euroregion's great territorial extension (the central position of the two Carpathian axes shaping two distinct areas, one west Carpathian and the other east Carpathian, each with its own functions, particularities and growth targets and a large population that exceeds the total population of some neighbouring countries), made it difficult to function properly so that agreements for a common development of the region itself were facing serious problems, also for the countries involved. As a result, the municipalities located on either side of the Romania – Hungary border decided to create their own structure (Fig. 2), capable to make individual activities and cooperation relations more efficient.

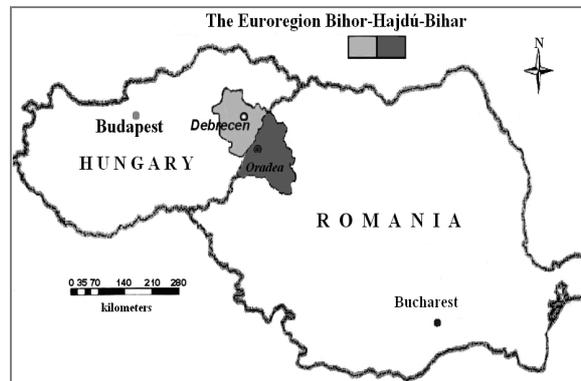


Fig. 2 – The Bihor-Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion (source: Ilieș, 2004, p.154).

Consequently, the new territorial structure is aimed primarily at stimulating new ways of cooperation between these two countries, according to established objectives:

- competitiveness, efficiency and economic growth,
- balanced development and cohesion,
- environmental protection, natural and build-up sites,
- integration.

From 2002 to-date, when the Euroregion came into being, these objectives have been effectively pursued, leading to a balanced development of the locality network infrastructure. Thus, in many localities, public transport systems, as well as the goods and passengers transport, became more economically-efficient and environmentally-friendly. Besides, excessive and uncontrolled urbanization, especially in the two county-seats, Oradea and Debrecen, could be avoided; in the rural area, the distribution of farms, by size and production type, allowed for more efficient large-scale outputs.

Solving some of these issues has led and will further lead to reducing nationalist tensions between the two neighbouring counties, at both local and regional levels, to stability and functional economic cooperation, or to other ties between them (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – Associated localities (source: Ilieș, 2004, p.160).

Although the two communities have complementary or similar cultural, historical and socio-economic development premises, yet the region's administrative centers being small-sized have not attracted large-scale investments, particularly in research and technology. However, according to the World Bank data on investments versus population ratio, both cities may expect investments of up to 100 million USD, there is a coherent policy to promote the region's development. Both local authorities should not forget that only some localities are competitive and attractive for foreign investments, exports and growths. Consequently, they should strive to continue to create optimum business conditions, vital for the local economy as a whole.

The region has a very diverse development potential, uneven in the territory. Nevertheless, from the large cities (Oradea, Debrecen) to the most isolated areas, local resources can be identified to ensure sustainable development. If the urban centres have plenty of development resources and opportunities, isolated areas, for all the negative effects of their geopolitical position, they have an important tourist asset, namely that of preserving folk culture and traditions.

Moreover, lying in the proximity of Central Europe, and having a very original relief (caves, defiles, etc.), a favourable climate and low heights (about 1,800 m alt. and little over, e.g. Cucurbăta Mare Peak, 1,849 m), the region has a considerable tourist potential due to its archaeological vestiges, natural reserves, glacial and storage-lakes, numerous caves, spas and health resorts, propitious conditions for mountain tourism, leisure and recreation. The region has also several ethno-folkloric areas which has allowed for the development of agro-tourism in Bihar County (e.g. Beiuş Land, "Munții Apuseni" National Park, Chişcău, Pietroasa or Padiş, etc.) and also in Hajdú-Bihar County (e.g. The National Park at Hortobágy, Hajdúszoboszló, Debrecen and its surroundings, etc.).

The data collected from the two institutions, reveal a good cooperation between the two communities based on the traditional relations between their territorial-administrative units. But, to maintain this situation at the current level, and if possible improve it, both municipalities should take into account the advantages and disadvantages of either of them, and also the threats posed by infrastructure, migration, the degree of attractiveness of their areas, and not least the environmental issues which could appear in the region (Table 2).

Table 2

The SWOT Analysis of Bihar – Hajdú-Bihar Counties

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Good accessibility by air (Oradea and Debrecen Airports); high density of the road and railway network (above the national average); – Important investments in the business infrastructure and the possibility for the formation of businesses clusters of enterprises with a good brand and tradition, e.g. car and equipment manufacturing, furniture, textiles and food industries; – Subsoil resources (complex ores, bauxite, thermal water); – Increasing entrepreneurial capacity; – Basic services available in urban areas; – Traditional urban centers with well-structured cross-border relations (Oradea, Salonta, Mehkerek, and Kőtegyan); – Tourism in nature and human resources appreciated both at home and abroad, put to account by numerous tourist structures; – A university centre boasting an old tradition (Debrecen), and one that has been developing over the last 15 years (Oradea) and other academic centres with a good development potential; – Complete and balanced educational infrastructure; – Tradition in advanced health services (Debrecen). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of investments to develop the infrastructure of roads, railways and airports in the region; – Low investments in research and development; low participation of commercial firms in the information society; – Very few services and products with high added value; – Insufficient capacity and degradation of the sewage and water purification systems; – Underdeveloped research infrastructure; – Insufficient tourist resorts for young people; little support for the development of local/ regional conditions in this respect; – Insufficient health-care personnel, particularly in the rural areas, inadequate building structures and insufficient technical and material endowments of the medical units (especially on the Romanian side).

Table 2 (continued)

DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES	EXISTING RISKS AND POSSIBLE THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The use of European funds for the construction/rehabilitation of the access infrastructure (road, railway, air); – The existence of many market niches for industrial and food products, furniture items and services; – The reorientation of banks for the support, establishment and development of the small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SME) to diversify their services; – Opportunities to receive EU post-accession funds for increasing EU economic and social cohesion; – Little competitiveness of the region's enterprises in the EU market; – The EU's emphasis on the development of border regions; intensification of the economic and social relations; – Greater international interest for practicing tourism in natural parks and for cultural tourism; – Interest in developing metropolitan areas; – Increasing public and private investments in education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Although the region is crossed by a European road, there is a risk for the regional territory to be skirted by some major European corridors; – There is considerably lower interest for servicing people than for financing sub-projects which directly help the process of the labour employment; – The SMEs are unprepared for coping with environmental issues, quality, communication, and managerial practices; – High levels of emigration, particularly of high-skilled labour; – Neglect for the cultural heritage; – The poor quality of public utilities reduces the region's attractiveness; – The closure of schools in small villages that have few students may increase illiteracy.

The above issues are simply some indicators for establishing a basis of cooperation between the two communities and their territorial-administrative units. Starting from these aspects and making a short introduction to what regional cooperation means from the Euroregion perspective, we would say that, in our case, cooperation, also means finding a common language, materialised in coherent programmes in the field of economy, tourism, culture, art and other domains. An example would be the good relations that exist between the two universities – Oradea and Debrecen – which actually date back before the Euroregion had been established, and continue within the framework of collaboration in matters of educational programmes, achievable through information transfer and human resources.

Of course, there are lots of relevant examples of cooperation between the two neighbouring counties. One of these is the occasional opening of the border crossing-point Cheresig (Romania), and its Hungarian counterpart Korosszegapati, enabling people from the two localities to cross the border more easily. The SWOT analysis made in this paper (Table 2) shows both similitudes and differences, primarily in terms of economic development conducive to cross-border cooperation, because especially in recent years, transfrontier development perspectives has made most economic actors and decision-makers from the two counties accept it.

The presence of important cross-border cooperation actors (NGOs, sport associations, travel centres, schools and universities) can represent a solid foundation for initiating and supporting joint development strategies between the communities, also including their adjacent areas.

Although differences in matters of concrete problems do exist, yet there are common views on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. In the light of SWOT analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

- strengths – will be consolidated by the enthusiasm of participants (people and authorities), in mutually finding the usefulness derived from cooperation. In this case, direct and open communication is a precondition for raising awareness and striving to eliminate prejudices, most of them generated by history. Because each partner has his own identity, mentality and a different historical and cultural background, the authorities involved in cooperation must include in their programme the development of a new identity common to both communities, e.g. research into the cultural identity liable to strengthening a region's economic power as well;

- weaknesses – imply much organisational effort to abide by the provisions of the cooperation treaty and, last but not least, work together to make compromises;

- opportunities – reside in the elements common to both territories, and provided cooperation structures make them operational, the experience could act as a model for future cross-border

cooperation. However, since participants in cross-border cooperation speak different languages, clarification of linguistic notions is of paramount importance in order to avoid misunderstanding;

– threats – could still exist if each part is at the same time involved in cooperation projects with other territorial structures, with the sole purpose of bringing more money to public institutions.

In conclusion, consolidating economic relations will be a strong motivation of common interest. Sharing the profit of joint investments will force both administrative bodies to have closer contacts irrespective of nationality or language. In other words, business does not have a nationality, but it is a favourable framework for intercultural and interethnic contacts. It is the result of more investments in Romania, especially foreign investments, the greater involvement of the Romanian border region, which being better urbanized has a greater potential to attract foreign investments. This type of complementarity offers a solution for dealing with the high unemployment rate existing in the Hungarian border region which has a monostructural agrarian character, without the possibility for people to supplement their incomes from other industrial branches than rural tourism. Therefore, at Euroregion level, the cross-border cooperation policies promoted aim primarily at the protection and rehabilitation of environmental factors (air, water, forests, etc.) by means of globally accepted rules: common security of food, finances, health-care, etc., protection and rehabilitation of the cultural heritage, etc.

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