

# DOCTORAL (Ph.D.) DISSERTATION

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**The role of national minorities  
in cross-border economic cooperation  
An analysis of the Hungarian-Romanian  
border area in the period 2007–2020**

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**THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MINORITIES IN CROSS-BORDER ECONOMIC  
COOPERATION**

Dissertation for obtaining a doctorate (PhD) degree

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# The role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation

## Summary

This doctoral research aimed to explore the role of national minorities (specifically the Romanian community living in the Hungarian border counties and the Hungarian community living in the Romanian border counties) in cross-border economic cooperation at the Hungarian-Romanian border between 2007 and 2020. The research used a mixed-methodology approach including a literature review, document analysis, interviews, focus groups, statistical analysis and numerical project analysis. The research found that the Hungarian-Romanian border-scape had undergone significant changes between 2007 and 2020, primarily as a result of independent processes on both sides of the border. National minorities played only a small, but positive role in the Interreg cross-border economic projects, and were mostly active in projects linked to identity and education. The research also found that the national minorities were increasingly more often mentioned in the border counties' development strategies over time and were mostly presented in a positive light, however, the specific objectives and tools with which they could more actively participate in achieving the shared goals were largely missing. The perception of the national minorities regarding the border, their neighbours and the cross-border economic cooperation was found to be complex and contradictory. The upheld border control is largely rejected, while the perception about each other is simultaneously framed as competitor and cooperating partner. The cross-border cooperation itself is viewed positively. The thesis opened new pathways for further research both in the theoretical and practical senses, especially calling for systematic and comparable data collection. It also suggested that policymakers can apply these findings to create strategies that use the strengths of national minorities and to create tools and initiatives that help these groups to realize their full potential as bridges between the two countries.

**Keywords:** *cross-border cooperation, national minorities, perception, economic development, Hungarian–Romanian border, perceptions of border and neighbours*



# 1. Introduction

Most of European history could be explained through the changing borders between states. Consequently, it is not surprising that borders are often referred to as “*scars of history*” (Brunet-Jailly & Wassenberg, 2020; Grieves, 2012; Jeffery & Collins, 1998). According to this school of thought, borders entail negative social and economic consequences for the border regions and their habitants because they often create barriers to trade and movement, restrict the functional hinterlands of the settlements close to them, lead to disparities and tensions between regions, as well as result in the emergence of illegal activities.

As a potential solution the creation of a "borderless Europe" was proposed by the founding fathers of the European Union in the 1950s. While first it was limited to the creation of a common market for coal and steel in order to promote economic collaboration and reduce the risk of another war between European nations, later it was expanded to include the establishment of a common market for all goods and services, as well as the free movement of people and capital.

However, the validity and the feasibility of a "borderless Europe" is still debated in academic and practitioner circles alike. The literature on debordering and re-bordering tendencies are convincingly capturing this debate. On what seems to be a consensus is the fact that the negative, separating effects of the borders could be rectified in a regional scope by establishing good cross-border cooperation (CBC) practices.

The main role of cross-border cooperation is to promote joint actions, projects, and programmes between territories that share a border, in order to address common challenges. This can include economic development, infrastructure, environment, culture, security, and more. Cross-border cooperation can also foster greater understanding and cooperation between different communities and stakeholders, and can help to strengthen regional integration and stability. This is also the reason why border regions are regarded as the "laboratory of the European Union" as the internal border regions cover 40% of the EU's territory and host 30% of its population (150 million people), who have an equal right for not living in function-poor, peripheral areas but rather flourishing territories offering a variety of opportunities and high living standard.

## 1.1 Problem statement

The desire to understand the underlying processes shaping the border regions and to help the border regions realise their endogenous full potential motivated scholars for several decades to produce a substantial amount of research on the different aspects of cross-border cooperation. While it was already stated that “*a general border theory is not achievable*

*and should not be attempted*” (Paasi, 2001, p. 27), there is still a need for the creation of additional theoretical frameworks and a more comprehensive understanding of the various factors that shape cross-border relationships and interactions in border regions (Durand & Decoville, 2020).

This includes gaining insight into these regions’ specific historical, economic, and spatial contexts and how they impact the dynamics of cross-border cooperation. This has been done to a large extent by previous scholars. In some of these works it was already found that cross-border cooperation “*can in some cases be driven by cultural identity and/or economic and social motivating factors*” (Portolés, 2015, p. 11). Certain groups, such as national minorities “*especially can foster cross-border interaction through their economic and social practices that are based on their multilingualism and cultural ties*” (Malloy, 2010, p. 205). However, despite their potentially pivotal role, so far not enough attention has been granted to the exploration of this aspect.

Noticing the gap in the literature of the existing research, I decided to focus my doctoral thesis on the role the national minorities (specifically the Romanian minority living in the Hungarian border counties and the Hungarian minority living in the Romanian border counties) play in the cross-border economic cooperation at the Hungarian-Romanian border. The time frame of the analysis covers the period between 2007 and 2020 because this encapsulates the two programming cycles in which both Hungary and Romania have participated as EU Member States.

Given the complexity of the topic, I designed a mixed-method approach to collect as varied information as possible as well as to allow for the triangulation of the data to advance reliability. Through the literature review, document analysis, interviews, focus group and statistical analysis it is hoped that a deeper understanding is reached which not only fills some of the gaps in the current state of the art but also helps to inform more effective and efficient approaches to cross-border initiatives and programmes.

Consequently, research on the role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation is important for several reasons. Firstly, understanding the role that national minorities play in fostering cross-border interaction can provide valuable insight into how these groups can be effectively included in cross-border initiatives and programmes. Secondly, it can also help to shed light on the specific historical, economic, and social factors that shape cross-border cooperation in border regions. Thirdly, understanding the role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation could also help to promote and maintain peace, stability and cooperation between neighbouring countries, especially in the context of EU integration.

## 1.2 Research questions and hypotheses

Stemming from the problem statement I aimed to explore in this research the role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation on the Hungarian-Romanian border area between 2007-2020. Subsequently, I posed four research questions and four hypotheses respectively:

**Question #1:** What changes characterized the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape between 2007 and 2020?

**Hypothesis #1:** The Hungarian-Romanian borderscape significantly changed in several ways, however, these changes are mostly the result of independent processes happening on both sides of the border and not the outcome of a coordinated and planned cooperation.

**Question #2:** What role did national minorities play in the Interreg cross-border economic projects between 2007 and 2020?

**Hypothesis #2:** The national minorities played a small albeit positive role in the Interreg cross-border economic projects, and they were especially active in those economy-related projects that are preparatory in their nature and their primary goal was to create the necessary conditions on which further initiatives could be built.

**Question #3:** How were national minorities represented in the border counties' development strategies between 2007 and 2020?

**Hypothesis #3:** The national minorities were more often and in detail mentioned in those counties where their population was more significant, and these documents were analysing the role of the national minorities from several aspects; however, it was rare to mark those objective and specific tools with which these groups could realise the set aims.

**Question #4:** What is the current perception of national minorities regarding the border, their neighbors, and their role in cross-border economic cooperation?

**Hypothesis #4:** The national minorities on both sides of the border perceive cross-border economic cooperation as a tool for improving the standard of living at the borderland; they are open towards their neighbours, but frustration is perceived regarding the border itself and their own role is perceived critically.

### **1.3 Methodological approach**

In order to best answer the research questions, I chose the constructivist research paradigm because this philosophical approach allows for the researcher and the participants to create together meaning and understanding in the research process. I deemed this approach suitable for this study as it is applicable to shedding light on the perceptions and role of national minorities on the Hungarian-Romanian borderland, rather than it takes my own views or preconceptions as a starting point. However, it is worth noting that constructivism also might have some drawbacks or pitfalls, such as researcher bias, selection bias or language bias. To minimize these risks, I tried my best to be critical, transparent and reflective of my own thought process and took ethical considerations seriously, such as informed consent and anonymity of the participants.

To further ensure the quality and depth of the research I designed a mixed method methodology where I used literature review, document analysis, interviews, focus group, statistical analysis and numerical project analysis to be able to triangulate the data and increase the validity and reliability of the research. The literature review comprises works from a diverse range using a combination of two methods, the semi-systematic and integrative approaches. My main goal with it was to critically analyse the existing knowledge on the topic, to integrate diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives and to identify gaps or methodological problems in the existing literature.

In the empirical part of the research, I used two types of document analysis methods to examine the development strategies of Hungarian-Romanian border counties. Qualitative and quantitative content analyses were used to understand large amounts of data by grouping words and concepts relevant to the research into categories. I mainly focused on words related to national minorities and used the NVivo programme to produce reports. Based on the findings then I designed a benchmark to gain a better understanding of the topic. Additionally, the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation's (EGTC) projects were also analysed with document analysing tools.

Moreover, I applied two types of qualitative methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and a focus group. The research used a semi-structured in-depth interview design as it is an effective tool to gather detailed knowledge from participants about their perceptions. The semi-structured approach was chosen as it focused on specific items related to the research question while still allowing participants to provide detailed and in-depth answers. All in all, 14 interviews were carried out in Romanian and in Hungarian. The results of a focus group discussion together with a mental mapping exercise were also used to supplement the results from the interviews.

Furthermore, I also relied on two types of quantitative methods: statistical data analysis and numerical project analysis. Statistical data was vital in evaluating the role of national minorities on the Hungarian-Romanian border because it provided a quantitative and objective

basis for understanding the socio-economic characteristics of these minority groups. The main indicators that I used were the territory of the border counties, the population of the border counties, the ratio of national minorities in the border counties, GDP per capita, net migration, unemployment ratios, the volume of cross-border traffic within the programme region, number of visitors coming from the neighbouring country as well as the data relating to the borderscape concept. I completed this with the second type of quantitative method which was the numerical analysis of the cross-border projects implemented in the Hungarian-Romanian border region between 2007 and 2020 within the framework of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme. After downloading all the 564 project data from the official database of the European Union I completed a series of assessments explained more in detail in the section 3.3.

The structure of the thesis follows the internal logic of the research questions and paired the different methodologies to the hypotheses (Table 1.) After the introduction, the literature review is written with two main parts: one dedicated to concepts and the theoretical framework and the other to the more statistical borderscape exploration. Then follows the methodology chapter explaining the methods used for answering the research questions. The empirical research provides the backbone of the thesis as this summarises the primary research results that I gained in three aspects: the role of national minorities in cross-border projects, the role of national minorities in strategic development documents and the perception of the national minorities. The Discussion chapter then synthesises the results of the different research methods organised according to the four research questions and four hypotheses. The main text of the thesis finishes with the presentation of the new scientific and professional contribution, along with the limitations and the potential avenues for future research. After the Conclusion chapter the Appendix and the Bibliography, are presented.

**Table 1: Methodology, Hypotheses**

Methodology	Hypotheses			
	H1	H2	H3	H4
literature review	✓	✓	✓	✓
focus group (indirectly)	✓	✓		✓
statistical analysis	✓	✓		
numerical project analysis		✓		
qualitative and quantitative document analysis			✓	
interviews				✓
mental mapping (indirectly)				✓

*Source: own elaboration*

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Concepts and theoretical framework

The borders and their characteristics are at the forefront of the European project as only through open and permeable borders can the four freedoms – the free movement of goods, capital, services and people – be guaranteed. This is why the cross-border regions are often called the “*laboratories of Europe*” (Hooper & Kramsch, 2004, p. 3) and are especially compelling when a certain social-economic issue needs to be understood.

Consequently, it is not surprising that a wide debate is being conducted among academics, practitioners and policymakers about borders. Even though the discourse was dominated in the early days by the mere description of the geographical location and the prevailing border management regimes, it was slowly transformed by the recognition “*that borders are institutions, as contrasted to simply lines in the sand or on the map*” (Paasi, 1998). These institutions then needed a more complex framework for analysis which is still in the making as even as late as 2002 scholars claimed that “*the existing literature on borders and cross-border cooperation and the role it plays in European integration offers little in the way of a coherent theoretical approach that can explain rather than describe the complexities of transboundary exchange*” (Grix, 2002, p. 5). This hiatus is partly explained by the diversity of the disciplines involved (Economics, Political Geography, International Relations, Sociology, and History) and partly by the diversity of the border regions themselves.

Nevertheless, lately two theoretical frameworks are gaining more and more followers: the concept of debordering and re-bordering. According to the followers of the first one, there is a necessity for opening the borders, reducing the separating effects of the frontiers and debordering in general (Albert & Brock, 1996; Blatter, 2001). This approach was challenged by recent events such as the migration crisis in 2014 and the global pandemic in 2020 which fuelled an unprecedented and uncoordinated closure of the borders and the strengthening of those voices in the literature that are observing a re-bordering effect (Jańczak, 2020; Klatt, 2020). Due to this varied and sometimes contradictory academic scene, in the following sections, these theoretical frameworks and the main used concepts (cross-border region, borderscape, national minority) are defined.

#### 2.1.1 (Cross-)border region and borderland

In the theoretical literature, there is a somewhat prevailing consensus that a cross-border region is an area that encompasses territory in two or more countries and is characterized by close (albeit not necessarily entirely harmonious) economic, cultural, and social ties. Cross-

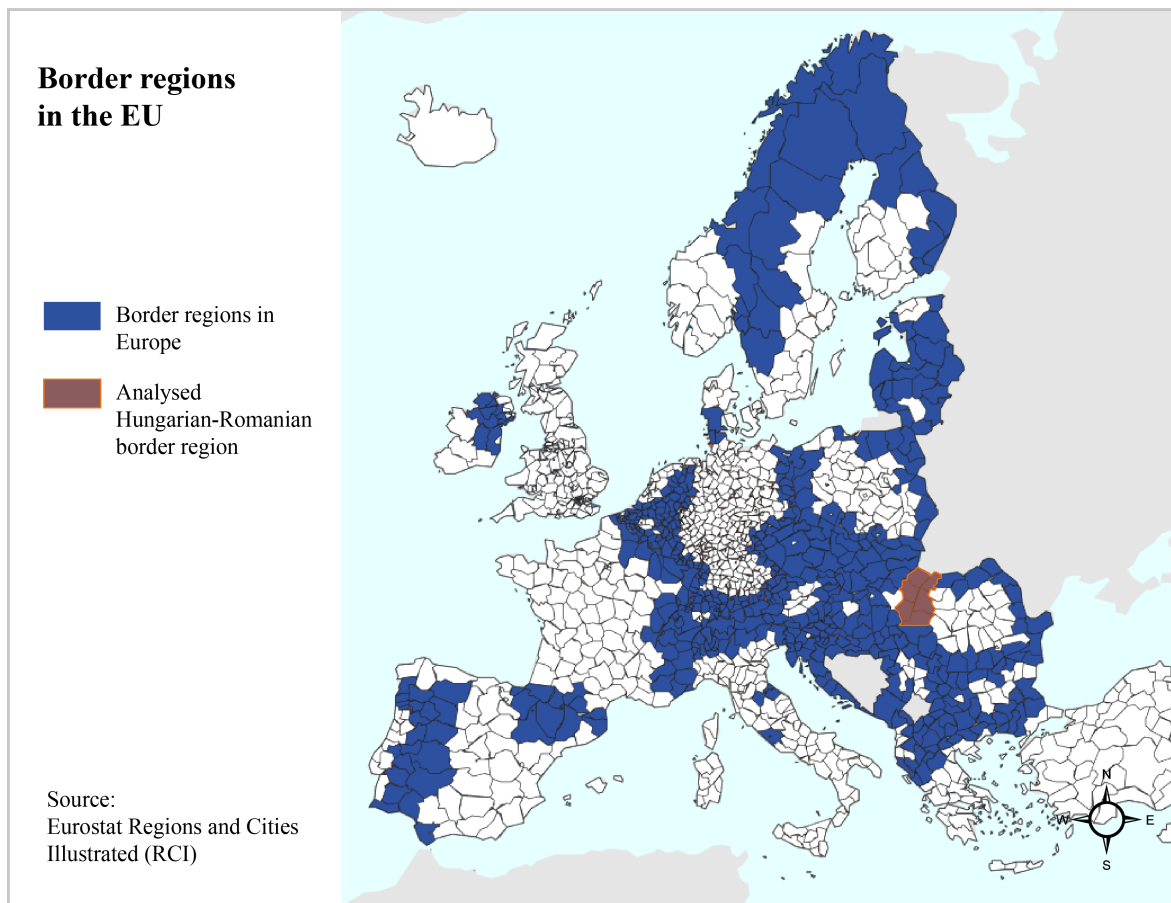
border regions often develop based on more than just geographical proximity, but rather build on shared history, economic interdependence and intertwined people-to-people relations and family connections (Keating, 2002).

Originally, the term "borderland" was introduced nearly a hundred years ago by Stephen B. Jones who was mostly preoccupied with the so-called "boundary-making", offering policymakers a practical guide on border management on the US-Canada border (Jones, 1945). In his work, the term borderland refers to the area in the closest proximity to the borders which is characterized by a unique cultural, economic, and political identity that is influenced by its location and proximity to the border. This approach is further supported by the border historian Martínez who considers that a borderland "*is a region that lies adjacent to a border*" (Martínez, 1994, p. 5). Consequently, the term "borderland" is often used to describe areas that are located along international borders and are marked by a high degree of cross-border interaction and exchange (Diener & Hagen, 2012).

Other definitions approach the term from a more normative stance claiming that "*borderlands are territories that are subordinated to a certain national regime and are therefore subject to the norms of its specific political system*" (Wastl-Walter, 2020). However, De Sousa (2013) argues with this oversimplified definition saying that a border region is not only the edge of a sovereign territory of a country but rather it is a "*special area of fluxes and exchanges of a social, cultural, economic and political nature, a space where the development of multiple activities takes place and where the type and intensity of transactions have evolved in time*" (ibid, p. 671). This is an approach that is reflected also in this work as it is in line with the theoretical framework presented below.

There is no convincing counterargument in the literature against not using the terms borderland, border region and border area synonymously, so in this work, I will be using them interchangeably when referring to one side of the border. The terms cross-border region, cross-border area or transboundary region or area will be used where the act of crossing the border needed to be emphasised.

The more practice-oriented sciences such as statistics needed to agree on a somewhat more measurable definition. Consequently, the Eurostat's current definition states that a border region in the European Union is "*those regions with a land border, or those regions where more than half of the population lives within 25 km of such a border*" (Figure 1). Based on this definition, Eurostat calculated that there are 463 NUTS 3 border regions in the EU-28 and 885 non-border regions, meaning that little more than one-third of EU territory is considered a borderland (Eurostat, 2016). The EU's border regions include 360 regions having a land border and 103 regions are within 25 km of a land border.



**Figure 1: Border regions in the EU**  
 Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat (2022)

Inconsistent with this methodology, for Schengen states, the regulation for local border traffic at external borders defines the border area differently: an area that may extend to a maximum of 50 kilometres on either side of the border. However, since this applies to the external borders and the examined Hungarian-Romanian border is an intra-EU border, I decided that the widely adapted administrative approach is the best one, namely that the NUTS 3 level regions that are adjacent to a state border is considered as border regions (Sohn & Stambolic, 2013). The selection of border regions based on NUTS 3 areas also corresponds to the definition of the territorially relevant cross-border cooperation programme of the European Regional Development Fund, the Interreg, which will be discussed more in detail in section 4.1.

### 2.1.2 Debordering and re-bordering

Debordering and re-bordering are the two sides of the theoretical framework that partly sets the scene for the analysis of the role of the national minorities in economic cross-border cooperation at the Hungarian-Romanian border area. Debordering usually refers to the process of dismantling or relaxing border controls, especially those related to the movement of people and goods across national or international borders. In other words, debordering



*“covers all activities that expand and open up boundaries, reduce (central) boundary control and decrease boundary congruence”* (Popescu, 2012).

The debordering process stems from two main theories. On the one hand, neo-functionalism introduced the idea that for nation-states and their peripheral border regions, there is a need and interest to cooperate in order to be able to provide certain functions for those areas that are further from the centre (Haas, 1964). The starting point for debordering was the need to exchange goods and services, which is only possible if the borders are approachable and permeable. This later also affected other fields, industries and types of activities too (Lindberg, 1963). In this sense Jańczak (2018) argues that cross-border cooperation is not only a *“pragmatically oriented and economically driven process”* but it is also closely linked to debordering as without the relaxation of border controls to a certain extent its flourishing would not be possible (Jańczak, 2018, p. 512).

On the other hand, the social constructivist approach also hugely influenced the theoretical framework in the sense that it links the debordering process to the communication and standardization of identities, norms and values (Wiener & Diez, 2004). According to the social constructivist theory, the meaning and significance of social phenomena, such as borders, are not fixed but are constructed and negotiated through social interaction and communication. This is important as when discussing the role of national minorities, the analyses of the social interactions and interpretations are of utmost importance.

In Europe, the internal debordering intensified with the creation of the Single Market, the monetary union and the Schengen agreement abolishing controls at the internal borders. Even though the analysed Hungarian-Romanian border section did not go through the whole cycle as it is not yet an internal Schengen border, it is an internal European Union border and so a debordering tendency can undeniably be recognised as I will demonstrate with examples in section 2.1.3.

Somewhat inseparably from the debordering process, references to re-bordering tendencies also appeared in the literature referring *“to all activities of boundary closure or re-trenchment as well as increases in (central) boundary control and in boundary congruence”* (Popescu, 2012). Border scholars in their most recent works usually enlist external factors (such as the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian-Ukrainian war) as the cause for the increase in re-bordering activities within the European Union. As Schimmelfennig (2021) states *“externally induced pressures overburden common institutions and lead to ‘internal re-bordering’: the resurrection of barriers between member states”* (Schimmelfennig, 2021, p. 313).

However, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge the internal reasons as well. Changes in the political landscape, such as the emergence of new political parties or regimes, can lead to calls for re-bordering; for example, with the dominance of the Scottish National Party voices asking for independence from the United Kingdom and consequently reintroducing the border has been louder (Paddison, 2009). Furthermore, economic factors can also

have a similar effect; for instance, the UK's decision to leave the EU was partly driven by economic considerations, including the desire to control immigration (i.e. reinstitute borders) (Goodwin-Hawkins & Jones, 2019). Similarly, social and cultural factors can play a role; such as in the case of the Catalan region which held a referendum on independence from Spain in 2017 (Martín-Uceda et al., 2019).

Due to the large number of studies that assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequently closed borders, a consensus is about to develop among border scholars that while a complete debordering process is debatable and not necessarily desirable, the newly strengthening re-bordering tendencies have a negative effect on the European integration and on cross-border cooperation. It was shown that the reintroduced intra-EU borders restricted cross-border flows and damaged economic development (Böhm, 2021, p. 145).

While it is impossible to see what will be the end of these competing tendencies, leading border scholars are calling for *“increasing the investment for future EU cross-border cooperation programmes, in particular, in policy areas such as institutional, social, and cultural cooperation”* (Medeiros et al., 2020, p. 9) in order to overcome the re-bordering effects. While other thinkers conclude that the establishment of a "Fortress Europe", where the external borders are extremely strengthened and the internal borders are abolished, is *“unlikely to materialise, giving rise instead to national re-bordering as a reaction to growing pressures on the Union's internal and external borders”* (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021, p. 1) is a likely development.

### **2.1.3 Borderscape**

Borderscape is a relatively new concept mainly used for understanding how borders shape the economic, social and cultural dynamics of border regions, and how these dynamics in turn shape the border itself. The creation of the concept is attributed to the performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes who called one of their performances in 1999 "Borderscape 2000: Kitsch, Violence, and Shamanism at the End of the Century." The performance described as a "high-tech Aztec Spanglish lounge operetta" is using the concept somewhat differently than how it later evolved as the performance addressed and examined border-crossing issues of race, gender, language, religion, politics, commodification and multiculturalism. The second appearance of the term was in 2003 when Harbers' essay called "Borderscapes, the Influence of National Borders on European Spatial Planning" appeared in the book entitled Euroscapes (Broesi, 2003). Since then, many scholars have used the term, however, without an unequivocal definition.

What appears to be sure about the term "borderscape" is that it is coined from the words "border" and "landscape", bringing in all the connotations of these terms. In the literature, there are at least three different coexisting interpretations (dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015). Firstly, the meaning implied by the original theatre performance where the suffix "-scape" potentially refers primarily to the circuits of images and ideas rather than landscapes

in the primary sense of the word. This interpretation inspired scholars such as van Houtum et al. (2012) who read into the word that the border area is something constructed that could be reshaped and redesigned by certain flows or actors transnationally. This interpretation provides a strong backbone to the present analysis as it means that even national minorities living in border areas could reshape and redesign a border area.

In the second interpretation, put forward by Harbers (2003), borderscape is appearing more like a concrete physical landscape laying around a border. Instead of putting the emphasis on flows and actors, Harbers is interested in how the nation-state is shaping and reshaping the border region describing how the presence of a border distorts the man-made or natural surroundings of a border. This approach has older roots in the literature (Hassingier, 1932; Whittlesey, 1935) pulling the term more into the disciplinary tradition of Political Geography and shedding light on how borders reorganise human activities and spaces; a direction less relevant for my present work.

According to the third strand of interpretation, borderscape is nothing else but “*a portion of land surface influenced by the presence of international boundary*” (Dolff-Bonekämper & Kuipers, 2004). This interpretation which links the term a bit too tightly to territory seems somewhat too restrictive which is a criticism often cited in the literature. Scott et al. (2018, p. 175) for instance considers borderscapes as “*social/political panoramas that emerge around border contexts and that connect the realm of high politics with that of communities and individuals who are affected by the borders*”. This is somewhat in line with Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007)’s opinion which argues that “*borderscape is a zone of varied and differentiated encounters. It is neither enveloped by the state nor semantically exhaustible. The borderscape is a zone of competing and even contradictory emplacements and of temporalities that hark to forms of spatial organization that refuse the territorial imperative. If the borderscape is understood as a zone of contingent meanings, then it may (and does) hark to conceptions of belonging that stretch across (and into) territorial divisions that stand in the stead of our considerations of solidarity and justice*” (ibid).

In line with this, I found it logical to follow Brambilla (2014)’s methodological call for incorporating “experience” and “representation” not only because it was a helpful theoretical framework for answering the research questions but also to advance the borderscape’s agenda and thus contribute to the international economics and border studies. Krichker (2021) says that the borderscape concept is so popular because it has an “irresistible vagueness”, without a singular definition “*since it changes its meaning depending on who is looking at it and for what purpose*” (ibid). For this reason, it is crucial to move further from the historical-theoretical analysis of the term and operationalise the concept.

In order to be able to translate the concept borderscape into an empirical research tool, van Houtum's typology and the CESCO's Territorial Impact Assessment<sup>1</sup> will be used, which I adapted to the present study. van Houtum (2000)'s typology is widely used among scholars as it differentiates between three approaches, namely (1) "flow", (2) "cross-border cooperation", and (3) "people". Usually, authors concentrate on one of these approaches, thus analysing either the factors influencing cross-border flows, or analysing networking, social integration and harmonization, or analysing those activities (including perception, cognition, behaviour, actions and mindset) that produce and reproduce the border.

Based on this, CESCO created an idiotypic methodology for measuring the cross-border territorial impact of certain initiatives. The logic follows van Houtum and Strüver (2002)'s threefold theory: first, the cross-border flows of goods, people and services should be assessed because they mirror the physical permeability of the border which is the prerequisite of any further activities contributing to the development of a shared borderscape. Second, the level of social integration should be measured as the cross-border cooperation approach refers to the internal connectivity of the two border communities. This represents the framework of the procedure of shaping the common borderscape. Thirdly, the people approach concentrates on the perceptions, narratives and spatial behaviour of the border citizens. Even though this is highly difficult to measure, it gives a real picture of the integration level of the common borderland: namely, the commitment of the border citizens to their home region.

The following Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 enlist those indicators and methods that were identified by CESCO as useful for a Territorial Impact Assessment in an ideal world where data and resource restrictions are not present. I applied this practical methodology because it is not only organically fitting into the present work's theoretical framework, but also provides a useful practical guide for statistical data collection and empirical research.

However, since the aim of the present work is not to merely carry out a Territorial Impact Assessment, the list was only applied after I carried out a dual critical selection. First, I selected those indicators that are relevant for the analysis of the role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation (marked with an R as relevant in the third column of the table). Then those indicators were incorporated in the section 2.2 that are actually available in reliable national or international statistical platforms (marked with an A as available in the Tables).

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<sup>1</sup>During my work at the Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives (CESCI) since 2018, I had the opportunity to closely familiarise myself with CESCO's Territorial Impact Assessment model, which is partly described by Gyula Ocskay in the book published by CESCO in 2020 entitled "Changes in the representation of a borderscape. The case of the Mária Valéria Bridge." or by Gyula Ocskay in Cross-Border Territorial Impact Assessment (edited by Medeiros 2020).

As can be seen from the Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 unfortunately, not all the indicators that would have been relevant could be used due to the lack of comparable data collection. The nature of some of the indicators made it impossible to collect the necessary primary statistical data within the frameworks of the doctoral research. However, I strived to shed a light on some of these topics applying qualitative methods, the results of which are discussed in Chapter 4.

**Table 2: Indicators relating to the FLOW factor**

Group of indicators	Main category	Relevance and availability
INFRA-STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS OF CROSS-BORDER FLOWS	Average distance of border crossing points	R + A
	Average distance between the major regional centres of the border region (travelling time and geographic distance)	R + A
	Volume of cross-border traffic within the programme region	R + A
	Number of cross-border transport lines	
CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY	Number of cross-border commuters	
	Number of commuting students across the border	
	Number of visitors / overnights produced by citizens coming from the neighbouring country	R + A
	Frequency and average length of visits in the neighbouring country	R
	Number of registered residents originating from the other side of the border	
	Number of travellers using cross-border transport lines	
CROSS-BORDER BUSINESS ACTIVITY	Number of SMEs with owners from the neighbouring country, number of their employees and value of their annual turnover	R
	Number of cross-border joint ventures, number of their employees and value of their annual turnover	R
	Differences in real estate and fuel prices according to the physical distance from the border	
	Value of investments within the borderland made by investors from the neighbouring country	R
CROSS-BORDER SERVICES	Number of cross-border services, their cross-border clients and the frequency of their use by these clients	R
	Number of employees of cross-border service providers	R
	Annual turnover of cross-border service providers	R

*Source: own elaboration based on Ocskay (2020b)*

**Table 3: Indicators relating to the CBC factor**

Group of indicators	Main category	Relevance and availability
ADMINISTRATIVE CONDITIONS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION	Number of interstate agreements	R + A
	Number of harmonized legal provisions with the neighbouring country	
	Number of town-twinning agreements within the programme region	R + A
	Number of cross-border service contracts between institutions	R
SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY	Level of connectivity	R
	Number of citizens participating in cross-border activities and projects	R
	Number of joint cultural events based on the performers' nationality	
	Number of participants of professional and cultural events coming from the other side of the border	R
BILINGUALISM	Level of bilingualism in administration, business and everyday life	R
	Number of students studying the neighbouring country's official language	
	Changes in the interethnic structure of the borderland	R + A
CROSS-BORDER INSTITUTIONS	Number of EGTCs (or other cross-border governance entities) and their members	R + A
	Average annual turnover, number of employees of EGTCs (or other cross-border governance entities)	R + A
	Number and total value of the projects implemented by the EGTCs (or other cross-border governance entities)	R + A
	Number of other operating cross-border governance structures (e.g. Euroregions), their annual turnover, number of employees	R
	Number of cross-border institutions, networks and clusters, their employees, their annual turnover	R
	Number and value of projects realised by cross-border structures and institutions	
	Average age of cross-border structures	R + A
	Number of institutions taking part in cross-border activities	R
CROSS-BORDER PROJECTS	Number, geographic scope and value of projects implemented jointly across the border	R + A
	Sustainability of the project results	R
	Sustainability of project partnerships	R
	Assessment of integrated approach applied in projects and calls for tender	

*Source: own elaboration based on Ocskay (2020b)*

**Table 4:** Indicators relating to the *PEOPLE* factor

Group of indicators	Main category	Relevance and availability
PERCEPTIONS ON DISTANCE	Mental distance of the adjacent region	R + A
	Affective distance of border citizens	
	Level of mutual trust	R + A
PERCEPTIONS OF OTHERNESS	Mediascapes of the neighbouring country (quantity and quality)	
	Mental maps of the border citizens	R + A
OWNERSHIP OF THE SHARED TERRITORY	Reasons and motivations of border crossings	R + A
	Geographic scope of cross-border mobility	

Source: own elaboration based on Ocskay (2020b)

### 2.1.4 Cross-border economic cooperation

Cross-border cooperation is developed among advanced economies to ensure the following public functions: “(1) military and political strategy as the main item of the state’s territorial integrity; (2) reduced gap in the economic, cultural and social development; (3) selection of an effective immigration and labour mobility system; (4) creation of new products, services and jobs; (5) development of integration-driven culture and social behaviour” (Bilchak, 2014, p. 69). Out of these functions, three can be linked to the economic side of cross-border cooperation. To put it shortly, cross-border economic cooperation refers to the exchange of goods, services, and capital among countries across national borders. It can involve a variety of activities, such as international trade, investment, labour movement, creation of joint production lines and services.

Even though cross-border economic cooperation has a long tradition dating back to the Roman Empire, the more recent times are marked by an effort of the European countries to increase cross-border economic cooperation (Czimre, 2006) through a variety of means, including the creation of free trade areas and customs unions. In this sense, one key milestone in the development of cross-border economic cooperation in Europe was the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957. The EEC, which later became the European Union, was a regional organization that aimed to promote economic cooperation and integration among its member states. As part of this effort, the EEC established a common market, which allowed for the free movement of goods, services, and capital among member states (Urwin, 1995).

In the decades since its formation, the EU has pursued further integration through the creation of a single market and the adoption of a common currency, the euro. The EU has also expanded to include more member states and has sought to promote cross-border economic cooperation with non-member countries (Rechnitzer, 1999) through trade agreements and other mechanisms (O’Dowd, 2002). Overall, the development of cross-border economic

cooperation in Europe has been a complex and ongoing process, shaped by a variety of economic, political, and historical factors.

Following the historical roots of cross-border economic cooperation the legislative framework in Europe is largely coordinated by the European Union. The EU's legislative powers are derived from its treaties, which are legally binding agreements that establish the EU's governing institutions and set out its goals and policies. The main treaties that relate to cross-border economic cooperation in the EU are the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). The TFEU contains provisions on the functioning of the EU's single market, which allows for the free movement of goods, services, and capital among member states. It also sets out rules on trade policy, competition policy, and the coordination of economic and monetary policy (Egan & Guimarães, 2017). The TEU establishes the EU's external relations, including its trade policy and its relations with non-member countries. It also sets out the principles of solidarity and cooperation among member states and provides for the establishment of common foreign and security policies.

From an analytical point of view, there are several theoretical frameworks that are suitable for analysing cross-border economic cooperation (Hardi, 2001). Firstly, the relative advantage theory created by the economist David Ricardo in 1817 claims that countries should specialise in producing and exporting the goods and services where they have a comparative efficiency to other countries, and import those that they are less efficient at producing. The theory of comparative advantage is based on the idea that countries have different relative costs of production for different goods and services, due to differences in their natural resources, labour, capital, and other factors. This theory is often regarded as one of the most important (Suranovic, 2010), but somewhat counter-intuitive (Krugman, 1996) observations in economics that explains that the absolute advantage and not the comparative advantage is responsible for much of international trade.

Another often-cited theoretical framework is the Heckscher-Ohlin model which was developed by economists Eli Heckscher and Bertil Ohlin based on Ricardo's theory. It states that countries tend to "*export the goods that use their abundant and cheap factors of production, and import the goods that use their scarce and expensive factors of production*" (Blaug, 1992). The model more accurately describes cross-border economic cooperation in times when knowledge and production technologies can be more easily transferred between countries.

Another branch growing from the Ricardian theory is called the new trade theory. New trade theory analyses trade patterns and the location of economic activity. It focuses on the role of increasing returns to scale and imperfect competition in shaping trade patterns. It suggests that firms may engage in international trade not only because of differences in the costs of producing different goods but also because of differences in the size, the existence of product differentiation and market power of firms in different countries.



Finally, the gravity model is a statistical model created to forecast the amount of trade that is likely to happen between two countries. The inspiration behind the model came from the natural sciences where it was already proven that the gravitational force between two planets is directly proportional to their mass and inversely proportional to the distance between them. According to the gravity model in cross-border economic cooperation, the amount of trade between two countries follows the same logic (Anderson, 2011). However, this model has a series of limitations as it ignores important aspects like tariffs, trade agreements, cultural and historical ties between countries, changes in exchange rates etc.

From reading the literature I have realised what is able to complete the gravity model is the study of political economy which is preoccupied with how political and economic systems interact and influence one another. In the context of cross-border economic cooperation, political economy is concerned with how the political decisions and institutions of one country can affect the economic outcomes of another country and vice versa. Political economy is an important consideration in cross-border economic cooperation because political factors can significantly influence the nature and success of such cooperation (Jessop, 2002).

Cross-border economic cooperation can bring benefits to participating countries or regions. Firstly, it can provide an increased access to markets for companies operating in the borderland (that otherwise potentially would have a territorially severed scope), which is likely to increase their sales and profits (Espín et al., 2016). Secondly, it increases efficiency because through cooperation the actors can create specializations among themselves and divide the different production steps in a way to reduce costs. Thirdly, cross-border economic cooperation increases competition among the economic operators, which potentially leads to lowered prices and higher quality of products and services (Church & Reid, 1996).

However, cross-border economic cooperation can also have some drawbacks as it can raise complex economic and political issues (Novotny, 2006). Firstly, the increased competition's positive effect can quickly turn negative if the domestic industries are unable to compete with lower-cost imports and resulting in job losses and other economic disruptions (Grosz, 2005). Secondly, cross-border economic cooperation might lead to economic imbalances with trade deficits and surpluses that might result in economic dependencies (Wang & Wei, 2022). Thirdly, there is a risk of economic exploitation of cheap labour in one country by companies based in another (Vendina, 2016). Finally, cross-border economic cooperation might have an adverse environmental impact due to the increased transportation of goods across national borders which contributes to air and water pollution and the use of fossil energy carriers (Nagy, 2011). However, in the current over-globalised trading system, trading across the border can in fact mean the shortening of supply chains.

### **2.1.5 National minority**

It has been already noted that “*border region studies and minority issues are highly intertwined*” (Engl, 2020, p. 199), which is further evidenced by a series of studies exploring

this connectedness (Engl & Woelk, 2007; Klatt, 2013; Malloy, 2010; Markusse, 2004). And yet so far there is no universally accepted definition for the concept of "national minority". This is despite the fact that discussions on the definition of national minorities have already emerged after 1945 within the UN's various panels of experts (Vizi, 2018).

Perhaps the best-known definition is written by Francesco Capotorti, an Italian professor of international law commissioned by the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities which states that "*a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the state – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language*" (Capotorti, 1996). According to another definition nationality "*can only be determined on the basis of subjective theory, everyone belongs to the nation of which one feels and considers oneself a member of*" (Flachbarth, 1935).

Many studies tend to refer to Henrard (2000)'s definition stating that "*a minority is a population group with ethnic, religious and linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population, which is non-dominant, numerically smaller than the rest of the population and has the wish to hold on to its separate identity*" (Henrard, 2000, p. 48). There was a perceivable shift after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 in minority protection paradigms when the international community moved from general individual human rights to the idea of special minority rights recognising cultural diversity as a basic value of democratic societies (Malloy, 2010; Marko & Constantin, 2019).

The changeover also prepared the ground for the definition of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe which currently appears to be the most accepted definition and thus I applied it to the purposes of this research too. According to this "*the expression 'national minority' refers to a group of persons in a state who: a) reside on the territory of that state and are citizens thereof; b) maintain longstanding, firm and lasting ties with that state; c) display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics; d) are sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state or of a region of that state; and e) are motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity, including their culture, their traditions, their religion or their language*" Parliamentary Assembly (1993).

It has to be noted though that this definition has been the subject of some criticism, which adds important details to the debate. On the one hand, critics say that this definition of the Council of Europe is based on essentialist notions of race, religion, language, and national origin, which might be problematic since these categories are not fixed and can be culturally and politically constructed. Consequently, the definition is claimed to be too narrow and does not adequately account for the diversity and complexity of minority groups (Kovalyova, 2021).

Another criticism of this definition is that it is based on the assumption that national

minorities are passive and need to be protected by the state. This has led to concerns that the definition reinforces a paternalistic approach to minority rights and fails to recognize the agency and self-determination of minority groups. This is in line with some of the voices that observe that “*when new capacities emerge and ‘new spaces for politics’ become defined, national minorities are rarely seen as primary actors*” (Malloy, 2010). Nevertheless, a statist doctrine is still noticeable in the EU that observes the importance of minority protection to prevent conflicts. At the same time, it neglects to a certain degree the active role of minorities in constructing political, economic and social spaces, especially in border regions where they mostly reside (Engl, 2020).

The role that the national minorities might fulfil, however, has been studied from a theoretical point of view to a certain degree. The report of the European Center for Minority Issues entitled "Dynamics of Integration in the OSCE Area: National Minorities and Bridge Building" claims that members of the national minorities are able to initiate cooperation across state borders by relying on their intercultural knowledge and social capital (European Center for Minority Issues, 2016, p. 10). The report points out bilingualism as a key asset that makes the minority actors able to identify issues and areas where joint action across borders or cultural divides will benefit the whole of society, in such cases, they have been referred to as "bridge builders" (Komac & Vizi, 2019, p. 15).

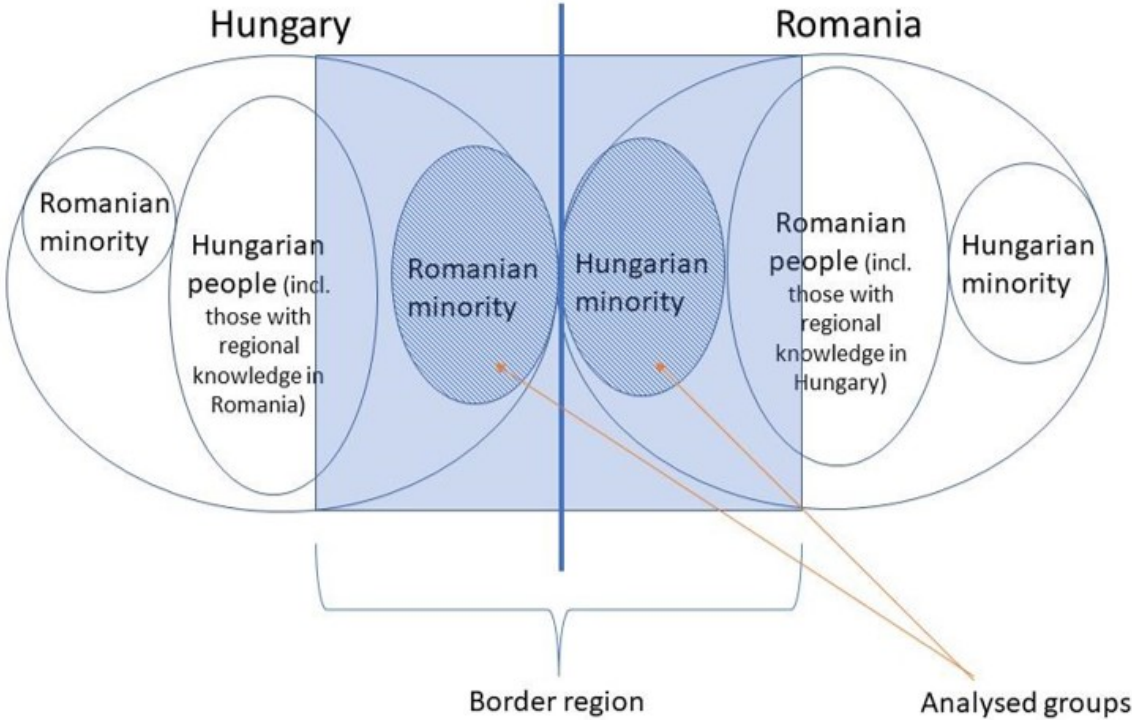
This observation has been extended to economic processes as well as “*due to their bilingual and bi-cultural identities, members of national minorities monitor economic developments not only in their own community but also in their kin-state communities, and they may spot gaps or lack of policymaking earlier than local authorities precisely because of their bi-cultural knowledge*” (ibid). However, the report also notes that this is an area where national minorities are almost entirely invisible, as their involvement is mixed into the general monitoring of regional development programmes.

Apart from the mere definition, in the literature authors also divide the role of national minorities into smaller categories, attributing to them sub-functions such as “*promoting the sustainability of cross-border forms of cooperation*” (Portolés, 2015). In this interpretation, national minorities function as bailees for the long-term survival of cooperation. Another sub-function is "ensuring the flow of information", which is mostly attributed to the representatives of the national minorities because they usually live along the border and travel across more often than those belonging to the majority of the society.

At the same time, it seems from the literature that it would be a mistake to overestimate the role of national minorities. Klatt claims that “*the presence of trans-border ethnic groups does not automatically lead to intensified cross-border cooperation*” (Klatt, 2006, p. 246). The role of national minorities in cross-border cooperation can, contrary to the above, even be negative, if the national minority and the majority of the same nationality living on the other side of the border cooperate in a way that excludes representatives of the other nationalities from joint cooperation initiatives. In this case, not only there is a risk that the excluded party

will be deprived of economic development and the quality of life of the whole population could be divided, but also that voices against border revision might be amplified in areas with a history of conflict (ibid). This would be considered a "hindering" role, which can ultimately be a major obstacle to cooperation and it can further deepen conflicts. Since in the literature this approach was not yet tested on the Hungarian-Romanian case, my research adds to this discourse.

Regardless of the above-presented criticisms of the Council of Europe’s definition, it is still the most widely used one in the context of national minorities in cross-border cooperation and thus I adapted it to this work. At the same time, it needs to be clearly stated that despite the fact that this definition is valid for several ethnicities residing in the analysed Hungarian-Romanian border area, in my doctoral research I exclusively analyse the Romanian national minority living on the Hungarian side of the border region and the Hungarian national minority living on the Romanian side of the border region (in NUTS 3 territorial unit) because the primary scope of the research is to shed light on how these minorities affect cross-border economic cooperation in the border region (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Delimitation of the analysed groups  
*Source: own elaboration*

Subsequently, it is important to point out that regardless of the fact that scholars who study cross-border socio-economic practices in minority contexts often apply the concept of "regionauts" (Klatt & Herrmann, 2011) it is not applicable within the frames of this study. The term regionauts is usually used to describe people who have skills to use in the world on

both sides of a border and move in both the physical and mental landscapes of border regions (Löfgren, 2008; O’Dell, 2003).

However, in this study even though groups other than the Romanian minority living at the Hungarian border and the Hungarian minority living at the Romanian border are recognised, they are not included. For the sake of readability, it is possible that the short forms of "Romanians in Hungary" or "Hungarians in Romania" is used in some parts of the thesis, but the meaning behind them always complies with the above-presented restrictions.

## **2.2 Hungarian-Romanian borderscape**

### **2.2.1 General description**

*“No border in Europe is simple”* (Toibín, 2010, p. 24), a statement which seems to be also true for the Hungarian-Romanian border. In the nineteenth century, the land that is now the Hungarian-Romanian border was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. However, this border between Hungary and Romania was also an external border for the Monarchy. This led to frequent conflicts due to unclear boundary lines (Sallai, 2021, p. 76). The border between Hungary and Romania was later altered multiple times, both in terms of its location and its function. The border was first established in 1888 and was modified by the Treaty of Bucharest in 1918. After the end of World War I, the Hungarian-Romanian border was redefined at the Paris Peace Conference and was formally demarcated between 1921 and 1923.

During the bloody mayhems of the twentieth century, the Hungarian-Romanian border had been modified several times, and *“the delimitation of the common state border violated the rights of nationalities each time, which, after the demarcation of the new borders, left its mark on the relations between the two countries”* (Sallai, 2019, p. 71). In 1940, the border was changed again as a result of the Second Vienna Award, but this change was short-lived. After World War II, the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty restored the Hungarian-Romanian border to its pre-war status as of January 1, 1938 (Romsics, 2017, p. 549).

These borders undoubtedly led to various difficulties, including economic, infrastructural, administrative, and social problems. As Baranyi observed the reevaluation of border roles post-Trianon has burdened cross-border cooperation and relationships (Baranyi, 2014b). Despite adapting to the new situation, Hungary struggled to address the dilemma of border regions’ cooperation.

Although the physical location of the border between Hungary and Romania has remained relatively constant, the border regime, its openness, and perceptions of it have changed significantly over the years. Even after both countries became part of the socialist block after World War II, border control between them was strict. It was not until 1977, with the passage of Law No. 31, that the Hungarian-Romanian agreement on local border traffic was amended to allow for easier crossing within a 20 km area near the border. Until the

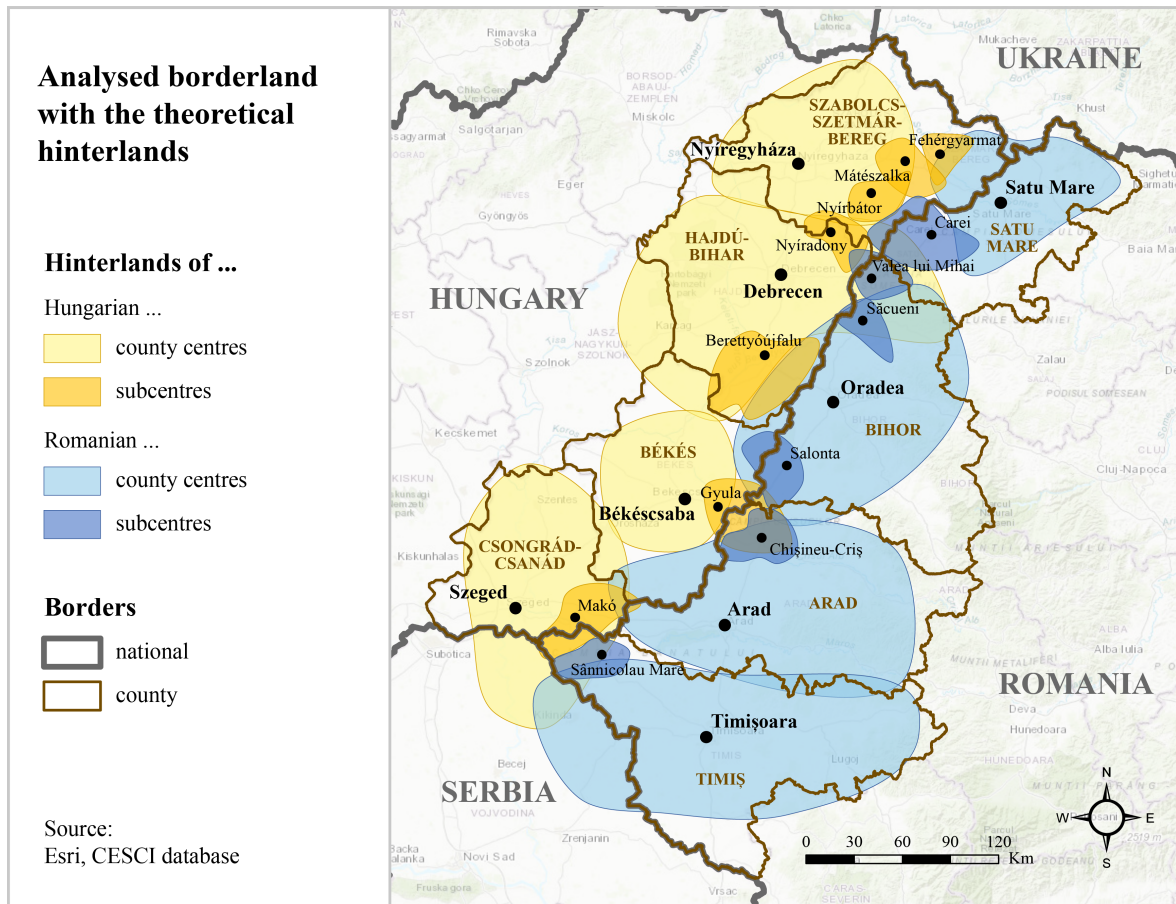
fall of communism in 1989, strict border control was enforced, leading to frequent instances of tourists being subjected to harassment or even denied entry at the Hungarian-Romanian border leading to statements such as “*tourists were literally stripped naked at the Hungarian-Romanian border*” (Révész, 2009, p. 492). Furthermore, as Péntes pointed out, large scale disparities existed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which decreased significantly by 2016, this “*convergence influenced the border zones as well*” (Péntes, 2020, p. 65).

The early twenty-first century marked a period of reconciliation and consolidation on the Hungarian-Romanian border. As Czimre states “*the decades after the change of regime are the years of recovery from the negative historical heritage and the years of discovery of new types of relations*”, especially since “*more opportunities were opened for the two countries for more thorough co-operation*” (Czimre, 2018, p. 99).

As several researchers pointed out, at that time this border region appeared to be one of the best-prepared area for the development and expanding of cross-border cooperation programmes (Deica, 2006; Gasparini & Del Bianco, 2011). Both countries joined NATO (Hungary in 1999, Romania in 2004) and the European Union (Hungary in 2004, Romania in 2007). The EU’s introduction of the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital theoretically led to a major overhaul of the Hungarian-Romanian border regime (Süli-Zakar & Horga, 2006). However, Hungary’s membership in the Schengen area (since 2007) and Romania’s non-membership to this day have resulted in this border being considered an external border of the Schengen area, meaning that border controls cannot be eliminated. Romania has met the requirements for full EU membership (Zsákai, 2022), but the delay in its accession has caused frustration along the border. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting border closures, which were implemented without proper dialogue and preparation, have further hindered the positive assessment of the Hungarian-Romanian border and disregarded previous progress towards a borderless Europe (Hajdú & Rácz, 2020, p. 210).

The Hungarian-Romanian border is 443 km, belonging lengthwise to the middle category of borders within the EU. In line with the conclusions of the theoretical part of the literature review, the NUTS 3 level territorial units of the Hungarian-Romanian border section are analysed here, namely the south-eastern and eastern part of Hungary, the northwestern and western part of Romania with 4-4 counties (Hungary: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád-Csanád and from Romania: Satu Mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiş).

Figure 3) shows the analysed territory with the theoretical hinterlands of the county centres and the smaller centres calculated based on the Reilly-formula (Zhuang & Yu, 2014) estimating the influence zones of settlements based on the population number and the distance between the neighbouring settlements. It is visible that the country border rudely cuts the hinterlands of the regional centres, which almost only shows overlaps in the case of Debrecen and Oradea.



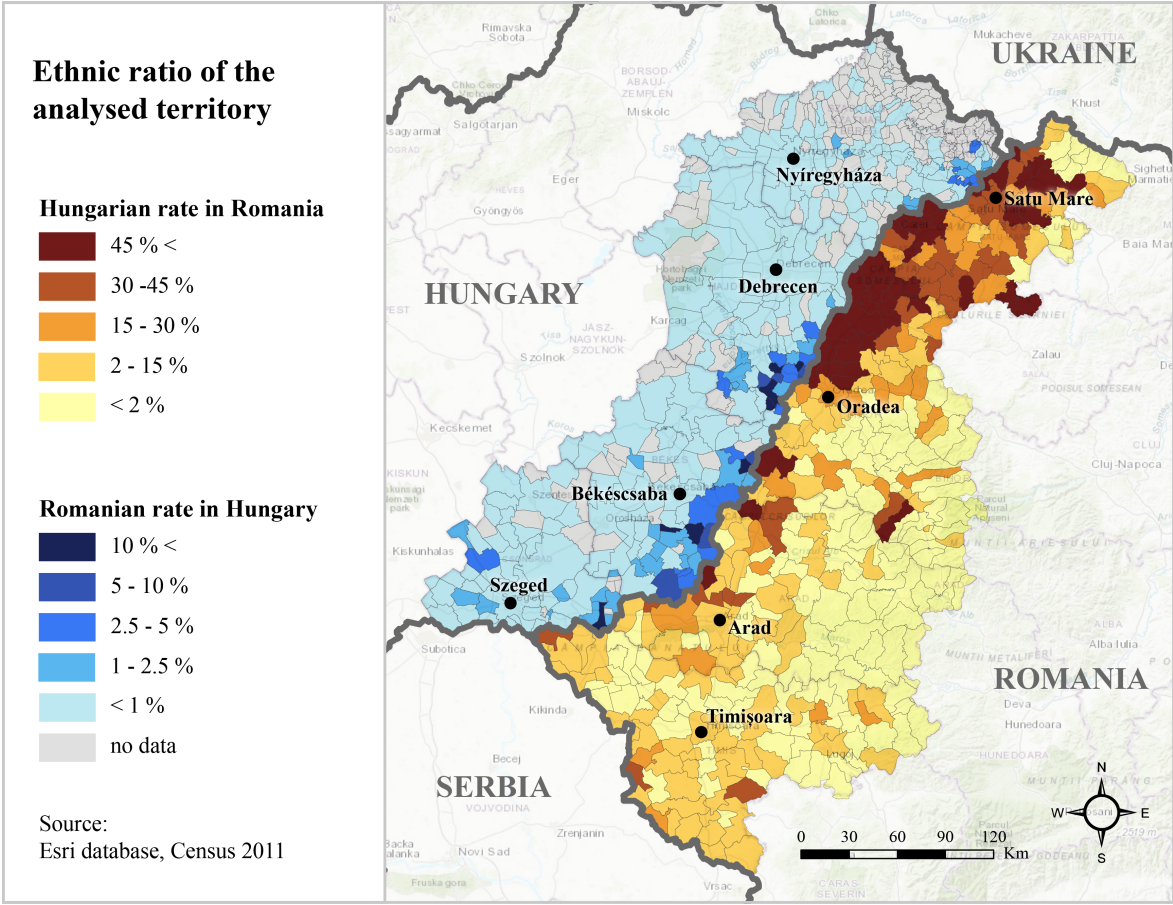
**Figure 3:** *The analysed borderland with the theoretical hinterlands*  
*Source: own elaboration based on Esri and CESC database*

Even though from several points of view the Hungarian-Romanian border region appears homogenous, there are many distinct features (Czimre & Țoca, 2019). From the point of view of territorial capital, for instance, during the 2010s it was shown that the area close to the two sides of the border belonged to different clusters in all the analysed aspects of territorial endowments (Tóth, 2023).

The total area of the eight counties is 50,454 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 43.7% is in Hungary and 56.3% is in Romania (Csoka, 2018, p. 97). However, the ethnic distribution is not reflected in this balanced geographical situation (Figure 4): according to the last census (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2022), on the Romanian side there were 324,303 Hungarians living, Timiș county had the lowest ratio (5.1%) and Satu Mare county the highest (34.5%), while on the Hungarian side the proportion of Romanians were smaller: 9,477 people, meaning 0.1–1.4% of the respective counties' population (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2013). The demographic landscape along the Hungarian-Romanian border has witnessed a decline in the ratio of national minorities compared to the majority populations on both sides. Between 2011 and 2022, the Hungarian population in Romanian counties decreased by 16.3%, while the Romanian population in Hungarian counties experienced an 18.5% reduction based on the most recent censuses. This decline reflects complex macro-level demographic processes,



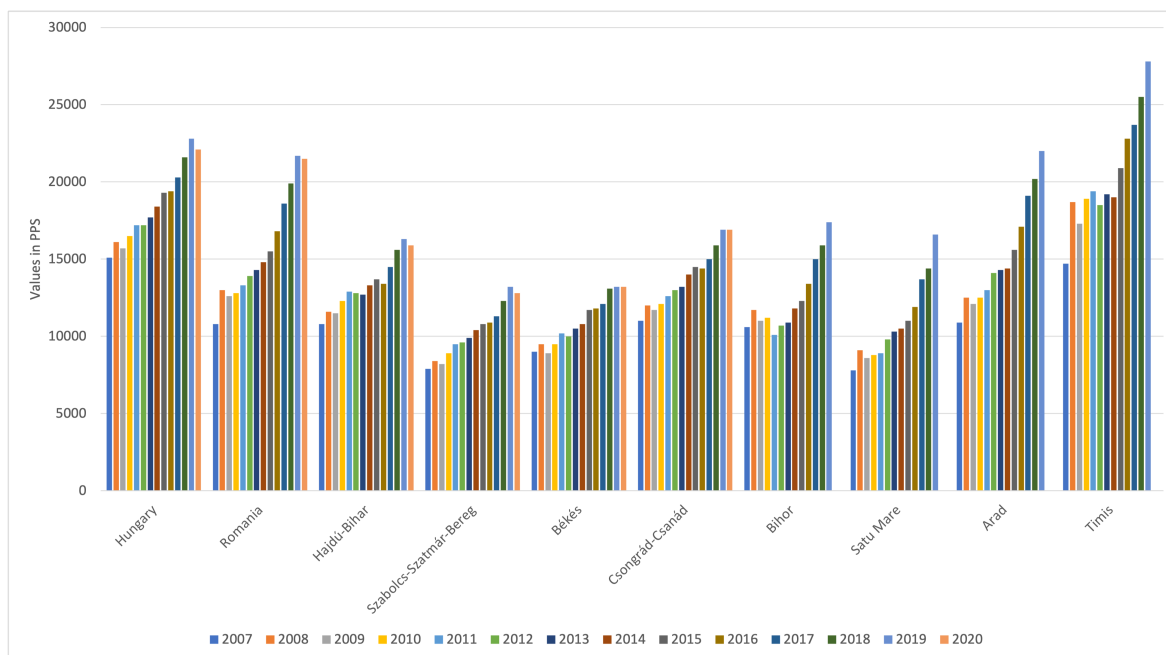
encompassing assimilation, ethnic disparities in fertility and mortality, and migration trends (Kiss, 2018).



**Figure 4:** Population and ethnic ratio of the analysed territory  
*Source: own elaboration based on Esri and Census 2011*

Even though the border region’s economic productivity is significantly lower than the EU average, the Hungarian-Romanian borderland shows an improving tendency when it comes to GDP per capita in purchasing power between 2007 and 2020 (Figure 5). When the whole countries are compared, it can be seen that Hungary starts off from a higher level, but Romania runs through a steeper development curve, this results in that by 2020 the two countries nearly had the same GDP per capita in PPS (HU = 22,100, RO = 21,500). When I compared only the cross-border region, I found that by 2019 three Romanian counties were leading the chart Timiș (27,800), Arad (22,000) and Bihor (17,400). The rate of GDP increase was also seeming to be territorially divided. The Hungarian counties increased their GDP between 2007 and 2019 at 46.7% (Békés) and 67.1% (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg), while the Romanian counties managed to develop at a much quicker rate as the smallest increase was 64.2% (Bihor) and the highest 112.8% (Satu Mare). However, there is a generally positive recent trend as the four regions which contain the counties included in the area are being ranked as modest innovators and lower-competitiveness areas in European assessments (Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2019, Regional Competitiveness Index – RCI 2019).

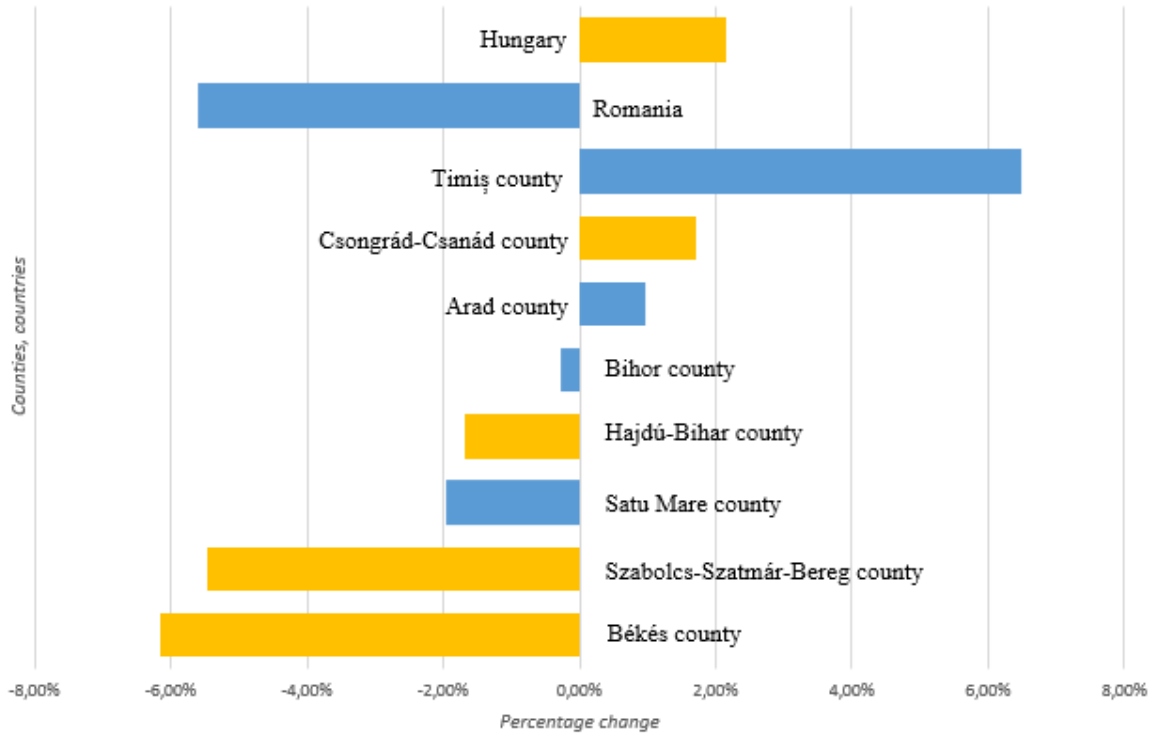




**Figure 5: GDP per capita in purchasing power standard**  
*Source: own elaboration based on (Eurostat, 2022)*

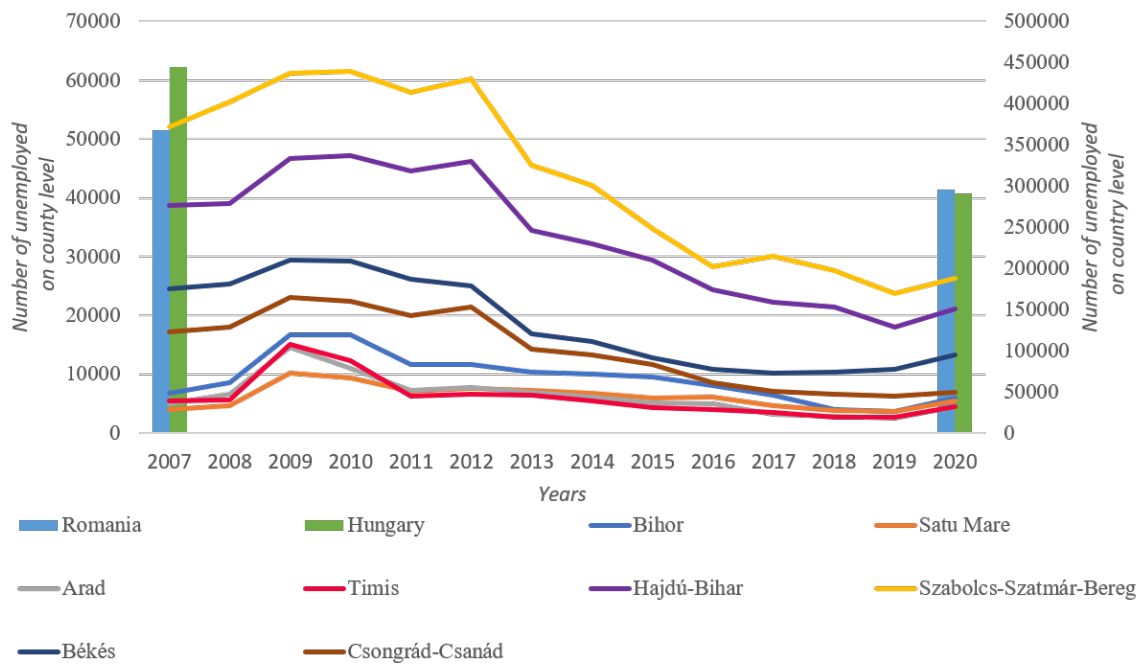
Foreign investments serve as a significant indicator of a region or county's attractiveness and are crucial for driving sectoral economic growth. As of the end of 2018, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Romania surpassed 71 billion Euros, while Hungary received 27 billion Euros in FDI. When assessing FDI per capita, Romania remains one of the most appealing countries in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, displaying a robust upward trajectory with 4,153 Euros per capita. This figure represents a 17% increase compared to the 2016 level. In contrast, Hungary experienced slower FDI per capita growth, rising by only 11%, primarily due to the annual decrease in the resident population. In the border region between Hungary and Romania, foreign direct investments notably increased between 2016 to 2018. Specifically, Romanian counties, such as Satu Mare (31.07%) and Timiș (22.30%), experienced significant growth, although Arad recorded a negative value (-4.36%). Conversely, all Hungarian counties saw negative or strongly negative trends, with Békés (-24.49%) and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (-19.04%) being the most adversely affected.

Net migration can be another telling indicator of a territory's social-economic development as usually people move away from less prosperous regions to more flourishing ones (Figure 6). The largest positive net migration was directed towards Timiș county (6.47%), Csongrád-Csanád county (1.70%), and Arad county (0.95%). All the other counties lost more habitants than they gained. The largest net outmigration was recorded in Békés county (6.15%). Even though the Romanian borderland counties were considerably better in attracting population than their Hungarian counterparts, the observation is the opposite for the countries themselves.



**Figure 6:** Net migration change between 2007 and 2020  
 Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat (2022)

Finally, the number of the unemployed are also telling about the state of a region's economic status. Figure 7 shows that a largely similar decreasing tendency happened on both sides of the border. Nevertheless, the steepness of the decline in the number of unemployed was different. When I compared the data from 2007 and 2020, the Hungarian counties managed to show a slightly better decrease in the number of unemployed, albeit their starting point was higher. The values of the whole countries (to which the scale on the right-hand side refers and is represented by the green and blue bars) mirror similar tendencies.



**Figure 7: Tendencies of unemployment between 2007-2020**  
 Source: own elaboration based on Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (2022)

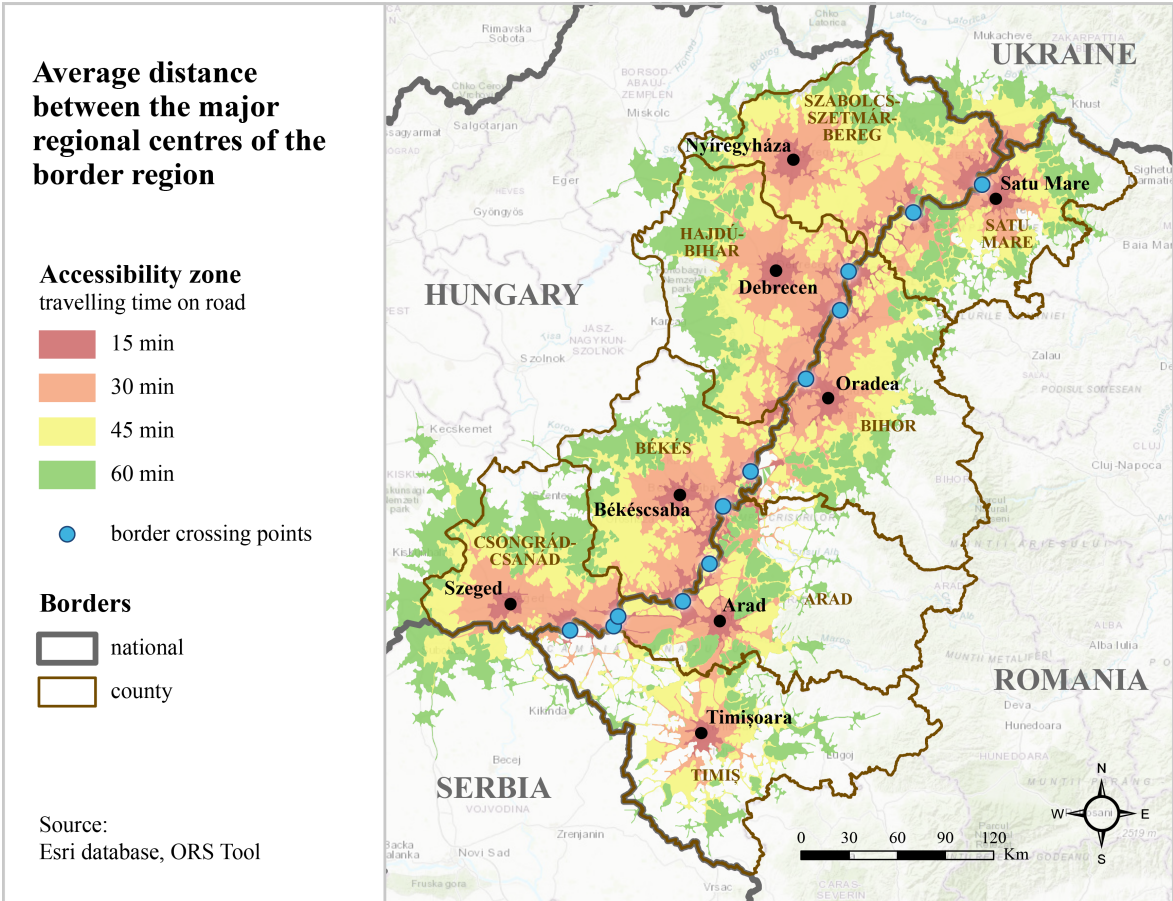
### 2.2.2 Indicators relating to the "flow" factor

According to the borderscape theory presented above the indicators relating to the "flow" factor can be grouped into four categories. The first category relates to the infrastructural conditions of cross-border flows. One of the most telling data in this category is the average distance of border crossing points as the shorter the distance is, the easier can people living in the cross-border region reach a crossing point and thus visit the neighbouring country. Even though other factors (such as the opening time of the border crossing or the system of border control) also play a role in it, if the distance between the border crossing points is too big, that can indicate that bottlenecks often develop in cross-border flows.

In the Hungarian-Romanian border there was definitely a tendency of building and opening more border crossing points in the analysed period. While in 1990 there were only 7 functioning border crossing points, by 2007 their number increased to 11 (Magyar Közút, 2008) and by 2020 their number more than doubled as there were 26 built border crossing points (Magyar Közút, 2021). Obviously, this relatively dynamic increase in the number of border crossing points visibly decreased the distance people had to travel to cross the border. While in 1990 the average border crossing point was 63.2 km from each other, by 2007 the distance was reduced to 40.2 km and by 2020 further reduced to 17 km. In theory, this value can be considered quite good as in comparison in France there is a border crossing point at every 23.1 km on average taking into account all of its land borders. However, 10 border crossings are only open with strict restrictions in opening times. If they are not counted, then the average density of crossings which are open is more than 37 km which is four times

higher than the Austrian-Hungarian amount, but in comparison, the Bulgarian-Romanian or Hungarian-Croatian ratios are more than double as high.

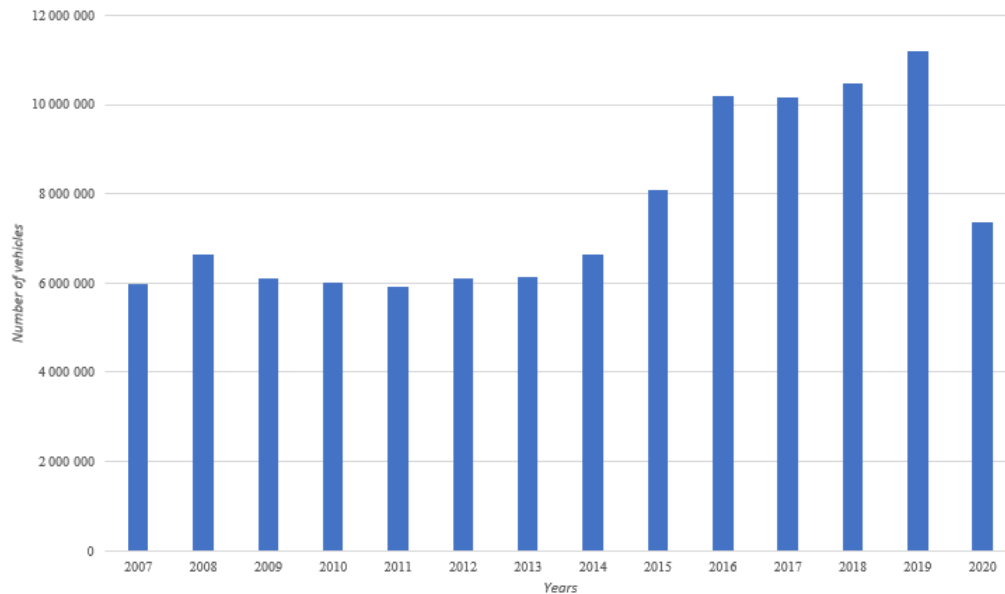
Another telling data is the average distance between the major regional centres of the border region. As it can be seen in Figure 8, if the traveling time on road is taken into consideration at the time of the writing of this dissertation, than there is a bit of an asymmetry between the two countries as the Hungarian main urban centres seem to be reachable quicker (the 15-20-30 min radiuses are bigger) than on the Romanian side.



**Figure 8:** Average distance between the major regional centres of the border region  
Source: own elaboration based on Esri and ORS Tool

Finally, the volume of cross-border traffic (Figure 9) within the programme region can be quite telling about the infrastructural conditions of cross-border flows. According to the number of vehicle traffic crossing the Hungarian-Romanian border there was a more or less stagnating period between 2007 and 2013 when approximately 5.9 million vehicles crossed the border yearly. Between 2014 and 2019 a continuous but not too steep increase was observable, in the peak year, 2019, more than 11.1 million vehicles crossed the border. In 2020 with the travelling restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this number fell back to 7.3 million which is still higher than the value in 2007. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that these border crossings are not exclusively limited to travels within the border area as

the visiting passing traffic (for instance of the considerable Romanian expat community) is also included.



**Figure 9:** *Vehicle traffic crossing the Hungarian-Romanian border*  
 Source: own elaboration based on Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (2022)

The second category of indicators concerns cross-border mobility, especially the number of visitors/overnights produced by citizens coming from the neighbouring country. Unfortunately, there is a huge gap in systematic data collection in both countries when it comes to focusing on the borderland. Only aggregated data is available that shows the number of arrivals of visitors from Romania to Hungary and from Hungary to Romania and even that is not available for the same years. Consequently, the interpretation of this data should be done very carefully and only used as an illustration of general trends as it disregards the territorial differences and the actual cross-border flows. Nevertheless, visitors from Romania spent 10,578 days in Hungary in 2009 (on average spending 1,4 days which due to the shortness of the stay might allow for speculation that the majority of the visitors stayed in the border region) (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2022). This number nearly doubled by 2019 when 20,450 days were spent by visitors from Romania in Hungary. Compared to visitors from other countries, in the observed decade Romania was among the top sending countries. Similarly, Hungarian visits in Romania were leading the charts as in 2013 there were 1,443 arrivals registered which increased to 1,562 by 2016 (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2022).

Cross-border commuting has been a long-standing trend in the border region, particularly from Romania to Hungary due to disparities in average wages. In addition to commuters targeting the northern part of the Hungarian border area (around Nyíregyháza, Mátészalka, Debrecen), seasonal work is also prevalent in the primarily agricultural region. In recent

years, commuting in the opposite direction has become increasingly common, from Békés county to Arad and more intensely to Sânnicolau Mare and Timișoara. This has led to a borderland characterized by two-way labour mobility, with a volume of less than 10,000 people, including those who have moved from Romanian cities like Satu Mare, Oradea and Arad to the Hungarian side (in the subregions of Csenger, Biharkeresztes and Battonya). Cross-border residential mobility has also been present for the past 15 years, occurring after Romania's accession to the EU. The main reason for these movements is the lower real estate prices on the Hungarian side.

Similarly to other border areas in Europe, price differences have a strong pull effect, leading to cross-border shopping tourism in both directions. For a long time, the significant differences in the quality of services have led many Romanian citizens to take advantage of the proximity of the border, particularly in the beauty, wellness, health services, and gastronomy. These differences have been reduced in recent years, with more and more Hungarian citizens visiting border cities to enjoy Romanian services. Nevertheless, these existing differences continue to facilitate exchanges and cross-border flows, which can improve the climate for cooperation.

The third category deals with cross-border business activity. Admittedly, this would be one of the most important aspects of cross-border economic cooperation and yet virtually there is no data regarding the number of SMEs with owners from the neighbouring country, the number of their employees and the value of their annual turnover; the number of cross-border joint ventures, number of their employees and value of their annual turnover; or the value of investments within the cross-border region made by investors from the neighbouring country. Not only official statistical data is not collected and published on either side of the border, but also the Chambers of Commerce were not able to provide numerical information upon my request. Foreign direct investment might provide some insights regarding the business activity stimulated by foreign actors, however, the data is only available on a national level and the source of the FDI is not recorded. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development data, the period between 2007 and 2020 was more turbulent for Hungary than it was for Romania; in Romania the peak year was 2008 (6.30%) which then decreased to the minimum point in 2011 (1.38%), while in Hungary it started out at a lower level (4.05% in 2008) then increased to 11.34% in 2012, but dropped to -11.61% in 2015 to only grow back to 4.36% in 2020 (UNCTADSTAT, 2022).

The fourth category describes cross-border services, where ideally information would be available on the number of cross-border services, their cross-border clients and the frequency of their use by these clients; the number of employees of cross-border service providers or the annual turnover of cross-border service providers. However, again this is extremely scarce on the Hungarian-Romanian border, though – in contrast with the indicators above – in this case it is probably also because of the lack of real cross-border services. According to the 2022 inventory of more than 1,500 Pan-European cross-border public services, there were

only 12 such cases on the Hungarian-Romanian border section. Out of these 12 cross-border public services, 7 were rail lines offering regular public transport services (5 by a Hungarian private organisation and 2 by a Romanian private organisation). The other five examples were divided between the healthcare sector (providing emergency care; telemedicine system; telediagnosis service) and the education sector (European Exchange School Alliance; joint elementary school in Berettyó) (ESPON, 2022).

### **2.2.3 Indicators relating to the "CBC" factor**

It is not surprising that the indicators of the cross-border cooperation factors are the most populous group with five subcategories: the administrative conditions of cross-border cooperation, the social connectivity, the bilingualism, the cross-border institutions and the cross-border projects. Firstly, the administrative conditions of cross-border cooperation play a role within which the number of interstate agreements and the number of town-twinning agreements are the most important ones.

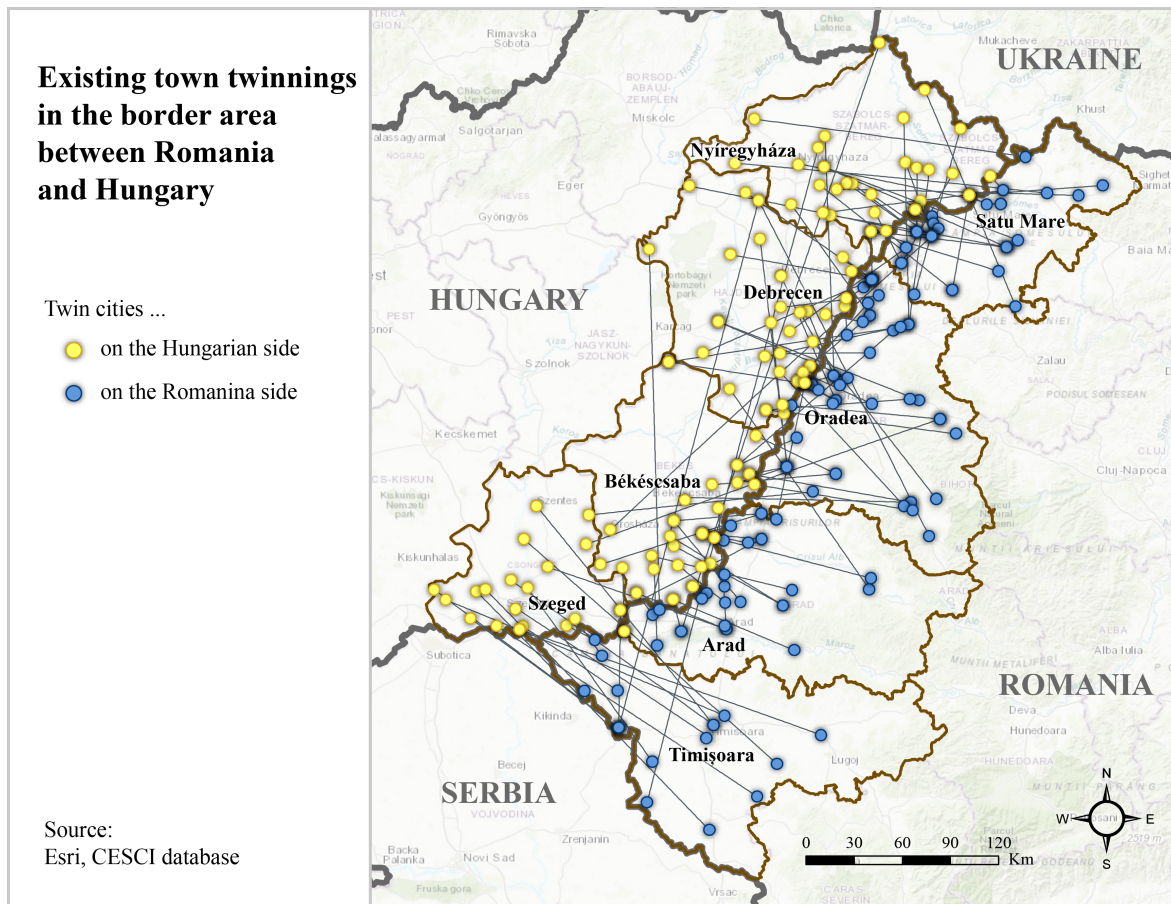
Between Hungary and Romania there is a series of interstate agreements providing the administrative framework for cross-border cooperation above the context established by the European Union. One of the most important is the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" which was signed in 1996 and established the foundation for cooperation and mutual assistance between the two countries in a number of areas such as politics, economics, culture, and defence. In the area of sectoral cooperation, the following bilateral agreements have been established between the two countries:

- 1990: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of culture and education
- 1997: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of tourism
- 2001: A bilateral agreement on the protection and promotion of investments
- 2002: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of environment
- 2002: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of regional development
- 2002: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of justice
- 2003: A bilateral agreement on the protection of watercourses crossing the border and on cooperation of their sustainable utilisation
- 2002: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of agriculture
- 2008: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of fisheries
- 2008: A bilateral agreement on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications
- 2008: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of transport
- 2011: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of energy
- 2011: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of emergency management



- 2011: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of healthcare
- 2012: A bilateral agreement on the protection of the rights of national minorities
- 2014: A bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of sports

The density of the town-twinning agreements (144 all in all) within the analysed region shows a relatively lively scene of local level cooperation, or at least the willingness for it (as there is no data on how often do the twin towns initiate an activity together). It can be telling of the cooperation efforts of the border area that six out of the eight major cities have twin-city relations with each other: Debrecen and Oradea, Nyíregyháza and Satu Mare, Szeged and Timișoara (Figure 10). This is especially noteworthy in the light of Baranyi's words who claimed that regarding the possible levels of interregional cooperation a distinct emphasis is placed on the role played by bordering cities, regional centers and para-centres in international and regional-interregional cooperation (Baranyi, 2014a).



**Figure 10:** Town-twinning agreements within the programme region  
 Source: own elaboration based on Esri, CESC database

Social connectivity would be the second subgroup, however, there is no systematic data collection in the literature. However, on the project level examples can be found for jointly organised professional and cultural events where participants were coming from both sides



of the border. A such example could be from the 2007–2013 programming period the project called "Two cultures together in symbiosis – joint history – in one European region: Protecting culture and history for a multicoloured united Europe" where a two-week camp was organised for Hungarian and for Romanian children, as well as courses for the youth, and conferences for the experts. In the 2014-2020 period for instance in the project called "Let's celebrate our traditions together" two in Cetariu and three in Kaba were organised where folk groups and artists from both sides participated. Or within the project "Cultural Cooperation among Citizens from the Salonta-Gyula Cross-border Area" a jointly created film was made with the participation of amateur actors (50 members of the film-making staff and a minimum of 500 spectators from Salonta and Gyula at the film screening were present). A more detailed analysis of the relevant Interreg projects is included in Chapter 4.1.

Measuring bilingualism is a somewhat more straightforward issue in Hungary than in Romania. The census in 2011 counted 128,852 people in Hungary who spoke Romanian (90,733 out of which spoke it not as their mother tongue). In the border counties the ratio of the population who spoke Romanian was the highest in Békés county (2.88%) and the lowest in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county (0.68%). However, in Romania there are no officially collected data on how many people – especially ethnic Romanians – spoke Hungarian. At the same time the conflicts that were previously more pronounced around the use of the Hungarian language in Romania seem to be reduced in the last years. The legal possibilities for the use of the Hungarian language in administrative-legal settings, albeit linked to conditions, have been significantly extended (Horváth, 2009, p. 1311).

The fourth subcategory is about cross-border institutions and is mostly preoccupied with cross-border structures. Since Euroregional (Hardi, 2007) and EGTC cooperation are important instruments for the economic revival of the underdeveloped regions and the creation of a single European area (A. Badulescu et al., 2014) after their definition an overview is provided about the structures operating on the Hungarian-Romanian border.

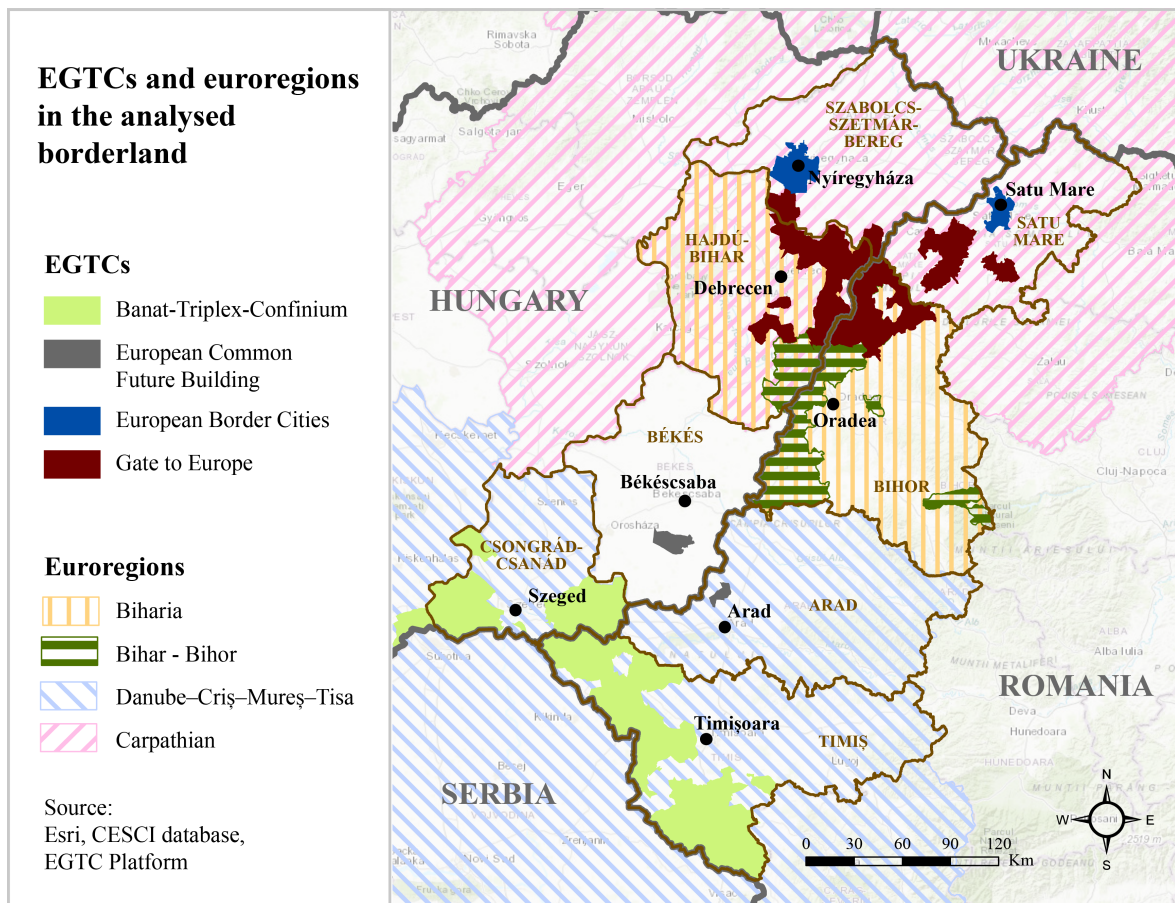
On the one hand, Euroregions are transnational cooperation structures between at least two neighbouring territories in adjacent European countries (Vassi & Salas-Olmedo, 2014, p 45). They bring together local and regional authorities, have a permanent secretariat and technical team, and focus on regional development, transport, local economy, cultural activities, and environmental protection (Medeiros, 2020).

On the other hand, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is a tool that allows public bodies in different EU member states to form a collective entity with legal personality and facilitate territorial cooperation. It was established on 5 July 2006 by the Regulation (EC) 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and it aims to improve European economic and social cohesion, support Europe 2020 objectives, and promote multilevel governance (Biot, 2012).

The added value of the EGTC tool was promoted by the Committee of Regions as it being threefold. Firstly, it strengthens territorial cohesion by helping the achievement of the

EU's objectives as stated in the Treaty of Lisbon. Secondly, it pushes for results that support Europe 2020 by boosting competitiveness and sustainability in Europe's regions. Thirdly, it promotes multilevel governance since the EGTC offers "*the possibility of involving different institutional levels in a single cooperative structure*", and thus "*opens up the prospect of new forms of multilevel governance, enabling European regional and local authorities to become driving forces in drawing up and implementing EU policy, helping to make European governance more open, participatory, democratic, accountable and transparent*" (Committee of the Regions. et al., 2017). In short, the experiences of the first 15 years of the EGTC could be summarised "*based on four terms: integration, flexibility, adaptability and representativity*" (Ocskay, 2020a, p. 54).

Euroregions and EGTCs are both structures that facilitate cross-border cooperation between regions in Europe (Figure 11). The main difference between them is that Euroregions are seen as more of a "brand" and do not have the same legal structure as EGTCs. However, both types of structures can co-exist and cooperate on the same or overlapping territories. This is the case on the Hungarian-Romanian border, where the Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion, the Carpathian Euroregion, the Biharia Euroregion, the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC, the Gate to Europe EGTC, the European Common Future Building EGTC, and the European Border Cities EGTC have all played a role in promoting economic cooperation between 2007 and 2020.



**Figure 11:** Euroregions and EGTCs in the Hungarian-Romanian border in 2022  
 Source: own elaboration based on Esri, CESC database, EGTC Platform

### Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion

The Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza Euroregion (DKMT) was established in 1997 in Szeged, Hungary and includes regions from Hungary, Romania, and Serbia. The Euroregion covers an area of 71,879 km<sup>2</sup> and is home to 5.3 million people. The purpose of the cooperation is to “develop and broaden relationships among local communities and local governments in the field of economy, education, culture, science and sports – and help the region to join the process of the European integration” (DKMT Euroregion, 1997). The DKMT Euroregion has established 10 workgroups focused on various fields, including economy, infrastructure and tourism; culture, sports, and social issues; and healthcare, among others.

The main focus of the DKMT Euroregion is to promote projects of regional interest and act as a forum for cross-border issues (Rieser, 2010). However, the Euroregion has faced challenges in being a driving force for economic cooperation due to developmental tendencies of the peripheries and significant homogenization barriers Dudă-Dăianu and Abrudan (2017). Despite these challenges, the DKMT Euroregion has made progress in promoting economic cooperation, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development and tourism (Pál, 2014, p. 26).

## **Carpathian Euroregion**

The Carpathian Euroregion was established in 1993 by representatives of regional administrations in Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Hungary, with Romanian counties joining in 2000. The Euroregion covers an area of 160,000 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of over 15 million people. The main goals of the Carpathian Euroregion are to bring together the people of the Carpathian region and facilitate cooperation in the fields of science, culture, education, trade, tourism, and economy. While economic development is a stated goal, the Euroregion is mostly known for its successes in the areas of environmental protection, cultural exchange, institutional networking, and promoting peaceful coexistence (Borshch, 2014; Chabanna, 2013; Tanaka, 2006).

Despite these successes, the Carpathian Euroregion has also made efforts to promote economic development. One such effort has been the increase in border crossings in the region, which has facilitated local and regional exchange and the development of sophisticated structures of cooperation (Borshch, 2014). The Euroregion has also organized trade fairs and established the Carpathian Association of Chambers of Commerce to promote economic cooperation. Additionally, the presence of the Euroregion has led to the creation of "institutional spin-offs" such as the Carpathian Agency of Regional Development and the Centre for Cross-border Cooperation, which focus on enabling cross-border economic cooperation (Smętkowski & Rok, 2016). However, economic integration in the Euroregion is primarily limited to trade, indicating that cross-border cooperation in the region is not particularly advanced. At the same time there are more critical voices saying that Carpathian Euroregion "*has not proved its viability*" (D. Badulescu et al., 2015, p. 563) due to its large size, the mountainous terrain, the large population in the area as well as the asymmetric motivations of the countries involved in its creation.

## **Biharia Euroregion**

The Biharia Euroregion is a cross-border cooperation structure between Romania and Hungary, formed by the Romanian county of Bihor and the Hungarian county of Hajdú-Bihar. It was established in 2002 as a way for the two counties to address common challenges and take advantage of their differences in resources to foster economic cooperation (Țoca, 2013). The local authorities of the two counties hoped to significantly increase the number of bilateral projects (Cismas & Sabău, 2012, p. 97) through the establishment of the Euroregion. In the early 2010s, the economic potential of the area was seen as having increased and it was believed that attracting European funding through structural funds was key to balanced development in the border region.

However, the Biharia Euroregion seems to have lost much of its relevance in recent years, as it even lacks a functioning website, which may indicate a lack of active projects. Some have suggested that the Euroregion could benefit from adopting the model of the EGTC, which provides a stable legal framework and financial autonomy for interregional cooperation and is

promoted and supported by the European Union. It is possible that the Biharia Euroregion has given way to the EGTC as a more effective means of realizing socio-economic development and interregional cooperation as suggested by experts "this could bring advantages in the long term, it would give a stable legal framework and financial autonomy for the Euroregion. It could be established axis for better cooperation and priorities" (Buda, 2016).

In the analysed border section, four EGTCs were established between 2011-2014, the basic data of which are summarised in the Table 5.

**Table 5:** Basic data of the EGTCs working on the Hungarian-Romanian border

EGTC	Establishment	Members	Employees
Banat-Triplex Confinium	2011	76	3
Gate to Europe	2012	35	3
European Border Cities	2014	2	0
European Common Future Building	2012	8	1

*Source: own elaboration*

### **Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC**

The Banat-Triplex Confinium (BTC) EGTC was established in 2011 and brings together 76 municipalities in the Homokhátság, Tisza, Maros/Mureş, and Banat regions on the Hungarian-Romanian border. The BTC EGTC operates in an area of 8,374.4 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 444,570, and its headquarters are located in Mórahalom, Hungary. The goals of the BTC EGTC include promoting the harmonious development of the region through cross-border cooperation, developing joint strategies for sustainable territorial development, and fostering comprehensive social development in the border regions through partnership and the efficient use of resources.

The BTC EGTC has implemented several initiatives to promote cross-border economic cooperation on the Hungarian-Romanian border. For example, it carried out the COOP-Banat project between 2012-2013, which aimed to improve cooperation and network in order to achieve economic growth in the South-Plains and West-Romanian regions. The BTC EGTC has also supported the E-transport project, which provides passenger transport between Jimbolia (Romania) and Mórahalom (Hungary) using environmentally friendly e-buses and includes cultural and touristic events on both sides of the border. In addition, the BTC EGTC had created a business partner finding portal and EXPO to connect small and medium businesses in the region and promote networking, as well as development plans to help businesses keep up with international market trends and become more competitive. However, these initiatives have only been available on the Serbian-Hungarian border and not the Hungarian-Romanian border.

## **Gate to Europe EGTC**

The Gate to Europe European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was registered in 2012 and includes 35 municipalities in the Hungarian-Romanian border area. The EGTC operates in an area of 2,617.9 km<sup>2</sup>, partially covering the southern part of Nyírség, Érmellék/Valea Ierului, Berettyó, and the Hajdúság Landscape Protection Area. Its headquarter is located in Nyíradony, Hungary, and it has a population of 190,023. The main objective of the Gate to Europe EGTC is to strengthen economic and social cohesion among its members through cross-border cooperation. Its specific objectives include the creation of regional development plans and the implementation of joint projects, the promotion of tourism through the development of joint products, the improvement of tourism infrastructure, joint marketing, and the management of tourism.

One of the main ways in which the Gate to Europe EGTC promotes economic cooperation is through supporting agriculture. It has organized farmer clubs, trade fairs, and field trips to allow farmers to exchange experiences, and it has supported farmers and municipalities through the establishment of a marketplace, the construction of a processing plant and storage building, and the purchase of equipment such as wood chippers and tractors. The EGTC has also supported the organization of agricultural forums and the purchase of equipment through externally managed tenders.

## **European Common Future Building EGTC**

The European Common Future Building EGTC was registered in 2012 and includes eight municipalities on the Hungarian-Romanian borderland. The EGTC operates in an area of 575.6 km<sup>2</sup>, covering the Békési-hát region and the eastern part of Arad County. Its headquarter is located in Battonya, Hungary, and it has a population of 34,254. The main objective of the EGTC is to strengthen economic and social cohesion among its members through cross-border cooperation. Its specific objectives include the creation of joint regional development plans and the implementation of joint projects, the establishment and operation of joint institutions to facilitate cooperation and support projects, and the promotion and management of tourism through the development of joint products, the improvement of tourism infrastructure, and joint marketing.

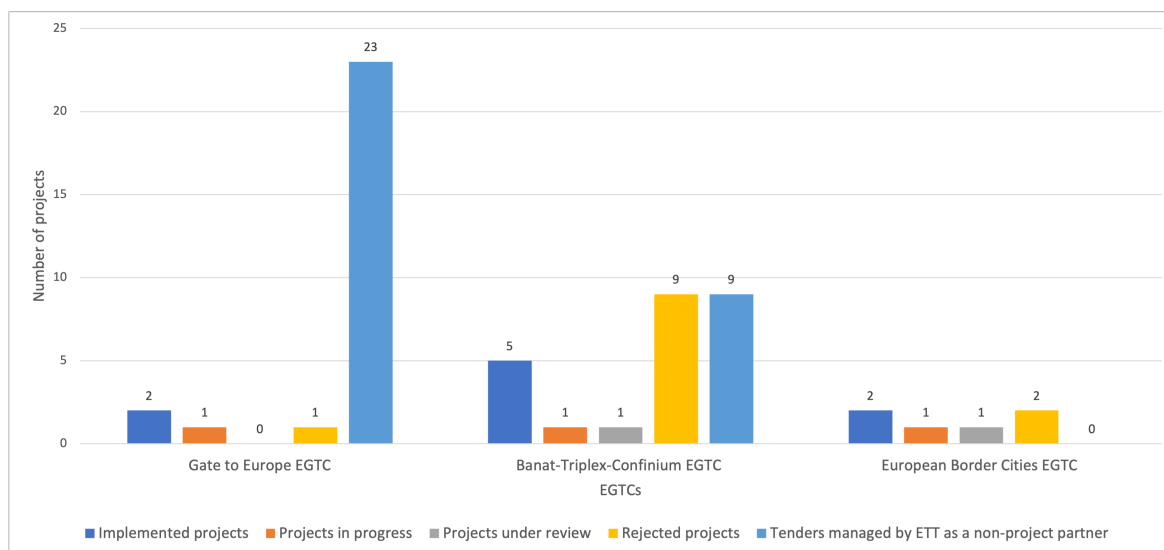
The European Common Future Building EGTC has not yet had the capacity or opportunity to focus on cross-border economic development. Its recent Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme project, called COMPSPORT, aimed to create an active social group in the area through events that bring citizens and organizations on both sides of the border closer together and establish better connections despite cultural and language barriers. While this may be a prerequisite for economic cooperation, it is not economic cooperation in itself.

## European Border Cities EGTC

The European Border Cities EGTC is the youngest on the Hungarian-Romanian border section, having been registered in 2014. It brings together the municipalities of Nyíregyháza and Satu Mare, and covers a total of 411.3 km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of 236,695. The EGTC's registered office is located in Nyíregyháza, Hungary, and its general objective is to strengthen economic and social cohesion among its members through cross-border cooperation. Specific objectives of the EGTC include the elaboration of joint regional development plans, the development and implementation of common projects, the promotion of tourism through joint product development, the development of tourism infrastructure, and joint marketing efforts.

However, the European Border Cities EGTC has not yet reached the stage where it can directly and effectively promote economic cross-border cooperation. Instead, it has focused on projects that prepare the ground for such cooperation, such as CultDialogue and Kultaction. CultDialogue aims to increase the capacity of cultural organizations and establish a methodology for cooperation in the field of culture, while Kultaction organizes traditional events, strengthens cooperation between institutes, expands the range of programs, and creates opportunities for experience sharing.

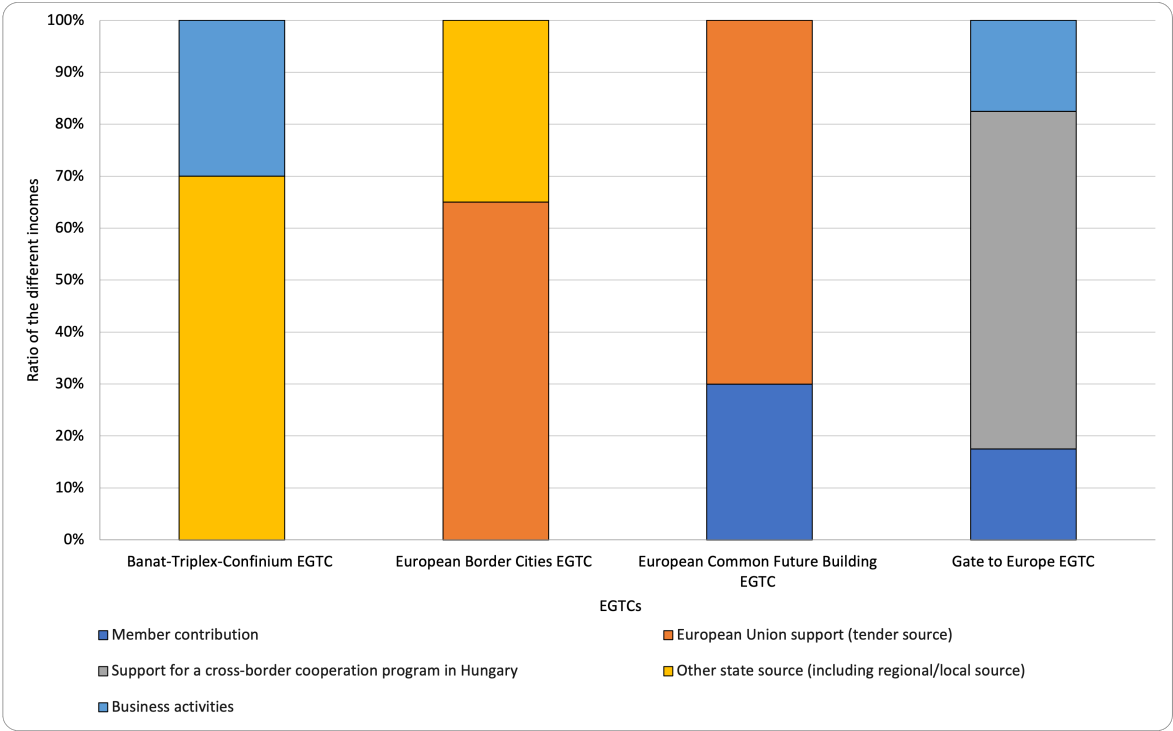
To summarise the overview of the EGTCs operating on the Hungarian-Romanian border it can be said that three out of the four EGTCs were relatively active (Figure 12), being involved since their establishment (the year of establishment is presented in Table 5) until 2021 in a series of projects (Gate to Europe 27, BTC 25 and European Border Cities 6).



**Figure 12:** Ratio of the different types of projects and their sum in euro according to the relevant EGTCs

Source: own elaboration based on (CESCI, 2022)

These projects in turn yielded incomes for the EGTCs (Figure 13). Out of the three EGTCs where there is data in 2020 the Gate to Europe EGTC had the highest income (76,714 euros compared to its 30,110 euros expenses), then BTC EGTC (35,752 euros income and 31,115 euros expense), while European Border Cities EGTC had the same amount of income as expense (10,593 EUR).



**Figure 13:** Ratio of the different incomes of the analysed EGTCs  
*Source: own elaboration based on (CESCI, 2022)*

In conclusion, the Euroregions and EGTCs were only able to effectively improve cross-border economic development on the Hungarian-Romanian border to a limited degree, as their activities were mostly focused on preparing the circumstances for more direct and effective initiatives, were sporadic and small-scale, and therefore did not have enough time or scope to have a long-lasting impact. However, these activities were still important and contributed to the incremental improvement of cross-border economic cooperation.

**2.2.4 Indicators relating to the "people" factor**

Arguably, the most interesting group of indicators are dealing with the "people" factor, i.e. how people shape the borderscape. Unfortunately, for almost all the indicators belonging here there is a striking lack of systematically collected comparable data. This is partly due to the fact that these indicators are often operating with relatively new concepts and partly due to the fact that their inherent nature is not necessarily suitable for quantification.

The first subgroup deals with the perceptions of distance by analysing the mental distance of the adjacent regions and the level of mutual trust. The mental distance the people living



in the borderland experience with connection to the border is “*always relative to what is on the other side of it*” (Barth, 1995). This was evidenced by a study on the determinants of economic cross-border relationships of small and medium-sized companies in border regions at the Belgian-Netherlands border (van Houtum, 2000) where it was found that people’s mental distance towards the other side, as well as their perception of the border’s symbolic value, “*affected the number of such relationships significantly and in a negative fashion*” (Popova, 2011, p. 178), to put it simply the shorter the distance is, the more likely it is to have a lively cross-border cooperation scene.

Similarly, another study was conducted among high school students in Szeged, Hungary, to examine their mental distance from the South-Eastern border of Hungary, specifically the border with Serbia and Romania. The authors of the study analysed 93 responses and found that two-thirds of the students only marked settlements within Hungary, and not in the neighbouring countries, despite the fact that there was nothing in the survey to discourage them from doing so. Additionally, the survey revealed that students generally perceived settlements on the other side of the border as being further away, with the exception of well-known settlements. The study suggests that the national border may act as an obstacle in the development of the students’ perception of space (Balázs & Farsang, 2016).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among scholars in the role of trust and social capital in transnational relationships and cross-border cooperation which was reflected in a series of studies published in the topic (Rippl et al., 2009). Researchers have found that trust is a crucial factor in policy networks and cross-border cooperation because it provides an added level of confidence in situations where knowledge is limited and risk assessment is fragmented (Switzer et al., 2013). Studies have analysed the various forms of trust that exist, including rational-personal trust, which is based on an individual’s decision to participate in cooperation; social-cultural trust, which is affected by factors such as language and working methods; general-personal trust, which is influenced by experiences of trustworthiness and familiarity; and historical-institutional trust, which is based on the path-dependent development of cooperation activities and foreign policies (Koch, 2017). These forms of trust are interconnected and can reveal the ambivalent nature of cooperation practices, which are influenced by territorial and relational factors. Thus, trust among actors in cooperation networks is essential for overcoming territorial barriers through relational actions that strengthen the transnational actor-network and promote cooperation across borders.

It is striking though that similar studies on the Hungarian-Romanian border are largely missing. What comes through from a similar analysis is that the level of mutual trust between Hungary and Romania has varied over time and has been influenced by a number of factors, including political, historical, and cultural differences. Overall, the relationship between Hungary and Romania can be considered complex and dynamic, with elements of both cooperation and tension.

The second category of the "people" factor indicators relate to the perceptions of otherness.

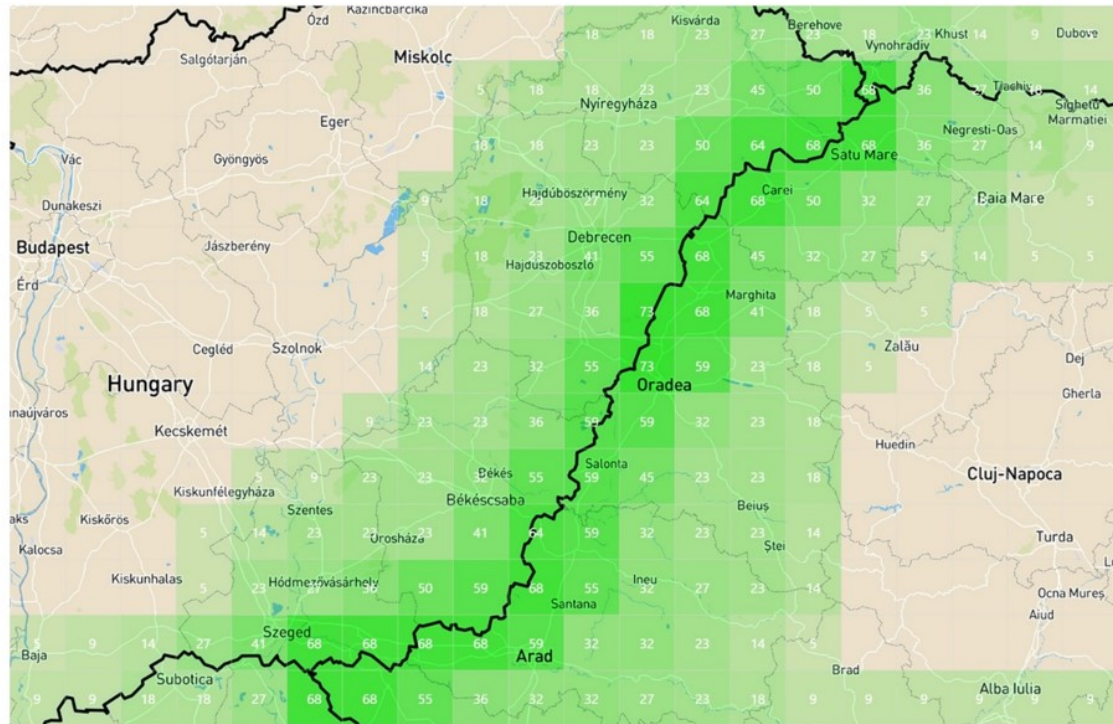
Perception of otherness refers to the way in which individuals and groups perceive those who are different from them, i.e. in this case the people on the other side of the border. One of the best ways to understand this could be the analysis of the mediascapes of the borderland, as this shows how media outlets shape the way people understand and perceive their neighbours. However, such studies for the Hungarian-Romanian borderland are largely missing from the literature.

Mental maps of the border citizens, however, can also be telling about the perception of otherness. Analysing the perception of the Hungarian-Romanian border in literature involves taking into account various elements such as geography, history, language, culture, economy, and psychology. These complexities are further influenced by personal and inter-generational observations and experiences. Mental mapping as “*a unique, personal, and selective representation of reality*” (Sulsters, 2005, p. 1) is suitable to grasp these complexities as these maps are based on personal experience, but can also be based on indirect information from mass media or reputation. However, this method is not without criticism and some experts doubt its accuracy. Critics argue that drawings, pictures, or sketches cannot be read objectively. Despite this criticism, more and more scholars are using this method in their research (Broadhead, 2010; Le Rider, 2008; Rédei et al., 2011).

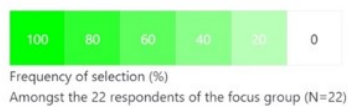
Within the project of the Jean Monnet network called "Borders in motion" (Frontem) a mental map was carried out<sup>2</sup> between April and May 2022. The mental map was created based on 22 online answers where primarily but not exclusively students were asked to mark those territories on the map showing Hungary and Romania which they consider to be border regions. The smallest unit with which the participants could mark a territory was 20x20 km; the number and location of tiles they could identify were not limited. The result is shown on Figure 14.

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<sup>2</sup>The cartographic project of the mental map itself was implemented by Dr. Pauline Pupier from the Artois University who gave her written consent to me to reference the map, which was not published within the project.



Frontem research seminar: Map your cross-border region



**Figure 14:** Results of the mental mapping exercise on the Hungarian-Romanian border  
 Source: Dr. Pauline Pupier, prepared within the framework of the Frontem project

The survey revealed a wide range of views among participants on what constitutes the border area. The smallest area selected was only 1 tile (400 km<sup>2</sup>), while the largest was 138 tiles (55,200 km<sup>2</sup>). The average area selected was 46.4 tiles (18,545 km<sup>2</sup>) which more-or-less indicates a scale of territory that mathematically would be needed to pad the border with a 40 km distance in both directions. It is also observed that the respondents did not mark the tiles in a symmetrical or mathematically precise way and the highest frequency of selection is quite low (73%), meaning that there is no area along the border that is identified by every participant as a border region. The highest frequency selections are located towards Oradea (Romania), Nagykeréki (Hungary) and Pocsaj (Hungary), which illustrates that there is no consensus on cross-border centrality. Therefore, the aggregate mental map of the Hungarian-Romanian cross-border region corresponds to a diffuse cross-border strip of about 50–150 km wide that only 2/3 of the respondents recognize as such.

The mental map also revealed that participants tended to identify more tiles on the Romanian side as border regions compared to the Hungarian side, implying that there may be a reason why the geographical perception of the border is more extensive on the Romanian

side. Additionally, it is interesting to note that some of the participants consider even the furthest regions on either side of the border as still being part of the border region, with the farthest point on the Romanian side being 320-350 km from the closest border crossing point, while the farthest point on the Hungarian side is only half that distance, at 120–150 km from the closest border crossing point.

Finally, the third subcategory in the "people" factor relates to the ownership of the shared territory meaning how much people regard the whole cross-border region as their own. To understand this, the reasons and motivations for border crossings and the geographic scope of cross-border mobility could be analysed. However, once again it is problematic that "reliable data on movement is often scarce, imprecise, and out of date" (Blanford et al., 2015). This is the case even though during the COVID-19 pandemic there were voices propagating to use of anonymised mobile phone data to model the mobility patterns of people in the border region.

Since this is not available, only from sporadic newspaper reporting and other non-academic sources can it be concluded that the main reason for people to cross the Hungarian-Romanian border is for work, visiting friends and family, tourism, education, healthcare and shopping. Lately visiting friends and family, tourism and healthcare-related visits seem to be more dominant. At the same time there is a growing tendency for students coming from Romania to study in Hungary as in 2015 Romania was the 8<sup>th</sup> on the list of sending students to its western neighbour, this increased to the 4<sup>th</sup> place (with 2,645 students) by 2020 (KSH, 2023). It needs to be emphasized here that only a part of these students is coming from the Romanian side of the border region and stay on the Hungarian side of the border region and not selecting a destination further in Hungary or coming from other parts of Romania.

To sum up the literature review it can be stated that the economic cross-border cooperation has already been under scrutiny in terms of its impacts (Medeiros, 2015), its methodology used (Jaschitz, 2020), the nature of the process (Grix, 2002) along with other aspects. One of the most outstanding branches of this field of study focuses on the main actors of cross-border cooperation (A. Badulescu et al., 2014; Koch, 2018; Plangger, 2019), such as national minorities (Klatt, 2006; Kühl, 2004; Malloy, 2010). Despite this, through the literature review, I found that there is a considerable gap in the literature when it comes to the assessment of the role of national minorities in cross-border economic development processes. This seems true both from a methodological point of view and also in a territorial sense since the Hungarian-Romanian border region is not well explored yet in this regard.

### **2.2.5 Current challenges and succeeded of the Hungarian-Romanian border section**

The Hungarian-Romanian border region currently faces several economic, environmental, infrastructural, and governance problems that pose significant challenges to its development (Pásztor & Péntes, 2013). Economically, the region exhibits a stark disparity in GDP per capita, with all areas falling below the national average, except for Timiș in Romania, which

is still below the Hungarian national average (Koulov, 2020). Moreover, the entire region lags far behind the EU-27 average (Brodny & Tutak, 2022), indicating the need for substantial economic growth efforts.

In the analysed period, entrepreneurship and business support initiatives have struggled to create sustainable job opportunities (Balcsók et al., 2019), particularly in Romanian counties like Bihor, Satu Mare, and Arad, which have witnessed declining numbers of newly created jobs. Additionally, the region predominantly relies on low-level technologies (Răbontu & Babucea, 2020) and lacks business sophistication, impacting its overall competitiveness.

The loss of human capital to other EU countries is another pressing issue, especially in the Romanian region (Botezat & Moraru, 2020), except for Timiș. This brain drain can hinder economic development and innovation potential. Moreover, the low productivity change (Merlevede & Purice, 2019) in sectors like construction and financial activities underscores the need for revitalization and innovation.

Infrastructure challenges encompass lower-than-average transport performance, limited rail connectivity, and competition among regional airports (Komornicki & Goliszek, 2023). The absence of direct train routes between major cities like Szeged and Timișoara hampers mobility, affecting students, workers, researchers, and professionals.

Governance weaknesses further hinder development, as the region faces territorial fragmentation, disparities in administrative competencies between Hungary and Romania, and a lack of administrative capacity in rural areas (Polgár, 2022). The Quality of Government Index reflects a lagging region in terms of government services, with significant disparities between Hungarian and Romanian regions.

While ethnically motivated clashes and conflicts between citizens in the Hungarian-Romanian border region is not usual in these days, there is still a palpable tension (Barwiński, 2019) around ethnic issues which is time to time politically fuelled from both central governments. True reconciliation and the collective resolution of traumas is still something that needs to be achieved in the Hungarian-Romanian relation.

Despite of these challenges and the historical complexity of the region, the Hungarian-Romanian border area has some remarkable successes as well. The selected achievements of this border area mentioned below demonstrates how cross-border cooperation, economic development, cultural exchange, infrastructure projects, and environmental efforts had a beneficial impact on the region.

Firstly, EU programs, such as Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme, have driven economic development (Marchis, 2022). Business networks strived to empower small and medium-sized enterprises to access new markets and collaborate across borders, in order to facilitate innovation and entrepreneurship. This demonstrates the potential of EU-backed cross-border programs in addressing common challenges and bolstering regional development. EU funding also has catalysed infrastructure projects. For instance, the Debrecen-Nyíregyháza M4 motorway extension, co-funded by the EU, improved transportation links

with Romania, stimulating cross-border trade and cooperation. These investments bridge economic gaps and contribute to regional growth.

Secondly, cultural exchange programs have played a pivotal role in fostering unity and understanding. Annual festivals like the Szeged-Romanian Days and Timișoara Hungarian Days celebrate and preserve cultural identities. Language courses and cultural centers further encourage cross-cultural dialogue. Such initiatives not only strengthen bonds but also promote social cohesion in the border region.

Thirdly, infrastructure development has enhanced connectivity, bolstering economic ties. The Nagylak-Csanádpalota railway border crossing modernization reduced transit times, lowered transportation costs, and facilitated trade. This project aligns with EU Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) objectives, promoting cross-border mobility and economic integration.

As Batranyi states *“due to the partly historical reasons and partly the consequences of previous unfavorable macro- and micro-economic factors, (...) strenghtening cross-border cooperation is a vital development policy issue for Hungary and its neighbors”* (Baranyi, 2017, p. 18). Consequently, addressing the prevalent multifaceted challenges requires robust cross-border cooperation, innovative business support models, investments in infrastructure, and improvements in government services. Bridging the economic, environmental, infrastructural, and governance gaps is essential for unlocking the region’s untapped potential and fostering sustainable growth.

### 3. Methodology

For this research, I chose the constructivist research paradigm as the philosophical approach because it says that *“people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences”* (Adom et al., 2016, p. 2) thus it emphasizes the active role of the researcher and the participants in creating meaning and understanding in the research process. Constructivism holds that knowledge and understanding are constructed through interactions between individuals and their environment and that people actively construct their own understanding of the world around them. This approach is widely accepted in the literature (for example (Massey, 2005), but also in the Hungarian literature many references are pointing towards the constructivist approach ((Benedek, 2010), (Fábián, 2012), (Faragó, 2013), (Kovách, 2012), (Varró, 2004). Constructivism denies metaphysical realism, instead of depicting reality it deals with its (re)construction, it is *“not looking to understand the ontological reality, but rather the lived experience of the world”* (Faragó, 2013).

Constructivism *“offers suitable tools to reveal historical layers and reinterpret the changes of East European borders”* (Fábián, 2013). In addition, the constructivist reading of border regions gives the possibility to interpret the semiotics of the border which forms the mutual concepts of “me” and “the other” in an anthropological, discursive way ((Newman & Paasi, 1998)). Thus, this research paradigm served best the purposes of my research as it aimed to shed light on the perspectives and meanings of the citizens of the Hungarian-Romanian cross-border territory, rather than to impose my own views or preconceptions on the data. This way through an iterative process an understanding could be gained of how people construct meaning and make sense of their experiences, and how these constructions change over time in sensitive and sometimes controversial topics such as national minority and cross-border cooperation.

Consequently, the constructivist research paradigm proved to be suitable for analysing the role of national minorities in economic cross-border cooperation, as it emphasizes the active role of individuals and groups in creating their own experiences and understanding of the world. This can be particularly useful when studying the perspectives and experiences of national minorities in relation to cross-border economic cooperation, which was done through several methods.

I have designed a complex mixed method methodology (built up by literature review, document analysis, interviews, focus group, statistical analysis and numerical project analysis as detailed below) because this allowed for the triangulation of the data, comparing and contrasting the findings from one method against the other. This is hoped to increase the

validity and reliability of the research and provide a more nuanced understanding of the topic (Hall, 2013).

However, it is worth noting that constructivism also might have some drawbacks or pitfalls. For instance, it is sometimes associated with researcher bias, selection bias or language bias. In order to minimize this, I tried to be critical, transparent and reflective with my own thought process which I actively sought to check against the literature and other researchers' views. Also, the interviews were carried out in the preferred language of the interviewee in each case in order to assure the fullest possibility for self-expression. Furthermore, ethical considerations were also taken seriously; informed consent and anonymity for the stated information were ensured.

### **3.1 Document analysis**

In order to comprehensively answer the research questions, a thorough literature review was carried out comprising works from a diverse range of fields such as Economics, Border Studies, Human Geography and Political Science. However, it is worth taking into consideration that despite the best efforts, it is almost certain that some relevant materials are still missing since "*the literature on border studies is so vast and diverse that it would be useless to cover it all*" (Popescu, 2012). In the literature review primarily materials written in English, Hungarian and Romanian were analysed, in a smaller scale some relevant French sources were also included.

Subscribing to the idea of Cooper (1988), the literature review was created with the broad goal of critically analysing the literature, integrating diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives and identifying central issues or methodological problems in the existing literature. However, these goals can be achieved in more than one way so I followed Snyder (2019) taxonomy and applied the semi-systematic and integrative approaches to the literature review.

The literature review used a combination of two methods, the semi-systematic and integrative approaches. The semi-systematic approach was chosen because it is well-suited for topics that have been conceptualized differently and researched in various disciplines (Snyder, 2019). This approach was applied to the qualitative parts of the literature review and helped to provide not only an overview of the current state of knowledge on the topic but also a historical perspective. The integrative approach was also used, which aims to evaluate, analyse, and combine existing studies to generate new insights and understanding by identifying gaps in the literature and providing a basis for the development of new theoretical frameworks and perspectives. This approach often requires a more creative way of collecting data as the goal is not to cover all articles ever published on the topic but rather "*to combine perspectives and insights from different fields or research traditions*" (Snyder, 2019, p. 336).

Putting these approaches into practice required a three-step process. First, I collected a wide range of keywords to identify the possibly informative publications. Second, I evaluated the found literature for its relevance, credibility and quality. Finally, I organised and analysed



the selected materials. I grouped the literature into themes and sub-themes and wrote a critical summary of the findings which provided the context for the empirical research. In the empirical part of the research, two types of document analysis methods were used: the evaluation of the border counties' development strategies and the assessment of the EGTC's different project databases.

The qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used to examine the development strategies of Hungarian-Romanian border counties because this can be "*fast, flexible and effective when applied to direct discourse and textual data*" (Cavanagh, 1997). This analytical approach helped me to understand large amounts of data by grouping words and concepts relevant to the research into categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The research mainly focused on words related to national minorities and I used the NVivo program to create reports. With these findings then I designed a benchmark made of three factors: the number of chapters dedicated to the topic in the documents, the number of references relevant to national minorities in the visions and in the SWOT analyses. To ensure comparability, I scaled and assigned weights to these values based on their importance: the average density of the highlighted words within a given document was weighted by a multiplier of 0.4, references found in the SWOT analysis by a multiplier of 0.3, mentions in the vision by a multiplier of 0.2 and the number of dedicated chapters by a multiplier of 0.1. After the quantitative analysis, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted to identify the focal points of the content in the strategy documents. I grouped the references to national minorities into thematic units to identify potential trends.

Secondly, I analysed the EGTC's projects from two sources. On the one hand, the EGTC monitor<sup>3</sup> platform was used which was developed by the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives in 2021 and it contains the EGTCs interactive maps, basic data, detailed list of projects as well as recent news presenting their activities. On the other hand, I used a publication, of which I am one of the authors, published on the same platform called "Snapshot of EGTC's with Hungarian Participation" which offers an "*overview of the situation and performance of the EGTCs with Hungarian participation*" (CESCI, 2022). The publication relies on the project database created for the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade by the EGTCs and contained data on nearly 440 projects of the groupings, as well as the results of a survey among the EGTCs, conducted by CESCI. The results of the document analysis methods are summarised in the section 4.2.

## **3.2 Qualitative methods**

Qualitative methods are important as they provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topic and allow for the exploration of participants' perspectives. Consequently, in order to best serve the purposes of this research I used two types of qualitative methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups. The majority of these

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<sup>3</sup>See: <https://egtcmirror.cesci-net.eu/en/>

results are summarised in the section 4.3.

For the purposes of the research, I designed a semi-structured in-depth interview (the set of questions is included in the Appendix in the original Romanian (Appendix C) and Hungarian (Appendix D) versions as well as the English translation (Appendix B) as it is an effective tool “*to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or sets of experiences*” (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 52). I chose the semi-structured approach as it focused on specific items related to the research question while still allowing participants to provide detailed and in-depth answers. A responsive interviewing style was used, which is based on the assumption that “*people interpret events and construct their own understanding of what happened, and that the researcher’s job is to listen, balance, and analyse these constructions in order to understand how people see their worlds*” (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 10). This was achieved by asking three different types of questions: main questions, probes and follow-up questions, which helped to gain accurate and comprehensive information.

The interviews took place online or over the phone whichever was more suitable for the interviewees. Even though the option for the in-person interview was also offered, none of the participants preferred it. The online format proved to be the most popular as it provided flexibility and comfort; the participants could select the time and place where they were able to openly speak. The length of the interviews was determined by the interviewee’s experiences and willingness to share; the shortest interview was 35 minutes, and the longest was 1 hour and 20 minutes. The interviews themselves took place between 7<sup>th</sup> September 2022 and 13<sup>th</sup> December 2022.

I selected the participants according to the snowballing method. After the most renowned experts and local stakeholders were interviewed, they were asked to name organisations or individuals who they consider knowledgeable in the topic. This method proved to work because unconventional actors also appeared on the radar and then turned out to be considerably insightful on the topic. I continued the process until the collected dataset started to get saturated and the new interviews became repetitive. All in all, 14 interviews were carried out, and the list is included in Appendix A. In order to guarantee that the answers are included anonymously, every participant was assigned a random code upon which they are referred in the research.

Out of the 14 interviewees at the time of the research, 6 interviewees resided on the Romanian side of the border, however, several mentioned that they lived for longer periods on both sides of the border. 9 participants claimed that their mother tongue was Hungarian, but 8 were bilingual and spoke both Hungarian and Romanian on a high level. The interviews were always conducted in the preferred language of the interviewee: Romanian or Hungarian. All the quotes that are included in the dissertation were translated into English by myself.

Stemming from the above-explained constructivist research philosophy, which posits that “*reality is a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world*”

(Elkind, 2005, p. 334), there is no single reality or truth regarding how the border is or can be perceived, but rather it is created by individuals and groups. Constructivism acknowledges that reality is a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world, and therefore, to discover the underlying meaning of events and activities, reality needs to be interpreted which is better to be done in several ways.

To do this, apart from the above-mentioned methods, I also incorporated the results of a focus group discussion. The focus group discussion (part of which was a mental mapping exercise) was organised within the project of the Jean Monnet network "Borders in motion" (Frontem) in which I also participated in a professional capacity. The project was launched on November 18, 2019, and is planned to finish by the Summer of 2023. Under the leadership of Sciences Po Strasbourg, the network had seven partners: the University of Southern Denmark, the Euro-Institute, the Centre for Cross-Border Studies in Armagh, the Babeş-Bolyai University, the Catholic University of Louvain and the University of Victoria in Canada.

The project aimed to benchmark and provide a toolkit on different border management systems and the evolving perception of borders by citizens. As part of the project, a focus group discussion was held on May 19, 2022, at Cluj Napoca, Romania, with the active contribution of 10 Hungarian and Romanian participants coming from various cities and backgrounds in academia, public policy, border services, civil society etc. The majority of the participants were already well-established stakeholders in their respective fields, most of them belonging to the agegroup of 30-50 years-old, but there were two students involved as well. Regarding the origin of the participants, around half of them were from the border region, some of them were still living there or maintaining close relations with the territory. The focus group was dedicated to assessing border perceptions and the selection of the participants were mostly motivated by their broad understanding and connection to the topic. The quotes used in this research were taken by myself at the event and are disclosed here anonymised.

Furthermore, the mental mapping exercise of the Frontem project was also used in the writing of this paper. The cartographic project of mental map itself was implemented by Dr. Pauline Pupier from the Artois University in France between April and May 2022, however, its interpretation is the result of my original work. The mental map is created based on 22 online answers where primarily but not exclusively students were asked to mark those territories on the map showing Romania and Hungary which they consider to be border regions. The participants of the mental mapping were not the same as the participants of the focus group in order to broaden the collected input for the topic. The smallest unit with which the participants could mark a territory was 20x20 km; the number and location of tiles they could identify were not limited.

### 3.3 Quantitative methods

In order to provide an as well-rounded assessment as possible, I also relied on two types of quantitative methods: statistical data analysis and numerical project analysis.

Statistical data is vital in evaluating the role of national minorities on the Hungarian-Romanian border because it provides a quantitative and objective basis for understanding the socio-economic characteristics of these minority groups. Additionally, statistical data can be used to tap into the changes over time. Overall, statistical data is useful for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation on the Hungarian-Romanian border region.

Primarily I analysed the statistical data collected by the national statistical offices of the two countries and the respective counties. In certain instances, I used statistical data collected on the European Union level which whenever it was possible was given a preference since in these cases the data harmonisation did not have to be taken separately into consideration. In the case of the most important indicators, I prepared visualisations in form of diagrams (using MS Office programmes such as Excel and PowerPoint) and maps (using ArcGIS and Adobe InDesign) in order to help with the understanding of the data.

Whereas ideally a broader set of indicators should have been used, it was a huge problem that large-scale, comparable, time series data was simply not available. This is an enormous deficiency of the territory which is suffered by all researchers, policymakers and practitioners, however, its remedy is outside of the scope of the present doctoral research.

The main indicators that were used are:

- Territory of the border counties
- Population of the border counties
- Ratio of national minorities in the border counties
- GDP per capita
- Net migration
- Unemployment ratios
- Volume of cross-border traffic within the programme region
- Number of visitors produced by citizens coming from the neighbouring country

At the same time, other relevant references to further statistical data or research interpreting statistical data were also included in the analysis if it added to the given point.

The second type of quantitative method I used was the numerical analysis of the cross-border projects implemented in the Hungarian-Romanian border region between 2007 and 2020 within the framework of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme. For this, I employed the official database of <https://keep.eu><sup>4</sup>, which is the website created by the

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<sup>4</sup>The data was downloaded on 6 March, 2022.

European Union for the professional community for the official data communication of cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes. The database was built and is maintained by Interact as part of its mission with the support of the European Commission and as such it is publicly available.

Since the database covers the periods 2000–2006, 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, all relevant projects for the analysis were available in terms of the temporal scope of the research. In total, I downloaded and analysed the details of 564 such projects, the vast majority (455) of which come from the period 2007–2013, and 109 from the period 2014–2020. All in all, from the two programmes 1,393 partnerships were scrutinized. The analysis mostly used simple mathematic methods such as calculations with the budget or the number/ratio of the different projects.

In order to complete the analysis first based on the published descriptions I grouped the projects into different categories. One of the angles was to see whether the given projects focus on the analysed national minorities in any form. Those projects that were found to deal with the national minorities were further subjected to inquiry to see in what capacity the national minorities appear in the descriptions and how this is proportional to the entirety of the projects from this border section between 2007–2020.

The other categorisation I completed was meant to measure the level of cooperation the projects strive to realise at the end of the project implementation period. This was done by classifying the projects into three types of cooperation: (1) ad-hoc event, development, exchange, (2) regular events, long-standing cooperation or (3) cross-border institution, service or product creation. Then I compared the results of these analyses with the results of the thematic analysis to see the prevalent cooperation level of those projects which are relevant from the point of view of economic development. Finally, I visualised the conclusion in a unique coordinate system designed for this purpose and presented it in the section 4.1.

## 4. Empirical research

### 4.1 Role of national minorities in cross-border projects

Analysing the role of national minorities in economic cross-border cooperation is vital because it can provide insight into how diverse communities can contribute to the economic development of regions and countries<sup>5</sup>. Research based on case-studies observed that “*high level of population fractionalisation has a strong and positive influence on economic development in the short, medium and long run*” (Rodríguez-Pose & von Berlepsch, 2019, p. 873) and at the same time “*high level of polarization undermine development*” (ibid). Consequently, by understanding the unique perspectives, capabilities and roles of national minorities strategies can be created and implemented to leverage these strengths for mutual benefit.

The analysis of the role of national minorities can also help in understanding the dynamics of cross-border cooperation, how it can be enhanced and how it can be beneficial for the minorities themselves and for the wider territorial context in which they live. It also can help to build more inclusive and equitable societies by ensuring that economic opportunities are accessible to everyone. This is in harmony with the EU’s main goal as it was always a spatial endeavour “*unifying the space of the continent while attempting to reduce regional inequalities through seeking social and economic cohesion*” (Madanipour et al., 2022, p. 820).

When it comes to cross-border projects, in theory they could be funded from several sources, these being (1) the European Union through various programmes such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) for cross-border projects; (2) national government funding from Hungary and Romania; (3) private sector funding; (4) international organizations, such as the World Bank or the Council of Europe; and (5) other funding sources, such as grants from foundations, or crowdfunding. Even though there is no official data, according to the stakeholder interviews as well as document analysis it seems that on the Hungarian-Romanian border section between 2007 and 2020 the most prominent type of cross-border projects was those which were carried out within the framework of the European Union’s Interreg.

The Interreg programme was created in 1989 as part of the EU’s Cohesion Policy to promote cross-border cooperation and regional development within the European Union (Medeiros, 2018). The first Interreg programme was launched in 1990 and ran until 1993. Since then, the programme has been renewed and expanded several times, with the latest

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<sup>5</sup>This section is written based on my article submitted previously to *Tér és Társadalom* journal.

programme (Interreg V-A) running between 2014 to 2020. From its creation until the end of the latest programme “*approximately 30 billion euros will have been spent*” (Durand & Decoville, 2020, p. 2) to promote cooperation between border regions and to address common challenges and activate the potential for economic growth (Diakoniuk, 2021). In one of the most recent publications of the European Commission called "Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions" among the main goals of these programmes economic growth is named as one of the highest apart from the improvement of connectivity between border territories, protection of the environment or improvement of public health (European Commission, 2017).

The Hungarian-Romanian border has a long history of such cross-border cooperation projects dating back to 1996 when the first pilot programme was launched. The original contract signed in September 1996 was perceived by many as marking the end of a centuries-long period of tension and mutual mistrust and it was seen as a major step towards cooperation and removing obstacles in the two countries' path to Euro-Atlantic integration. It also established regular communication and consultations between the leading institutions of the two states through joint government meetings and consultations with parliament presidents. However, there are those who argue that this change “*did not bring the two peoples closer together neither helped the historical reconciliation*” (Salat, 2009, p. 347) nor did it create a new narrative to address unresolved historical grievances regardless that the declared aim of the programme was to “*consolidate the links between the population in the cross-border region, with its communities and its economic operators*” (Csoka, 2018, p. 98).

In the period 1996-2003 from the EU Phare CBC Fund 62 million euros were allocated for the development of key facilities in the border area, such as the modernization of border crossings and roads, as well as business infrastructure development projects (Jusztin, 2005, p. 108). Environmental protection was also an important objective, but projects that would directly build on the national minorities or economic development were largely missing.

In the period between 2007–2013, important new features were introduced, such as the financing instrument becoming the European Regional Development Fund. The programme's aim was to increase convergence, regional competitiveness, and employment, as well as to promote European territorial cooperation (F. Feier & Badulescu, 2016, p. 50). The programme was divided into two priorities: (1) improving the key conditions for joint sustainable development in the cooperation area and (2) strengthening social and economic cohesion in the border region for which a total of 275,179,861 euros were available.

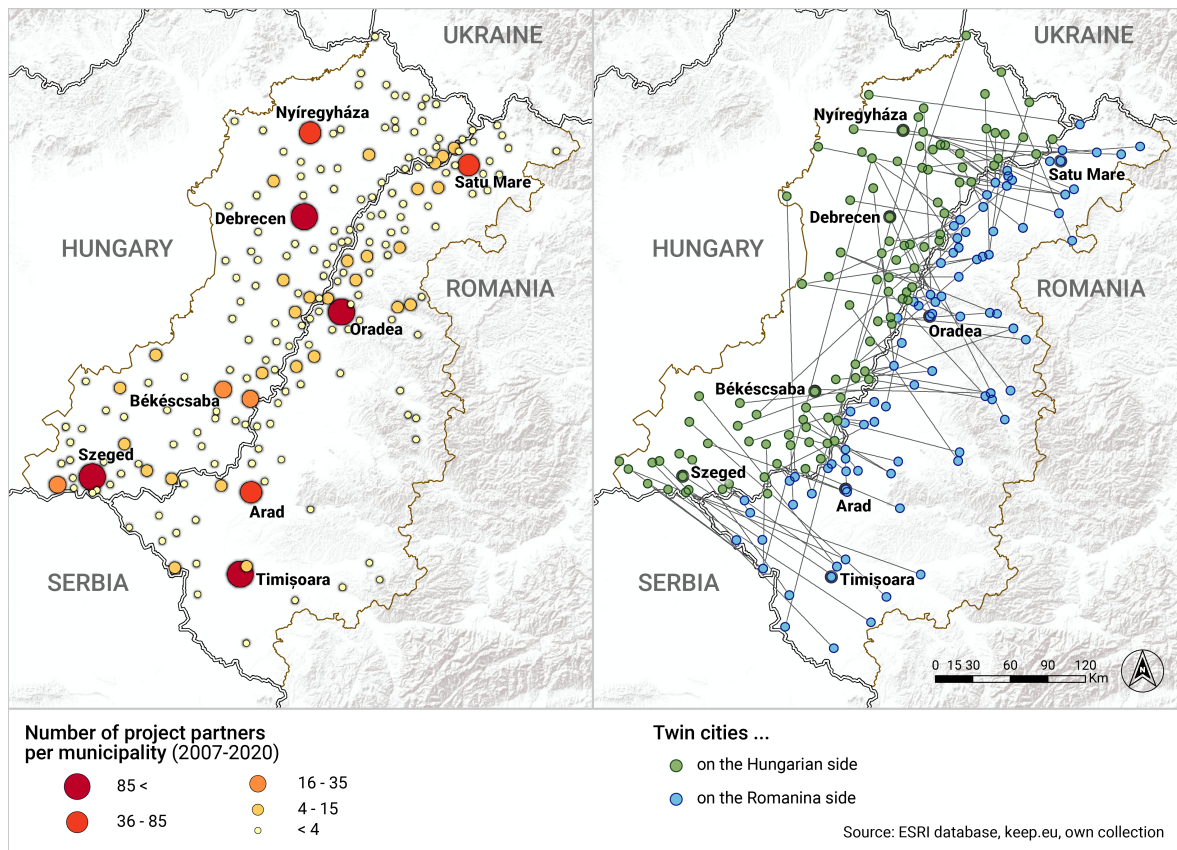
Between 2014–2020, the objective of the programme was to uphold the support for cooperation in the border area. The programme continued to be financed by the European Regional Development Fund and was supplemented by national co-financing. Six priority axes were formulated: (1) social inclusion, (2) environmental protection and resource efficiency, (3) sustainable and quality employment, (4) network infrastructures in transport and energy, (5) adaptation to climate change and risk prevention, and (6) efficient public administration, for

which a total of 202,134,399 euro was available.

The main objectives of cross-border programmes have always been “*to reduce the segregation effect and to capitalize on the territorial capital of border regions*” (Medeiros, 2015, p. 105). At the same time, “*the objective of the CBC Programme is to bring the different actors closer to each other in order to better exploit the opportunities offered by the joint development of the border area*” (F.-C. Feier, 2013, p. 152). The different actors also mean the Hungarians living in the Romanian border section as well as the Romanian community living in the Hungarian border section and their varied institutions, organisations and other non-formal community groupings, but also interpreted as mere individuals living in the borderland and using the space for their best interest.

Examining the role of national minorities in Interreg projects involves scrutinizing the territorial distribution of project partners (Figure 15). In the Romanian-Hungarian border region, municipalities along or close to the border are more likely to have project partners, potentially linked to the catalyzing role of national minorities in cross-border initiatives. Urban centers with higher population density and economic activity tend to attract more project partners, fostering collaboration. Analysing the correlation between project partners and twin cities along the border reveals interesting patterns. The regions with larger minority populations tend to have a lower dependency on formalized relations like twin cities, possibly capitalizing on extensive informal networks. The size of project budgets and the involvement of nationalities as partners also play a role, with larger cities winning higher ERDF contributions, possibly due to their vibrant cultural, economic, and institutional life.





**Figure 15:** Comparative maps on the number of projects and the twincity network  
 Source: Viktória Jánosi

Due to the importance of this topic and its relevance from the point of view of the second research question of this thesis, this subchapter aims to contribute to the discussion on the roles of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation by answering three interrelated questions: (1) What themes supporting the development of the economy appeared in the two analysed programme cycles (2007–2013 and 2014–2020) and to what extent did they receive support? (2) In how many projects did the role of national minorities appear and in what context? (3) What is the level of cross-border cooperation in the Interreg projects? The following sections are mostly written based on the data published in the official Interreg repository as detailed in Chapter 3.3.

#### 4.1.1 Economic analysis of themes in the cross-border projects

The Interreg programme, which has been in existence for 30 years, has had varying levels of success (Wassenberg & Reitel, 2015) in facilitating cooperation, networking, trust-building, and finding practical solutions (Frățczak-Müller & Mielczarek-Żejmo, 2020) for the challenges and obstacles experienced in relation to economic development. While the programme has covered a wide range of themes at the EU level, its success varies greatly depending on factors such as the prevailing economic conditions, the current political leadership both on national and EU-level, cultural identity, state formation, and geographical factors (Sousa,

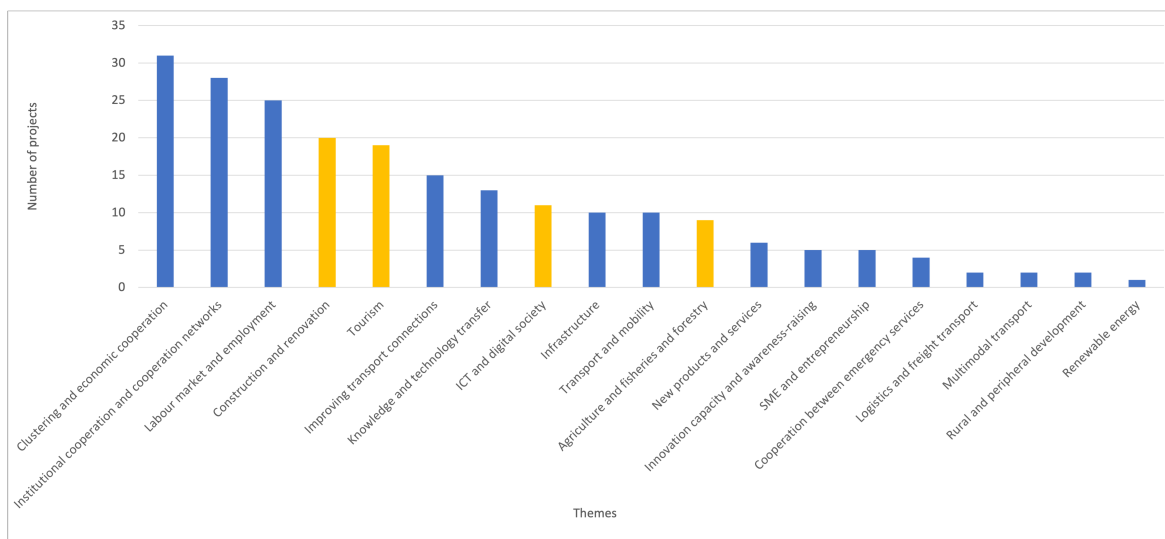
2013, p. 669). Consequently, it is important to analyse the distribution of themes in past cross-border projects between Romania and Hungary to understand the programme's overall success and to ensure the improvement for the future phases.

An examination of the themes of cross-border cooperation projects between Hungary and Romania can provide insight into how these projects are promoting economic development in the border region. In this analysis I identified the industries and sectors that were receiving support, as well as the types of economic development tools and strategies that were used. This information can provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the cross-border programme on the region's economic growth.

### **Industrial focus of the cross-border projects**

The cross-border projects between Hungary and Romania can be examined from an economic standpoint to understand the industries that have been directly supported and the types of economic development tools that have been used. From the official thematic classification of the projects in the two programme cycles, it can be seen that just over half (51%) of the 19 themes are closely related to the economy. However, traditional industries are underrepresented, with only four appearing in the official classification.

During the 2007–2013 programming period, four industries received direct support: agriculture, construction, tourism, and the information and communication (ICT) industry (Figure 16). The ratio between the supported industries was the following: 9 projects in agriculture received funding amounting to 4,313,389.15 euros; 20 projects in construction received funding amounting to 24,350,312.33 euros; 18 projects in tourism received funding amounting to 19,719,707.86 euros; and 11 projects in the ICT industry received funding amounting to 3,299,646.80 euros. This data shows that the number of projects and their budgets do not necessarily correlate which can be interpreted as a reflection of the different needs of the given industry at that time. All in all, 21% of total aid received during this period was used directly to support industries according to their thematic classification.



**Figure 16:** Number of Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme projects between 2007-2020 with an economy-related and industry-specific theme  
Source: own elaboration

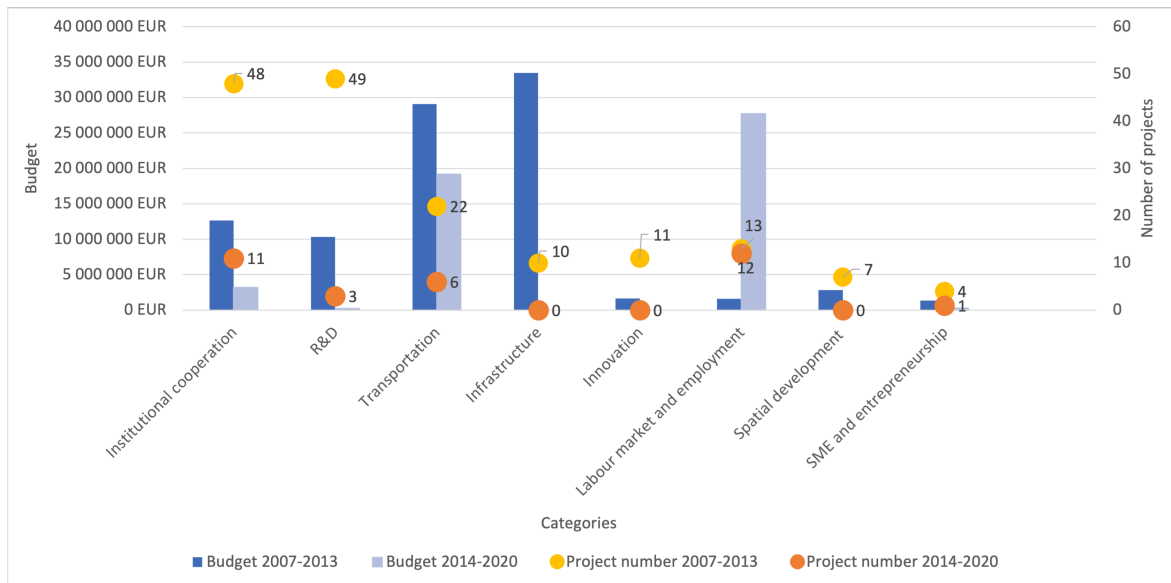
In contrast, during the 2014–2020 period, only tourism was identified as a directly supported industry, and only one project was classified in this category. However, it should be noted that this project had a budget of 2,718,105.80 euros, which represents a 248% increase compared to the average value of tourism projects in the previous period, and represents only 1% of the total value of projects implemented during this period.

When comparing the number of projects that had an economic relevance or were directly linked to an industry to the other topics, it became apparent that the economy-related projects were less numerous (218, compared to 346 other types). This means that the non-economy related projects made up 61% of all projects, while industry-related projects made up 11%, and other economy-related projects made up 28%. Considering that the programme is declared to support a great variety of topics, this ratio can still be viewed as substantial.

### **Economic analysis of development tools used in cross-border projects**

An examination of the development tools used in cross-border projects between Hungary and Romania can provide insight into how these projects were promoting economic growth and development in the border region. Upon analysing the official thematic classification of the projects, it is clear that there were a significant number of categories that, while not directly linked to economic development or specific industries, still played an important role in creating the necessary environment for economic development.

According to the original classification, 14 such categories could be distinguished, but in some cases, they were so similar that they were combined to avoid distorting the analysis (Figure 17)<sup>6</sup>.



**Figure 17: Number and budget of projects in supported categories**  
*Source: own elaboration*

The thematic analysis of cross-border projects between Hungary and Romania between the two programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020) shows significant differences in the allocation of resources. In the first period, a significant number of projects were labelled as economic development projects (164 in total) while in the second period, only 33 such projects were identified. However, the total value of the projects did not decrease as much as the number of projects, with the total project budget decreasing by only 56% possibly meaning that in the second period larger projects with bigger financial needs were prioritized compared to a higher number but smaller scaled projects.

During the two periods, there was a noticeable reorganization in the distribution of projects among different thematic categories. In the first period, most projects supported R&D (49 projects) and institutional cooperation (48 projects), while in the second period, the largest number of economic projects supported the labour market and employment (12 projects) and the promotion of institutional cooperation (11 projects).

Additionally, certain areas such as infrastructure, innovation and spatial development projects received no support during the 2014–2020 period. Moreover, when analysing the budget of the projects, it can be seen that infrastructure projects had the highest budget in the

<sup>6</sup>These are the following cases: Clustering and economic cooperation as well as Institutional cooperation and cooperation networks were grouped into Institutional cooperation; Education and training as well as Knowledge and technology transfer was grouped into R&D; Improving transport links, as well as Logistics and freight, and Transport and mobility was grouped into Transportation; Innovation capacity and awareness, as well as New products and services were grouped into Innovation; Spatial planning and development as well as Rural and peripheral development was grouped into Spatial development.

first period, while transport and labour market projects had the highest budget in the second period.

It is important to consider not only the number of projects implemented in a certain topic, but also the budget allocated to those projects. Analysis of the budget allocated in the 2007–2013 period shows that infrastructure projects had the highest average budget at more than 3.3 million euros, followed by projects aimed at improving transport links with an average budget of over 1.3 million euros. However, it is important to note that these infrastructure projects lay the foundation for sustained collaboration in future cross-border cooperation programmes.

On the other hand, labour market projects had the smallest budget at an average of 122,000 euros, the reason behind this can simultaneously be the general state of the world economy which was in an expansive, prosperous state or the fact that labour market projects are usually focusing on human resource development which might be cheaper than large infrastructural investments. After the 2008 financial crisis, in the 2014–2020 period, the labour market was in a much worse shape which was reflected in the fact that these projects along with transport projects had the highest budget on average, while institutional cooperation projects had the smallest budget at 223,000 euros.

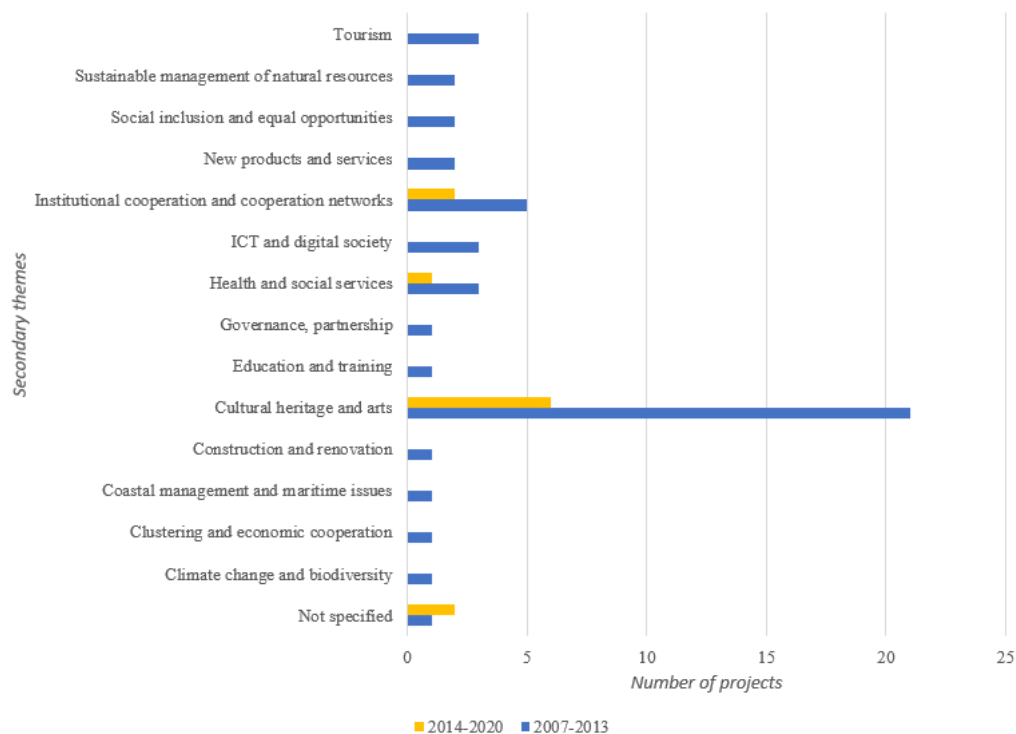
#### **4.1.2 The involvement of national minorities in Interreg projects**

It is noteworthy that the final report of the 2007–2013 programme and the mid-term evaluation report of the 2014–2020 period did not accord much attention to the role of national minorities<sup>7</sup>. Both documents only stated that projects should promote equal opportunities for all and tackle barriers faced by minorities, the disabled, and other vulnerable groups (Lucaciu, 2022, p. 54), but did not provide any measurements.

To understand the role of national minorities in the Interreg projects implemented on the Hungarian-Romanian border between 2007–2020, I analysed in depth the projects classified under the "community integration and common identity" category. There were 48 such projects in the 2007–2013 period and 11 in the 2014–2020 period, with a total budget of 28,632,491.71 euros. The majority of these projects were related to cultural heritage and arts, and also had a significant role in institutional cooperation networks (Figure 18).

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<sup>7</sup>The final evaluation of the 2014–2020 programme was not published at the time of writing the present thesis.



**Figure 18:** Secondary thematic classification of projects concerning community integration and common identity  
 Source: own elaboration

The analysis shows that out of the 564 projects, only 10 dealt with national minorities in depth (i.e. not only acknowledged the presence of national minorities but strategically positioned their assets and characteristics at the very core of the project), with a budget of 10.3 million euros, representing only 2.1% of the combined budget. The content of these projects can be divided into two main categories: projects dealing with identity and projects dealing with education.

Most of the projects that focused on identity aimed to strengthen the cultural identity of both Hungarians living in Romania and Romanians living in Hungary (for example the project called 2 cultures together, period: 2007–2013). This is done through organizing conferences, traditional events, theatre plays, and camps dedicated to traditional arts and crafts. Other projects in this category focused on promoting cultural traditions and resources through workshops on ceramics, pottery, wooden toys, etc. Some projects also aimed to establish a shared events calendar where folklore bands/dancers or artists from Hungary participated in Romanian events and vice versa, thus promoting the traditions of the two countries (for example the project called CBBISC, period: 2007–2013).

The projects that focused on education usually linked two or more educational institutions together in order to organize mutual teacher class visits, seminars, and conferences. The goal was to achieve “the transfer of knowledge and establishing a specialized programme of education and training” (project acronym: LearnByArt, period: 2007-2013) in different fields depending on the speciality of the partner institutions. As part of one such project

teachers from different schools from the two sides of the border have compiled a Draft of Common Good Practice Guide, based on which two summer camps were organized, one in Romania for Hungarian students and one in Hungary for Romanian students, where teachers from both sides of the border could practice the methods described in the Guide which was also disseminated to all schools in Hajdú-Bihar and Bihor counties and School Inspectorates. Some projects also produced new materials in a joint manner in an online format in the form of a bilingual, multi-functional Community Learning Resource Centre in the Hungarian-Romanian border region. It can be concluded that the common thread among these projects was the heavy use of culture as a connecting method for bringing together people from the two sides of the border (for example the project BORDERLAND-CLRC, period: 2007–2013).

In these projects, culture was often used as a way to bring together people from both sides of the border, which aligns with the idea that “*culture can contribute towards the strengthening of cross-border cooperation while avoiding topics of conflict*” (Kurowska-Pysz & Puksas, 2020, p. 2). However, there is also a risk that involving national minorities in these activities can change the balance of cooperation in cross-border cooperation such that representatives of the same nation are involved on both sides of the border, “*in some borderlands, this kind of partnership is not treated as cross-border cooperation, because it does not provide real cooperation between neighbouring nations*” (Ibid).

Additionally, involving national minorities can also create barriers to the development of cross-border cooperation, as seen in the past with the German-Danish border (Klatt, 2006, p. 244). There may be conflicting interests as national minorities prioritize cultural relations with their kin-state, while majorities prioritize tangible financial gains. However, it seems that in the Hungarian-Romanian border, the involvement of national minorities in the analysed projects was fairly balanced and did not result in overly dominant Hungarian-Hungarian or Romanian-Romanian activities, indicating that they likely strengthen cross-border cooperation and economic development in the border area.

### **4.1.3 Cross-border and economic nature of Interreg projects**

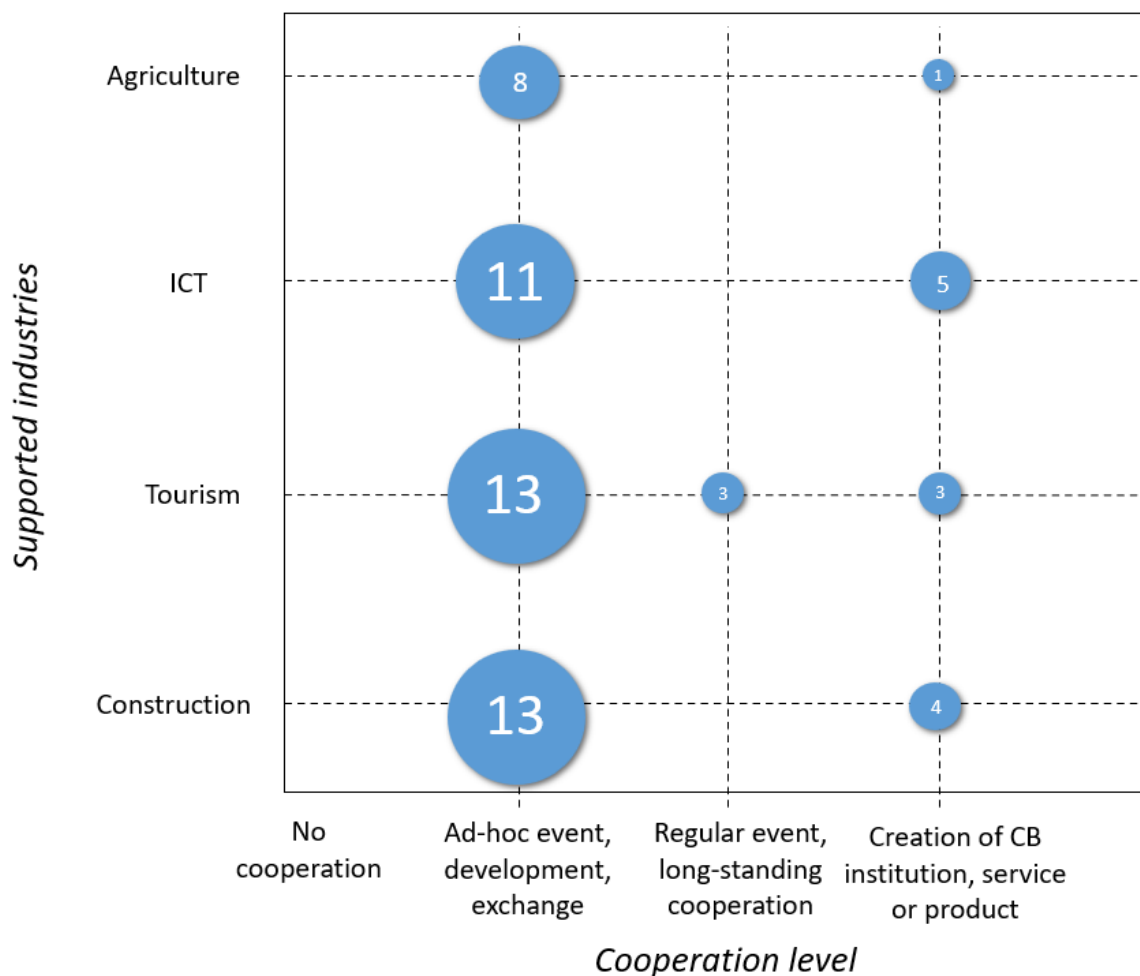
The Final Evaluation of the Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2007–2013 highlighted that the emergence of cross-border character is an essential element of the programme (KPMG, 2013, p. 28). The report stated that stakeholders have “*varying opinions as to whether significant cross-border added value is produced in all cases, but a positive disposition prevails. The level of a project’s cross-border character is barely measurable*” (Ibid). However, the report showed that the formulation of the project ideas was stemming in 70% from a cross-border need, 18% from a regional need and only in 12% from a local need. This suggests a willingness of the beneficiaries to think in a cross-border manner.

To measure the cross-border nature of the projects from the period 2007–2020, I propose a more transparent method, which is to examine the projects from the point of view of the level of cooperation reached with regard to the various explicitly supported industries. If

only ad-hoc, one-off events or development took place within the framework of the given project, then I classified the project at the lowest level of cooperation, if regular events or long-term cooperation developed, then it was rated a medium result, while if a truly cross-border institution, service or product was created following the project, then the given project won the highest-level classification. This latest category is in fact the best way for the border region to realise growth based on its endogenous resources and in a 360-degree (Caniëls and Verspagen (2001)).

The analysis showed (Figure 19) that the majority (74%) of the projects implemented in industries in the last two programming periods were at the lowest level of cooperation, i.e. only ad-hoc events or developments were implemented. Within the industries agriculture was in the worse position as 89% of the projects belonging to this category were realised on the lowest cooperation level. The ratio for construction is 76%, for ICT was 69% and for tourism 68%, meaning that in none of the industries was it reached that at least half of the projects would attain the second or third level of cooperation. This is surprising especially in the case of tourism, since due to the nature of the industries, it is here where the most regular collaborations could be expected to develop, or even the creation of joint products and offer packages would not be too difficult to create. It should also be emphasized that of the four industries only in the case of tourism could projects be identified that foresee regular events or long-term cooperation. In the case of the other industries, this was not typical at all in the examined period in the Hungarian-Romanian border section.





**Figure 19:** Cross-border and economic nature of Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme (2007–2020) projects  
*Source: own elaboration*

The highest degree of cross-border cooperation was achieved by 21% of the projects, in these cases a cross-border institution, service or product was created during the project work. From this point of view, the ICT industry proved to be the most successful, where five such projects were implemented, most of which supported widespread access to the internet. The other industries show a fairly balanced picture, with the exception of agriculture, where no such project was identified in the examined period.

The role of national minorities in the economic development projects of the last two Interreg programmes on the Hungarian-Romanian border is an important and under-researched topic. The data from 564 projects were analysed according to three different points of view. Firstly, while 51% of the projects had an official classification related to economic development, the majority of these projects had only an indirect link to the economy. In the 2007–2013 period, infrastructure projects were the most supported, with an average budget of more than euros 3,3 million each. In the 2014–2020 period, transport projects and labour market projects had the largest budget. Directly only four industries were supported throughout the two periods, these being agriculture, construction, tourism and the ICT industry. The

ratio of the budget allocated to these projects was 21% for the 2007–2013 period and 1% for the 2014–2020 period.

Secondly, the role of national minorities can be controversial, but in the case of the Hungarian-Romanian Interreg projects, it seems that national minorities play a positive role in economic development. Finally, the analysis of the cross-border nature of the projects shows that the vast majority of those projects linked to industries were still in an early phase, mostly creating ad-hoc events, developments or exchanges. Even though the ultimate goal of the Interreg is to establish true cross-border institutions, services or products, these early initiatives could also play a pivotal role in forming valuable relations and gaining necessary experiences.

## **4.2 Role of national minorities in strategic development documents**

When analysing cross-border economic development, it is important to take into consideration the affected counties' strategic development documents because they provide insight into the specific needs, priorities and goals of the region<sup>8</sup>. These documents outline the long-term vision and strategy for the economic development of the county, and identify the key sectors, resources (including actors) and challenges that need to be addressed. Furthermore, it allows for a better understanding of the potential for cooperation and cross-border synergies between the regions, as well as the possibilities for complementarity and the possible areas of cooperation.

Theoretically, cross-border cooperation can be implemented at the EU, state, regional or local level. However, I chose the county level for analysis, because practice shows that in Hungary for cross-border cooperation the national level is the least used form, as it is the most difficult to implement due to its complexity (Fejes & Soós, 2007, p. 104), and the local level lacks comprehensive competence. Although in Romania, the scope of counties was reduced, they are still the most suitable administrative units for comparison (Sageata (2014)).

Consequently, a detailed analysis of the counties' development strategies is key to understanding the role of national minorities in their own environment. These strategy documents not only record the state of affairs at the time they were created but also record policymakers' detailed vision of the future.

The analysed county strategies are summarised in a Table in Appendix E. In the cases of some counties only strategic document from one period was included as in these cases the other was not publicly available, nor the counties were willing to share them upon request.

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<sup>8</sup>This chapter is written partly based on my previous article submitted to Pro Publico Bono journal.

### 4.2.1 The number of mentions of the affected national minorities

In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the role that national minorities play in cross-border economic development within the county strategy documents, it is necessary to examine the frequency at which the Romanian minority is mentioned in the development documents of Hungarian border counties, as well as the Hungarian minority in the development documents of Romanian border counties. To accomplish this, I conducted a document analysis, and created a benchmark that consisted of four elements.

When creating the benchmark, I took into consideration various factors, such as the weighted average density of words referring to the group being studied in relation to other words in the document, the number of chapters devoted to national minorities and cross-border cooperation, and relevant mentions in the vision and SWOT analyses of the strategies.

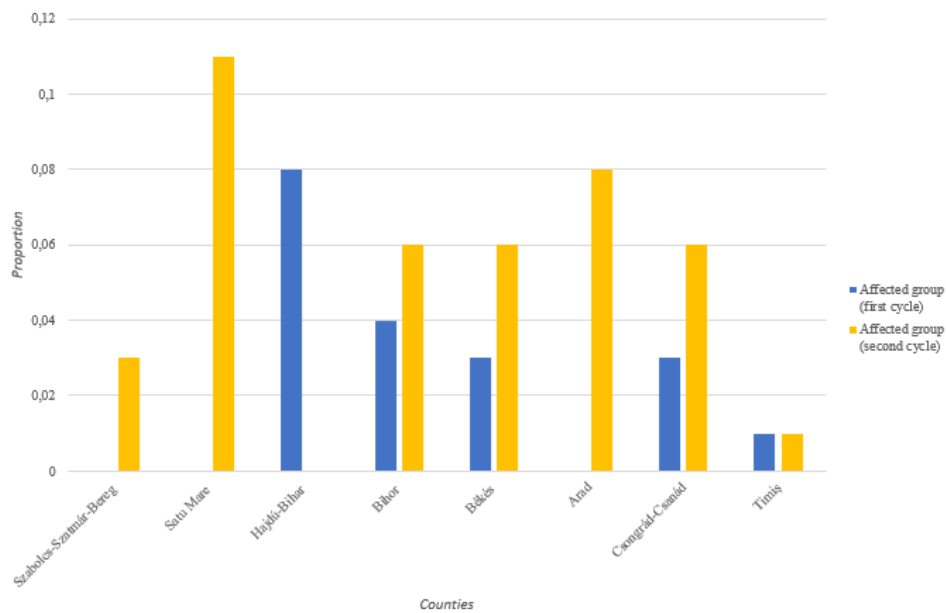
I examined the average density of highlighted words by looking at the number of times the term referred to the Hungarian<sup>9</sup> community appeared in the Romanian county strategy documents and the number of times the term referring to the Romanian<sup>10</sup> community appeared in Hungarian county strategy documents. These values ranged widely, with some county documents only mentioning the national minority 2 times, while others mentioned it 236 times. However, it is important to note that the nominal value does not necessarily indicate the importance of the respective nationalities within the overall strategy, as the length of the document can also greatly influence the amount of attention these topics are granted. To avoid distortion in the results, I counted the weighted proportion of these references.

Figure 20 shows that over time there has been a greater emphasis on concepts relating to national minorities in proportion. This indicates that strategy makers found national minorities increasingly important in achieving their development goals. Counties made references to national minorities to varying extents, with Satu Mare county in Romania (0.11%) mentioning national minorities the most, which is not surprising given that the proportion of Hungarian minority (34.5%) is the highest in this county (INS 2011). At the lowest number, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county (0.03%) and Timiș county (0.01%) mentioned national minorities in their documents, where the ratio of the national minorities is currently 0.29% and 5.1% respectively.

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<sup>9</sup>These expressions were as follows: magyar (Hungarian) magyarországi (from/in Hungary), as well as their conjugated forms such as maghiar, maghiara, maghiară, maghiare, maghiari, maghiarii, maghiarilor, maghiarimii, maghiaro, ungară, Ungaria, Ungariei, ungurelui.

<sup>10</sup>These expressions were as follows: român (Romanian) români (from/in Romania), as well as their conjugated forms such as Româniában, Româniából, Româniához, români, Româniával, românok.

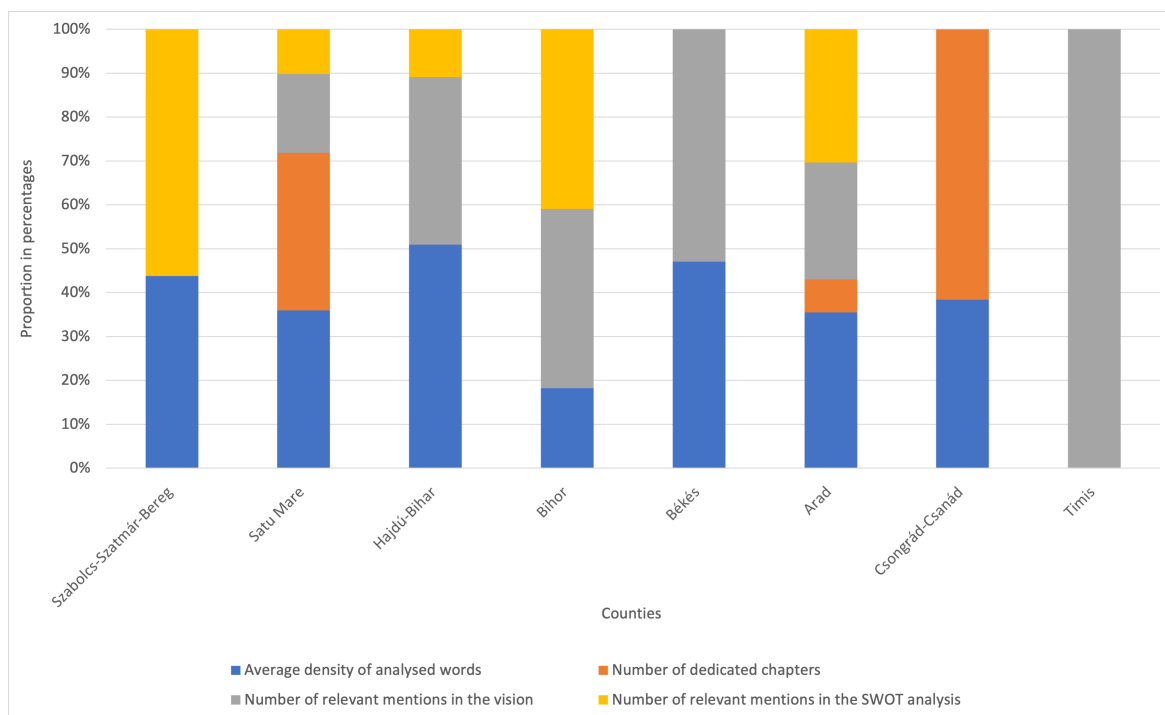


**Figure 20:** Weighted proportion of the terms referring to the respective national minorities in the county strategy papers  
Source: own elaboration

The second criterion of the benchmark examined the extent to which the structure of county development documents reflected the active involvement of national minorities in cross-border cooperation. During the analysis, the structure of the strategies was explored, looking at those topics that stand alone as separate units in the documents (chapters, sub-chapters). This analysis is visualised in a Table in Appendix F.

The analysis shows that the economic component was present in every strategic document in one form or another. The most common subtopic within the economy was business support infrastructure, but topics of labour market and industry also reoccurred in several strategies. Another common topic was territorial development, within which rural development occurred for most of the counties. However, chapters on cross-border cooperation were hardly common. They mostly came up in the documents of Satu Mare county from the Romanian side and Csongrád-Csanád county on the Hungarian side. In these cases, the subchapters were about bilateral cross-border cooperation agreements, European cooperation programmes and the EGTCs.

The third and fourth criterion of the benchmark were relevant mentions regarding the vision defined in the strategy and the SWOT analysis. Although not all strategies included these elements, the vast majority of them did, and they could serve as an acceptable base for comparison. Based on these aspects, the counties' strategies varied greatly in their approach to national minorities and cross-border cooperation (Figure 21).



**Figure 21:** The proportion and weight of the benchmark analysis' criteria by counties  
Source: own elaboration

## 4.2.2 Content analysis of the appearance of national minorities

It is not enough to only consider the numerical analysis, as it is crucial to not just understand how often national minorities are referenced in county strategy documents, but also the context in which they are mentioned and the roles they are suggested to play. To gain a more in-depth understanding, I also analysed the context of references to national minorities using the NVivo software. Below the main findings of the synthesized data are presented organized by country.

### Romanian counties

To underpin their economic development objectives all four Romanian border county strategies published a detailed economic analysis, detailing the county's economic conditions, the resources of its sectors and the situation of its labour market. It is interesting to observe that these descriptive parts were often comparative, but in no case did the comparison consider counties on the other side of the border, but the range of comparison was always limited within the boundaries of the nation-state. This is surprising not only because of the significant Hungarian-Romanian cross-border trade (Süli-Zakar & Czimre, 2007) and labour mobility (Balcsók et al., 2019), but also because, in some cases, the centre of the neighbouring county in Hungary is geographically closer than the centre of the neighbouring county in Romania. For example, in the economic analysis of Satu Mare, economic indicators were compared with Bistrița-Năsăud County, although the county centres of Banská Štiavnica and Satu Mare are 191 km apart, while Satu Mare is only 109 km away from Nyíregyháza, county capital of

Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county.

Another recurring theme in the Romanian strategies was the explicit connection between the Hungarian minority and cross-border cooperation in various fields such as health, environmental protection, economic and cultural cooperation. For instance:

*"( . . . ) the intensity of territorial cooperation is influenced by the presence of national minorities. At the time of the 2002 census, 35.2% of Satu Mare's population stated to be of the Hungarian minority. The border region has a multi-ethnic population and therefore rich multicultural traditions. This is reflected in the frequent cross-border interaction of local communities, which provide a firm base to strengthen cross-border relations, and to promote the integrated development of the region" (Satu Mare 2016, 298).*

The strategies highlighted that the presence of national minorities played a significant role in territorial cooperation. They also mentioned the multi-ethnic population and rich multicultural traditions in the border region, which were reflected in the frequent cross-border interaction of local communities, which provided a strong foundation to strengthen cross-border relations and promote integrated development. This sentiment is also echoed in the development document of Bihor county, which emphasized the important role of the Hungarian minority in maintaining cross-border relations because of their common historical roots:

*"Among the minorities, the Hungarian minority needs to be highlighted, whose role is not only important because of common historical roots, but also because it serves as a fundamental factor in maintaining cross-border relations" (Bihor 2007, 38).*

The strategies also exhibit a positive attitude towards national minorities, viewing them as valuable resources. This attitude was reflected in the visions of the strategies, which, while brief in nature, often refer to concepts such as diversity, multi-ethnic cultural heritage, local traditions, and international spirit as important values. This perspective was consistent across the SWOT analyses of the strategies, where the topic of national minorities was frequently mentioned in the documents of Satu Mare, Bihor, and Arad counties.

In the SWOT analyses of the Romanian strategies for counties along the border, the Hungarian minority was specifically mentioned a total of 15 times. These mentions were divided into 11 strengths, 2 opportunities, 1 weakness, and 1 threat. For instance, the presence of cultural and historical tourist destinations that were important to Hungarians was considered a strength, while the exchange of experiences with the Hungarian side was viewed as an opportunity. On the other hand, inadequate modernization and inefficiency in the road, rail and aviation infrastructure, which obstructs cross-border traffic, was considered a weakness, and competition, mainly in tourism, on the other side of the border was considered a threat.

It is unusual for the general visions outlined in these strategies to be transformed into specific objectives, with the exception of Satu Mare county, which had a specific goal of strengthening cultural tourism. The strategy stated that this measure was necessary to capitalize on the county's anthropic, historical, and cultural elements, specifically those important to the Hungarian minority, and to ensure their long-term and systematic sustainability:

*"This measure is necessary to exploit the tourism potential of the county's anthropic, historical and cultural elements, by making use of elements of importance to the Hungarian minority, and to ensure the long-term and systematic sustainability of these elements" (Satu Mare 2016, 416).*

This objective was supported by a comprehensive list of tourist attractions, highlighting Hungarian-related sites and cultural heritage elements that the county could capitalize on.

Timiș County went even further by suggesting methods for involving national minorities in cross-border economic development. These methods included collecting folklore, fairy tales, and stories from national minorities, preserving and enhancing national minority heritage through permanent and temporary exhibitions, and organizing and offering themed intercultural tours.

It is visible even from these examples that the Romanian county strategies view national minorities as assets that play a significant role in cross-border cooperation and can provide access to financial support and development. In terms of the economy, the Hungarian minority is primarily linked to the tourism sector in these documents.

### **Hungarian counties**

The Hungarian county strategies, like the Romanian ones, did not typically include data and indicators from the neighbouring counties on the opposite side of the border in their statistical and descriptive territorial analyses. Neither did they make any qualitative references to the development documents and economic characteristics of those counties. An exception to this can be seen in the development strategy of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county, which included an examination of the development strategy of Satu Mare county and highlighted its vision and objectives.

It is notable that the county documents in Hungary gave less attention to the Romanian community, likely due to the smaller size of the Romanian population. However, the Romanian minority was still mentioned in the descriptive statistics section and the Hajdú-Bihar county document also listed the municipalities that offer kindergarten or school education for the Romanian national minority community.

In general, the Hungarian county documents placed more emphasis on the territorial identity of the area rather than the ethnic diversity, they provided a comprehensive overview of the historical background and changes of the Hungarian-Romanian border, which was also present in the Romanian county documents. The development document of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county also included a thorough examination of the results of primary research

on territorial identity, with a focus on the inhabitants' connection to the county rather than their national identity associated with the area.

Cross-border cooperation, however, was of high importance in these documents. It was concluded for example that:

*"(. . .) there is still considerable potential for rebuilding cross-border relations. Current trends suggest a revival of relations along the Romanian border" (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 2012, 77).*

Békés county had a similar approach:

*"Cross-border cooperation needs to be underlined, especially with the Romanian Bihor and Arad counties. Békés county is bound to further strengthen relations due to its geopolitical characteristics, and its achievements in the development of cross-border relations." (Békés 2010, 29).*

In the development document, Hajdú-Bihar county stated that they considered the active participation in international organisations to be of utmost importance, as they could provide a breakthrough opportunity for the development of the county. The strategy pointed out that the county:

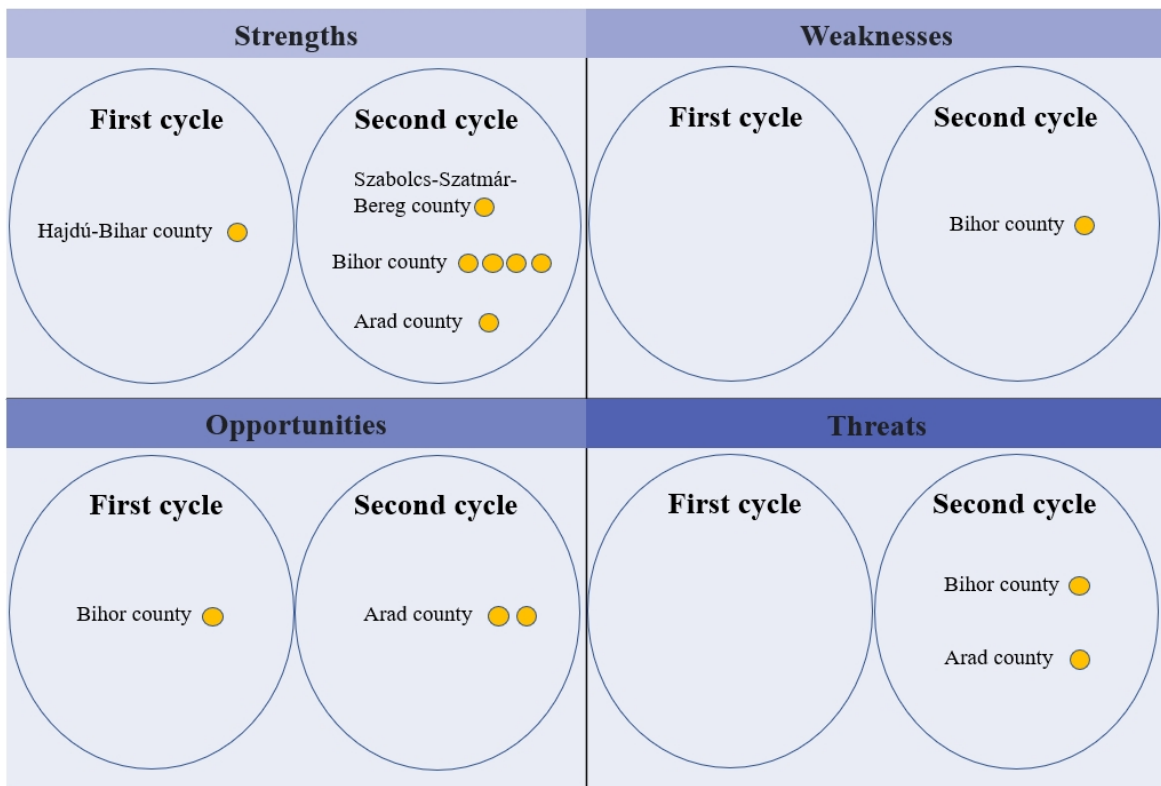
*"(. . .) has historically been closely linked to the Romanian Bihor county, where the development of tourism services is also a key economic factor. It is in the interest of both counties, in terms of their tourism, to coordinate their development and share tourism activities in certain areas. As a result, the two counties could become the 'gateway to Transylvania' together in regard to tourism. Lacking cooperation, a strong competition would develop, the impact of which would be adverse to both counties" (Hajdú-Bihar 2006, 93).*

The Hungarian county documents tended to view cross-border cooperation as a strength and opportunity in their SWOT analyses and they saw it to a lesser extent as a threat from competition. One major difference is that while Romanian documents often mentioned the Hungarian minority, Hungarian documents did not usually mention the Romanian minority in relation to cross-border economic development. This is evident in Hajdú-Bihar's development document, which evaluated the National Spatial Development Concept's (in Hungarian: Országos Területfejlesztési Koncepció (OTK)) territorial objectives according to their own county criteria. According to this, the OTK set up the "representation of the values of national minorities in the development of the rural areas inhabited by them" as a medium-term goal. Hajdú-Bihar county has established a weak connection to this goal (Hajdú-Bihar 2006, 24).

When I aggregated all the references to the national minorities in the analysed border counties' strategic documents it showed that the national minorities were much more perceived as strengths (7 times in the two cycles) than anything else. However, in some of the counties'



documents national minorities could also appear as weaknesses or threats as it is shown in Figure 22.



**Figure 22:** The ratio and distribution of the references to the national minorities in the counties' strategic documents' SWOT-analysis  
Source: own elaboration

In conclusion, the results of the quantitative benchmark analysis show that the importance of national minorities in county development documents has increased over the two financial cycles between 2007 and 2020, but the emphasis on the issue varies among counties. Satu Mare county places greater importance on national minorities than other counties, while Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Timiș counties have less concern for the issue.

The qualitative analysis found that the border played a significant role in the county strategy documents and that economic indicators were compared only with neighbouring counties within the same country, not with counties on the other side of the border. However, there is evidence that the counties were aware of each other's development documents and intended to cooperate. The role of national minorities was handled differently among counties, with Hungarian counties generally making fewer specific references to the Romanian minority, while Romanian counties had more specific cross-border economic development objectives and measures related to the Hungarian minority, mostly focused on tourism development.

## 4.3 Perception of national minorities

### 4.3.1 Factors influencing border perception

In order to fully understand the citizens' perceptions of cross-border cooperation first I needed to explore the main influencing factors<sup>11</sup>. Undoubtedly, the topic could be expanded in a much deeper manner, however, this section only contains the analysis of those three factors that came up in the focus group and the interviews, these being history, permeability as well as political discourse and institutions.

To understand local citizens' perceptions of the border dividing Hungary and Romania it "appears necessary to take into consideration (...) the historical and cultural aspects" (Bioteau, 2015, p. 15) especially in the case of a border with a similarly turbulent history that inherently shapes the perception of the people living in the border area. The current border, which was established in 1920, has a long and tumultuous history that has led to conflicts and has had a deep impact on the collective identity of those living on both sides of the border.

The aftermath of the First World War is especially deeply engrained in generations of people through the visual images, textual expressions, and rhetorical figures related to "*the image of the wounded, mutilated, and maimed country which became the cultural legacy of the Treaty of Trianon in Hungary*" (Menyhért & Zeta Books, 2016, p. 69). Since the Treaty, the border has always been considered "a sensitive border", as according to some sources it was periodically contested by Hungary, "either through political irredentism or through nostalgia in Hungarian cultural circles" (Popa, 2004, p. 87). The situation was not helped by the pursuit of Romania's "one people one country" principle either (Andersen et al., 2016) which is unequivocally formulated to this day in the first line of Romania's constitution stating that "*Romania is a national state, sovereign and independent, unitary and indivisible*" (Constituția României, nr. 429/200), without any mention or regard to the national minorities living in its territory.

While events like joining NATO and EU as well as the establishment of Euroregions and EGTCs are usually seen as positive for border perception, some argue that Hungary's actions in preserving its cultural identity and promoting the interests of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries have led to reluctance from the Romanian side. However, regardless how certain historical events are interpreted and presented by the different actors, what seems to be certain is that history itself do influence the perception on the borders both on the level of individuals and on the level of narratives.

The second factor that I found to influence citizens' perceptions of borders is the permeability of borders. While some say that good fences make good neighbours, many scholars argue that in fact permeable borders lead to better relationships between neighbours (Feinstein & Dajani-Daoudi, 2000). From the 1990s, research from various disciplines suggested that

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<sup>11</sup>This chapter is written partly based on my previous research submitted to the Frontem's project publication.

borders have become more permeable, but recent crises such as the migration crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, and the Ukrainian-Russian war have shown that nation-states are more resilient than previously thought. Regardless of the speed of these debordering processes, it is clear that the permeability of a border itself influences how people perceive it (Moraczewska et al., 2010, p. 334). If a border is seen as a hard line, as it was during the communist era between Hungary and Romania, people are more likely to perceive it as something dangerous, as evidenced by many "complaint stories" of people who had to cross the border during that time (Feischmidt, 2005). Even after the changeover, many people still tell stories about these experiences, which shows that the permeability of national borders does not make the border irrelevant or border crossing an unreflective routine. This is why measures related to the permeability of the border, such as Romania entering the Schengen area, are particularly important to people living in the border region.

The third factor that influences citizens' perceptions of borders is the role of political discourse and institutions. While it can be difficult to determine whether citizens' views shape political discourse and institutions or vice versa, it is clear that political discourse and institutions do play a role in how people perceive borders. Political ideology and decisions shape the direction of development and can influence whether borders are open or closed. Examples of both approaches can be found throughout the history of the Hungarian-Romanian border.

Political discourse and institutions also influence border perception at all levels, from regional to national and international. Both Hungary and Romania have centralized, hierarchical institutions that may be less open to cooperation. However, the need for change and modernization, as well as the specific needs of the communities in the border region, have led to positive developments in cross-border cooperation under Euroregional frameworks and CBC-specific programmes (D. Badulescu et al., 2015, p. 575). Institutions that do not have a specific focus on cross-border cooperation, such as universities, can also play a role in shaping border perception if they carry out relevant activities.

### **4.3.2 Citizens' border perception**

As I showed above, the perception of borders can be influenced by a number of factors, but the focus groups and the interviews indicated that these perceptions can also vary greatly among citizens. In some cases, borders may be seen as barriers to cooperation and trade, while in others they may be viewed as opportunities for cross-border collaboration. The role of national minorities renders the topic even more complex as often they play a significant role in shaping border perceptions and at the same time they can also act as a litmus paper for capturing and understanding the perceptions prevalent in the given border society.

For instance, in a research project that ran from 2009 to 2012, the European Commission conducted a survey of 9,300 undergraduate students across 43 cities and 18 countries to explore different perceptions of Europe. The project, called "European Union & the world

seen from abroad" (EUROBROADMAP), aimed to gain a deeper understanding of mental maps of the world both inside and outside the EU. Despite the publication of at least 40 scientific papers based on the study's findings, none of them specifically examined the Hungarian-Romanian border, which at the time was an internal EU border but still an external Schengen border. However, an article delved into the most significant Hungary-related findings of the project and provided insight into perceptions of the Hungarian-Romanian border. In the study, Hungarian students were asked to rate the top ten countries they would not like to live in, with Romania coming in first place (112 responses) and Iraq coming in second (79 responses). Additionally, the authors of the study grouped countries based on the responses and placed Romania in a group called "high awareness, negative asymmetry", as it was frequently mentioned in a negative sense by many students (Kincses & Jakobi, 2012). These results give some insight into the fairly negative perceptions about the neighbouring country, however, since its scope is bigger than the border region, it needs to be completed with additional observations from the ground.

### **Borders as barriers vs borders as bridges**

Borders are traditionally perceived as physical barriers that separate two entities, usually countries. However, this separation can often lead to negative consequences such as alienation, hindered economic development and poor social cohesion (Spierings & Velde, 2013). Borders discourage spatial interaction and are often perceived as dividing "us" from "them" (Moraczewska et al., 2010, p. 334). Interestingly enough, the *"perceptions which emphasize notions of difference, mutual fear and threat are, more often than not, socially constructed from the centre with walls and fences constituting the mechanism through which difference is perpetuated"* (Newman, 2003, p. 20). Consequently, from the literature it seems that the perception of borders as separators that discourage interaction is a phenomenon that originates from the central or national level.

This is in line with the views of one of the interviewees who said:

*"Since 2007 the relationship between the two countries has become less and less positive mostly due to political reasons, everyday cooperation feels less and less friendly. The fact that the Hungary-Romania relationships on the governmental level are not too good affects the perception of the citizens too who don't really say many flattering things about the border or their neighbour." (Interviewee Nr. 5)*

This observation aligns with the findings of the focus group, where some participants stated that the border between Hungary and Romania can act as a barrier to cross-border cooperation. When citizens living near the border are restricted in their ability to access urban functions such as healthcare services, education facilities, business opportunities, and entertainment options in their surrounding areas, their quality of life is reduced and their perception of the border may become more negative. One focus group participant mentioned that

*"Legal and economic regulations affect everything, for example, patient care, and in many ways, they hinder our lives as border citizens." (Anonymous focus group participant)*

Furthermore, the general consensus of the focus group was that, confirming the findings in the literature, these obstacles that turn the border into a barrier are engrained in the vast differences in the systems of the two countries and the lack of satisfactory level of harmonisation between them despite of the initiatives such as AEBR's *b-solutions* project<sup>12</sup> or CESCO's *Legal Accessibility*<sup>13</sup>. In fact, in the former initiative an obstacle from the Hungarian-Romanian border section was also included where the small-scale farmers of the border region were impeded in selling their products at the local markets on the other side of the border as the border constituted a barrier due to the absence of harmonised rules and regulations.

During the focus group discussion, the participants reflected on the fact that before the system changed the border was perceived to be dangerous, an area that was better to be kept away from since it was patrolled by armed guards and fighting dogs. These experiences contributed to the perception of the border as a barrier. However, one participant also mentioned that, even though the border zone was regarded as a forbidden territory, it was also a place where people from both sides of the border still met and exchanged goods and interactions:

*"You had to stay away from the border, but it was a meeting place for people divided by the border, and a place where people could exchange goods and interactions." (Anonymous focus group participant)*

The interviews created the appropriate setting for the interviewees to go deeper into the topic and explain how they feel about the borders. Someone said that

*"At the border crossing I experience annoyance and anger, not necessarily because of the existence of the border but rather the cumbersome and time-consuming procedure of crossing the border even if in principle it only means the ID control." (Interviewee Nr. 9)*

Somewhat in line with this, another interviewee said that

*"I am very much bothered by the presence of the unfair border, even though my negative feelings are somewhat lessened with the simplification of the border crossing, but it would still be better if this border became an intra-Schengen border." (Interviewee Nr. 13)*

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<sup>12</sup>b-solutions is a pilot initiative to tackle legal and administrative border obstacles along EU internal land borders. It is promoted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) and managed by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR). More: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

<sup>13</sup>Legal accessibility was launched in 2016 as a project of the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives. The project supported by the Hungarian Ministry of Justice aimed at identifying the pertaining legal and administrative obstacles along the Hungarian borders and drafting recommendations on the potential solutions based on the experiences of best practices. More: <https://legalaccess.cesci-net.eu/en/about-the-initiatives/>

What several interviewees pointed out is that the hard administrative border regime in the 1980s–1990s about which many negative first-hand experiences are still alive, made the border crossing extremely lengthy and stressful so once they crossed the border, they experienced a certain rush of feeling of freedom and connectedness to the other side which they then slowly started to subconsciously link with the border itself. These answers already show the complexity of the border perception that for people living in the same place and time the border could manifest as a barrier or as a bridge as well.

Perceiving the borders as bridges is not a newfound metaphor. *“The cross-border areas are perceived as progressive limits by the Hungarians and Romanians. They constitute a wide intermediary area, a meeting point for two (or more) communities of citizens exchanging exogenous and endogenous influences”* (Bioteau, 2015, p. 20). Bridges are images of boundaries that both separate and connect (Simmel, 1994), or in other words *“bridges are perceived as phenomena of connections”* (van Houtum & Strüver, 2002, p. 143). Some authors also take a step further and claim that when borders are perceived as bridges then they signify a connection or a contact *“through which the politically constructed division can be overcome”* (Simon, 2007, p. 132).

This is an important point in the understanding of the perception of the border because it is at this stance where the two spheres (i.e. the country-level political discourse and the everyday experiences of the border citizens) meet which is crucial because geopolitical discourses on cross-border cooperation are relatively separate from the everyday lives of local people (Paasi, 2011). The diverse perception of the borders often depends on the different actors where the non-state actors are usually *“promoters of perceiving borders as bridges than barriers”* (Moraczewska et al., 2010, p. 335).

The viewpoint that the border can act as a bridge for exchange and understanding, rather than a dividing line, was reinforced by some of the participants in the focus group. They also noted that people living in border regions are often bilingual, familiar with both Hungarian and Romanian culture, and have an extended cross-border network. As a result, these border people can act as real bridges between the two countries and people who live further away from the border and may not have first-hand experience with it.

However, one of the interviewees stated that there is danger linked to this bridge role when it comes to national minorities:

*“In my observation, national minorities on both sides of the Hungarian-Romanian border don’t really know how to fulfil the bridge role. It’s not that they don’t want to, but language competence and an interest in earning money alone are not enough. If the bridge role is stripped down to mere translation, then it quickly becomes hollow.”* (Interviewee Nr. 5)

Finally, quite some interviewees said that the border has no symbolic meaning, people do not pay attention to it, they do not think about it, do not reflect upon their perceptions, they simply acknowledge its existence and cross it.

### 4.3.3 Citizens' perception of their neighbours

Arguably in recent times one of the most prominent circumstances affecting the local citizens' perception of their neighbours at the Hungarian-Romanian border is a paradox resulting from the EU's discourse concerning border controls. Namely that *"on the one hand, the EU promotes good neighbourly relations, while on the other hand, it emphasises the need to strictly implement the Schengen acquis on border controls and visa regimes"* (Apap & Tchorbadijska, 2004, p. 1). It is true that the open-borders policy *"has affected thousands of ordinary citizens on both sides of the border and has significantly contributed to efforts to overcome the historical legacy of prejudice, stereotypes and resentment. Among the numerous examples one may single out the difficult and blood-stained relationships between (. . .) Hungary and Romania"* (Ibid). Consequently, the fact that Romania is still not granted a Schengen membership despite it fulfilling the necessary requirements, causes frustration and the deceleration of trust building and the proliferation of good neighbourly activities.

At the focus group these sentiments clearly came forward and several participants claimed that the still persisting Schengen border has a separating effect between the people living on both sides of the border and it poses an obstacle during the planning and implementation of joint initiatives. However, it is important to point out that it strongly seems like the issue around the Schengen area is not directly influencing the perception of the neighbours, as the Hungarian side is known to openly support Romania's accession to the Schengen zone. Furthermore, one of the focus group members also mentioned that the border control services on the Hungarian-Romanian border are thought to be working well together, thus it seems that the delayed Schengen entrance is not actively driving the parties away, it just simply slows down the further development of good neighbourly relations.

During the focus group discussion, the interviews as well as in previous research two main strands of perceptions regarding the neighbours were observed from the people living at the Hungarian-Romanian border. One of the prevailing perceptions of the neighbours was that of a cooperative partner. One of the focus group participants mentioned that

*"At the level of the citizen, things are much simpler. There have always been interactions, the historical framework has led to various approaches to this exchange between the two sides. This has determined the emergence of cooperation at all levels and areas: administrative, cultural, educational, health."* (Anonymous focus group participant)

It was also – albeit somewhat probably too naively – mentioned that

*"There is no competition, only very good collaboration between neighbours."* (Anonymous focus group participant)

Another participant offered practical examples to support this view based on regarding the neighbour as a partner with whom cooperation is possible when he mentioned joint projects (involving the development of cross-border bike paths and regular bus rides) in order to facilitate cross-border labour mobility.

As an attempt to tap into the citizens' perception of their neighbours the interviewees were asked about the level of trust they experience towards their neighbouring national minority. Almost all the participants claimed that there is a good level of trust between people from the two sides of the border, for example almost all said that they would buy used cars from the other side. However, when not asked in a general manner but probed for cross-border economic cooperation, a local stakeholder interviewee admitted that trust is not that universal and in business relation initiatives are often withered away because the parties are too cautious with each other:

*"In other respects, it is not easy to build working business relations as there is a little lack of trust: Hungarian and Romanian people have a different way of thinking, the system is different, and the business culture is different. The Chambers are working on bridging this reluctance and to build trust."*  
(Interviewee Nr. 4)

Even though an objective need for cooperation both at the institutional and personal level was found to be recognised at the Hungarian-Romanian border (D. Badulescu et al., 2015, p. 575), it was also shown that there is a certain level of only "*conformist attitudes and a formal sincerity*" (Ibid) when probed for the possibility of accelerating cross-border cooperation. This observation based on the high percentage of positive but unsubstantiated answers might be in line with the results of the focus group since the second prevailing perception regarding the neighbours was that of a competitor. A participant put this dichotomy succinctly when he said that

*"The relations are characterised by both collaboration and competition."*  
(Anonymous focus group participant)

To support this view, he offered the example of the airports in Oradea and Debrecen, two relatively similarly sized airports in close proximity on the two sides of the border. Yet instead of cooperating through destination management and fare packages, they rather behave like competitors targeting the same audience with similar offers (Virág, 2012, p. 103).

Regarding the perception of the neighbour as a competitor, another focus group participant extended this observation from the private company-dominated business sphere to the level of municipalities and public urban planning when said that

*"The 8 big cities of the border area are in strict competition with each other, and they will be as long as they feel growth potential exists. And their catchment area expects exactly this from them."* (Anonymous focus group participant)

This claim might show that the people living in the border cities would also rather regard their neighbours and the neighbouring settlements on the other side of the border as competitors and push this view on their elected officials to represent what they consider as their best interest.



It is an often-repeated claim that “*in the European Union peoples tend to consider each other as neighbours – close from the point of view cultural and political as well as geographical – and not as strangers*” (Viazzo & Fassio, 2012, p. 263). However, border studies have shown that, even if in recent decades certain national or political borders have fallen or weakened, other borders have formed or frozen, which is a process not independent at all from the perception of those citizens who live in the border section, the role they assume to themselves and the borders and the views they assign to their neighbours. Especially so that these views can translate into the agenda of the institutions, organisations and other entities that act on behalf of the border citizens, and thus it is of vital importance whether the prevailing perception is reflecting cooperation or competition.

Finally, one of the interviewees raised an extremely thought-provoking point when they claimed that the stereotypes and the perceptions about each other largely lost their relevance:

*"The globalist perception has diluted the stereotypes, their place was taken by the stakes: for example, the city of Oradea signed a cooperation agreement with Debrecen two weeks ago not because they love each other, but because they discovered financial sources that encourage them to do this. In the EU context the stereotype is relegated to the background because the frame pushes the actors to a completely different direction." (Interviewee Nr. 9)*

#### **4.3.4 Citizens' perception on cross-border economic cooperation**

##### **The perceived main actors driving cross-border cooperation**

While the interviewees recognised that in general the actors driving cross-border cooperation are governments, international organizations, territorial groupings, private sector entities, civil society organisations and individuals, what they perceived as the main actors working on cross-border economic cooperation are the Chambers of Commerce, local governments or the National Self-Government of Romanians in Hungary. A somewhat less intuitive type of actor that the research found was the clergy:

*"In an ideal case, the basis of all cooperation – and thus the Hungarian-Romanian economic cooperation too – is primarily the mutual trust and the motivation for finding mutual benefit. The role of the Christian church therefore primarily lies in providing the religious-moral foundation for cross-border economic relation as it is easier to create mutually fruitful relationships with companies whose managers have solid moral considerations." (Interviewee Nr. 7)*

The interviewee also mentioned that they encourage believers who come to them not only to put into practice the principles of Christian teaching, but they also to dispel all ethnic prejudices against members of another nation. Additionally, during liturgical gatherings,

certain prayers are said in all the languages whose representatives are present in the church, which also serve the creation of an atmosphere conducive to cooperation.

The national minorities regardless of their affiliation in any of the above-mentioned institutions also appeared in the interviews as actors driving cross-border economic cooperation in a similar context:

*"Usually, a company settles on one or the other side of the border as a result of personal acquaintances between members of the national minorities." (Interviewee Nr. 3)*

*"As a minority, we try to play a kind of bridge role in cross-border cooperation." (Interviewee Nr. 1)*

*"The existence of national minority communities is beneficial for both countries, a great treasure of inestimable value. The members of these communities simultaneously have two cultures and contribute to the formation of constructive relations. Individual members of the minority community, who are placed in important positions, contribute to positive relations as mediating factors." (Interviewee Nr. 11)*

### **The perceived obstacles of cross-border economic cooperation**

When the interviewees reflected on the obstacles they perceive in cross-border economic cooperation mostly three main difficulties were mentioned: the Schengen border, the impedimental politics and difficult bureaucracy and knowledge deficit.

As it was shown above, the issue of the still persisting Schengen border came up during the interviews and focus group in many shapes and forms. Not only a high expectation about its removal is present (so much so that one of the interviewees bought their house in 2007 in Biharkeresztes from a border guard who sold it expecting that he would be soon relocated due to lifting the border control and yet he still has to commute from Debrecen to work at the border at the time of the interview 15 years later; Interviewee Nr. 10), but also it is largely perceived as the most serious obstacle in cross-border economic cooperation:

*"Joining the Schengen area would eliminate waiting times at the border, it would make road traffic more continuous, and everyday relationships more natural. It would reduce differences in access to different services." (Interviewee Nr. 3)*

Impedimental politics and difficult bureaucracy were the second most important obstacle named by the interviewees

*"In many cases, political influence, bureaucracy, frequent legislative changes are the biggest obstacles." (Interviewee Nr. 2)*

or

*"Since the Interreg on the Hungarian-Romanian border became this complicated the potential beneficiaries found themselves in a very difficult situation. Plus, the small entities were completely disempowered." (Interviewee Nr. 5)*

Finally, according to the interviewees, there is a prevailing knowledge deficit that functions as an obstacle because the real understanding of what cross-border cooperation is seems to be missing

*"There are no real CBC projects on the RO-HU border, everyone wants to do their own thing, so they look for a partner who also wants to do their own thing, they pour the CBC sauce on it, but it is not really stemming from a cooperation spirit. From an economic point of view, CBC projects have no really relevant effect" (Interviewee Nr. 5)*

and the concerned parties do not know each other well enough:

*"They need to know each other and each other's activity as well as the internal special regulations of the given country; the business opportunities, the bureaucracy etc." (Interviewee Nr. 8)*

### **The perceived results of cross-border economic cooperation**

In terms of the perceived results of cross-border economic cooperation, there was no consensus among the interviewees. While some said that people accord importance to them:

*"People consider cross-border economic cooperation important because they hope that it will bring a better quality of life, new services, jobs, and better wages." (Interviewee Nr. 3)*

other claimed that citizens are largely not conscious or informed about these results:

*"Ordinary people are the generators and beneficiaries of cross-border economic cooperation – it serves their good, even if they are not necessarily conscious of it, but they might feel its absence." (Interviewee Nr. 14)*

This duality is also tangible in terms of how the interviewees judged the results of the cross-border economic cooperation between 2007 and 2020 on the Hungarian-Romanian border. The more optimistic voices pointed out various improvements such as:

*"Over the past 15 years, cross-border flows have increased." (Interviewee Nr. 2)*

*"12,000 Hungarian commercial companies operate in Romania, there are more than 6,000 joint ventures in Hungary. Cooperation has reached a fairly high level. From 2007 until now, the number of travellers from Romania to Hungary has increased by 50-60%." (Interviewee Nr. 1)*

*"Creation of industrial parks, the establishment of business incubators, opening and modernization of border crossings, creation of common physical and virtual marketplaces are all important results." (Interviewee Nr. 3)*

While the more pessimistic voices claimed that the developments in cross-border economic cooperations are questionable, too small and too slow at best and not involving the right actors.

*"There are no CBC investors, joint companies, there are maximum branch companies," (Interviewee Nr. 9)*

*"Most tenders that helped the CBC were made by local governments and the public sector, and although it was about economic stimulation, the presence of the private sector is missing." (Interviewee Nr. 9)*

To sum up, I found that the perception of borders, cross-border economic cooperation and the neighbours at the Hungarian-Romanian border was not unanimous. The border itself is simultaneously regarded as a barrier and a bridge for cross-border cooperation. The cross-border cooperation itself is regarded critically, especially the ability of the national minorities to truly fill with meaning the role that otherwise they recognise great potential in. Despite an objective need for cooperation, the relations between the two countries were found to be characterized by both collaboration and competition.

The tables below (6, 7, 8 and 9) summarise the sub-questions and main findings according to the four research questions.

**Table 6:** *Sub-questions and related main findings of the Research question #1*

Question #1: What changes characterised the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape between 2007 and 2020?	
Sub-questions	Main findings
What changes in economic cooperation and cross-border projects were observed in the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape between 2007 and 2020?	Between 2007 and 2020, the borderscape saw an increase in cross-border projects and initiatives aimed at fostering economic cooperation. These included projects funded by EU programs like Interreg and the participation of Euroregions and European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in various initiatives. However, these activities often focused on preparatory groundwork rather than direct economic cooperation, and their impact remained limited.
How did the perceptions of distance, mutual trust, and otherness change among people in the Hungarian-Romanian border region between 2007 and 2020?	The analysed period witnessed changes in the perceptions of distance and mutual trust. While there was a lack of systematically collected data, studies showed that factors like mental distance, mutual trust, and perceptions of otherness continued to influence cross-border interactions. The mental mapping exercise conducted in 2022 revealed that individuals had varying definitions of the border region, indicating evolving perceptions.
What were the key challenges and successes in the Hungarian-Romanian border region's development during the period from 2007 to 2020?	The analysed period brought both challenges and successes to the Hungarian-Romanian border region. Challenges included economic disparities, brain drain, infrastructure limitations, and governance weaknesses. However, successes were also observed in economic development through EU programs, cultural exchange, and infrastructure projects. These achievements demonstrated the potential of cross-border cooperation and investments in addressing common challenges.
What infrastructure changes and developments occurred in the Hungarian-Romanian border region between 2007 and 2020?	Infrastructure changes and developments in the border region included projects like the modernization of railway border crossings, improvements in transportation links, and efforts to reduce transit times and transportation costs. These infrastructure projects aimed to enhance connectivity, stimulate cross-border trade, and facilitate economic cooperation during the period from 2007 to 2020.

*Source: own elaboration*

**Table 7:** *Sub-questions and related main findings of the Research question #2*

Question #2: What role did national minorities play in the Interreg cross-border economic projects between 2007 and 2020?	
Sub-questions	Main findings
How are national minorities in the Hungarian-Romanian border section involved in cross-border projects?	National minorities are involved in cross-border projects through initiatives that aim to preserve and promote their cultural identity. These projects often include organizing cultural events, traditional workshops, and educational programs that facilitate cooperation and collaboration between minority groups in neighbouring regions.
What impact do cross-border projects involving national minorities in the Hungarian-Romanian border section have on economic development in the border area?	Cross-border projects involving national minorities can positively impact economic development by creating opportunities for cultural tourism, skill development, and fostering cross-border relationships. While these projects may not always directly contribute to economic growth, they play a crucial role in building trust and cooperation among communities, which can lead to long-term economic benefits.
How do cross-border projects balance the involvement of national minorities to ensure cooperation between neighboring regions?	Cross-border projects aim to balance the involvement of national minorities by promoting cultural exchange and collaboration while avoiding dominance by one group. They often emphasize cultural activities that bring people from both sides of the border together, thus strengthening cooperation and contributing to economic development in a balanced and inclusive manner.

*Source: own elaboration*

**Table 8:** *Sub-questions and related main findings of the Research question #3*

Question #3: How were the national minorities represented in the border counties' development strategies between 2007-2020?	
Sub-questions	Main findings
Why are the counties' strategic development documents a rational choice in understanding the national minorities representation in cross-border economic development?	The counties' development strategies offer a localized, policy-focused, and contextually relevant source of information for understanding the role and representation of national minorities in cross-border economic development.
How often were the national minorities mentioned in the counties' strategic documents?	The specific number of mentions and the density of references varied widely among counties, with some documents mentioning national minorities only a few times, while others included numerous references. However, the mere frequency of mentions does not necessarily indicate the importance or significance of national minorities within the overall development strategy. To gain a more nuanced understanding, it is essential to consider the context and roles attributed to national minorities in these mentions.
How are national minorities mentioned in these county strategy documents?	The importance of national minorities in some cases has increased over time in these documents.
How do Romanian and Hungarian counties differ in their approach to national minorities and cross-border cooperation according to the development strategies?	Romanian county strategies often connect the Hungarian minority to cross-border cooperation and view them positively. In contrast, Hungarian county strategies do not usually mention the Romanian minority in this context, focusing more on territorial identity and cross-border relations.

*Source: own elaboration*

**Table 9:** *Sub-questions and related main findings of the Research question #4*

Question #4: What is the current perception of the national minorities regarding the border, their neighbours and their own role in cross-border economic cooperation?	
Sub-questions	Main findings
What are the main factors influencing border perception in the Hungarian-Romanian cross-border region?	Three key factors influence border perception: history, permeability of borders, and political discourse and institutions. Historical events, including conflicts and treaties, shape people's collective identities and perceptions of the border. The permeability of the border, whether it is seen as a hard line or an open passage, significantly impacts how individuals perceive it. Political discourse and institutions also play a role in shaping border perception, as they can influence whether borders are open or closed.
How do citizens in the Hungarian-Romanian cross-border region perceive the border?	Citizens' perceptions of the border vary widely. Some view the border as barrier to cooperation and trade, while others see it as an opportunity for cross-border collaboration. Bilingual residents and those with cross-border networks can act as real bridges between the two countries and promote cooperation. The perception of borders as bridges is often associated with non-state actors promoting cooperation.
How does the delayed accession of Romania to the Schengen area affect perceptions of neighbours and cross-border cooperation?	The delayed accession of Romania to the Schengen area does cause frustration among residents of the Hungarian-Romanian border region. While it may not directly influence perceptions of neighbours, it slows down the development of good neighbourly relations and cross-border cooperation.
How do residents in the border region perceive their neighbours?	Residents in the border region perceive their neighbours in two main ways: as cooperative partners and as competitors. Some view their neighbours as partners with whom they can collaborate on various initiatives, including cross-border projects and economic activities. However, there is also a sense of competition, particularly in business relations, where differences in thinking, systems, and business culture can create challenges.
Is there a level of trust between people on both sides of the border, particularly among national minorities?	There is generally a good level of trust between people on both sides of the border, including among national minorities. Residents are willing to engage in various forms of cooperation and exchanges, such as buying used cars from the other side. However, when it comes to business relations, trust may not be universal, and cautiousness can hinder cross-border economic cooperation.

*Source: own elaboration*



## 5. Discussion of research results

**Question #1:** What changes characterised the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape between 2007 and 2020?

The research showed that in certain macroeconomic and macropolitical sense the period between 2007 and 2020 could be regarded as one unit on the Hungarian-Romanian border region. It was a period when both countries were members of the European Union, however, only Hungary was part of the Schengen Area. The creation of bilateral agreements was not very characteristic of this period, nor the closer interweaving of other types of cross-border political relations.

At the same time, important changes took place on the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape as the GDP per capita considerably increased; on the Romanian side of the border at a steeper rate. Other positive economic trends included the decrease in unemployment on both sides of the border as well as the increase in the number of visitors from the neighbouring country. The borderscape was also characterised by mostly negative migration trends (with the exception of Timiș county) which were causing several socio-economic problems in the region. Among the most important changes the increased mobility was also observed; not only several new border crossing points were opened in the analysed period, but also the measured border traffic grew considerably.

Finally, another significant change was the slow rearrangement of the power of the territorial structures. The relevance of most of the Euroregions working on the Hungarian-Romanian border slowly decreased and several new EGTCs was established, such as the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC, the Gate to Europe EGTC, the European Border Cities EGTC, and the European Common Future Building EGTC. However, their ability to push their agenda for cross-border cooperation was only fulfilled to a smaller degree.

In conclusion, the research showed that my original hypothesis was correct and the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape indeed significantly changed in several ways, however, these changes were mostly the result of independent processes happening on both sides of the border and not the outcome of coordinated cooperation. This was proven by the fact that the improved indicators (such as the GDP for example) were not increasing in a harmonious way on the two sides of the border or by the fact that the changes in territorial structures created for the advancement of cross-border economic cooperation were not completely in line with their originally pronounced objectives.

**Question #2:** What role did national minorities play in the Interreg cross-border economic projects between 2007 and 2020?

The research showed that the role of national minorities in the economic development projects of the last two Interreg programmes on the Hungarian-Romanian border was an important and under-researched topic. The analysis of 564 projects' data from the official EU database was done according to three different points of view. Firstly, while 51% of the projects had an official thematic classification that was related to economic development, the majority of these projects only had an indirect link to the economy by preparing the socio-economic environment for further improvements.

Secondly, numerically only a small fraction of the Interreg projects implemented between 2007 and 2020 were dealing with national minorities in a meaningful way (only 10 out of the 564 projects, representing only 2.1% of the budget). Following from the analysis their role was quite controversial. On the one hand, they could either support economic development projects by acting as bridges by relying on their bilingualism and mutual knowledge of the two cultures. Or on the other hand, they could also pose an obstacle if the majority perceived these initiatives as something undesirable and excluding or if the minority itself felt threatened by them.

Thirdly, the research also analysed the cross-border nature of the projects. It was found that the vast majority of those projects that are linked to industries (i.e. the economy link was ensured) were still in an early phase, mostly organising ad-hoc events, developments or exchanges.

In conclusion, the original hypothesis stating that the national minorities played a positive role in the Interreg cross-border economic projects, and they were especially active in those economy-related projects that were preparatory in their nature and their primary goal was to create the necessary conditions on which further initiatives could be built is only true up to a certain degree. It is true that nowhere in the projects did the national minorities appear in a negative or bad light, but everywhere they were presented positively, as an asset in driving development and change. At the same time, their appearance remained quite limited to projects linked to identity and education, thus not necessarily those projects that have the deepest impact on the economy of the border region. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that these usually people-to-people projects were often a stepping stone for future more economically impactful projects and the national minorities in these cases acted as bridges.

**Question #3:** How were the national minorities represented in the border counties' development strategies between 2007-2020?

The research showed that even though national minorities appeared already in the earlier development strategies (especially in the cases of those counties where they were more represented), over time their mentions proportionately increased showing that a greater emphasis was gradually given to them. This indicated that strategy makers found national minorities increasingly important in achieving their development goals.

While the economic component was present in every strategic document in one form or another, chapters on cross-border cooperation were hardly common. It was even less common to directly link these cross-border cooperation aspirations to the national minorities. Despite the varying approaches towards national minorities and cross-border cooperation in the strategic documents from counties on the Romanian and Hungarian border, a common thread throughout the documents was a positive attitude towards national minorities. This attitude was reflected in the visions outlined in the strategies, which placed emphasis on concepts such as diversity, multi-ethnic cultural heritage, local traditions, and international spirit. This positive perspective towards national minorities was consistent across the SWOT analyses of the strategies, where the topic of national minorities was frequently mentioned, indicating that they were viewed as a valuable resource.

However, it was extremely rare for a strategy to actually outline specific objectives or mechanisms linked to national minorities in order to operationalise their potential in the pursuit of the set vision. Timiș county was an exception in this sense since its strategy suggested methods for involving national minorities in cross-border economic development by capitalising on the collection of folklore, fairy tales, and stories from national minorities, preserving and enhancing national minority heritage through permanent and temporary exhibitions, and organizing and offering themed intercultural tours. Other strategies found it sufficient to link the given minority to the tourism sector without providing further details.

In conclusion, the original hypothesis was mostly proven by the research as the national minorities were more often and in detail represented in those counties where their population was bigger. Also, the counties' development strategies were analysing the role of the national minorities from several aspects, but – in contrast with the hypothesis – only in the rarest cases marked those objective and specific tools with which these groups could realise the set aims.

**Question #4:** What is the current perception of the national minorities regarding the border, their neighbours and their own role in cross-border economic cooperation?

The research showed, that the perception of the national minorities regarding the border, their neighbours and cross-border economic cooperation are extremely complex and contradictory. While events like joining NATO and EU as well as the establishment of Euroregions and EGTCs are usually seen as positive for border perception, it seems that Hungary's actions in preserving its cultural identity and promoting the interests of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries have led to reluctance from the Romanian side which was counterproductive for true cross-border cooperation (as opposed to Hungarian-Hungarian and Romanian-Romanian relations).

Regarding the border, the dominant perception is that it should not be there, Romania should be part of the Schengen Area. The multiple vetoes against this caused annoyance and frustration in the border region, however, this is not directed towards Hungary as the veto was not initiated by Hungary. At the same time, many do not regard the border as an obstacle, but rather as a bridge and a meeting point which is conducive to economic cooperation.

Regarding the neighbour, there are two dominant perceptions: they either regard each other as collaborators or as competitors depending on many factors. At the same time, the research also reflected upon the fact that these perceptions might be losing their importance as the globalised EU framework is pushing the actors to make their decisions purely based on their business interests as opposed to their perceptions or private opinions.

Regarding cross-border economic cooperation, there was a tangible positive perception linking it to prosperity and development. However, there is a strong line of criticism (also underpinned with empirical data) claiming that the ratio of truly cross-border cooperation projects is extremely low and instead both parties are just focusing on their own interest.

In conclusion, the original hypothesis was found to be true as the national minorities on both sides of the border perceived the cross-border economic cooperation as a tool for improving the standard of living at the borderland. Furthermore, they were open towards their neighbours, but frustration was perceived regarding the existence of the Schengen border itself despite the numerous efforts made to abolish it.

Consequently, the proven theses of this work are the following:

**Question #1:** What changes characterized the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape between 2007 and 2020?

**Thesis #1:** The borderscape of the Hungarian-Romanian border region underwent substantial transformations, yet these alterations primarily stemmed from distinct developments occurring independently on either side of the border, rather than being the product of a deliberate and coordinated collaborative effort.

**Question #2:** What role did national minorities play in the Interreg cross-border economic projects between 2007 and 2020?

**Thesis #2:** National minorities had a modest yet beneficial impact on Interreg cross-border economic initiatives, with their notable involvement mainly concentrated in preliminary economy-focused projects aimed at establishing essential foundations for subsequent initiatives.

**Question #3:** How were national minorities represented in the border counties' development strategies between 2007 and 2020?

**Thesis #3:** In counties with a larger presence of national minorities, these groups received more frequent and comprehensive mentions in the documents. While these documents analyzed the roles of national minorities from various perspectives, it was uncommon to identify the specific and practical tools through which these groups could achieve their defined objectives.

**Question #4:** What is the current perception of national minorities regarding the border, their neighbors, and their role in cross-border economic cooperation?

**Thesis #4:** National minorities on both sides of the border view cross-border economic cooperation as a means to enhance the borderland's living standards, displaying openness toward their neighbors while experiencing frustration regarding the border itself and critically evaluating their own roles.

## **6. New scientific results and future research**

### **6.1 Scientific contribution**

The scientific contribution of my doctoral thesis is hoped to be multi-fold. Firstly, there is a theoretical contribution as I implemented Bramilla's call to incorporate experience and representation into the borderscape research and in this sense broadened the theoretical knowledge in this field. By moving further from the historical-descriptive analysis of the Hungarian-Romanian border region and by operationalising van Houtum's typology as well as adapting CESCO's Territorial Impact Assessment tool to this specific case, the thesis offered newly gathered and synthesised information about the role of the Romanian minority in Hungary and the Hungarian community in Romanian border counties in the cross-border economic cooperation on the Hungarian-Romanian border region between 2007 and 2020.

The most important findings of the doctoral research which fills some of the gaps in the literature are concerning the main research questions. The Hungarian-Romanian borderscape had undergone significant changes between 2007 and 2020 especially concerning certain socio-economic indicators. These changes were primarily the result of independent processes happening on both sides of the border, rather than the outcome of a coordinated and planned cooperation. Despite this, national minorities have played a small, albeit positive role in the Interreg cross-border economic projects. They were particularly active in those economy-related projects that are preparatory in nature and whose primary goal is to create the necessary conditions on which further initiatives could be built. In terms of the counties' development strategies, the national minorities were more often and in detail mentioned in those counties where their population was more significant.

The national minorities appeared in these documents mostly in a positive light, the developers regarded them as assets that could be capitalised on if their strengths were brought forward. Even though in some of these documents the national minorities did appear as threats or weaknesses this was not their predominant representation. Despite all this, in the counties' development strategies, it was rare to find specific tools that these groups could use to realize the set aims for the benefit of the whole cross-border region.

From the thesis it came through that the national minorities on both sides of the border perceived cross-border economic cooperation as a tool for improving the standard of living at the borderland. They seemed open towards their neighbours, even though there were controversial perceptions co-existing parallelly as some regarded their neighbours as competitors

and some as cooperative partners. Perceptions about the border itself were much more homogenous and characterised by frustration exacerbated by the delayed accession of Romania to the Schengen Area. In terms of the perception of national minorities about their own role, apart from the positive connotations of them being bridges between the two countries, the research shed light on a more critical view too saying that the role of the national minorities was hardly fulfilled to their full potential.

Another scientific contribution coming from the doctoral research is to thematise the underlying danger of strengthening the Hungarian-Hungarian or Romanian-Romanian relations only in an unbalanced way. This would have potential negative effects on the borderland as it could cause tension and conflict. However, it seemed that in the Hungarian-Romanian border, the involvement of national minorities in the analysed period was fairly balanced and did not result in overly dominant Hungarian-Hungarian or Romanian-Romanian activities, indicating that they likely strengthened the cross-border cooperation and economic development in the border area.

Finally, another type of scientific contribution concerns the methodological developments. Admittedly, in the doctoral research I did not create an entirely new approach or model, however, a unique, mixed methodology was designed tailored to the research questions. The mixed methodology relied on interviews, focus group, document analysis, statistical methods and numerical project analysis apart from the literature review which allowed for the triangulation of the data. Moreover, I designed specific benchmarks for the research which could be further tested and improved by the scientific community.

## **6.2 Professional implications**

Apart from the scientific contribution, the doctoral research has several professional implications too due to the fact that the topic is very much engrained in practice, especially territorial development and policymaking.

The research contributed with tested arguments to those voices that claim that economic development could be fuelled by cross-border cooperation involving a wide variety of actors, such as national minorities. Consequently, by understanding the unique perspectives, capabilities and roles of national minorities policymakers can create strategies upon the strengths of the Romanian community living in Hungary and the Hungarian community living in the Romanian border region for mutual benefit. It also can help to build more inclusive and equitable societies by ensuring that economic opportunities are accessible to everyone.

In this research, I uncovered some of the obstacles and deficiencies that hinder the process of involving the national minorities in shaping cross-border economic development. The strategy and policymakers can use these findings to put more emphasis on filling these holes. The most important one is that the border counties' development strategies should include specific objectives linked to the general mission with which the national minorities can identify. Furthermore, tools and initiatives should be designed and implemented in order

to create the necessary frameworks for the national minorities to be able to realise their full potential as bridges between the two countries.

Moreover, there is a strong professional implication also for the political field as one of the lessons coming from the research was the considerable extent politics had on the perception of national minorities and cross-border economic cooperation. If the elected leaders of the borderland wish for a mutually fruitful cooperation then probably they should encourage all the aspirations that harbour partnership and collaboration.

Finally, the fourth level on which professional implications materialise is on the local level where the different organisations and bodies (such as Chambers of Commerce, EGTCs, Euroregions, local municipalities, schools, universities, companies, NGOs, churches etc.) have an important responsibility in knowledge acquisition and capacity building. The Hungarian-Romanian border region could visibly benefit from a deeper understanding of the characteristics of people, culture and processes from the other side. This could be achieved by regular and well-planned events where closer people-to-people relations could develop which then transpire into different types of cross-border economic cooperation. Furthermore, an educational process might also be an advantageous way to raise awareness on how to design and implement truly cross-border cooperation projects. The research shed light on the tendency that the majority of the Interreg projects in the analysed period were mostly ad-hoc and not truly cross-border in nature. Consequently, a series of tailored courses and workshops for the potentially involved actors might be beneficial in the dissemination of cross-border thinking and the know-how on how to develop cross-border economic development.

### **6.3 Limitations and future research**

Despite my best efforts this doctoral thesis has several limitations and shortcomings which need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. The two most important ones are: the relatively small sample size and the lack of generalizability.

The biggest drawback of the mixed method methodology was that the data collection could be carried out with limitations in the number of involved participants in the interviews, focus group and mental mapping. The fact that there are serious gaps in the official statistical data collection did not help either. However, the complementary nature of the designed methodology made up to a certain degree for these shortcomings.

Secondly, the topic and subsequently the research is deeply ingrained in set temporal and spatial circumstances. In various points of the research it is emphasised that the analysis refers to the Hungarian-Romanian border section between 2007 and 2020. While some of the findings are probably relevant and true for other border sections and other periods and while the methodology for instance could be applicable for other cases as well, the results should be interpreted only for the Hungarian-Romanian border section between 2007–2020.

The research – with its limitations – opened up new avenues for research with different methods. Quantitative research could be designed to fill in the gaps in the statistical data.



Especially systematically collected comparable data from both sides of the border is missing regarding the main socio-economic borderscape indicators.

For qualitative research different topics stemming from this thesis would deserve more attention. Now that the role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation is mapped out to a certain degree at the Hungarian-Romanian border region, further research should be conducted about how these groups could be more involved in a way that would best serve the interests of the whole cross-border area.

Finally, future research could be dedicated to further improving the proposed methodology, especially with a view to the designed benchmarks. I believe there is great potential and importance in finding the best tools to measure the different aspects of cross-border economic cooperation.

## 7. Conclusions

In this doctoral research my main goal was to explore the role of national minorities (specifically the Romanian community living in the Hungarian border counties and the Hungarian community living in the Romanian border counties) in cross-border economic cooperation at the Hungarian-Romanian border between 2007 and 2020.

In order to achieve this, stemming from the constructivist research paradigm I designed a mixed-methodology approach using a literature review, document analysis, interviews, focus group, statistical analysis and numerical project analysis. The literature review used a semi-systematic and integrative approach to critically analyse existing knowledge, integrate diverse perspectives and identify gaps. The empirical part of the research used qualitative and quantitative methods. The NVivo document analysis software was used to examine the development strategies of the Hungarian-Romanian border counties, while manual methods were applied in the document analysis of the EGTCs' projects. Furthermore, I applied semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups, as well as statistical data analysis and numerical project analysis. This complex research designed allowed for the triangulation of data and increased validity and reliability.

Through the research process I have answered four research questions. Firstly, I explored the changes that characterised the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape between 2007 and 2020. In this period the power of Euroregions decreased, while new EGTCs appeared but their objectives were not completely reached. I also found that there were positive economic trends, such as an increase in GDP, increase in mobility (including the opening of new border crossings), decrease in unemployment and an increase in the number of visitors from the neighbouring country, however, there were negative outmigration trends causing socio-economic problems in the region. Overall, I found that changes in the Hungarian-Romanian borderscape were mostly the result of independent processes on both sides of the border, rather than coordinated cooperation.

Secondly, I examined the role of national minorities in the Interreg cross-border economic projects between 2007 and 2020. Based on 564 projects' data I found that a little more than half of the projects had an official thematic classification related to economic development, but most of these projects only had an indirect link to the economy by preparing the socio-economic environment for further improvements. Moreover, the majority of these projects were only at the early stages of cross-border cooperation. I found that national minorities played a positive role in the Interreg cross-border economic projects, but they were mostly limited to projects linked to identity and education, rather than those with the deepest impact on the economy of the border region. However, these people-to-people projects were often a

stepping stone for future more economically impactful projects.

Thirdly, I analysed the way the national minorities were represented in the border counties' development strategies. I found that the national minorities were increasingly more often mentioned over time, indicating that strategy makers accorded more importance to them. An economic component was present in every strategic document, but chapters on cross-border cooperation were hardly common and it was even less common to directly link these aspirations to the national minorities. Despite the varying approaches towards national minorities and cross-border cooperation, a common thread throughout the documents was a positive attitude. However, it was extremely rare for a strategy to outline specific objectives or mechanisms linked to national minorities to operationalize their potential in the pursuit of the set vision.

Fourthly, I assessed the current perception of the national minorities regarding the border, their neighbours and cross-border economic cooperation. I found that these perceptions are extremely complex and contradictory. The dominant perception is that border control should not be there, and Romania should be part of the Schengen Area. Many also regard the border as a bridge and a meeting point that is conducive to economic cooperation. Regarding their neighbours, they view each other as collaborators or competitors. The research also found that these perceptions might be losing importance as the EU framework is pushing actors to make decisions based on their business interests rather than their perceptions or private opinions. Regarding cross-border economic cooperation, there is a positive perception linking it to prosperity and development, but there is prevailing criticism that the ratio of truly cross-border cooperation projects is low and that both parties are focused too much on their own interests.

Finally, these results have scientific and professional implications. The scientific contribution of the doctoral thesis is that it provides a theoretical contribution by incorporating experience and representation into the borderscape research and broadening the theoretical knowledge in this field as well as offering a methodological contribution through the unique mixed methodology. The most important professional implications are the evidence that economic development can be fuelled by cross-border cooperation involving national minorities. It also highlights the unique perspectives, capabilities, and roles of national minorities and how policymakers can create strategies that utilise their strengths for mutual benefit.

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# Appendices

## A. The list of interviewees

*Table 10: The list of interviewees*

Nr.	Organisation	Position
1.	Association for Gyula and Arad Connections	Founding member
2.	Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC	Project manager
3.	CED Central European Economic Development Network	Head of the regional office in Nagyvárád
4.	Chamber of Commerce Nagyvárád	Director economic
5.	Danube–Criş–Mureş–Tisa Euroregion	Managing director
6.	Gate to Europe EGTC	Director
7.	Hungarian Orthodox Diocese	Priest
8.	Monitoring Committee member of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme	Voting member
9.	Municipality of Nagykároly	Mayor
10.	Municipality of Oradea	Mayoral advisor, also responsible for Hungarian affairs
11.	National Self-Government of Romanians in Hungary	President
12.	Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Hungary	Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Church
13.	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county Chamber of Commerce	Retired Secretary General
14.	University of Oradea	Lecturer

*Source: own elaboration*

## **B. Interview questions in English**

### **How do citizens perceive the border with the neighbouring country?**

- Where does the border become obvious for citizens, how does it manifest?
- How do citizens feel about the border?
- What does it represent for citizens?
- How did this opinion about the border changed since 2007?

### **How do citizens view their neighbours on the other side of the border?**

- Do they trust them?
- Why (not)?
- How does this (lack of) trust manifest?
- Would you buy a car from somebody on the other side of the border?
- Would you establish a company with somebody from the other side of the border?
- Do you know about companies or organisations that have a shared ownership?
- Can you give concrete examples?

### **Who are what are the main actors that work towards cross-border economic cooperation?**

- Which activities has the civil sector carried out in order to improve cross-border economic cooperation?
- Which activities local governments carried out in order to improve cross-border economic cooperation?
- What importance would you say citizens place on cross-border economic cooperation?

### **Which are the 5 most important economic cross-border cooperation according to you that was implemented in your border section in the past 15 years?**

- What impedes the most the cross-border economic cooperation?
- In your opinion to what extent do national minorities play a role in the cross-border economic cooperation?
- Do you think this should be change?



- How and in what ways?
- Which services and goods attract them on the other side of the border?

**What are the principal functions of your organisation in relation to cross-border cooperation?**

- In the last 15 years, have cross-border flows in the area for which your organisation has responsibility increased, decreased or remained relatively stable?
- Does your organisation collaborate with other organisations/agencies in relation to cross-border cooperation?
- If so, what type of organisations/agencies are they?
- What importance would you give these collaborations?

**According to you who else should I ask about these questions?**

## C. Interview questions in Romanian

### **Cum văd cetățenii granița cu țara vecină?**

- Unde devine evidentă granița pentru localnici, cum se manifestă ea? Ce părere au oamenii despre graniță? Ce înseamnă asta pentru ei? Cum s-a schimbat această părere după 2007?

### **Cum văd oamenii vecinii care locuiesc de cealaltă parte a graniței?**

- Au încredere în ei? De ce, au încredere, sau de ce nu au? Cum se manifestă această încredere (sau lipsa acesteia)? Ar cumpăra o mașină de la cineva de peste graniță? Ar înființa o companie cu cineva de peste graniță? Cunoașteți companii sau organizații care sunt deținute în comun?

### **Cine sunt principalii actori care lucrează pentru cooperarea economică transfrontalieră?**

- Ce activități a desfășurat sectorul civil pentru a îmbunătăți cooperarea economică transfrontalieră?
- Ce activități au desfășurat autoritățile locale pentru a îmbunătăți cooperarea economică transfrontalieră?
- Ce credeți, ce importanță acordă oamenii cooperării economice transfrontaliere?

### **În opinia dumneavoastră, care sunt cele mai importante 5 cooperări economice transfrontaliere care s-au desfășurat la granița româno-maghiară în ultimii 15 ani?**

- Care sunt cele mai mare obstacol în calea cooperării economice transfrontaliere?
- În ce măsură credeți că minoritățile naționale joacă un rol în cooperarea economică transfrontalieră?
- Credeți că asta ar trebui schimbat?
- Cum și în ce fel?
- Ce servicii și bunuri atrag cetățeni peste graniță?

### **Care sunt principalele sarcini ale organizației dumneavoastră în legătură cu cooperarea transfrontalieră?**

- În ultimii 15 ani, fluxurile transfrontaliere au crescut, au scăzut sau au rămas relativ stabile în zona de care este responsabilă organizația dumneavoastră?

- Organizația dumneavoastră cooperează cu alte organizații/agenții în ceea ce privește cooperarea transfrontalieră?
- Dacă da, ce tip de organizații/agenții sunt acestea?
- Ce importanță ați acorda acestor colaborări?

**Ce părere aveți, pe cine ar trebui întrebat, în legătură cu acest chestionar?**

## **D. Interview questions in Hungarian**

### **Hogyan látják az állampolgárok a határt a szomszédos országgal?**

- Hol válik nyilvánvalóvá a határ a helyi lakosok számára, hogyan nyilvánul meg?
- Hogyan vélekednek az emberek a határról?
- Mit jelent ez számukra? Hogyan változott ez a vélemény a határról 2007 óta?

### **Hogyan látják az emberek a határ túloldalán élő szomszédait?**

- Bízna bennük? Miért, miben igen vagy miért nem? Hogyan nyilvánul meg ez a bizalom (vagy annak hiánya)?
- Vásárolna valakitől autót a határ túloldalán?
- Céget alapítana valakivel a határ túloldaláról?
- Tud olyan cégekről vagy szervezetekről, amelyek közös tulajdonban vannak?

### **Kik azok a főbb szereplők, akik a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködésért dolgoznak?**

- Milyen tevékenységeket végzett a civil szektor a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködés javítása érdekében?
- Milyen tevékenységeket végeztek az önkormányzatok a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködés javítása érdekében?
- Ön szerint milyen jelentőséget tulajdonítanak az emberek a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködésnek?

### **Ön szerint melyik az az 5 legfontosabb határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködés, amely az elmúlt 15 évben megvalósult a román-magyar határszakaszon?**

- Mi akadályozza leginkább a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködést?
- Ön szerint milyen mértékben játszanak szerepet a nemzeti kisebbségek a határon átnyúló gazdasági együttműködésben?
- Ön szerint ezen változtatni kellene? Hogyan és milyen módon?
- Milyen szolgáltatások és áruk vonzzák őket a határ túloldalán?

### **Melyek az Ön szervezetének fő feladatai a határon átnyúló együttműködéssel kapcsolatban?**

- Az elmúlt 15 évben nőttek, csökkentek vagy viszonylag stabilak maradtak a határon átnyúló áramlások azon a területen, amelyért az Ön szervezete felel?
- Együttműködik-e szervezete más szervezetekkel/ügynökségekkel a határon átnyúló együttműködéssel kapcsolatban?
- Ha igen, milyen típusú szervezetek/ügynökségek ezek? Milyen jelentőséget tulajdonítana ezeknek az együttműködéseknek?

**Ön szerint kit kellene még megkérdezni ezekről a kérdésekről?**

## E. List of the affected counties' analysed documents

*Table 11: List of the affected counties' analysed documents*

Country	County	Year	Title in national language	Title in English
HU	Békés	2007	Békés megye fejlesztési stratégiájának aktualizálása	Updated development strategy of Békés County
HU	Békés	2014	Békés megye területfejlesztési koncepciója	Regional development concept of Békés County
HU	Csongrád	2007	Csongrád megye területfejlesztési koncepciója	Regional development concept of Csongrád County
HU	Csongrád	2013	Csongrád megye területfejlesztési koncepciója	Regional development concept of Csongrád County
HU	Hajdú-Bihar	2006	Hajdú-Bihar megye területfejlesztési koncepciója és stratégiai programja	Regional development concept and strategic programme of Hajdú-Bihar County
HU	Hajdú-Bihar	2014	Hajdú-Bihar megyei területfejlesztési koncepció 2014-2020	Regional development concept of Hajdú-Bihar County 2014-2020
HU	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	2013	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg megyei területfejlesztési koncepció	Regional development concept of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County
RO	Bihor	2007	Planul de dezvoltare al județului Bihor 2007-2013	Bihor County Development Plan 2007-2013
RO	Bihor	2014	Strategia pentru dezvoltarea durabilă a județului Bihor pentru perioada 2014-2020	Bihor County Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020
RO	Arad	2016	Strategia de dezvoltare a județului Arad pentru perioada 2014-2020	Arad County Development Strategy 2014-2020
RO	Satu Mare	2016	Strategia de dezvoltare a județului Satu Mare până în 2020	Satu Mare County Development Strategy until 2020
RO	Timiș	2009	Strategia de dezvoltare economico-socială a județului Timiș	Timiș County Economic and Social Development Strategy
RO	Timiș	2015	Strategia de dezvoltare economico-socială a județului Timiș 2015-2020/2023	Timiș County Economic and Social Development Strategy 2015-2020/2023

*Source: own elaboration*

## **F. Summarising tables on the county documents' structure**

**Table 12: Summarising table on the county documents' structure:**

		2007–2013							
		Bihar	Hajdú-Bihar	Békés	Timiş	Csongrád-Csanád	Satu Mare	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	Arad
Economic profile	GDP	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Economy structure	2	2	0	3	0	2	0	0
	Agriculture and forestry	3	1	3	0	2	0	0	0
	Industry	2	3	2	0	2	0	0	0
	Rural economy	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Services	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	0
	Business sector	2	1	2	0	1	0	0	0
	Food economy	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Labor market	2	1	2	0	3	0	0	0
	Business support infrastructure	2	1	0	1	1	0	2	0
	Foreign trade	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Competitiveness analysis	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Energy	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	0
Economy SWOT	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	
Territorial development	Settlement and spatial structure	0	3	0	0	0	2	0	0
	The tool and institutional system of regional development	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Urban development	3	0	2	0	0	0	2	0
	Rural development	2	0	2	1	1	2	2	0
	Urban-rural connection	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Territorial marketing	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Territorial development SWOT	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Tourism	Attractions	3	0	2	0	2	0	0	0
	Tourism products and services	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Infrastructure	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0
	Promotion of tourist destinations	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	0
	Tourism SWOT	3	0	2	0	2	0	0	2

0 = topic not appearing in either cycles, 1 = topic appearing only in the first cycle, 2 = topic appearing only in the second cycle, 3 = topic appearing in both cycles, (own elaboration)

Source: own elaboration



**Table 13: Summarising table on the county documents' structure:**

2007–2013									
		Bihar	Hajdú-Bihar	Békés	Timis	Csongrád-Csanád	Satu Mare	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	Arad
Human resource	Social infrastructure	3	2	3	3	1	2	2	0
	Territorial identity	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Civil activity	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure	Road network	2	1	2	0	2	0	0	0
	Rail transport	2	1	2	0	3	0	0	0
	Air transport	2	0	2	0	3	0	0	0
	Naval shipping	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Transport	0	2	0	1	3	0	2	0
	Utility networks	2	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
	Infrastructure SWOT	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Cross-border cooperation	Cross-border collaborations	2	1	0	0	0	2	0	2
	Bilateral cooperation agreement	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	European cooperation programs	2	0	0	0	3	2	2	0
	EGTC	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	The Danube strategy	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	Cooperation within regions	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	Strategic planning in partnership	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	International relations	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	2014–2020 programming period	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
CBC SWOT	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	

0 = topic not appearing in either cycles, 1 = topic appearing only in the first cycle, 2 = topic appearing only in the second cycle, 3 = topic appearing in both cycles

Source: own elaboration

# Acknowledgement

I became aware of borders for the first time when I was five years old and my father as a teacher was organising a school trip from my small Transylvanian town to Budapest. When I asked him to take me with his students, he jokingly said that unfortunately he cannot because illiterate people are not allowed to cross the border. So as any determined kid would do, I decided that I must learn how to read, which I accomplished with the help of primarily my mother and my older sister. I was delighted that my father lived up to his word and took me on the trip. By the time we arrived at the border I was extremely excited and nervous only to realise that no matter how strict the border control between Romania and Hungary was in the 1990s involving lengthy passport checks and luggage control, none of the scary-looking border guards actually checked my reading skills! In the past more than two decades I not only got over this trauma, but I also realised that borders are fascinating social constructs with which it is far too easy to manipulate people. Since it is not always happening in such an innocent and inspiring way as it was with me and my dad, their in-depth study is critically vital.

This is why I am grateful to the University of Sopron, Alexandre Lamfalussy Faculty of Economics Doctoral School for providing me with the framework where I could immerse myself in the economic study of borders. I would like to thank dr. habil. Zoltán Pogátsa who started me off on this path and dr. habil. Balázs István Tóth who supervised me on this road and helped with words of encouragement and academic advice.

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# Declaration

I, the undersigned Melinda Istenes-Benczi, by signing this declaration declare that my PhD thesis “The role of national minorities in cross-border economic cooperation” was my own work; during the dissertation I complied with the LXXVI and the rules of the doctoral dissertation prescribed by the Doctoral School, especially regarding references and citations<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, I declare that I did not mislead the supervisor(s) or the programme leader with the dissertation.

By signing this declaration, I acknowledge that if it can be proved that the dissertation is not self-made or the author of a copyright infringement is related to the dissertation, the University of Sopron is entitled to refuse the acceptance of the dissertation.

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(PHD candidate)

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