

POSSIBILITIES OF CREATING CROSS-BORDER TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract: Tourism development is one of today's popular tools for mitigating regional inequalities, thus many regions see tourism as an opportunity to break out. This is no different in the case of border regions, where development in this direction is also supported by cross-border, EU-financed or (co-)financed programs. The aim of the paper is to investigate whether there is a real possibility of connecting the areas along the national borders for tourism purposes and creating sustainable tourism in these regions. The study examines the possibility of creating cross-border tourist destinations in three pre-selected areas in the Hungarian-Croatian, Hungarian-Slovenian and North-Western Hungarian-Slovakian border regions during the last two, already closed programming periods. Results of the research show, that cooperation between border countries for real tourism purposes is still possible today, and it only really aimed at creating uniform reception areas that ignore borders in a few cases. After the implementation of the programs, cross-border destinations as sellable tourist products were not created. The study shows that, in the case of two regions, the potential is given and the initiatives aimed at creating cross-border destinations are promising.

Keywords: tourism, destination, East-Central Europe, cross-border destination, region

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INTRODUCTION

Processes aimed at reducing territorial inequality and territorial differences go back more than half a century (Rechnitzer, 2016). In close connection with this statement, a much-researched topic, the "border as a spatial element with a specific structure" (Nemes-Nagy, 1998) arised, as well as the geography of border territories. In the East-Central European region, the topic became particularly topical with the EU accession of the countries concerned; the understanding of the social and economic processes in this topic were and are still aided by dozens of studies today.

The common conclusion of the scientific papers is that as a result of globalisation and regional processes (regionalism and regionalisation), the competition between market players - let it be the industry, the service sector, or tourism - is becoming more and more global. One of the possibilities of entering the international market and staying competitive can be the interconnection based on common characteristics, which is based on synergy, independent of national borders.

One of the fundamental goals of tourism is to increase the international competitiveness of a country. On one hand, the creation of cross-border destinations can contribute to increasing tourism competitiveness, especially in economically peripheral areas. On the other hand, the joint development of tourism in border regions strengthens cross-border relations and, in this case, the unified European identity. The purpose of the study is to examine the principle of the possibility of creating cross-border tourist destinations in relevance of each border area of three selected East-Central European countries (Hungary-Croatia, Hungary-Slovenia, and the North-Western part of Hungary-Slovakia).

The sources of the investigation are provided by the previous literature available on the topic: on the one hand, studies dealing with spatial structure processes, and on the other hand, researches that mainly examine East-Central European integration. There are also theses about tourism that are related to the research, as they examine borderlessness. An important, new source of research will be the analysis of EU programs supporting the promotion of cross-border relations (Interreg projects), as well as the activities of Euroregions and European regional associations operating in selected areas, aiming at creating cross-border destinations. The majority of the studies dealing with the topic examine the economic effects of support of cross-border cooperation in the country(s) through the implemented programs: for example, the Spanish-Portuguese cooperation (Chamusca, 2024), the Hungarian-Romanian cooperation (Bujdosó et al., 2015; Dávid et al., 2008), or Vojvodina as the external border of the EU (Nagy, 2020). Brunet-Jailly (2022) states in his dissertation (researching cross-border collaborations on a global level) regarding Europe that development of these areas is a fundamental issue, due to their relative underdevelopment because of their peripheral location within national borders, thus these programs are the main possibility to reduce territorial inequalities. The outstanding role of tourism as a tool is confirmed by the fact that the development of the sector played a prominent role in the Spanish-Portuguese territorial programs (Podadera-Rivera and Calderon-Vazquez, 2022). A similar result was found by Chilla and Lambracht (2023), who, after examining the activity level

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of the German border areas, came to the conclusion that the programs aimed at developing tourism, mostly affect the areas directly at the border. Although the research does not examine the creation of cross-border destinations that can be considered as a single unit, overall, they confirm the positive effects of cross-border cooperation on national economies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the first part of the paper, the connection between border territories, tourist areas and cross-border tourist destinations are presented, which are followed by a description of the spatial structure processes affecting East-Central Europe, mainly in the decades following the Trianon Peace Decree. Defining the common characteristics of the three chosen regions and collecting efforts made so far to create cross-border tourist destinations provides an opportunity to find an answer to the main question of the paper: is there a real possibility of connecting the areas along national borders for tourism purposes and creating sustainable tourism in these regions? The first figure shows the research methods and process (Figure 1).

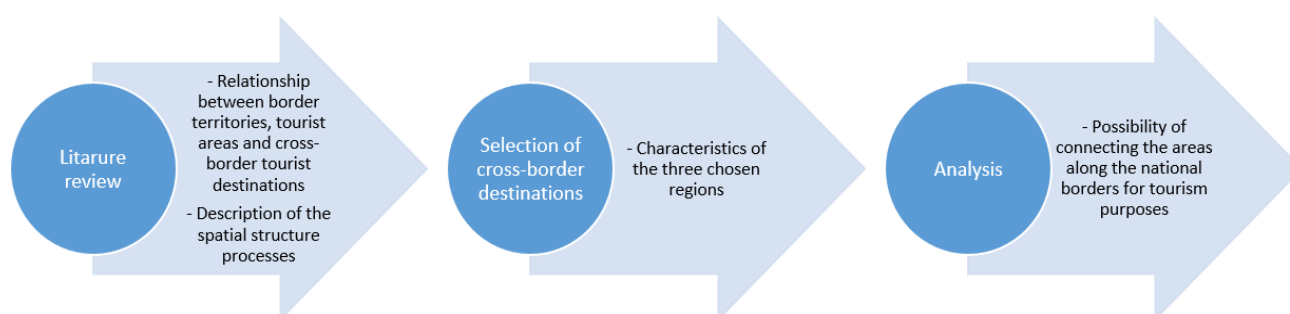


Figure 1. Flowchart of the methodology (Source: Own illustration)

According to our hypothesis, in disadvantaged, peripheral border regions, where even domestic tourism has less relevance, there is little chance of creating a cross-border tourist destination. The reason for this is not only the depletion of funding sources following the implementation of a tourism product development. The creation and maintenance of a successful destination is a multi-factor process. On one hand, external factors cannot (or only to a very small extent) be influenced, and on the other hand, until the given territorial unit does not occupy a stable position within its own country and still considered a disadvantaged area, there is no realistic chance of achieving integration beyond nations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Territorial units, border territories and tourism

As an introduction to the topic, the concepts and approaches used in the analysis and evaluation is described below.

1.1. Terminology related to spatial structure

Nowadays, space and spatial structure are frequently researched and defined areas of many disciplines, even at the level of terminology, countless articles and studies have been published with different interpretations of spatial concepts. The aspect of geographical spatial structure is the closest to the topic of border territories, therefore the most important definitions for the research will be presented below.

Space can be categorised in countless ways, for which the most frequently used criteria are the nature of space elements, the perception of space, and the size (extent) of space. Geography not only examines territorial units based on physical space and objects, but also analyses the related social and economic phenomena, with the approach of "creating space through the spatial localisation of individual phenomena" (Rechnitzer et al., 2003). The common characteristics of territorial units considered as a region, are the same physical environment, the socio-economic milieu, the social group as a frame of reference, and the same action position in space and time (Farágó-Rácz, 2011).

When researching the concept of destination, an internet search yields almost one hundred percent tourism-related literature, which derives the definition of a tourist destination (or area) from the terminology used by different subject areas of "territory" and/or "reception area".

According to the definition of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) in 1993, a tourist destination is "a place with tourist attractions, institutions, and services (reception area) that the tourist or a group of tourists choose to visit, and what the tourism supply side brings to the market and sells". The National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 (Hungary) finalised in 2017, interprets the tourist area (destination) in two dimensions:

- on one hand, as a geographically demarcated and uniformly interpreted space, which can be presented as a uniform reception area on the tourism market;
- on the other hand, as a demand category, which can be interpreted as the level of travel decisions.

According to the document, the destination is the smallest interpretable space category from a tourist point of view, which generates such a volume of demand that provides a suitable "plant size" for sustainable (and profitable) operation.

The geographical aspect in tourism, in addition to the delimitation, mainly appears in theoretical studies in the typification of individual regions (e.g. waterfront, mountainous, rural destinations). The other disciplines mostly deal with demarcations at regional level. According to Hardi (2004), the delimitation of a region can be done according to administrative (political) and functional aspects. The latter covers areas that have become a territorial unit not due to administrative constraints, but rather the development of history, economy, and society and/or geographical necessity.

1.2. Border and border territories

"Territorial units at different levels of the hierarchy of spatial organisation - landscapes, areas, regions, provinces, states - are separated from each other by the border" (Éger, 2001:28). Throughout history, borders initially had a role in defence, however, with the creation of modern states, they rather separated the unified nation-states from each other (Hardi, 2004).

Without exception, the border areas are connected in all cases by their common history, identity or the similarity of culture and traditions, as well as the mixed composition of the population. Even if there are no borders within the European Union today, the presence of the border, which can be both a limiting factor and an endless opportunity, significantly affects the livelihood and daily lives of the people living in the border areas. For nearly four decades, Hansen (1983) defined the border area as a territory, where socio-economic processes are significantly influenced by the state border. Twenty-five years later, Hardi (2008) added to the definition, stating that the extent of the border area is significantly influenced by the spatial structure characteristics of the area, the cross-border transport links, and the socio-economic characteristics on both sides, in addition to the existence of the border.

In the case of border regions, the interpretation of the periphery cannot be avoided either, which is one of the defining issues of EU integration efforts, especially regarding the problems arising from differences in territorial, social (ethnic) and economic development. Peripheral regions along national borders are in many cases cumulatively disadvantaged. Of course, border territory does not necessarily mean periphery, but it is a determining factor in supporting integration processes. It is not a new idea to connect regions in Europe, efforts and actions have already started with the signing of the Treaty of Rome (1957) (Rechnitzer, 2016). Several factors influence the possibilities of connection, as follows:

- number and density of interactions between areas;
- geographical features (a border can connect or separate from a physical point of view);
- differences developed in the course of history (ethnic, economic, institutional differences);
- and the mental border (the border image in people's minds). An integrated (border) area is created, when the connection between the areas is stable, and the interoperability (of people and goods) is not limited (Hardi, 2004). According to Hartl (2016), the possibility of cross-border cooperation is influenced by the following factors:
 - social factors (the more similar the social structure of the countries concerned, the greater the chance for deep and lasting cooperation)
 - political factors (one of the main influencing factors when intending to form a collaboration)
 - economic factors (can be broken down into numerous criteria, for example price level, production conditions, tax system or human resource infrastructure)
 - geographical factors (topographic features and the resulting infrastructural possibilities and settlement features)
 - cultural factors (cultural similarity, language barriers, mental distance between countries). It is also an important task when determining the potential inherent in tourism to consider the characteristics listed above. A specific feature can be identified not only as an attraction, but an attribute that determines the travel decision of a given region.

1.3. Tourism and border territories

Tourism is an increasingly important sector of the economy, one of the shapers of territorial processes. Settlements and regions with fewer economic resources - especially in border areas - often see the tourism industry as the (only) opportunity to break out. National borders have a significant influence on tourism, e.g. the entry and exit processes, the accessibility of destinations, or the conditions for the creation of cross-border tourist areas. In many cases bordering countries are forced to cooperate for economic, social or political purposes. One of the popularly used tool of cooperation is tourism (Kozak-Buhalis, 2019). Tourism can act as a catalyst for cooperation between bordering countries, especially if they share a common history and culture (Studzieniecki-Mazurek, 2007). It is necessary to examine border tourism from two spatial perspectives: on the one hand, trips focusing on the border itself, and on the other hand, activities concerning the border area (Timothy, 2000). In the case of trips focusing on the border, two criteria arise:

- In terms of travel-related motivations, the crossing of borders may appear as a motivational factor for older generations who have experienced limitations during previous trips. Border crossing is an activity that contributes to the travel experience.
- Crossing the border and carrying out a specific activity in another country can lead to the development of unique forms of tourism as well (a current example of this is shopping tourism and gasoline tourism between neighbouring countries due to the economic crisis. In the north-west of Hungary, dental tourism is also popular, where the primary motivation for travel is the much favourable prices of dental treatments). A special case is, when the two criteria exists together, when the activity carried out in a cross-border destination offers the special experience of being present in several countries at the same time, which is not physically possible in any other context (e.g. water trips on border rivers) (Ryden, 1993). When talking about cross-border regions as independent tourist destinations, although crossing the border is part of the trip, the motivation that determines the travel decision is different from the above.

A different approach is the examination of the spatial structure of the relationship between tourism and the border. Matznetter (1979) distinguished three cases in the case of border tourist areas (Figure 2):

- a) the border line is far from the target area (tourist area)
- b) there is a tourist destination only on one side of the border
- c) tourist areas located in two separate countries "meet" at the border:
 - i. two independent destinations operate on both sides of the border
 - ii. the two tourist areas merge and a cross-border tourist destination is created

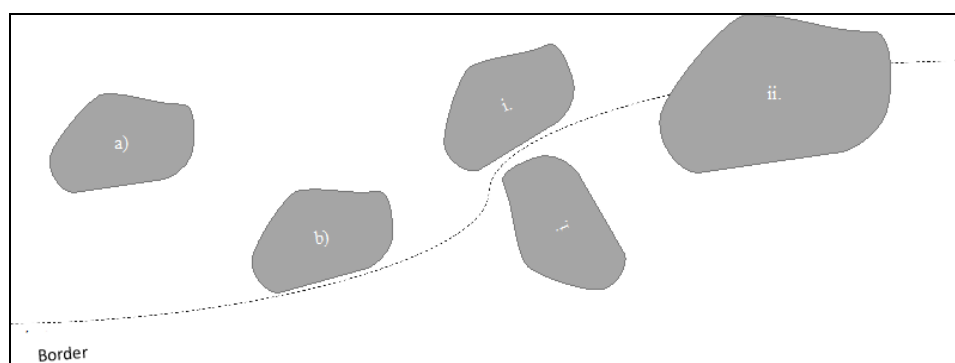


Figure 2. The relationship between tourist destinations and the border (Source: Own compilation based on Matznetter, 1979)

2. East-Central European integration

Countless studies deal with the integration processes of Europe and East-Central European countries, among which the central theme of more than one is the potential of tourism, primarily along the lines of impact assessment of case studies of projects implemented through funds provided by the European Union. Most of the studies focus on the increasing competitive situation, establishing the continuous reorganisation and expansion of the market, where some countries play an emerging role, while others, despite their favourable situation, are less able to take advantage of their opportunities; and the developments realised with the help of support sources - do not change their situation either.

2.1. Cooperation of border areas

In 2004, 10 countries joined the Union (mainly Eastern and Central European countries), and many of them had different backgrounds compared to the previous EU15 countries. Not only in terms of their geographical location, but also their economic situation and social organization were different, which had a significant impact on the cross-border development of regional policy. The integration efforts, initially launched only in the economic field, have now become the basis of many political areas, from environmental protection, through health care and international relations to migration issues, with special attention to cross-border cooperation and the needs of border regions.

Cross-border cooperation has become more and more popular as a result of EU support sources, and today there is practically no border section of the Union where we cannot find cross-border cooperation of some kind. Euroregional cooperation has become the most typical of cross-border cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. Since 1993, more than two dozen collaborations of this type have been established¹. However, the activities of the Euroregions have now practically ceased, with only a few exceptions. Meanwhile, due to glocalisation² (Lengyel, 2003), the importance of smaller-scale associations has increased. In addition to taking into account the factors of cooperation, we cannot forget that the border regions of member countries - Hungary also falls into this category - are often areas, where economic and social conflicts can be observed, and border territories are also peripheral (Baranyi, 2019). Therefore, it is not uncommon that these countries implemented and are still implementing their current development policy goals through EU subsidies, and as a result, they could not/cannot improve their position, while they do not contribute to the integration objectives of cross-border cooperation either. In domestic terms, the areas located on the Western and Eastern sides of the border, as well as on the Eastern side of the Southern border, can be considered as "dynamic border areas" that can take advantage of the benefits of the border area and the opportunities provided by cooperation. However at the same time, there are still "border areas lying in the shadow of the wind" (the Eastern parts of the Northern border and the Western half of the Southern border region), which can still be considered a cumulatively disadvantaged, peripheral area (Hardi, 2008).

2.2. The tourism policy of the European Union

The possibilities for tourism development in border areas and the creation of cross-border destinations are significantly influenced by the EU's tourism policy. Since December 2009, tourism in the European Union has had its own legal basis, recognising the importance of the sector, but at the same time leaving the principle of subsidiarity³, which the member states interpret differently in many cases. Nowadays in EU politics, tourism is a means of support in order to achieve objectives related to employment and economic growth. In this framework, the creation of sustainable and responsible tourism is more and more important. Prior EU measures directly affecting tourism include:

- creation of a European tourism satellite account (in addition to harmonised statistical data collection based on the tourist satellite accounts of the member states)
- directives created for the safety of travellers (e.g. directive 2006/7/EC on the quality of bathing water, directive (EU) 2015/2303 on travel packages)
- promotion of European destinations (e.g. the European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) award, DiscoverEU program)

¹ The collaborations established since 1993: Carpathian Euroregion (hereafter ER), Kassa-Miskolc ER, Sajó-Rima ER, Neogradiensis ER, Ipoly ER, Vág-Duna-Ipoly ER, Danube-Körös-Maros-Tisza ER, ER West/Nyugat - Pannonia, Danube-Dráva-Száva ER, Hármás Duna-vidék ER, Mura-Dráva ER, Bihar-Bihar ER, Hajdú-Bihar-Bihar ER

² The rise in the importance of local factors as a result of globalisation processes

³ Based on the principle of subsidiarity, the general principles and rules also apply to tourism, i.e. the decisions and conditions for the sector's operation are made at the level closest to the citizens, at the level of the member states

- promoting social tourism (the CALYSO program for the elderly, disabled and disadvantaged)
- creation of cross-border routes (e.g. EuroVelo network of 14 cycling routes, "Green Ribbon" pedestrian and cycling route from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea)
- support for cross-border projects in sustainable tourism (e.g. INTERREG – support for cross-border collaborations, COSME – transnational product developments to exploit synergies between tourism and the cultural and creative industries, NECSTour – platform for innovative tourism solutions). The creation of cross-border tourist areas is therefore not a declared goal at the EU level, which is why it appears only sporadically in programs supporting cross-border cooperation, as well as in the strategies of Euroregions and European regional associations (ETT, <https://egtc.kormany.hu>).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statement that there is no border section of the Union where cross-border cooperation does not exist, is not only true for cross-border cooperation in general. The number of cooperations for tourism purposes is also innumerable - mainly due to the support sources. The paper focuses on the tourism relations of three selected border areas (Hungary-Croatia, Hungary-Slovenia, and Hungary-Slovakia on the North-Western border areas), taking into account the established cooperations and evaluating the possibility to create cross-border tourist destinations along the criteria established in the previous chapters.

1. Cross-border cooperation in tourism - presentation of selected areas

Hungary – Croatia. The counties affected by the possibilities of cross-border cooperation are peripheral areas on both sides, the poorest parts of the countries. From a development point of view, they do not belong to the so-called effective state territories. The relevant Interreg program affects 3 territorial units in Hungary and 8 in Croatia. In the area, the border acts as a de facto dividing line, reinforced by language barriers; the proportion of national minorities on both sides barely reaches 3 permille (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Areas of Hungarian-Croatian cooperation (Source: Own illustration)

The region is basically a rural area consisting of small villages (Csapó et al., 2015). The existing cities are small, and their catchment area is small. Looking at the list of tourist attractions, the settlements further from the border on both sides have attractions that influence travel decisions, while the attractions in the areas closer to the border are of local importance and offer the same type of tourist product. The tables belonging to the subchapter (Tables 1, 2 and 3) are short lists of tourist attractions of the regions, however, they are not comprehensive "catalogues". The summary includes attractions categorised on the basis of the main tourist product types, which can influence consumers' travel decisions.

Table 1. Inventory of leisure tourism attractions in the Hungarian-Croatian border area
(Source: own editing based on internet sources (<https://www.iranypecs.hu/en>, <https://visitbaranja.croatia.hr/en-gb>))

Tourist product	Hungary	Croatia
Culture	Pécs as a city break location, Mohács as an event location and guardian of many traditions, Siklósi Castle, Szigetvári Castle	Eszék as a city break location
Health tourism	Spas of local importance (e.g. Barcs, Csokonyavisonta, Szigetvár), where foreign (Croatian) guest traffic stems from the border clearance. The exception to this is Harkány, but there the internationality is primarily ensured by the Czech clientele.	Locally important, smaller spas with more domestic guest traffic: Daruvár, Bizovac, Terme Sveti Martin
Wine and gastronomy	Villány wine region, which has little international visitor traffic, is primarily popular with Hungarian guests	The Croatian border wine region of Baranya (Vinogorje Baranja)
Active tourism	Local cycling routes and the cross-border "Three Rivers cycling route (Mura-Dráva-Danube), which is part of the EuroVelo international route 13 Drava water tours in national park protected areas only in organized form	"Amazon of Croatia" canoe tours only in organized form
Ecotourism	Danube-Drava National Park border areas: nature trails along the Drava, Ÿ-Drava Visitor Center, Béda-Karapanca landscape unit	Kopácsi Rét – floodplain natural park at the confluence of the Danube and Drava, in Slavonia Papuk Nature Park (in the Verőce-Drávamente region)

The relationship between the two countries began in the 1960s, mainly at the level of two-way shopping tourism, which was later connected to health tourism (bathing). However, cross-border tourism basically consists of only one-day trips. The Yugoslav War was a huge blow to the already disadvantaged region (it is far from the center of the country on both sides). Cross-border cooperation identifies tourism as a starting point, however, the impact of partnerships established in order to create more resources is not visible in the indicators of tourism (guests, guest nights).

Hungary – Slovenia. There are no geographical borders between the two countries; there are only a few Hungarian border sections with such uniform natural landscape (Figure 4). On the Hungarian side, the counties belonging to the area are Vas and Zala, while in Slovenia, the affected region is Pomurje (or Podravje in the relating Interreg program).

Table 2. Inventory of leisure tourism attractions in the Hungarian-Slovenian border area
(Source: Own editing based on internet sources (<https://orseg.info>, <https://www.zsz.hu/murafolde-mura-regio>))

Tourist product	Hungary	Slovenia
Culture	The cultural value is the Órség landscape and settlement structure, and the Vendvidék, primarily with a domestic scope	Landscape houses, village museums, castles and castles with smaller local history exhibitions
Health tourism	Lenti, Letenye spas that generate local and cross-border demand	Lendva spas of local importance, Moravske Toplice complex with international visitor traffic
Wine and gastronomy	Zalai wine region with local significance	Lendva wine route with local significance
Active tourism	Mura-Raba Tour pedestrian, horse and water tour routes involving the two countries; Amazon of Europe cycling route – a route involving 5 countries in the area of the Mura-Dráva-Danube UNESCO Biosphere Reserve	
Ecotourism	Órség National Park, Kerka-mente Naturpark; Csömödér Forest Railway	Goričko Naturpark

Just as in the case of the Hungarian-Croatian border section, this area is characterised by a rural countryside, agricultural areas and a peripheral location, the centers are remote and difficult to reach (Hardi, 2002). Diplomatic relations were already exemplary during the period of the Hungarian change of the regime. At that time, cooperation primarily aimed at preserving the identity of Hungarians and Slovenians living on both sides of the border.

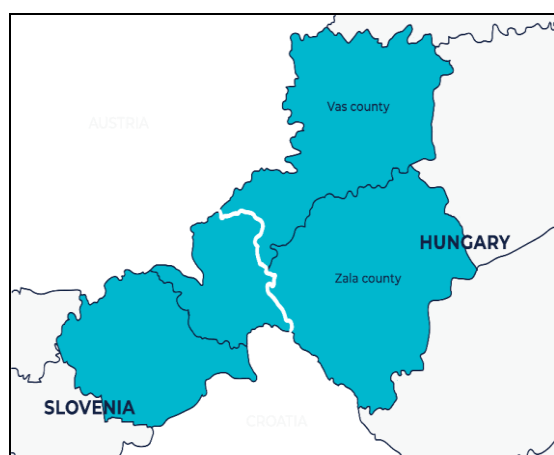


Figure 4. Areas of Hungarian-Slovenian cooperation
(Source: Own illustration)



Figure 5. Areas of Hungarian-Slovak cooperation
(Source: Own illustration)

Shopping tourism before the 1990s was also typical of this region, but actual leisure trips only started after the change of the regime in Hungary. Policy documents consider tourism to be a priority in the Hungarian-Slovenian cooperation, for the purpose of which the "Muránia Tourist Zone" connecting the two sides of the border was established in 2006. The strategic documents also highlight sustainable tourism as the number 1 priority, however this is not visible in marketing communication. Outbound trips primarily from our country to Slovenia affect the border area less (with the exception of the spa of Moravske Toplice, i.e. Tótszentmárton) (Gyuricza and Ginzer, 2016), and the number of trips from Slovenia to Hungary is not significant compared to inbound trips affecting the entire country.

Hungary – Slovakia. The Slovakian-Hungarian border section is Hungary's longest, it is 679 km long. Among the investigated areas, the proportion of Hungarian-inhabited settlements on the other side of the border is one of the highest here. The differences in development are increasing from West to East. While the Western section can be considered a "dynamic" area, the Eastern one can be considered a "wind-shadowed" area. The selected area for the study is Szigetköz and Csallóköz, where the Danube shaped the landscape and made it unique in East-Central Europe (Figure5).

In terms of connections, the aspirations for the cross-border region are stronger in the economically more developed, Western section. The area can be considered one of the most dynamically developing border regions, primarily because of the catchment area of Vienna and Bratislava, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage for the border settlements, precisely because of the central functions of the above-mentioned cities, which is why the majority of the resources on the Slovak side have been concentrated in the Slovak capital in recent decades. Although Hungarian-Slovak relations are not necessarily smooth in terms of major politics (especially with regard to the situation of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia), at the micro-regional level, after the availability of EU funds, relations became extremely active, and countless

programs were implemented for tourism purposes, connecting the regions' offerings. However, even in the case of the previously presented regions, after the completion of the projects, online marketing communication practically ceases, which is an essential condition in the case of tourism sales shifting towards the digital space (Chovanová, et al. 2016).

Table 3. Inventory of leisure tourism attractions in the north-western Hungarian-Slovak border area (Source: Own editing based on internet sources <https://szigetkozportal.hu/en/>, <https://www.travelguide.sk/eng/zitny-ostrov/tourist-attractions/tourist-regions/>)

Tourist product	Hungary	Slovakia
Culture	The baroque downtown of Győr; Saint James Church (Lébény) Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalmi - not directly part of the region, but due to its international appeal it can be a flagship	Csallóközi Museum (Dunaszerdahely), country houses and local history museums
Health tourism	Spa with significant foreign (Slovak, Austrian) demand due to Győr and Mosonmagyaróvár bordering Slovakia and Austria respectively	Thermal Corvinus (Nagymegyer), Thermalpark (Dunaszerdahely)
Wine and gastronomy	Pannonhalmi wine region	-
Active tourism	Futura Experience Center (Mosonmagyaróvár); Mobilis Interactive Exhibition Center (Győr); Canoe trips on the Rába, Danube and Mosoni-Danube	Water trips on the Little Danube and the Vág River
	Cross-border thematic walking, cycling and water tour routes of the Cultractive initiative (only one of the recommended tours crosses the administrative border)	
Ecotourism	Xantus János Zoo (Győr)	Kis Csallóköz Ecocentre

2. Analysing the possibility of the creation of cross-border tourist destinations

In the following part, the possibility of connecting the selected border regions for tourism purposes will be analysed and evaluated according to the characteristics described in the first, theoretical part of the paper. The evaluation of the given area is based on the literature review of the topic and what was presented in the previous chapters. It is important to note that the purpose of the analysis is not to assess the tourism relevance of individual territorial units, and in the case of the projects affected by the support, the aim is not to evaluate the tourism impact of the development. The investigation is carried out exclusively from the aspect of the possibilities of creating a cross-border tourist destination.

Table 4. Possibilities of creating a tourist destination that crosses the Hungarian-Croatian border (Source: Own editing)

Criterion	Evaluation
Opportunities for cooperation	
Social factors	The ethnic differences that have developed in the course of history are significant, although the border region of Croatia once belonged to our country, it has always been an area with a separate national identity.
Political factors	The political relationship can be said to be rather neutral, although trade relations have intensified since the South Slavic war, Croatia cannot be considered a priority partner of our country.
Economic factors	Both regions are located on the periphery, far from the capitals representing the center, and deep poverty appears on both sides of the border.
Geographical factors	The Dráva River is a physical obstacle to traffic in the area, and the number of crossing opportunities on the common border section is relatively low. ⁹
Cultural factors	Two completely different cultures and traditions, the population is characterized by different mentalities and lifestyles.
Cross-border collaborations	
Subsidized programs aimed at creating a cross-border destination for tourism purposes	None of the 12 subsidized programs for tourism purposes available on the website of the cooperation aim to create a cross-border destination, a tourist organization was involved in 1/3 of the projects.
Existence of a cross-border tourist destination	The idea of a cross-border tourist destination does not appear in the available Euroregional and ETT strategic documents.
Touristic relevance of the area in domestic tourism	Only the Pécs-Villány touristic area has appreciable touristic relevance in the country. Within the Croatian supply structure, border areas are of little importance for tourism.
Touristic relevance of the area in inbound (international) tourism	Based on statistical data, cross-border trips between the two countries are limited to a maximum of 1-day trips, other nations may be interested in the area, it occurs in the case of traditional spas, but the latter have no relevance from the point of view of cross-border tourism.
Linkable supply	A linkable supply element could be the Drava River, however, the nature conservation area status is a significant limiting factor in terms of duration and mooring possibilities.
Evaluation according to Matznetter's border tourist area classification	There is a tourist target area only on one side of the border (Pécs-Villány tourist area).

Hungary – Croatia. Based on the above (Table 4), it can be concluded that the real chance of creating a cross-border destination is low, which is hindered by the border itself (geographical barrier), the different cultures and traditions of the two nations, the inequality of tourism relevance, and indirectly by economic factors (the peripheral situation of the region). Due to the latter, the multiplier effect¹⁰ of tourism does not apply. It is also an attention-grabbing fact that only about one third of the subsidised projects has a tourism organisation that could support professional sales at the regional level.

Hungary – Slovenia. The creation of a cross-border destination is not a new idea in the Hungarian-Slovenian border region, its creation has already been facilitated by the implementation of quite a few programs by the people living in the region (Table 5). At the same time, a significant part of the developments contain unique and isolated development elements, presumably according to the current needs of the respective countries. Cross-border tourism product development was not followed by targeted and continuous marketing activity in any cases, and it is also not typical to update the information on the cooperation after a program finished.

Table 5. Possibilities for creating a tourist destination that crosses the Hungarian-Slovenian border (Source: Own editing)

Criterion	Evaluation
Opportunities for cooperation	
Social factors	Despite the ethnic differences, the quality of cross-border relations is outstanding, and transit between the two countries has developed organically.
Political factors	Diplomatic relations are balanced, both sides respect efforts to preserve national identity.
Economic factors	Both areas are located on the periphery, but at the same time, the relative proximity to the Bratislava-Sopron-Győr-Szombathely axis makes the situation of the area more favorable compared to the previously examined Hungarian-Croatian border region.
Geographical factors	There are no physical barriers between the two countries, from the point of view of the landscape, it can be considered a unified destination.
Cultural factors	With the preservation of national identity, customs, culture and traditions are still alive today on both sides, and the maintenance of culture and traditions is a high priority for both sides.
Cross-border collaborations	
Subsidized programs for tourism purposes, aimed at creating cross-border destinations	Of the 12 supported programs for tourism purposes available on the website of the cooperation, 3 also aim at creating cross-border destinations; moreover, the Iron Curtain cycle route goes even further, as it connects 5 countries. Compared to the previous one, the involvement of tourism organizations in this region is already significant, 6 programs were implemented with the participation of a consortium of 9 tourism organizations.
The existence of a cross-border tourist destination	The Muránia Tourist Zone was established more than 15 years ago, and in line with the strategic goals of the alliance, several programs implemented with support in the past period aimed at creating a cross-border tourist destination.
Touristic relevance of the area in domestic tourism	Both areas have touristic relevance within the borders of the given country, however, they do not belong to the regions of the mother countries that are frequented from the point of view of tourism.
The touristic relevance of the area in inbound (international) tourism	From the point of view of international tourism, spas are primarily an attraction; in addition to cross-border guest traffic, the spa complex in Moravske Toplice is capable of generating genuine foreign guest traffic.
Linkable offer	The clear connecting element is the geographical landscape and the folk architecture and traditions associated with the landscape. Water and bicycle hiking trails created along the Mura and Rába rivers contribute to cross-border adventures.
Evaluation according to Matznetter's border tourist area classification	There are tourist destination areas on both sides of the border, but they are not among the most frequented areas of the given country. According to Matznetter's classification, there are currently two independent destinations on both sides of the border.

Hungary – Slovakia. The creation of a cross-border destination is an existing idea and aspiration for the actors of the region, but at the level of active action, this has been less realised (Table 6). As in the case of the other two areas, it is also typical here that after the end of the supported projects, the sales of the created tourism products do not materialise and/or do not last. Despite this, the area has all the qualities needed to create a cross-border tourist area: the geographical features are favourable, the area is dynamically developing from an economic point of view, and the established collaborations are active and forward-looking.

Table 6. Possibilities of creating a tourist destination that crosses the Hungarian-Slovakian border in the North-West (Source: Own editing)

Criterion	Evaluation
Opportunities for cooperation	
Social factors	There are significant Hungarian-inhabited areas on the Slovak side, and in recent years there has been an increasingly significant migration of Slovaks to the bordering Hungarian settlements.
Political factors	Diplomatic relations are not necessarily smooth, but the relationship between the two countries can be considered active in the relevance of the border areas.
Economic factors	One of the most dynamically located border regions thanks to Vienna and Bratislava, the Slovak capital.
Geographical factors	The physical barriers between the two countries are not significant, the landscape is made unique by the unique Danube-shaped landscape of Szigetköz and Csallóköz.
Cultural factors	Although culture and traditions show many similarities, they are still different nations, with a strong sense of identity on the Slovak side.
Cross-border collaborations	
Subsidized programs aimed at creating a cross-border destination for tourism purposes	Out of the 10 subsidized programs available on the website of the cooperation, only 2 projects are aimed at creating a cross-border destination, but Arrabona EGTC, which since its establishment in 2011 has been consciously striving to connect the two areas, is a prominent player.
The existence of a cross-border tourist destination	The "Heart of the Danube" destination is an initiative launched in 2020 (Protour program), which aims to create a cross-border destination between Szigetköz and Csallóköz.
Tourism relevance of the area in domestic tourism	Thanks to the presence of larger cities, tourism is an important sector in both areas, however, the potential inherent in leisure tourism in the immediate border area has not yet been exploited.
The touristic relevance of the area in inbound (international) tourism.	International tourism at the level of leisure tourism primarily stems from border protection, additional foreign guest traffic can be linked to business tourism on the Hungarian side.
Linkable offer	The main connecting element is the geographical landscape and the opportunities provided by active and ecotourism, where the branding potential lies in the unique landscape characteristics of Szigetköz and Csallóköz.
Evaluation according to Matznetter's border tourist area classification	There are tourist destination areas on both sides of the border, a significant part of which still has little tourist relevance today. If we consider Győr (and Pannonhalma) as part of the territorial unit, then today's realistic picture is that there is a tourist destination only on one side of the border, however, in terms of initiatives, two independent destinations operate on both sides of the border.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question posed at the beginning of the paper - whether there is a real chance of creating cross-border tourist destinations in the three selected regions - is clearly yes. In the case of two regions, the potential is given and the initiatives aimed at creating them are forward-looking. However, if, in addition to the activity of regional actors, other factors influencing the possibility of cooperation are taken into account, the picture is more nuanced, and many other hindering factors arise, such as physical obstacles (Hungarian-Croatian region), economic instability (in the case of any region occurs on one or both sides), or self-serving developments. Another fact that supports the hypothesis is that, from a tourism professional point of view, these regions do not yet create sufficient demand for sustainable tourism in terms of their own internal markets, so the real development of cross-border destinations is possible.

An exception to this can be tourism product developments representing a niche market, where the success factor is ensured not by the number of offers, but by the creation of tourist products based on the same properties and themes as well as on unique properties (USP) (Szigetköz-Csallóköz - joint market entry water tour routes with its design).

The limitations of the research is the fact, that the afterlife of the projects realised with subsidies cannot be traced in most cases. Project management teams are dissolved after implementation or the mandatory maintenance period. Thus, there is no possibility for primary research (e.g. in-depth interviews with stakeholders) that would reveal the maintenance of the cooperation. An additional opportunity on the subject could be to interview tourists coming to the affected areas.

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