

## TERRITORIAL IMPACTS OF EUROPEAN UNION DEVELOPMENT FUNDS IN THE NORTHERN HUNGARY REGION

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**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to determine – in general and through a selected target area – what measurable territorial effects regional development grants, as development policy intervention tools, have. After reviewing the literature I examined the theoretical connections of the European Union's regional policy related to territorial and tourism development. Complex Tourism Impact Index was also used to examine the complex environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism. I conducted an examination of the tourism competitiveness factors (i.e. tourism embeddedness, tourism development, tourism efficiency and capacity utilization) and updated the methodology used to delimit core tourist areas in a previous study (Gyurkó & Bujdosó, 2017). In Hungary, tourism plays a key role in regional development, especially in underdeveloped regions with significant tourism potential. A relationship can be demonstrated between the amount of European Union funding spent on tourism development and the growth rate of the tourism sector's performance. European Union tourism grants have a measurable impact on tourism. According to the used factors, core touristic areas can be signed in the research area. Based TPI, Northern Hungary region can be considered a moderately low saturated destination, however, there are significant regional differences within the region. With my theoretical results, I drew attention to the multifaceted system of connections between tourism and regional development. I presented the cohesion objectives of the European Union's regional policy and their concrete manifestation through a convergence region in Hungary. With the help of my empirical results, I presented the different territorial impacts of the European Union's tourism development funds, as well as the impact of the funds on sectoral and competitiveness factors.

**Keywords:** development funds, European Union, tourism development, Northern Hungary

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### INTRODUCTION

The reduction of territorial disparities resulting from the uneven spatial distribution of development factors has long been a concern not only for decision-makers but also for researchers interested in the topic. By the end of the 20th century, researchers dealing with spatial phenomena began to pay increasing attention to exploring the relationships between direct and indirect development support and the economic, social and environmental responses they triggered.

The role of tourism in regional development has also become a focus of interest. The relationship between tourism and regional development, and the role of this sector in development policies, is multifaceted, and therefore, the opinions of professionals about the relationship between the two sectors are divided, mainly due to differences in conceptual perception (Seidualin et al., 2025). If we view regional development only as a means to reduce regional differences, we cannot deal with a regional development approach that is differentiated based on tourism attractiveness (Kraftné, 2000). However, if we start from the cross-sectoral nature of tourism and also keep in mind the related environmental, nature conservation, cultural and economic efficiency requirements, its regional development function cannot be questioned (Aubert et al., 2000).

According to Vukonic (2012), the debate on tourism as a factor in regional development has been going on for a long time and can be traced back to the early 1950s in tourism research. At the heart of the debate is the concept of the core-periphery dichotomy, i.e. whether tourism actually drives economic growth in peripheral areas and whether tourism is a means to dismantle existing spatial structures (Müller & Jansson, 2007; Hall, 2013).

During my research work, the choice of the sector was justified by several factors. On the one hand, there has long been an interest in measuring the impact and capacity of tourism, but so far there have been relatively few actual results in this area. There is broad agreement in the literature that tourism plays a key role in the development and competitiveness of many regions (Keller, 1987; Pearce, 1988; Oppermann, 1992; Giaoutzi et al., 2006; Müller et al., 2007; Lazzeretti et al., 2008; Dávid & Szűcs, 2009; Alberti et al., 2012; Huijbens et al., 2014; Huang & Chen, 2016; Hojcska & Szabó, 2021; Matlovicova, 2024, Matlovic & Matlovicova, 2025). Due to its positive socio-economic impact, the sector is strongly linked to regional development and social progress in general, especially in economically underdeveloped regions and countries (Pak, 1996; Nurkovic, 2009; Castanho et al., 2021). On the other hand, in recent times due to the growing importance of

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tourism (according to the WTTC, the contribution of tourism to GDP globally ranged between 10-11% in 2024, and in our country, according to the data of the Central Statistical Office, it exceeded 10%), it has played an increasingly important role in both economic, social and political life. Thirdly, one of the main goals of the European Union's cohesion policy is to promote catching up and support lagging regions (Tóth et al., 2020). Tourism, as an indirect tool of regional development, contributes significantly - especially in the area forming the geographical framework of the study - to the achievement of this goal (Kelfaoui & Rezzaz, 2021; Yasir et al., 2021; Gyurkó, 2025). The fundamental aim of the is to determine – in general and through a selected target area – what measurable territorial effects regional development grants, as development policy intervention tools, have. To achieve this objective, I examined the spatial effects of tourism developments implemented with European Union grants, and my aim was to explore the possible multifaceted relationship between grants and territorial development. In connection with the research, I formulated the following objectives:

To analyze a) the tourism processes of the Northern Hungary region since its accession to the European Union, b) the territorial characteristics of tourism in the Northern Hungary region and c) the territorial distribution of tourism development grants awarded in the European Union development periods (2004-2006, 2007-2013, 2014-2020).

To reveal, to identify the territorial impacts of tourism development grants awarded from European Union funds.

Look for connections between tourism grants awarded from European Union funds and changes in tourism indicators in the Northern Hungary region. Since the paper aims to answer scientific questions, my goal was not to conduct development policy and project or program effectiveness analyses. Therefore, I did not examine the sectoral efficiency of programs and priorities, the resource absorption issues related to obtaining grants, the regional and sectoral distribution of applicants and their connections and the implementation of the principles of cohesion policy.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

During my research work, I paid great attention to reviewing the domestic and international literature on the topic, which appears in my paper in two basic ways. On the one hand, – in order to provide a theoretical foundation for the topic – I reviewed the topics of territorial development, territorial processes and territorial development, primarily the definitions used in settlement geography. On the other hand, I examined the theoretical connections of the European Union's regional policy related to territorial and tourism development in Hungary and within it, Northern Hungary, and I reviewed the international and domestic methodological knowledge used to measure the effects of grants.

The source of the data required for the research varies by study area and indicator. To meet the data needs of the research, I relied heavily on existing databases. The source data comes directly from the supported project search application ([https://archive.palyazat.gov.hu/tamogatott\\_projektkereso](https://archive.palyazat.gov.hu/tamogatott_projektkereso)). The application uses data from the Unified Monitoring and Information System (EMIR), which contains data on all grants awarded. Another pillar of the research databases were parts available from the Public Database of the Central Statistical Office. In addition, the National Spatial Development and Planning Information System (TEIR), publicly available data from Eurostat, and the Statista database (statista.doc) available with institutional subscription were used.

The time interval of the study was 20 years after Hungary's accession to the European Union, i.e. the data from the period 2004-2023 were analyzed. Since this time period encompasses 3 completely closed European Union support cycles (2004-2006, 2007-2013, 2014-2020), and since, based on the study results presented in the literature, the effects of a supported investment take effect after 2-3 years, this time frame is suitable for achieving the research goals.

I used Microsoft Excel to process the collected statistical data. I used artificial intelligence exclusively for the interpretation of research methodology formulas. With the help of Microsoft Excel, I prepared a comparative analysis and calculated indices in order to explore all the factors that influence territorial effects and tourism competitiveness. In addition, I created a database integrated into a GIS system and then performed data analysis in it to perform the center of gravity analysis.

After reviewing and evaluating the research methodological background in detail, I defined the following research methods for analyzing the territorial impacts of funding sources:

In order to compare the changes in support amounts and guest nights, the focus of the evaluation was to explore the relationship between guest traffic and the resources obtained, using the methodology used by KPMG (2017). The territorial studies were conducted at the district and settlement levels.

I used the Complex Tourism Impact Index (Sütő, 2007) to examine the complex environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism in the Northern Hungary region. The territorial studies were conducted at district and settlement levels.

I conducted an examination of the tourism competitiveness factors of the Northern Hungary region, i.e. tourism embeddedness, tourism development, tourism efficiency and capacity utilization (Bujdosó et al., 2025).

I have updated the methodology used to delimit core tourist areas in a previous study (Gyurkó & Bujdosó, 2017). The following indicators and weights were defined for the research:

- Current attractions 20%
- Key tourism products 25%
- Turnover rate 30%
- Tourism networks and development activity 20%
- Local tourist tax 5%

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the consequences obtained during my research, I formulated the following results. In Hungary, tourism plays a key role in regional development, especially in underdeveloped regions with significant tourism potential.

A relationship can be demonstrated between the amount of European Union funding spent on tourism development and the growth rate of the tourism sector's performance. Despite the fact that tourism development was not an independent operational program in the Hungarian national development plans, the sector was given a prominent role in the operational programs aimed at regional development. In Hungary, between 2004 and 2020, 25.58% of the European Union regional development funds served tourism development (Table 1). With the results of secondary research, I confirmed that in the Northern Hungary region, both the proportion of regional development funds targeting tourism development (30.07%) and the growth rate of indicators measuring the performance of the tourism sector (tourism embeddedness, tourism development, tourism efficiency, capacity utilization) were higher than the national average (Table 1).

Table 1. Share of tourism development resources from regional development support by region in Hungary, 2004-2020 (Source: own compilation, based on EMIR data)

Region	Total regional development support 2004-2020, HUF	Total tourism support 2004-2020, HUF	Proportion of total tourism and regional development resources, %
Southern Great Plain	357 241 862 443	77 202 858 193	21.61
Southern Transdanubia	336 562 680 029	81 983 752 669	24.36
Northern Great Plain	440 994 626 271	104 913 627 557	23.79
<b>Northern Hungary</b>	<b>419 364 117 413</b>	<b>126 106 888 939</b>	<b>30.07</b>
Central Transdanubia	312 498 245 464	107 734 006 184	34.48
Central Hungary	1,017,138,291,204	45 066 645 917	4.43
Western Transdanubia	223 543 316 071	90 122 763 334	40.32

Table 2. Average relative change in tourism competitiveness factors – based on a three-year moving average – in the regions of Hungary (2004–2023) (Source: Bujdosó et al, 2025)

Area	Tourism embeddedness	No.	Tourism development	No.	Tourism efficiency	No.	Capacity utilization	No.
<b>Northern Hungary</b>	<b>99.89%</b>	<b>4.</b>	<b>101.68%</b>	<b>1.</b>	<b>100.57%</b>	<b>2.</b>	<b>101.21%</b>	<b>1.</b>
Southern Great Plain	100.99%	2.	101.31%	2.	99.85%	4.	100.45%	2.
Central Transdanubia	99.72%	6.	100.79%	3.	100.63%	1.	100.44%	3.
Southern Transdanubia	99.82%	5.	99.42%	5.	99.85%	5.	99.75%	4.
Northern Great Plain	99.56%	7.	99.39%	6.	100.27%	3.	99.58%	5.
Western Transdanubia	100.06%	3.	98.92%	7.	99.44%	6.	99.41%	6.
Pest	102.67%	1.	100.49%	4.	98.98%	7.	98.88%	7.

The Northern Hungary region (Table 2) can be considered an optimal study area for verifying the aspirations and objectives related to the regional policy of the European Union, as well as the territorial development effects of tourism. In one of the most backward regions of the European Union, including Hungary (convergence region), tourism-related grants have been used to reduce territorial differences and to promote developments based on local characteristics (various geographical and landscape characteristics, attractions). In accordance with the objectives, all types of areas and settlements have benefited from the developments, albeit to different degrees.

The selection of the Northern Hungary region as a research area is also justified by the tourist potential of the area, since its touristic features are diverse, multi-element, and can even be called complex. This fact is a decisive strength of the region. The attraction elements are also outstanding in terms of their significance, the results prove that the region has touristic potential at the domestic and even international level. The size of the support sources of the Northern Hungary region is based on the already mentioned high touristic potential (settlements rich in cultural and historical values, thermal springs, natural attractions, etc.), on the other hand, on the principle of the European Union's cohesion policy, according to which the development of less developed regions is a priority (Table 3). Based on these two factors, the Northern Hungary region was the most prominent region for tourism development in the past planning periods (Figure 1).

Table 3. Awarded tourism grants (ERDF) in the regions of Hungary between 2004-2020 and the level of GDP/capita in 2023 (Source: Own editing; Data: KSH database)

Region	Awarded tourism grants 2004-2020	No	Gross domestic product per capita (GDP/capita), thousand HUF, 2023	No.
<b>Northern Hungary</b>	<b>126,106,888,939 HUF</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4 921 Ft</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Central Transdanubia</b>	<b>107,734,006,184 HUF</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6 843 Ft</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Northern Great Plain</b>	<b>104,913,627,557 HUF</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5 048 Ft</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Western Transdanubia</b>	<b>90,122,763,334 HUF</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6 896 Ft</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Southern Transdanubia</b>	<b>81,983,752,669 HUF</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5 161 Ft</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Southern Great Plain</b>	<b>77,202,858,193 HUF</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5 482 Ft</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Budapest</b>	<b>31,443,826,593 HUF</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>17 146 Ft</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pest</b>	<b>13,622,819,324 HUF</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6 676 Ft</b>	<b>4</b>

In the Northern Hungary region, the European Union development funds for tourism served a dual regional development goal. By developing settlements and regions frequented by tourism (tourist center areas), they achieved the

convergence of tourism to the European level and improved its competitiveness. The development of settlements and regions with lower tourism performance and less frequented from a tourism perspective (tourist peripheries) served to reduce internal inequalities and reduce tourism development differences within the country.

In the period 2004-2020, a total of 110 out of the 610 municipalities in the region received EU support for tourism development, which is 18.03% of the municipalities in the region. Out of the 44 cities in the Northern Hungary region, development was implemented in 32 from European Union funds, while 13.66% (78) of the municipalities received support.

In terms of territorial distribution, a significant part of the grants went to the tourist core areas of the region (Mátra-Bükk, Mezőkövesd, Tokaj-Hegyalja, Lake Tisza), with a few World Heritage sites and spa towns as highlights. There are also several connected areas in the region where no tourism grants were received. (Figure 1).

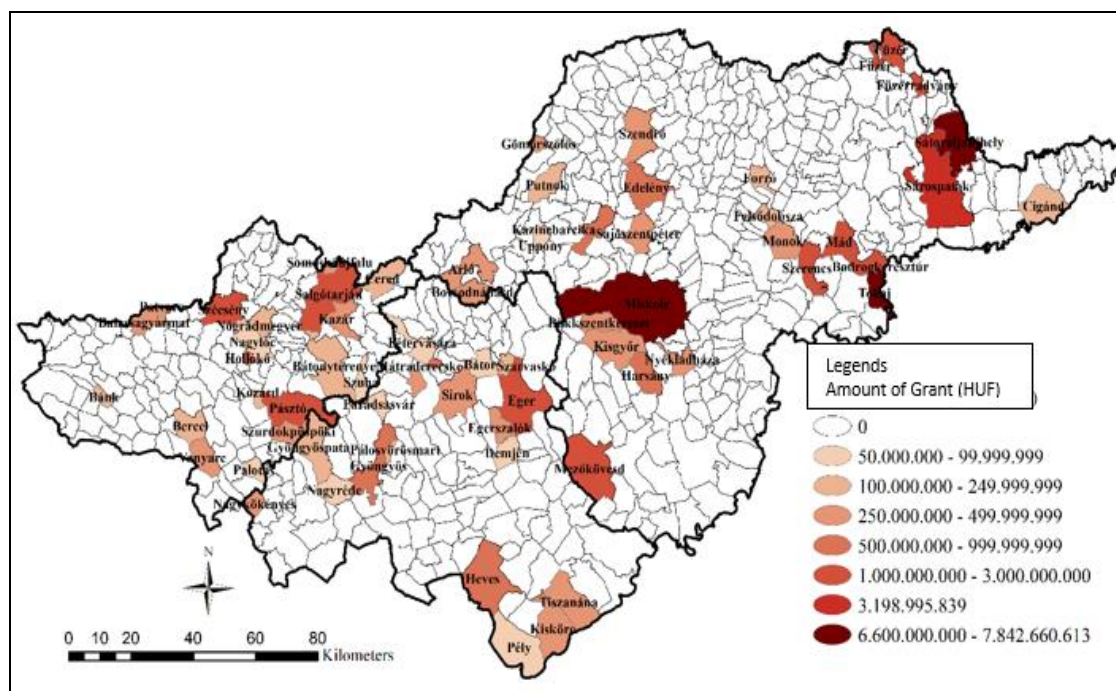


Figure 1. Amount of grants awarded for tourism development (HUF) in the settlements of the Northern Hungary region between 2014-2020 (Source: Own editing)

In terms of their proportion in the settlement structure, the categories between 10,000 and 50,000 people (2.3% and 12.72%) and between 5,000 and 10,000 people (1.97% and 6.36%) stand out among the supported settlement groups (Table 4). At the same time, settlements with less than 500 inhabitants were underrepresented in their proportion (34.26% and 16.36%). In the settlement category between 1000-2000 inhabitants, we can find close values for the two indicators (24.43% and 26.36%). In the Northern Hungary region, settlements form clearly demarcated tourist core areas based on attraction-based tourism products, tourism performance, and tourism networks. Tourism significantly determines the everyday life, social and economic relations of these settlements, thus it also plays an important role in regional development. Tourism core areas may be suitable for use as tourism planning and development units.

Table 4. Number of settlements and Distribution of the number of settlements that received support by population groups (%), 2024 (Source: Own compilation based on KSH Database, 2024)

Area	-499	500-999	1,000-1,999	2,000-4,999	5,000-9,999	10,000-49,999	50,000-
<b>Distribution of the number of settlements</b>							
<b>Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county</b>	43.02	20.95	20.11	11.45	2.23	1.96	0.28
<b>Heves county</b>	13.22	23.14	33.88	24.79	1.65	3.31	0.00
<b>Nograd county</b>	29.77	32.06	27.48	6.87	1.53	2.29	0.00
<b>Northern HU region</b>	34.26	23.77	24.43	13.11	1.97	2.30	0.16
<b>Distribution of the number of settlements receiving support</b>							
<b>Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county</b>	13.72	15.68	21.56	25.49	9.80	18.72	1.96
<b>Heves county</b>	12.90	16.12	19.35	32.25	6.45	12.90	0.00
<b>Nograd county</b>	21.42	17.85	39.28	7.14	7.14	10.71	0.00
<b>Northern HU region</b>	16.36	16.36	26.36	22.72	6.36	12.72	0.9

In the Northern Hungary region, tourist core areas can be delimited using statistical methods. As a result of a further development of previous research (Gyurkó & Bujdosó, 2017), the methodology used in the research allows five tourist areas within the region to be delimited in the studied area. In addition, Gyurkó (2020) identified two additional transboundary tourist areas and one potential tourist core area, which my studies confirmed (Figure 2).

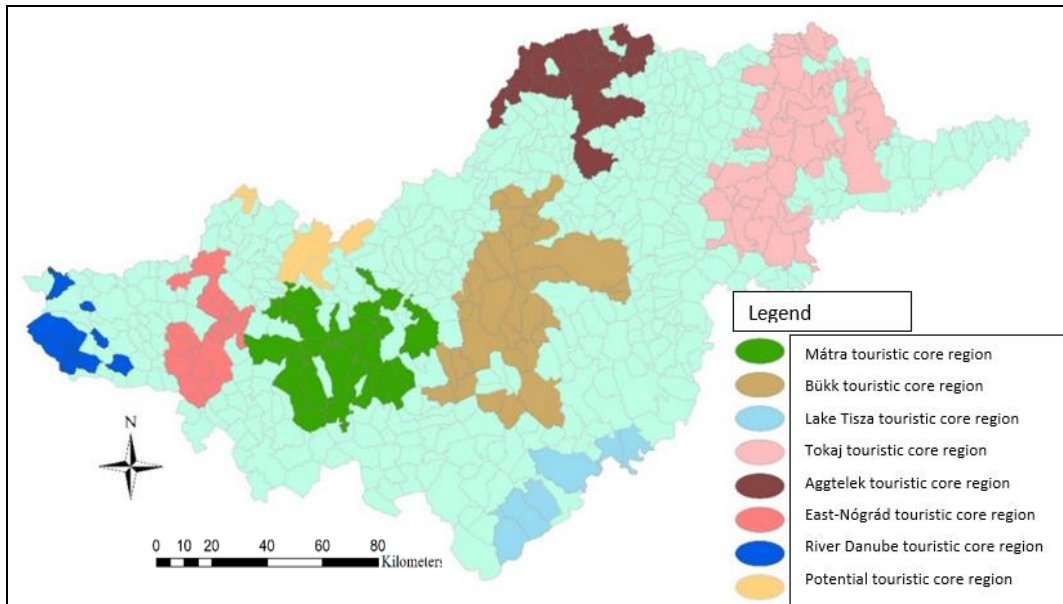


Figure 2. Tourist core areas in the Northern Hungary region (Source: Gyurkó & Bujdosó, 2017 based on Gyurkó, 2020)

The settlements of the Northern Hungary region can be classified into four categories:

- Settlements that cannot be classified as core areas: those settlements that have not experienced measurable tourist traffic or attraction
- Settlements classified as core areas with measurable tourism: those settlements that already have a measurable traffic indicator
- settlements classified as core areas with significant tourism: those settlements whose everyday life, social and economic indicators are already significantly influenced by tourism, have accommodation, attractions and tourist services.
- priority tourist settlement: settlements that generate outstanding tourist traffic, have cross-border appeal, and are internationally known.

European Union tourism grants have a measurable impact on tourism. In the Northern Hungary region, the different amounts of grants per area have a different effect on the changes in the most important tourism indicators. The effects of tourism grants can be recognized in the changes in tourism indicators at both district and settlement levels.

However, in the case of some settlements, a positive change in the value of tourism indicators may occur even without a source of support, which supports the important role of private investments. In the Northern Hungary region, all districts except Mezőcsát district received European Union tourism funding (Figure 3).

In the Northern Hungary region, all districts except Mezőcsát district received European Union tourism funding. Despite all this, the number of guest nights increased in 18 out of 29 districts, and in the case of Eger district, a significant amount of support resulted in a significant increase in the number of guest nights.

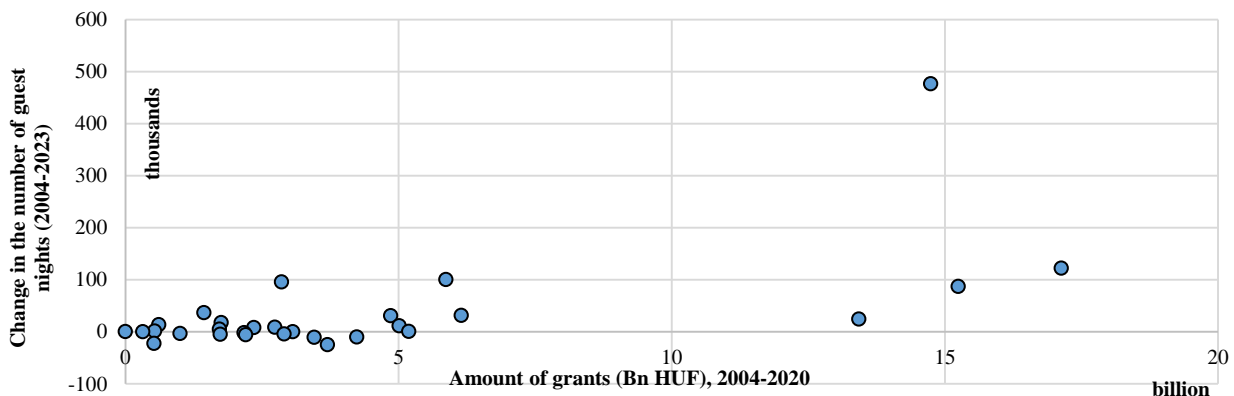


Figure 3. Change in the number of guest nights (2004-2023) and distribution of European Union tourism grants in the districts of the Northern Hungary region (Source: own compilation based on KPMG (2017), based on data from EMIR, IIES, KSH and TeIR)

In the Northern Hungary region, 110 settlements received European Union tourism development support, which is nearly one sixth of the settlements in the region, while 502 settlements did not receive support. Three settlements, Miskolc, Tokaj and Eger, stand out in the region. We can also find 63 settlements in the region that have received European Union tourism support, but their guest traffic has only increased or decreased slightly, while 45 settlements have not received support but have experienced a medium or small increase in the number of guest nights. In terms of the Complex Tourism Impact Indicator, which measures the complex environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism, the Northern

Hungary region can be considered a moderately low saturated destination, however, there are significant regional differences within the region. The region's mature and medium-mature destinations are primarily linked to the tourist core areas.

Based on the TPI index, districts in the region can be classified into all types (Figure 4. 7. Eger district, BÉlapátfalva district and Tokaj district can be considered mature destinations, while Mezőkövesd district, Pétervásárai district, Sátoraljaújhely district, Sárospatak district and Gyöngyös district are considered medium maturity areas.

The geographical location of the districts well reflects the main target areas of tourism in the Northern Hungary region, with mature destinations located within the core areas, while low-traffic tourist areas are located outside the core areas.

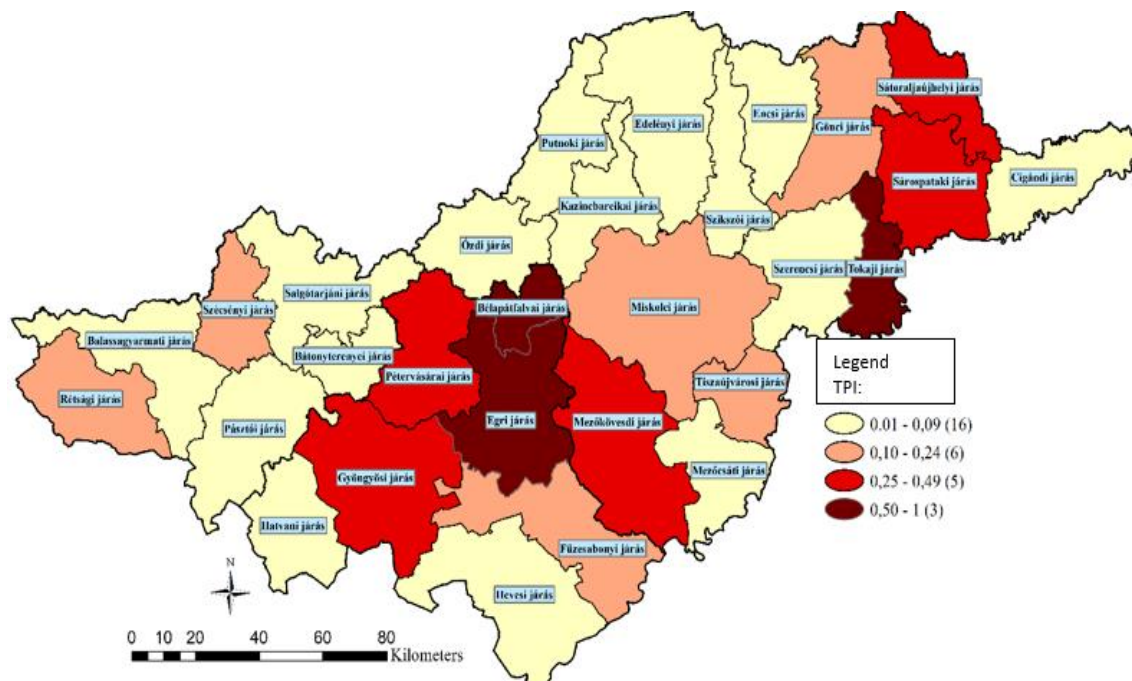


Figure 4. TPI index values in the districts of the Northern Hungary region in 2023 (Source: own editing; járás=district)

At the settlement level, I found that several settlements with low population but significant tourist traffic can already be considered mature destinations, while in the case of larger cities (Eger, Gyöngyös, Miskolc, Mezőkövesd), despite the high number of visitors and guest traffic, the negative complex effect of tourism does not appear even in such a volume.

Based on the changes in tourism competitiveness factors (tourism embeddedness, tourism development, tourism efficiency, capacity utilization), the European Union funds for tourism development purposes arriving in the Northern Hungary region contributed to the development of tourism in the region, to the increase in tourism efficiency and to the strengthening of the role of tourism within the economy.

The Northern Hungary region showed outstanding performance, the 101.68% growth value achieved in tourism development indicates that the revenue of accommodation establishments exceeded the national average in relation to the resident population, which confirms the gradual improvement of the region's tourism offer and the increase in demand, while the 101.21% result achieved in capacity utilization indicates the adequate utilization of the existing tourism infrastructure (Table 2). The outstanding value of these two indicators is also due to the efficient use of European Union grants (modernization of accommodation facilities, creation of new attractions). In terms of tourism efficiency, the Northern Hungary region achieved second place with a growth value of 100.57%, meaning that the revenue per guest night exceeded the national average, but the 99.89% value achieved in tourism embeddedness positioned the region in fourth place (the number of accommodation facilities decreased in relation to the resident population), meaning that the priority in the region was to improve the efficiency of existing capacities (quality development) rather than to establish new capacities.

## CONCLUSION

The main aim of my work was to highlight the growing socio-geographical, and regional geographical, significance of tourism. I tried to explore the connections with the applied methodological tools and to prove the complex relationships by performing territorial analyses. My research provided both theoretical and empirical results. With my theoretical results, I drew attention to the multifaceted system of connections between tourism and regional development. I presented the cohesion objectives of the European Union's regional policy and their concrete manifestation through a convergence region in Hungary.

With the help of my empirical results, I presented the different territorial impacts of the European Union's tourism development funds, as well as the impact of the funds on sectoral and competitiveness factors.

The future development of the tourism sector, its impact on regional development, and the size and territorial distribution of development resources still have many open questions. A promising research topic for the future could be the complex analysis of regional development resources and the examination of their utilization from a social and economic perspective. In my opinion, these further researches can expand social geography knowledge with new results.

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