

FROM CLOSED BORDER TO TOURISM DESTINATION: THE BARANJA TRIANGLE'S TRANSFORMATION FROM TRIANON TO SCHENGEN

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Abstract: Border regions in the post-socialist parts of Central and Eastern Europe have long been shaped by geopolitical fragmentation, infrastructural discontinuities, and economic peripheralization. The Baranja Triangle, located at the intersection of Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia, provides a particularly relevant case study due to its history of geopolitical fragmentation and the recent removal of both administrative and infrastructural border barriers. Recent developments, including Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area in 2023 and the completion of the M6–A5 motorway connection in 2025, have significantly improved the region's accessibility. This study examines whether these changes create realistic conditions for the tourism-based reintegration of the Baranja Triangle within a broader cross-border regional framework. A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining geopolitical and spatial analysis, GIS-based accessibility modeling, a questionnaire survey among local residents (n = 60), and twelve semi-structured interviews with regional stakeholders; the findings were synthesized in a TOWS matrix. Results indicate that although physical and administrative barriers have largely disappeared, the creation of an integrated cross-border tourism destination depends primarily on institutional coordination and strategic development frameworks. Survey results show a moderately positive local attitude toward tourism, cross-border cooperation, and infrastructural improvements, while correlation analysis indicates that residents perceive these factors as interconnected elements of regional development. The study concludes that heritage tourism, ecotourism, cycling tourism, and wine–gastronomic tourism offer realistic pathways for sustainable development, enabling the Baranja Triangle to gradually transform from a peripheral borderland into a competitive tourism destination within the Danube region.

Keywords: cross-border tourism, Schengen Area, Baranja Triangle, infrastructure development, regional integration, sustainable tourism, geopolitical changes

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INTRODUCTION

The Baranja Triangle (Hungarian: Baranya-háromszög) is situated on the northeastern periphery of Croatia, at the tri-border intersection of Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia. The region is bounded by the Hungarian–Croatian land border to the north, the Danube River to the east, and the Drava River to the south and southwest. Today, the area comprises the city of Beli Manastir (Pélmonostor) and eight municipalities. Its geographical position—characterized by the floodplains of two major rivers and lowland topography—fundamentally determines both its natural endowments and its socioeconomic development trajectory. The Banske Hill (Bansko brdo / Báni-hegy), at 245 meters in elevation, and its surrounding area offer favorable conditions for viticulture and wine tourism.

The region's geographically strategic position astride multiple borders has profoundly shaped its development throughout the twentieth century. Border changes, political instability, and economic marginalization have resulted in prolonged regional isolation, which in turn has contributed to significant demographic decline and economic stagnation.

Similar to border regions across post-socialist countries, the Baranja Triangle has demonstrated acute vulnerability to processes of population loss and economic contraction. In recent years, tourism development has emerged as one of the most significant instruments for counteracting these trends. European Union-supported CBC (cross-border cooperation) programs (notably Interreg) have created new opportunities for peripheral regions to strengthen their economic position through transnational partnerships that transcend political boundaries (Tóth et al., 2020; Nemes & Happ, 2024). For the Baranja Triangle, the Danube and Drava rivers form a natural axis that could connect tourist attractions on both sides of

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the border and provide a foundation for developing water-based tourism, cycling routes, and other thematic initiatives, notably wine tourism, across the region. In recent years, the region's geopolitical situation has shifted markedly: Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area on January 1, 2023, and the interconnection of the Hungarian M6 and Croatian A5 motorways in October 2025 have opened new transportation and economic perspectives for CBC initiatives.

These developments remain exceptionally recent, and the academic literature has not yet examined their impacts on the Baranja Triangle. This juncture therefore offers a unique opportunity to explore the economic and tourism-based reintegration of a region hitherto characterized by geopolitical isolation.

The aim of this study is to examine whether, in light of Schengen accession and new transport infrastructure, the Baranja Triangle's integration into a broader cross-border regional framework based on tourism development is realistic. Furthermore, it investigates whether a sustainable tourism economy, rooted in local assets, can be established in the region.

Theoretical Framework

Prior to the fall of the Iron Curtain, economic development in the border regions of Eastern Europe was constrained by insufficient investment and limited CBC (Tóth et al., 2020). These conditions frequently resulted in peripheralization and outmigration (Lang, 2015). Following the European Union accession of Eastern Bloc countries, however, programs designed to address structural disparities imparted new momentum to these regions (Wastl-Walter, 2009).

Although a significant portion of the EU population resides in border areas, their economic performance continues to lag behind the continental average; consequently, the 2014–2020 programming period allocated substantial resources—approximately €6.6 billion—toward their development (European Commission, 2017).

Similar spatial disparities are particularly pronounced along the Danube corridor, where regions with markedly different levels of economic development coexist, making macro-regional cooperation an essential framework for reducing territorial inequalities and fostering coordinated development (Hardi, 2012).

Tourism has emerged as one of the most widely adopted instruments of CBC, particularly in contexts of shared historical heritage (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019; Studzieniecki & Mazurek, 2007). This approach, however, necessitates novel forms of state coordination (Zaitseva et al., 2016). According to Timothy (2000), the border itself may function both as an independent motivational factor in travel and, as Ryden (1993) emphasizes, as a facilitator of the experiential distinctiveness of simultaneous presence in multiple nation-states. In the case of the Baranja Triangle, the fundamental question—following Matznetter's (1979) typology—is whether two independent destinations will persist on opposite sides of the border, or whether their convergence will produce an integrated tourism destination.

Social innovation plays a critical role in CBC initiatives: it strengthens local identity, facilitates the adoption of best practices, and supports sustainability objectives (Pentz, 2023; Marton et al., 2021). This process generates interaction between communities and tourists, thereby fostering peaceful coexistence (Michalkó et al., 2018), as exemplified by the network-based development model of the Veszprém-Balaton region (Lőrincz et al., 2023).

Tourism innovations typically emerge from complex network collaborations—including tourism destination management (TDM) organizations and clusters (Nagy, 2022; Nagy & Aubert, 2025)—within which consumers actively shape experiences through co-creation mechanisms (Marien & Papp, 2024).

Beyond open-ended experience innovation (Hoarau-Heemstra, 2011; Nagy, 2014), the development of the Baranja Triangle may be significantly shaped by smart destination frameworks and digitalization (Marinac et al., 2025). Innovation is driven not only by competition and technological advancement but also by public sector support (Hall & Williams, 2008). Finally, the ascendancy of alternative tourism forms—such as ecotourism (Szabados & Merza, 2023)—may represent a substantial breakthrough opportunity for the region (Csapó & Marton, 2010).

Considering established best practices in the tourism-led development of formerly closed border regions, the Baranja Triangle could draw valuable lessons from the Austria–Slovenia–Hungary tri-border area. In this region, numerous local initiatives have gradually evolved into EU cofinanced rural development programs linked to the tourism sector.

These initiatives have contributed not only to the gradual mitigation of border-area peripheralization but also to the broader socio-economic upscaling of the territory. The underlying development drivers in the Baranja Triangle closely resemble those observed in the Ország and Neusiedler See regions, where development strategies are rooted in well-preserved natural and cultural landscapes, local traditions, and principles of ecological sustainability. EU-funded initiatives such as 'Iron Curtain Cycling' integrate the area and the local attractions into internationally visible context and tourism products (EuroVelo, 2025), projects like 'From Mill to Mill' build upon existing heritage assets to create new tourism attractions (Interreg Slovenia-Hungary Program, 2025), while programs such as 'PaNaNet+' integrate previously fragmented nature-based assets into internationally visible tourism products and promote environmental awareness and sustainability education through cross-border cooperation (Interreg V-A AT-HU Program, 2025).

METHODS AND SOURCES

Our research examined the impact of geopolitical changes and transformations in transport infrastructure on the tourism potential of the Baranja Triangle. We also analyzed the role of CBC in the region's tourism sector, assessed existing forms of tourism and their developmental opportunities, and explored the attitudes of the local population toward tourism and cross-border collaboration (Figure 1). A mixed-methods approach was employed. For spatial analyses, we utilized QGIS 3.40 ("Bratislava") software to map tourism attractions in the Baranja Triangle and its immediate surroundings, and to examine the region's transportation infrastructure and accessibility. For travel time-based accessibility analysis, we used a combination of the TravelTime API and QGIS, which enabled route and isochrone calculations based on current road network data.

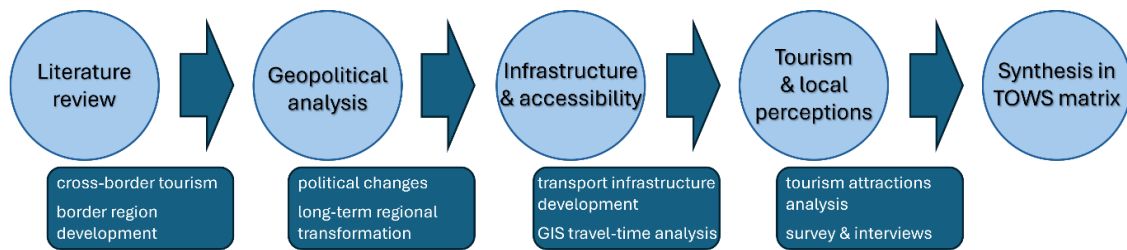


Figure 1. Flowchart of the methodology (Source: Own illustration)

To gauge local perspectives on tourism, CBC, the connection of the M6 and A5 highways, and Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area, we conducted a quantitative survey. Secondary sources included relevant academic literature and documents from European Union CBC programs. The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Eligibility required respondents to be at least 18 years old and residents of the Baranja Triangle. Data collection relied partly on Facebook advertising and primarily on snowball sampling. While this method is suitable for reaching hard-to-access populations, a key methodological limitation is its deviation from classical principles of representative sampling; thus, findings cannot be generalized to the entire population (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

The questionnaire comprised two sections: the first collected demographic data, while the second addressed respondents' assessments of their economic situation, the relationships between CBC, tourism, and transport infrastructure development, and the perceived impacts of these factors on their livelihoods and the development of the Baranja Triangle. Quantitative data were analyzed using Jamovi 2.6.44 statistical software, employing descriptive statistics as well as non-parametric comparative (Mann-Whitney U) and correlational (Spearman's rank correlation) methods.

To compensate for the small questionnaire sample size ($n=60$), we conducted twelve semi-structured interviews in the region to refine our findings. Interviewees represented a diverse range of local stakeholders, including agricultural producers, entrepreneurs, educators, and representatives of local public and civic life. The sample also included a winemaker, a municipal council member, organizers of cultural and gastro-tourism events, as well as church and community representatives, allowing tourism-related perceptions to be explored from multiple social and economic perspectives. Finally, results from the various sources were synthesized in a TOWS matrix to identify the region's key development opportunities and challenges.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1. Geopolitical Analysis: The Impact of Historical-Political Changes on Tourism Potential

The Baranja Triangle has been shaped by numerous geopolitical changes throughout its history, which continue to influence its demographic processes, ethnic composition, economic situation, and tourism potential. Within the broader Danube region, such historical discontinuities are not exceptional. The region has repeatedly experienced periods of fragmentation and reintegration shaped by shifting political borders, imperial structures and geopolitical conflicts (Hardi, 2012). From the founding of the Hungarian state in 1000 until 1541, the territory of the present-day Baranja Triangle was under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hungary; however, over the subsequent approximately 500 years, the region was ruled by six different state formations. The twentieth century alone witnessed five shifts in sovereignty.

This turbulent past has resulted in a significant historical heritage, while the continuous transformation of the ethnic structure has produced a culturally diverse landscape that persists to this day.

- 1000–1541 – The Period of the Kingdom of Hungary: Agricultural prosperity and the development of the settlement network established a long-term foundation for the region's agricultural traditions and cultural heritage. The historical roots of the contemporary settlement structure were laid during this period, and a wine-region identity already characterized the Banskó Hill (Báni-hegy) area.

- 1541–1687 – The Period of Ottoman Rule: The region's military-logistical significance—evidenced by Suleiman I's bridge connecting Osijek (Eszék) and Darda (Dárda), the Osijek fortress, the military road traversing the region, and the proximity to the battles of Mohács (1526, 1687)—created considerable heritage tourism value. The settlement of South Slavic peoples and the strengthening of Reformed communities continue to define the region's ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity.

- 1687–1920 – The Era of the Habsburg Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: The Belje Estate as a modern agricultural enterprise, along with church construction and infrastructural development, left behind a substantial volume of built heritage. The agricultural and historical legacy of this period remains a potential tourism resource.

- 1920–1991 – The Period of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the Kingdom of Hungary, and Yugoslavia:

Border changes, Yugoslav land reform, and isolation due to a lack of transportation infrastructure hindered the area's development. However, the multiethnic society and cultural imprints of the Yugoslav era created a unique identity that could be integrated into contemporary tourism offerings. An example is Yugonostalgia, a form of longing for the past—a bittersweet nostalgia for the positive, idealized aspects of the former socialist Yugoslav state.

- 1991–1998 – The Years of War: The Serb-Croatian conflict, emigration, and economic collapse severely damaged the region's general and tourism infrastructure. Nonetheless, the major clashes that occurred in the area can serve as important sites of remembrance and education regarding the war.

- 1998 to the Present – The Period of Independent Croatia: Croatia's accession to the European Union and the Schengen Area, along with the significant improvement in transportation infrastructure (the M6–A5 highway), has substantially enhanced the region's accessibility. CBC and cultural-gastronomic tourism have gained new development opportunities.

2. Infrastructure development relevant to tourism

Following the Treaty of Trianon, the Baranja Triangle was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1920 (Hajdú, 2011; Végh et al., 2021; Bali & Matucza, 2021). The region entered a period of persistent marginalization, driven by the division of the previously integrated Baranya County and the Belje Estate (Székely, 2014; Végh et al., 2021), the dissolution of landholding structures after Yugoslav land reform, the diminished political-economic role of the Hungarian and German landowning class, and the continuous deterioration of transportation connections (Bali & Matucza, 2021). Until 1941, the Baranja Triangle remained under Serbian administration (as part of Vojvodina, Bačka, and later the Danube Banovina) but lacked functional transportation links to these core territories (Hajdú, 2011, Végh et al., 2021). Notably, no road or railway bridge crossed the Danube in the region at that time. Until 1962, access from Croatian territories was limited to a single railway bridge in Osijek that also carried road traffic, reinforcing the area's pronounced isolation.

This isolation began to ease with key infrastructure projects. The first road bridge across the Drava toward Croatian territories was constructed in Osijek (Eszék) in 1962, followed by a bridge at Batina (Kiskőszeg) across the Danube toward Serbian territories in 1974 (Végh et al., 2021). Following Croatian independence, the state played a pivotal role in further improving connectivity. Strategically important road bridges across the Drava were built in the Belišće (Belistye) area in 2001 and near Osijek (Eszék) in 2007. A highway bridge crossing the Drava was completed near Petrijevci (Petróc) in 2016 (Pirisi & Reményi, 2008; Végh et al., 2021).

While the 2015 European refugee crisis temporarily led to stricter border controls and enhanced surveillance at the Croatian-Hungarian border, Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area on January 1, 2023, ultimately enabled complete free movement across this border section.

The combination of border-free travel and the connection of the M6 and A5 motorways—completed in October 2025 as part of the Vc corridor—has significantly advanced the accessibility of the Baranja Triangle. As demonstrated by the isochrone map from our GIS travel-time analysis, the Hungarian regional tourism hub of Pécs is now reachable within a 60-minute drive from Beli Manastir (Pélmonostor). Furthermore, five of the eight municipal centers of the Baranja Triangle—Petlovac (Baranyaszentistván), Popovac (Baranyabán), Jagodnjak (Kácsfalu), Kneževi Vinogradi (Hercegszőlős), and Čeminac (Laskafalu)—are also located within this 60-minute travel-time threshold from Pécs (Figure 2).

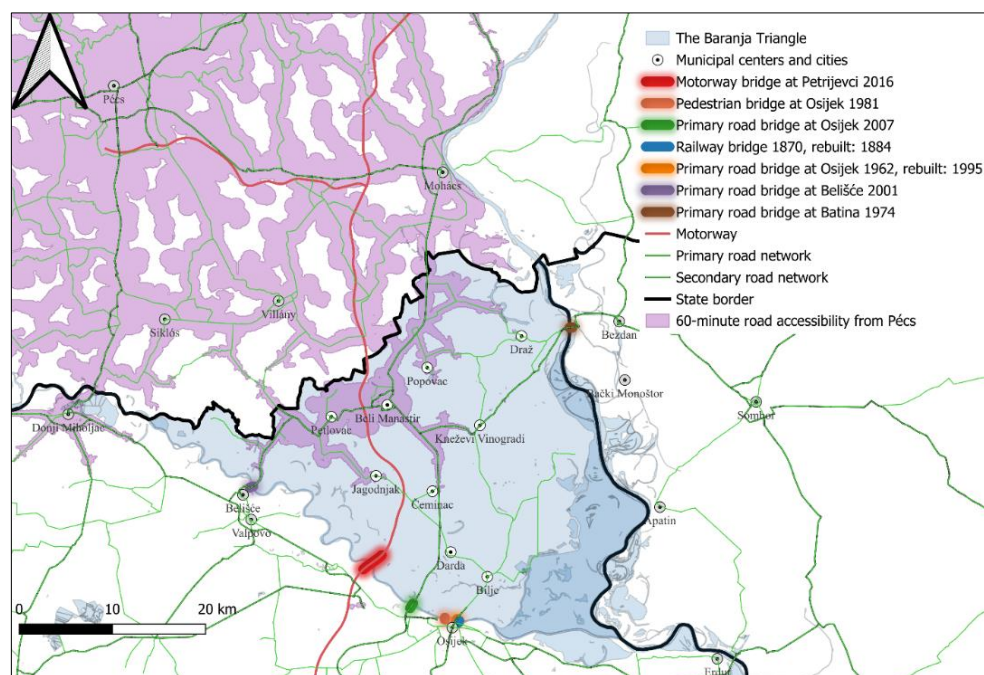


Figure 2. The road network and accessibility of the Baranja Triangle (Source: Own illustration)

This represents a profound change. During periods of armed conflict, the border was completely impassable. Even during times of Yugoslav-Hungarian political confrontation, administrative barriers posed significant obstacles. The current situation—featuring the most open border in the past 100 years—was achieved not primarily through infrastructural development, but through administrative measures and a fundamental transformation of the border regime. This highlights a key limitation of isochrone analysis in this context: the 2025 highway connection builds upon a baseline where, during past political crises, crossing the Hungarian border into the region was not possible at all.

Croatia's accession to the euro area does not currently constitute a primary driver of tourism development in the Baranja Triangle, as the region forms a functional cross-border unit with adjacent Hungarian territories where euro adoption is not anticipated in the near future. Nevertheless, the introduction of the euro increases the transparency and comparability of price levels for Western European visitors. Given that tourism-related prices in the Baranja area remain generally lower than in most parts of Croatia and Western Europe, this may enhance the region's attractiveness and generate moderate increases in short-term inbound tourism from euro-area markets.

3. Institutional Connections Analysis: The Role of Cross-Border Cooperation in Development and Territorial Cohesion Processes in the Baranja Triangle

The socioeconomic changes of the past two decades—particularly Hungary's and Croatia's accession to the European Union and Croatia's subsequent accession to the Schengen Area in 2023—have created the most favorable geopolitical and financial conditions for the Baranja Triangle along the Hungarian-Croatian border in the past hundred years. This favorable position rests on two pillars:

- Institutional sister-city relationships established since the 1970s.
- Initiatives promoting cooperation along the EU's external borders (e.g., the 2002 External Border Initiative) and continuously growing Interreg funding.

3.1. Institutional and Twinning-Type Cooperation

Sister-city relationships established from the 1970s onward (e.g., Mohács–Beli Manastir, 1970; Pécs–Osijek, 1973; Baranya County–Osijek-Baranja County, 1995; University of Pécs–Josip Juraj Strossmayer University, renewed in 2024) are primarily of sociocultural significance, with limited economic impact (Reményi, 2008; Pámer, 2019). Twinning relationships among smaller municipalities can facilitate economic convergence only in the long term; in the absence of declared political will, project-based cooperation currently remains limited.

3.2. Organizational-Based Cooperation

- Danube-Drava-Sava Euroregion (c. 1998–2010): A top-down initiative that exceeded the region's institutional maturity and resources—representing a "missed opportunity" (Sikfői, 2011). During the pre-Schengen period, it failed to resolve the region's peripheral position and generated no significant socioeconomic impacts.
- Pannon EGTC (European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation) (2010–present): An organization blending bottom-up and top-down approaches within an EU legal framework, representing the common interests of border counties. Its activities are primarily project-based (e.g., CBJointStrategy, UPSCALE DDS, Amazon of Europe Biketrail, Pannon Future Forest) and focused on maximizing EU funding, making it potentially the region's most important shared development organization in the short to medium term. On this basis, there is a need for a transnational development program independent of temporary grant funding that integrates the Baranja Triangle's strategic strengths and actively involves the two county-level and national governments (see the TOWS matrix later).

3.3. Relevant Outcomes of EU Co-Financed Interreg Programs in the Baranja Triangle

- Pre-2004 (Phare CBC and Interreg III Slovenia–Hungary–Croatia): Focused on capacity building and pilot projects; despite pressing infrastructure needs, these programs prioritized "soft" development.
- 2007–2013 IPA CBC (€52M, 164 projects): The most significant project for the Baranja Triangle was the "De-Mining" initiative. In tourism, Pécs–Osijek cooperation occurred without generating meaningful territorial cohesion effects.
- Interreg V-A (2014–2020, €60M): Exhibited low territorial relevance to the Baranja Triangle; projects were primarily cultural and focused on cycling/water tourism in the larger hubs of Pécs, Osijek, and Mohács.
- Interreg VI-A (2021–2027, €58M): Characterized by a late start and strong competition; notable projects include the Amazon of Europe bicycle route (involving visitor center expansion in Osijek and infrastructure in Siklós, etc.) and joint projects linking Mohács, Belišće, and Osijek. Interregional and transnational Interreg programs (Danube, Central) are available but difficult to access due to their complexity and currently represent marginal funding sources for the region. For the Baranja Triangle to achieve a genuine transformation in scale, integrated development programs are necessary. These must be prepared with the involvement of local stakeholders, transcend particular interests, and strategically exploit the barrier-free physical and legal environment of the Schengen Area and the coordination capacity of the Pannon EGTC, particularly in the areas of wine, eco-, water, and heritage tourism.

4. Attraction Analysis: Forms of Tourism and Their Development Opportunities in the Baranja Triangle

The role of tourism as a tool for CBC and regional development continues to strengthen within the European Union (Bujdosó et al., 2015). For the Baranja Triangle, Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area and the elimination of border controls have created favorable conditions for cross-border tourism cooperation. Cross-border tourism networks supported in Croatian-Hungarian CBC projects—such as green routes or various thematic tourism trails—were initially developed to foster social innovation and the rapid adoption of neighboring "best practices" (Csapó et al., 2015; Szabó et al., 2014). However, most of these initiatives subsequently collapsed due to a lack of proper management, although certain elements persist today. Tourism in the Baranja Triangle and southern Baranya is not significant in either country, yet the region possesses considerable development potential (Figure 3). In our view, a shared, cross-border tourism destination created through coordinated development could provide a competitive advantage and greater international appeal.

The region's strong embeddedness in Hungarian socio-cultural traditions may represent a measurable driver of inbound tourism from Hungary, particularly if tourism products are strategically integrated with nearby flagship destinations on the Hungarian side, such as the city of Pécs, the Villány–Harkány tourism area and Mohács. This potential is primarily rooted in shared cultural heritage and historical ties, rather than in the relatively small number of ethnic Hungarians currently residing in the area. The examination of tourism in the Baranja Triangle also demonstrates that regional tourism development requires broad, multi-level cooperation (Marton et al., 2016). With the end of its previous isolation, the region's cultural and natural heritage has become a viable resource for tourism development.

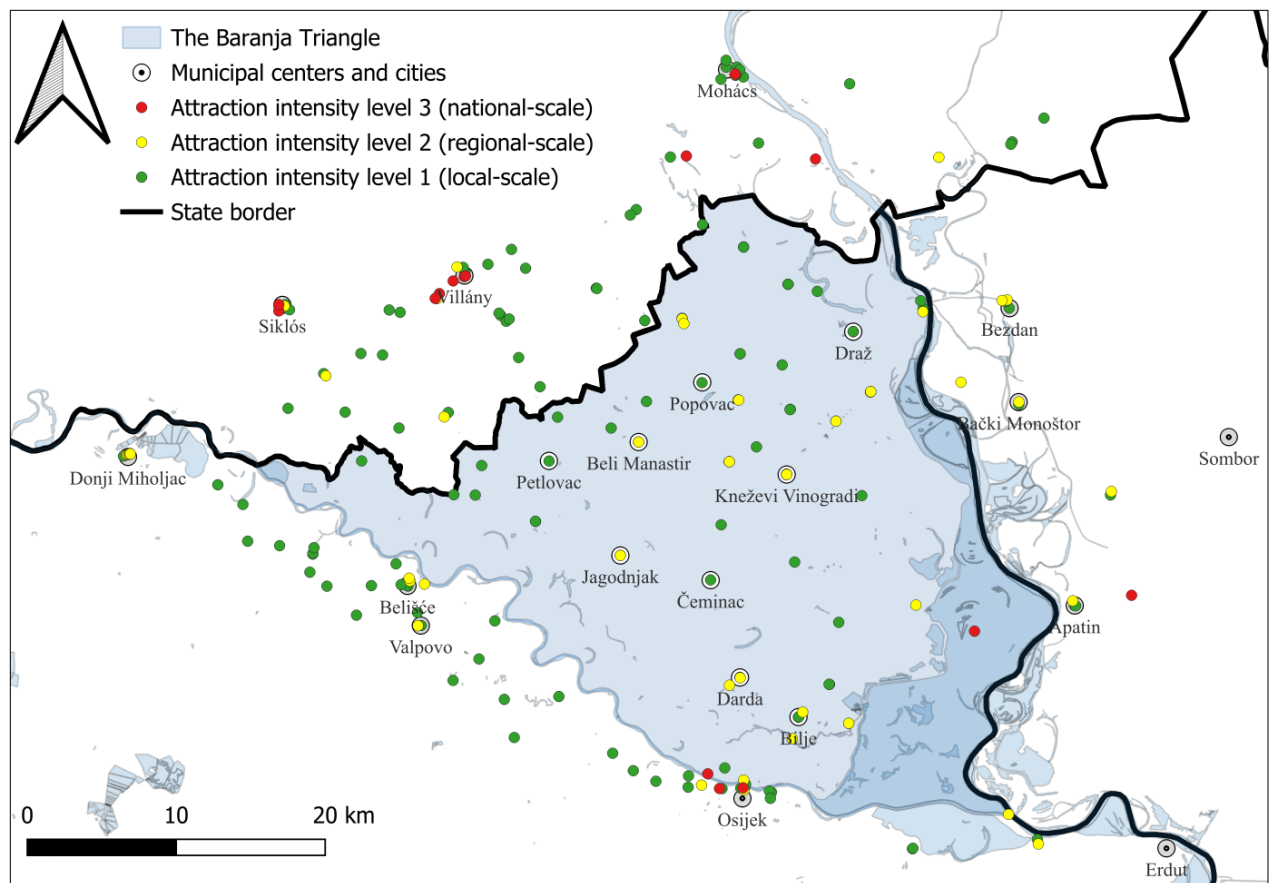


Figure 3. Attractions of the Baranja Triangle and its immediate surroundings (Source: Own illustration)

Nevertheless, despite substantial support, increases have been observed primarily in excursion traffic, while the number of tourists and overnight stays remains very low (Zsibók & Egyed, 2024). The Baranja Triangle's tourism product portfolio is diverse. It is primarily linked to leisure tourism and largely based on natural resources, with the exception of cultural tourism. Identical product types appear on both sides of the border, yet cooperation between them is limited, and partnerships formed within CBC projects typically do not survive beyond the mandatory project maintenance period. The coordinated development of these products and the creation of a shared, cross-border destination could establish the region's unique selling proposition—a characteristic that could also attract international market interest (Spiegler et al., 2023).

The territory's tourism products can be fundamentally divided into three main categories:

- Cultural Tourism Built on Shared Historical Past and Heritage Values:

Border regions are often connected by shared history, identity, culture, traditions, and mixed population composition (Varga et al., 2025). This observation applies strongly to the examined region. The Danube area has been an important military route since Roman times, and heritage values from multiple periods exist on both sides (e.g., the Limes and Ottoman-era monuments). Building on these, cultural tourism can be developed through mirror projects. The main sub-products include:

- Heritage tourism. The region contains a significant concentration of archaeological heritage and forms part of the Roman Danube Limes cultural landscape, sections of which were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2021. However, the Batina–Ilok sector (Ad Militare–Cuccium) remains under nomination and currently plays only a marginal role in regional tourism development. Most archaeological remains are still located on agricultural land, and the timing and format of their future public presentation remain uncertain. In the longer term, these sites may become an important component of the region's cultural tourism portfolio, complementing its existing natural and cultural attractions. The "Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route"—a European Cultural Route—may similarly represent an additional, currently underutilised opportunity for integrating the region into wider international heritage tourism networks.

- Dark tourism. The 500th anniversary of the Battle of Mohács directs attention to the region's Ottoman-era devastation. The development of this memorial site could strengthen dark tourism, and the coordinated development of monuments found on both sides of the border could create international appeal.

- Festival tourism. The region's festivals are diverse, with nearly every settlement hosting some form of gastronomic event. These currently have primarily local and regional appeal. Through program coordination and joint marketing, they could generate greater interest. The Busójárás in Mohács—listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage—is the flagship event of festival tourism and could have significant drawing power for tourism in the Baranja Triangle.

- Active and Ecotourism:

Outstanding examples of cross-border development can be realized in the fields of active and ecotourism.

- Bicycle tourism. The region's infrastructural conditions are favorable. Two EuroVelo routes (EuroVelo 13 and 6)

increase international visibility. Improved visitor facilities and targeted marketing could encourage cyclists from border regions to explore the area. With the spread of electric bicycles, the target audience expands to include a more prominent senior demographic, for whom the Baranja Triangle can be a favorable destination.

- Walking tourism / Green routes. Two green routes were established through CBC projects (Baranya Green Route and Ormánság Green Route). Development based on local resources can be effective, but without appropriate management organizations, their tourism and rural development role remains limited.

- Ecotourism. Development is led by the Danube-Drava National Park and the Kopački Rit Nature Park. Previous CBC projects have fostered strong professional cooperation, and the ecotourism offerings on both sides of the border are innovative and have generated significant interest.

- Wine and Gastronomic Tourism:

The Baranja Triangle has a significant tradition of viticulture and winemaking (Tarnai, 2025). Building on this and the region's rich gastronomic culture, a unique offering can be developed. Beyond wine, paprika, kulen sausage, and smoked carp, numerous local products create demand. The development of local festivals (kulen festival, paprika festival, Fish Days in Kopačevo, Wine Marathon in Zmajevac, etc.) could result in broader appeal.

5. Local Society's Supportive Attitude toward Tourism and Cross-Border Cooperation Programs

Our questionnaire survey aimed to explore the attitudes of residents in the Baranja Triangle regarding tourism, CBC, Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area, and the expected impacts of the M6–A5 highway connection on both individual living conditions and the region's overall development.

- Sample Characteristics:

A total of 60 individuals participated in the survey (30 women, 50.0%; 30 men, 50.0%). The mean age of respondents was 45.3 years (range: 22–67 years). Regarding the highest level of educational attainment, 2 individuals (3.3%) completed primary education or less, 3 (5.0%) completed vocational training, 7 (11.7%) completed general secondary education, 16 (26.7%) completed technical secondary education, and 32 (53.3%) completed tertiary education or higher (college, university, or doctoral degree). As noted in the methodology section, snowball sampling does not yield a sample representative of the entire Baranja Triangle population, a limitation reflected in the educational attainment distribution. Due to the voluntary nature of the survey, individuals with greater interest in tourism, CBC, and transportation/economic development likely participated at higher rates, explaining the overrepresentation of respondents with tertiary education.

- Descriptive Results:

Respondents provided answers on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = worst, 7 = best). Based on descriptive analysis, respondents overall assessed the development of the Baranja Triangle as moderately positive (mean = 4.42), while expressing relative dissatisfaction with their own current economic situation (mean = 3.87). Respondents assessed tourism's impact on the Baranja Triangle as moderately positive (mean = 5.03); however, they viewed tourism's impact on their own material situation more negatively (mean = 3.67). Regarding expected benefits from tourism development, respondents most frequently highlighted local infrastructure development (n=35, 57.4%), expansion of work and business opportunities (n=34, 55.7%), improvement of the settlement environment (n=33, 54.1%), and revitalization of cultural and community life (n=32, 52.5%). CBC along the Croatian–Hungarian and Croatian–Serbian borders was assessed as having a moderately positive impact on the region (mean = 4.28), while its impact on personal quality of life was viewed as moderate (mean = 3.98). Primary expectations from CBC centered on the revitalization of cultural and community life (n=33, 55.0%), expansion of social networks (n=31, 50.8%), improvement in work and business opportunities (n=29, 47.5%), and local infrastructure development (n=26, 42.6%). Overall, respondents evaluated Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area and the realization of the M6–A5 highway connection as rather positive for the Baranja Triangle's development (mean = 5.20), while viewing their impact on personal living conditions as moderately positive (mean = 4.58).

The most frequently anticipated effects included local infrastructure development (n=30, 49.2%), expansion of work and business opportunities (n=21, 34.4%), improved accessibility of services (n=19, 31.1%), expansion of social networks (n=18, 29.5%), and a general improvement in the daily quality of life of the local population (n=18, 29.5%).

- Analysis of Gender Differences:

Following descriptive analysis, we examined gender differences in responses to the Likert-scale items. As the data did not consistently meet assumptions of normality, we employed the Mann–Whitney U test. Results indicated no statistically significant difference between male and female responses for any of the examined items ($p > 0.05$ in all cases), with low effect sizes, suggesting minimal gender-based variation in attitudes.

- Correlational Analyses:

Finally, we examined associations between variables using Spearman's rank correlation analysis. Results demonstrated moderate to strong positive correlations between assessments of the individual and regional impacts of tourism development, CBC, transportation infrastructure improvements, and Croatia's Schengen accession ($\rho \approx 0.42$ – 0.69 ; $p < 0.001$).

Overall, the results suggest that in respondents' perceptions, tourism development, CBC, improved transportation infrastructure, and Schengen accession are closely interconnected factors in assessments of both individual living conditions and the Baranja Triangle's economic and social development.

Insights from the semi-structured interviews broadly reinforced these findings. Interviewees emphasized that the region's economic profile remains predominantly agricultural, with tourism currently playing a supplementary role. At the same time, several respondents highlighted potential resources that could support future tourism development, including cultural festivals and community events, wine-related tourism, and the region's rich historical and cultural heritage.

Overall, the interviews suggest that local actors perceive tourism as a promising development opportunity which, although not yet a dominant economic sector, may contribute to the long-term economic diversification of the Baranja Triangle.

Analysis: Development Matrix Based on External and Internal Environmental Factors of the Baranja Triangle—TOWS Matrix

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	SO Strategies (Leveraging Strengths)	WO Strategies (Counterbalancing Weaknesses)
1. EU and national development funding (e.g., Interreg CBC/ Danube/Central, RRF etc.). 2. Climate adaptation, green transition, and renewable energy utilization. 3. Cultural and tourism momentum (Mohács 2026 commemorations, legacy of Pécs European Capital of Culture, growing demand for soft tourism—wine, cycling, eco-, and water-based). 4. Unified Schengen territory (Croatia-Hungary).	1. Develop joint heritage tourism products with international appeal by linking key assets (e.g., Zsolnay Cultural Quarter in Pécs, Busójárás in Mohács, Mohács 500 commemorations, Tvrdá in Osijek) through EU-funded programs. 2. Develop integrated wine, gastronomic, eco-, and cycling tourism products with international appeal (e.g., Villány–Siklós Wine Route with Slavonia; Amazon of Europe cycling route; Kopački Rit–Béda-Karapanca floodplain reserve). 3. Joint development of the cross-border logistics hub function – Mohács bridge and port + Osijek Airport (Pécs–Pogány Airport, “Vojvodina’s Smile” motorway, etc.).	1. Jointly lobby for the implementation of missing transport links to mitigate peripherality (e.g., connecting the M60 motorway to the Croatian A13, motorway developments in Vojvodina, upgrading Pécs Airport). 2. Launch joint vocational training programs to reduce outmigration by fostering high value-added local products (primarily food), involving the University of Pécs, University of Osijek, and vocational training centers. 3. Create a joint “Smart-Eco” digital eco-region—establish a digital platform centered on Osijek–Pécs, leveraging 5G and smart tourism technologies.
Threats	ST Strategies (Protecting Strengths)	WT Strategies (Minimizing Threats)
1. Outmigration, demographic aging. 2. Climate change (droughts, flash floods, etc.). 3. Competition with the Croatian coast and Lake Balaton (lower-cost tourism) 4. Geopolitical tensions (border traffic, migration)	1. Launch transnational Croatian–Hungarian and local (municipal-level) youth retention programs— establish a Pécs–Osijek startup incubator and subsidized housing initiatives (public sector). 2. Create and promote an independent, joint “Baranja Triangle” eco-experience soft tourism brand, incorporating elements such as Villány–Slavonia wine tourism, Kopački Rit, Mohács floodplain areas, and cycling tourism. 3. Further develop port infrastructure— expand promenade boat ports in Mohács, Batina, and Osijek; develop floodplain free ports.	1. Develop a joint Croatian–Hungarian demographic pact project— introduce state-involved subsidies and incentives to counteract population decline. 2. Establish a climate adaptation and disaster management pact— a Croatian–Hungarian state and county-level agreement for flood protection in floodplain areas and drought management.

CONCLUSION

Croatia’s accession to the Schengen Area and the completion of the M6–A5 motorway connection have enabled the Baranja Triangle to reclaim its historical role as a relational space along the Danube’s north–south axis, moving beyond its status as a peripheral dead end over the past century. Following the imperial shifts, conflicts, and physical border closures of the twentieth century, the removal of physical and political barriers presents a reintegration opportunity of historical significance. However, seizing this opportunity is not automatic.

Our findings indicate that improved motorway connectivity and the Schengen opening alone do not resolve the socioeconomic problems stemming from long-term isolation; rather, they represent necessary but insufficient conditions for convergence. The decisive factor lies in the institutional management of geopolitical reintegration.

This requires stronger cooperation frameworks anchored in the EGTC and Interreg programs, coordinated governance across state, county, and local levels, and the implementation of an integrated cross-border development program—one that articulates objectives transcending particularistic interests.

The moderately positive and supportive attitude of local society (scoring 4–5 on a 7-point scale), corroborated by insights from the semi-structured interviews, suggests that CBC-based tourism development initiatives possess social legitimacy. At the same time, the population expects tangible outcomes in the form of job creation, entrepreneurial opportunities, infrastructure improvements, and an enhanced quality of life. Correlation results indicate that residents perceive tourism, CBC, Schengen accession, and the M6–A5 motorway as mutually reinforcing elements of a shared development pathway, which is conducive to the acceptance of complex, multi-faceted tourism strategies.

Analysis of the TOWS matrix and our empirical findings clearly identifies dark tourism, the expansion of cycling networks, wine tourism, and ecotourism as locally grounded development directions that align realistically with the characteristics of the Baranja Triangle. Combining these forms points toward a sustainable and diversified tourism model capable of partially mitigating outmigration and population aging, even if it cannot fully offset underlying demographic and structural challenges. The future success of the Baranja Triangle hinges on its ability to transform geopolitical openness and the infrastructural turning point into a jointly articulated cross-border vision and effective institutional cooperation frameworks. Tourism emerges as a historically novel yet rapidly integrating function within the region’s economy and self-image. The “recovery” of its Danube-oriented relational role, coupled with smart, heritage-focused destination development, jointly charts the region’s long-term trajectory from Trianon to Schengen and beyond.

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List of Abbreviations: CBC – Cross-Border Cooperation; EGTC – European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation; EU – European Union; GIS – Geographic Information System; QGIS – Quantum Geographic Information System; RRF – Recovery and Resilience Facility; TDM – Tourism Destination Management; TOWS – Threats–Opportunities–Weaknesses–Strengths; Abbreviations used in the TOWS matrix: SO – Strengths–Opportunities; WO – Weaknesses–Opportunities; ST – Strengths–Threats; WT – Weaknesses–Threats;

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