

CROSS-BORDER PROJECTS – MEANS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ALONG THE ROMANIAN-HUNGARIAN BORDER

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the linkage between establishing cross-border relations and tourism development by focusing on ten tourism projects implemented under Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Co-operation Programme (2007-2013). The study area comprises the two neighbouring counties of Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, the border connecting two areas characterised by social and economic similarities. Building on a solid foundation, as the first Hungarian-Romanian cross-border initiatives were launched nearly two decades ago, the two counties work together towards the shared aim of developing business infrastructure, cross-border trade, culture and tourism. The present study examines the relevance of cross-border projects viewed from the perspective of sustainable tourism development in two peripheral counties featuring similar resources. Moreover, the investigation is based on consultation of project documents, reports and promotional materials, against the theoretical framework of cross-border cooperation and regional development.

Key words: cross-border cooperation, sustainable tourism, thematic routes

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INTRODUCTION

Although the term of border traditionally implies separation, dividing places in political, social, economic and cultural terms, within the European Union borders lost their former significance (Knippenberg & Markusse, 1999). According to the new perspectives on border analysis, state boundary functions are no longer perceived as barriers but a bridge between the communities situated on both sides, establishing a linkage of cultural and economic interest (Ilieș, 2003; Ricq, 2006). Moreover, border areas are frequently characterised as having a high cross-border interaction potential, especially when facing a series of issues at territorial, socio-economic, cultural and institutional level (Popa, 2006).

When analysing the phenomenon of cross-border interaction, Martinez (1994) proposes four models of borderlands interaction: alienated, co-existent, interdependent and integrated. In the first case, the cross-border interaction is absent and tension prevails while co-existent borderlands feature limited binational relations, the border remaining slightly open. Interdependent borderlands are characterised by stability and establishment of cooperative relationships, whilst the last

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proposed model, namely the interdependent borderland, describes functionally merged economies, unrestricted movement of goods and people across the frontier. Based on these features, it can be concluded that, at present, the Romanian-Hungarian boundary represents an example of interdependent borderland, where stability and a favourable economic climate create opportunities for cross-border interactions, as well as developing social and cultural relations. However, state boundary function changed over the years as a result of historical events. In the case of the Romanian-Hungarian border, the frontier function shifted from filtration (after the Treaty of Triannon, signed in 1920) to separation and demarcation during socialism. After the fall of the communist regime the frontier regained its filtration function but Romania's entry to Schengen zone will eventually lead to an open frontier (Kádár & Rab, 2012).

Against this background, the issue of cross-border cooperation and sustainable development have gained more interest in recent years as transboundary relations have been referred to as tools for surmounting the regions' peripheral state (Tokes & Lenkey, 2013). Studies and reaserches conducted in this field provide manifold possibilities of promoting cross-border cooperation, emphasizing the role played by the university system in joining together communities and economic agents from the border area (Herman et al., 2012) or focusing on public services in euroregional context (Bădulescu et al., 2013). One of the means of achieving the goal of sustainability is also represented by tourism partnerships, a viable solution within a cross-border context due to its capacity to improve access to funding, create a link between several actors (locals, decision makers, visitors), decrease conflict and raise public awareness (Pfuller et al., 2011; Prokkola, 2008). According to Committee of Regions (2006), in border regions tourism may become a means for development due to its ability to reinvigorate rural areas, by increasing employment and generating additional revenues through the development of culture and nature-based activities. At the same time, the creation of tourism destinations in peripheral areas could also sustain a balanced distribution of economic activities (figure 1).



Figure 1. The synthetic scheme of the opportunities created by sustainable tourism development in cross-border areas

THE SUMMARY OF HUNGARY-ROMANIA CROSS-BORDER CO-OPERATION PROGRAMME, 2007-2013

The current Romanian-Hungarian cross-border cooperation initiatives are laid on firm foundation, as the two adjacent countries have participated in cross-border programmes since 1996 and benefitted from pre-accession funds. Thus, between 1996-2003 the allocated budget for the Romanian counties involved in Phare CBC Programme reached 28 million Euro and for the Hungarian side nearly 34 million Euro. The general objective was represented by framing regional development strategies for the eight counties separated by the borderline, promoting openness and creation of partnerships (Miclăuş, 2002).

Hungary-Romania Co-operation Programme, 2007-2013 extends previous experiences in the field of common development strategies meant to strengthen economic and social cohesion (Interreg III A, 2000-2006 and Phare CBC RO-HU, 2004-2006). Against this background, the programme strategy pursues to bring various stakeholders closer to one another in order to better

utilize the opportunities deriving from the joined development of border regions. The programme is financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), granting 85% of the total project budget, completed with the national public funding (incorporating both the co-financing of the two Member States involved in the programme and the applicants' contribution).

The projects were designed so as to meet at least two of the following criteria connected to joint development, implementation, management and funding, implying the existence of minimum two partners. Another condition relates to the fact that only projects bearing transboundary character and impact can be awarded. On the one hand, cross-border character refers to any problem / need / opportunity present of both sides of the borderline and which can be effectively solved only through a transboundary approach. On the other hand, cross-border impact implies that interventions are manifested on both sides of the border, on long-term its advantages are durable and measurable. The activity or intervention is intended to satisfy real needs (<http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/overview/>).

The eligible border area consists in eight NUTS III level counties: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád in Hungary; respectively Satu Mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiș in Romania. The intervention area presents similar economic and social conditions (rather weak SME sector, high unemployment rate in rural areas, poor accessibility of small rural settlements situated in the proximity of the borderline). The intervention area reaches 4 million inhabitants, it covers a surface of 50 454 km² and is crossed by important rivers (Someș, Barcău, Crișuri, Mureș) which bind the neighbouring counties, creating further opportunities for cross-border cooperation.

DATA AND METHODS

The present study has been developed in two stages and makes use of qualitative methods. The first phase of the research was based on the study of bibliographic materials and sources of secondary data (official studies, evaluation reports, programme documents and website, promotional materials), which provided a framework for discussing the relation between cross-border cooperation and tourism development. The second stage uses the case study approach, the focus being mainly on the cross-border tourism projects implemented in Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, analysing their most significant results.

ROMANIAN-HUNGARIAN CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The present paper focuses on the two adjacent counties of Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and explores the links between the cross-border projects developed within Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Co-operation Programme (2007-2013) and the goal of sustainable tourism development. As stated by the Committee of Regions (2006), particular attention should be given to the sustainability of the tourism industry in which five goals have been identified, as it follows:

- promoting environment protection and sustainable development;
- redefining the place of tourism in the regional economy through the establishment of strategic objectives and planning;
- improving cooperation between regions and states on a territorial basis, contributing thus to increase the cohesion of regions within the EU;
- improving collaborative relations and partnerships between the stakeholders involved in tourism development at all governance levels (particularly to dissemination of partnerships between public and private actors);
- supporting initiatives that lead to an operational implementation of sustainable tourism through proper funding, including in the field of natural and cultural values protection;
- creating competitive tourist products (such as thematic routes) based on restored values and modernised facilities.

The two adjacent counties of Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (figure 2) are a component of the Carpathian Euroregion, founded in 1993 and also border Ukraine and Slovakia, a favourable position which encourages transboundary cooperation in different sectors. The study area is characterised by a succession of varied landscapes, among which the plain covers the largest surface (Nyírség, Rétköz, Szatmár-Bereg, Someş and Carei Plains), bordered by hills (Crasna and Codrului Hills) and low mountains (Oaş and Igriş). The movement of people and goods across the border is assured by the following crossing points:

- roadway: Petea - Csengersima (goods and passenger traffic, transport of dangerous waste);
- roadway: Urziceni - Vállaj (passenger traffic);
- railway: Carei - Ágerdömajor (international passenger and goods traffic).

The road and railway border crossing points are completed by the two airports from Satu Mare and Nyíregyháza.

The accessibility in the cross-border area is improved by the two rehabilitated roads: Sanislău - Ömböly (finalised in 2013, project awarded with 4 810 506.15 € through ERDF) and Lazuri - Zajta (finalised in 2013, with a total ERDF contribution of 3 903 819.65 €).

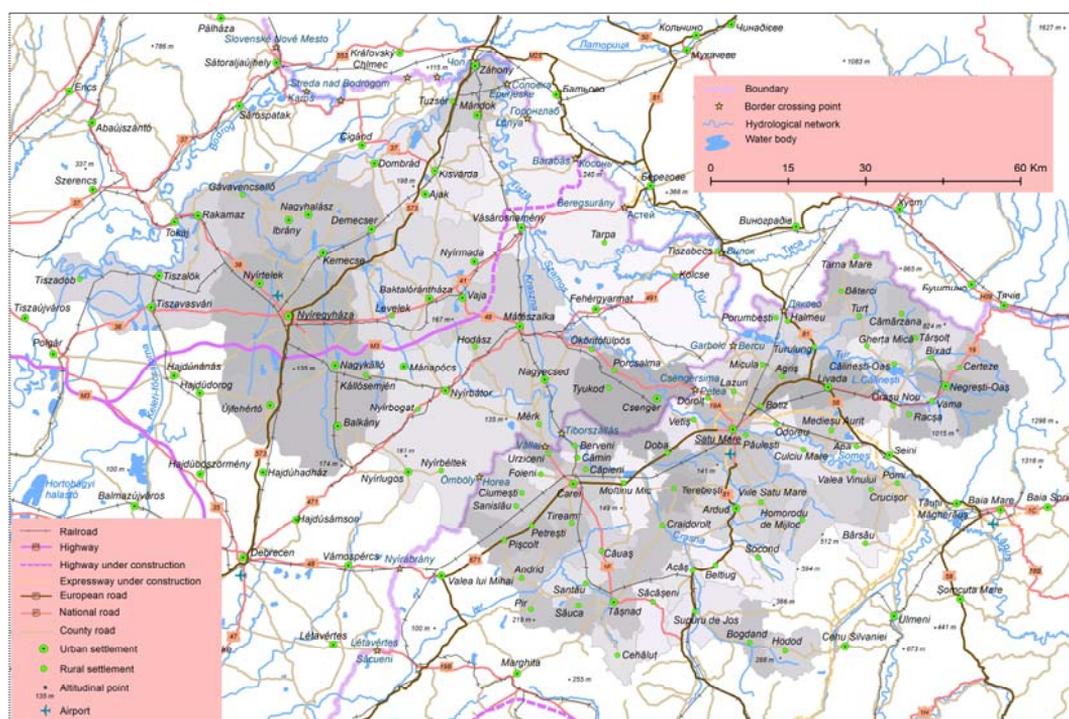


Figure 2. The two adjacent counties of Satu Mare (Romania) and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (Hungary)
(Source: own elaboration based on OpenStreetMap)

In the case of Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties a number of 104 projects were implemented under Hungary-Romania Co-operation Programme, 2007-2013. In order to better utilise the touristic potential of the area, the shared interventions aimed to protect, rehabilitate and promote the most representative assets from both sides of the border, improve their accessibility and establish joint tourism destinations. Hence, an integrated approach can be distinguished as the stand-alone investments were replaced with a new concept, namely the creation of thematic routes, linking rehabilitated historical monuments and natural areas which are thus sustainably promoted. The actions undertaken in this regard include (Evaluation of the Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Co-operation Programme 2007-13):

- preparation of studies, plans and strategies in the field of conservation, development and joint use of natural and cultural legacy;
- designation of awareness-raising campaigns and consultations regarding the protection, development and promotion of tourist resources;
- sustainable utilisation of the region's tourist potential by investments in the field of tourism infrastructure;
- preservation and promotion of the intangible heritage through cultural events bearing cross-border dimensions.

In the analysed area, during 2007-2013 the cross-border relations were focused on nine key areas of intervention, reaching a total budget of 61.8 million Euro, amount of which over 52 million Euro was awarded by ERDF (figure 3). Moreover, the study indicates that most projects focused on environment protection (20 projects) while the 14 projects regarding the improvement of transport infrastructure were provided almost 40 % of the funding sustained by ERDF, namely over 21 million euro.

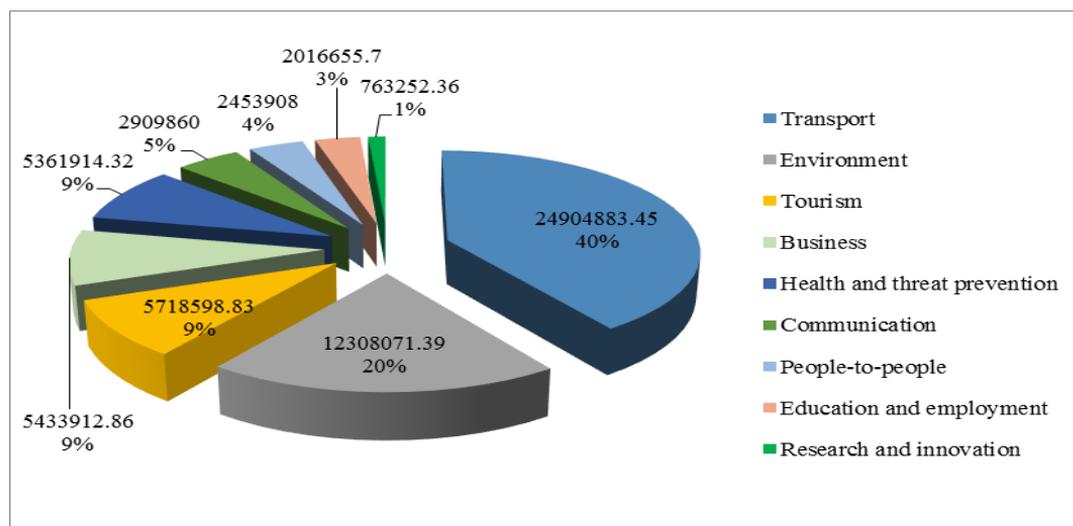


Figure 3. Total budget of the implemented projects within Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme, 2007-2013 in the study area

Source: http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/

The concern for the development of common tourism attractions as priority 2 of the analysed programme, led to the joined fulfilment of ten projects with a total budget of approximately 5.7 million euro (table 1). The implemented projects take into account both the natural values of the area (curative thermal and mineral springs, water bodies and rivers, protected areas) and cultural heritage assets which together frame the region's touristic offer. The investigation upon the cross-border tourism projects has revealed the concern for joint development of thematic routes build around cultural values, which are supplemented with health, leisure and active tourism elements.

Table 1. Cross-border tourism projects finalised in the period of 2007-2013
(Data source: http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/)

Project title	Total project budget (€)	Total ERDF awarded (€)	Project end date
Plums as connecting link in the development of tourism in Szatmár Region	212 116	172 757	November 30 th 2010

Route of medieval churches in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Satu Mare counties	89 138.8	75 767.98	May 31 st 2011
Organisation of interactive exhibitions in the castle of Carei and the manor-house at Szabolcs and their marketing in the context of cross-border tourism	1 010 231	858 696.35	May 31 st 2011
Joint tourism development in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Satu Mare counties, built upon historical and natural resources, viewed in terms of active leisure	187 879.81	153 224.09	July 31 st 2011
Gastronomic journey in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Satu Mare counties	148 760	121 802.32	June 30 th 2012
Legends of Szatmár	152 220	124 286.18	March 31 st 2012
Development of touristic portal and database on the tourist attractions of the eight cross-border counties	401 828.22	330 637.8	December 24 th 2012
Co-operation between Nyírbátor and Carei for joint development of cross-border tourist destination	1 536 230	1 305 795.5	August 31 st 2014
Realisation, extension and rehabilitation of museal sites in Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties, in the context of cross-border tourism	595 621	506 227.85	September 30 th 2014
Mary's Trail: Protection and presentation of mutual religious tourism values	1 384 574	1 176 887.9	September 30 th 2014

Relevance of joint tourism development and destination building projects

The examination of the cross-border projects implemented under the analysed cooperation programme in the field of tourism, as well as further initiatives bearing beneficial effects on this industry, have revealed their role in strengthening the region's image as a cross-border tourism destination. Although encountering challenges and difficulties, the aim of sustainability in the field of tourism was achieved through the following pillars:

a) Increasing the attractiveness of the two border counties through the revival of cultural tourism represented one of the major concerns. A significant step in this respect would be the restoration and reinsertion of the Károlyi castle from Carei into the tourist circuit, as well as the archaeological site from Medieșu Aurit or Ady Endre and Vasile Lucaciu memorial houses from Satu Mare county. In the case of the neighbouring county, such initiatives were concentrated towards the Village Museum from Sóstó, Mudrány manor house in Szabolcs (housing interactive and historic interiors exhibitions), Bessenyei György memorial house in Tiszabercel or other religious monuments. The imposing edifice from Carei has become a landmark, to which numerous cultural events and further development directions are connected. Such attempts aim at imposing Carei as a cross-border tourist destination and are materialised in collaborative efforts to revitalise the castle's arboretum and manège or to promote interactive exhibitions in a cross-border context (by creating partnerships with similiar cultural institutions from Nyírbátor, Szabolcs or Gébérjen). The relevance of cross-border projects in the field of cultural tourism is best reflected in the increase of visitors' number. Thus, according to the activity report drawn by Satu Mare County Museum, in 2013 the exhibitions hosted by the museum network, as well as the memorial and traditional houses in the county, attracted about 73 300 visitors, an increase by nearly 49% as against the year of 2010 (which registered 36 158 visitors).

b) The designation of thematic tours to promote the tourist assets from the two adjoining counties presents a thorough cross-border character, being best examples of cooperation based on bilateral and multilateral partnerships (Kovács & Nagy, 2013). Border regions are often considered as economically disadvantaged, in these areas such tourism products appear as viable development opportunities (Kovács & Martyin, 2013). Relevant examples in this respect are represented by the introduction of a common brand, based on a fruit which is considered as treasure of the Szatmar region (namely the plum) and also the connection of several tourism routes (*Plum Route, The Route of Medieval Churches, Gastronomic Journey, Cycling Paths*). To be noted that the usage of

a gastronomic element (the plum and its derivatives) constitutes the first shared initiative to create a brand and an attempt to define local identity. The Plum Route currently connects 27 settlements from Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county and 10 from Satu Mare county, bringing forward the region's traditions and culinary heritage. As components of cultural routes, such thematic paths have been conceived in order to market the most representative values in the analysed area, thus becoming a link between two communities bearing certain affinities but which are separated by the borderline. Thereby, *The Route of Medieval Churches* becomes a competitive tourist product achieved by interconnecting values belonging to the same spectrum (religious heritage), whose designation involves cross-border efforts of specialists from various fields: art, patrimony, history, marketing, tourism. The route distinguished itself as a harmonised cross-border project implemented in order to rehabilitate, protect and promote the cultural heritage values from the Carpathian Basin, linking settlements from Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Satu Mare and Transcarpathia.

c) Promoting ecotourism and cultivating respect towards natural values have grown into a goal subsumed within the domain of environment protection. A cross-border approach regarding this field represents a necessity as environmental threats cannot be delimited by the border and the two counties face similar problems (river pollution, deforestation, wetlands drainage, lack of a uniform system of monitoring species of interest). In a cross-border context, sustainable tourism tends to promote the development of several directions which are suitable for the analysed area: adventure, recreation, study, scientific and ecotourism (Bătea, 2013). The last type is sustained by three favourable prospects: elements of flora, fauna and the rich cultural heritage, a result of the cohabitation between different ethnic groups, namely Romanians, Hungarians and Germans. The region's natural assets (wetlands, sandy grasslands, freshwater habitats, forested and steppe areas preserving species of community interest) have contributed to the sites' designation as part of the Natura 2000 network. Over 20 Natura 2000 sites have been identified in the proximity of the borderline, encouraging the creation of a Transboundary Nature Park, as in the case of Carei Plain – Bátorliget (Papp, 2008). In fact, in many parts of the world such parks and nature reserves have crossed over the borderline, becoming a prominent attraction and a significant component of the regional tourism offer (Timothy, 2000). Moreover, transboundary parks rely on cross-border cooperation and partnerships between stakeholders, whose management plans promote conservation, balance, integration and therefore may lead to a more sustainable environment (Doppelfeld, 2006).

d) The last aspect refers to development and rehabilitation of transport infrastructure as priority 1 of Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Co-operation Programme, 2007-2013. This intervention had implications in terms of improving the cross-border mobility and the touristic appeal of the border region. The accomplishment of the three cycling routes and the two rehabilitated roads implies a high cross-border character, aiming to create direct links between communities. These projects have partially achieved their goal, namely to connect rural settlements from the vicinity of the border, strengthen cross-border relations and diversify the region's recreational offer. If taking into account that cycling market in Europe is rising, the endeavour to create such cross-border routes appears as commendable. In addition, cycling tourism represents an environmentally sustainable type of tourism, having minimal impact on host communities and environment (Vujko & Plavša, 2013). On the other hand, the shortcoming consists in overlooking certain facts, for instance the cross-border cycle route entitled „*On two wheels in Szatmar*”, developed on the banks of Someş river (between Satu Mare and Fehérgyarmat) can be travelled through only when the temporary border crossing point from Oar is opened.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the aspects mentioned above, it is concluded that the implementation of cross-border projects represents a solution for achieving the desired aim of sustainability in tourism. In the case of Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties the level of transboundary

cooperation is relatively high and has been maintained through institutionally established relations since 1990s. Based on previous experiences, the recent finalised co-operation programme meant the joint implementation of 104 projects covering 9 domains, tourism industry included. This paper was centred on the main results of Hungary-Romania Co-operation Programme, 2007-2013 and the developed partnerships in the field of tourism. In this respect, the study has revealed that the cooperation between Romanian and Hungarian interest groups (municipalities, entrepreneurs, non-profit organisations, cultural institutions) had positive effects on the visibility and diversification of the region's tourist offer. The thematic routes represent an example of good practice but still require additional efforts to ensure their proper promotion and operation. Within this context, one may conclude that cross-border relations are beneficial to tourism development because they offer local entrepreneurs improved acces to funding. One the other hand, tourism provides a close connection not only between partners, but also between specialists from different fields consulted during project implementation.

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