



Cross-border municipal cooperation in the Austrian-Hungarian border region: an empirical analysis of sister city relations

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Extended abstract

Abstract

Hungary occupies a distinctive geopolitical position in Europe, sharing borders with seven countries and functioning as a contact zone between different political, economic, and cultural regimes. Consequently, its border regions have been the subject of sustained academic interest since the 1970s, particularly in the context of post-socialist transformation and European integration. Among these regions, the Austrian–Hungarian border area stands out as one of the most dynamic and institutionally developed cross-border spaces in Central Europe.

This study examines the evolution of cross-border cooperation in the Austrian–Hungarian border region, with special emphasis on sister city relationships as a form of municipal diplomacy. While large-scale institutional frameworks such as Euroregions and EU-funded programs have received considerable attention, less focus has been placed on the role of local governments in fostering cross-border integration through formalized partnerships. Sister city agreements represent a decentralized and socially embedded mechanism of cooperation, often involving cultural exchange, educational collaboration, and civil society engagement.

The empirical analysis concentrates on municipalities in Győr-Moson-Sopron and Vas counties, Hungary's two western counties directly bordering Austria. Using the comprehensive database of the National Association of Local Authorities of Municipalities (TÖOSZ), the study maps and evaluates the Austrian-related sister city partnerships of settlements in this border zone. The research investigates the geographical distribution of partnerships across Austrian federal provinces, the thematic content of cooperation, and the overall structure of the municipal network.

By providing a systematic overview of cross-border sistering practices in Hungary's western borderlands, the paper contributes to a better understanding of how local-level institutional relations support territorial integration. The findings highlight the importance of geographic proximity, historical embeddedness, and cultural exchange in shaping durable cross-border ties, thereby offering new insights into the micro-level foundations of regional cooperation in Central Europe.

Objective and Research Context

Border regions have long occupied a central position in European regional science, especially in the context of post-socialist transformation and European integration. The Austrian–Hungarian border area represents one of the most dynamic and symbolically significant frontier zones in Central Europe. Over the past several decades, it has evolved from a heavily securitized Cold War boundary into an increasingly institutionalized space of economic interaction, labour mobility, and cross-border cooperation.

This study examines municipal-level cross-border cooperation between Austria and Hungary, with a particular focus on sister city agreements involving settlements in Győr-Moson-Sopron and Vas counties. These two counties constitute Hungary's only direct territorial interface with Austria and therefore serve as a natural laboratory for analysing local-level international engagement. The primary objective of the paper is to assess the spatial patterns, thematic orientations, and institutional characteristics of sister city partnerships between Hungarian border municipalities and Austrian settlements. By doing so, the study contributes to the broader literature on cross-border governance, municipal diplomacy, and territorial integration.

While earlier research in Hungarian regional science has emphasized the structural transformation of the Austrian–Hungarian border region, this paper shifts attention toward the micro-institutional layer of cooperation. Instead of focusing on macroeconomic convergence or large-scale Euroregional frameworks, the analysis explores how local governments and civil actors construct and maintain cross-border ties through formalized partnerships. The study contributes in three ways. First, it offers a systematic empirical examination of sister city networks in Hungary's western borderlands. Second, it provides territorial evidence for the continuing importance of geographic proximity in shaping cross-border relations. Third, it refines our understanding of municipal diplomacy as a bottom-up component of European territorial integration.

Theoretical Background: Border Regions, Institutionalization, and Municipal Diplomacy

Border regions were historically interpreted as peripheral and disadvantaged spaces. However, since the 1990s, scholarly approaches have increasingly conceptualized them as potential interfaces of innovation, integration, and transnational governance. The European Union's Cohesion Policy, INTERREG programs, and Euroregional structures have institutionalized cooperation at multiple scales. The Austrian–Hungarian border exemplifies this trajectory. Following decades of political closure during the socialist period, gradual liberalization in the 1980s and systemic change after 1989 opened the frontier to economic exchange and institutional experimentation. Researchers have identified several defining characteristics of this region, including asymmetrical economic structures between Austria and Hungary; intense labour mobility toward Austria; cultural and historical embeddedness dating back to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as well as progressive institutionalization of cooperation mechanisms.

While macro-level frameworks, such as Euroregions and bilateral state agreements, have received substantial attention, less emphasis has been placed on municipal diplomacy and sister city networks. Sistering represents a decentralized, often voluntary and symbolically charged form of cooperation. It typically involves cultural exchange, educational collaboration, and civil society interaction, and can serve as a foundation for more formalized cooperation. From a governance perspective, sister city agreements illustrate how local authorities engage in international relations beyond the nation-state framework. They represent horizontal networks rather than hierarchical arrangements and often rely on social capital, trust, and long-term interpersonal relations. In the context of border regions, such partnerships may serve multiple functions: reinforcing shared regional identity; supporting minority language and cultural preservation; facilitating information exchange and small-scale economic interaction as well as creating resilience against macro-level political tensions. We position sister city relations as relational indicators of territorial embeddedness and cross-border integration, rather than merely symbolic gestures.

Data and Methodology

The empirical basis of the study is a comprehensive sister city database maintained by the National Association of Local Governments in Hungary (TÖOSZ). The database contains information on the full set of registered Hungarian municipal partnerships, including:

- Name and country of partner settlement;
- Status of the agreement (formal contract or other documentation);
- Year of establishment (where available);
- Thematic orientation of cooperation;
- Additional information on international activities.

The research focuses exclusively on municipalities in Győr-Moson-Sopron and Vas counties. According to official 2024 data, these two counties contain 398 settlements. Of these, 161 municipalities (40.45%) are registered members of TÖOSZ with at least one recorded sister city partnership. These settlements constitute the analytical sample. The methodological approach is descriptive-analytical and consists of a quantitative assessment of partnership frequency and country distribution; spatial analysis of Austrian partner distribution across federal provinces; a thematic categorization of cooperation types and interpretation within the broader context of cross-border regional development.

While the dataset provides valuable coverage, certain limitations must be acknowledged, particularly incomplete information regarding the year of establishment and the depth of cooperation activities.

Empirical Findings

By 2018, the municipalities of Győr-Moson-Sopron and Vas counties had concluded 366 sister city agreements. Of these 67.21% are associated with Győr-Moson-Sopron county and 32.79% with Vas county.

In terms of international orientation, Austrian partnerships represent 23.5% of all agreements, making Austria the second most frequent partner country after Slovakia (24.32%). Romanian (14.21%) and German (10.11%) settlements also constitute significant shares. This distribution reflects both geographic logic and historical-cultural ties within Central and Eastern Europe. It

suggests that western Hungarian municipalities are embedded not only in immediate cross-border relations but also in broader regional networks.

Restricting the analysis to Austrian partners, 85 sister city relations were identified between the two Hungarian counties and Austrian settlements. The overwhelming majority are located in Burgenland (60 partnerships), followed by Lower Austria (10) and Styria (10). Minor representation exists in Salzburg (3), Upper Austria (1), and Tyrol (1). No partnerships were recorded with settlements in Vienna, Carinthia, or Vorarlberg. The spatial concentration in Burgenland verifies the significance of immediate geographic proximity. Shared historical legacies, most notably the region's integration within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until 1921, likely reinforce relational density. The distribution also suggests that small- and medium-sized municipalities tend to cooperate with settlements of similar administrative scale. The absence of Vienna indicates that partnerships rarely connect peripheral Hungarian municipalities with major metropolitan centers. Instead, cross-border municipal diplomacy appears to operate primarily at the small-town and rural level.

With regard to the thematic orientation of the cooperation, the majority (76%) of Austrian-Hungarian partnerships are categorized as general or cultural in nature. Civil-society-based cooperation accounts for approximately 4.7%, while explicitly economic cooperation represents only about 5% of cases.

The most common drivers of cooperation include educational institutions (language learning, student exchange, vocational placements); cultural associations (music ensembles, dance groups); sports clubs; volunteer fire brigades and minority organizations. These findings indicate that cross-border municipal diplomacy is predominantly soft in character, emphasizing social and cultural exchange rather than direct economic collaboration. Partnerships function as platforms for recurring interpersonal contact rather than transactional economic coordination.

Only 12% of agreements provide recorded years of establishment (primarily between 1994 and 2004), coinciding with Hungary's pre-accession and early EU membership period. The limited availability of temporal data constrains deeper chronological analysis.

The empirical results imply that cross-border sister city cooperation in Hungary's western border region is strongly shaped by territorial proximity, historical embeddedness, and civil-society engagement. First, spatial logic dominates network formation, the concentration of partnerships in Burgenland confirms the role of geographic proximity. Second, cooperation is predominantly socially embedded rather than economically strategic. Cultural exchange, civic associations, and informal institutional ties play a central role in sustaining partnerships. This aligns with broader theories of cross-border regionalization that emphasize the importance of social capital and trust-building mechanisms. Third, economic asymmetry, often highlighted in macro-level analyses of the Austrian-Hungarian border region, does not directly translate into economic-type municipal agreements. Instead, partnerships appear to mitigate asymmetry through cultural normalization and relationship-building rather than through explicit development projects. Fourth, the findings suggest that sister city networks can be interpreted as indicators of cross-border institutional thickness. Even if limited in direct economic impact, they contribute to long-term relational stability and communicative infrastructure in border areas.

Conclusion

Our research examines sister city agreements between Austrian settlements and municipalities in Hungary's Győr-Moson-Sopron and Vas counties. Using a comprehensive national database, the analysis revealed strong territorial concentration in Burgenland, a dominant cultural orientation of partnerships, and a primarily small-scale, socially embedded pattern of cooperation. The findings reinforce the view that cross-border integration is not only a matter of state-level diplomacy or EU-funded projects but also a cumulative outcome of localized institutional relationships. Municipal diplomacy, although often symbolic, constitutes an essential layer of territorial integration.

Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating qualitative fieldwork, examining partnership intensity, or comparing western Hungarian patterns with other border regions. Incorporating network analysis techniques would also allow for a more structural interpretation of relational hierarchies within the cross-border system.

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