

Twinning and cross-border cooperation in the Hungary-Romania border region

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Extended abstract

For a long time, the traditional method of cross-border cooperation was the establishment of twinning partnerships, which has a long history in Europe. The development of inter-municipal cooperation began after the First World War, but it gained serious momentum after World War II, when the idea of peaceful cooperation was a tool to rebuild Europe and create a global order. Establishment of twinning was typically built on common historical roots, following a territorial logic. Thus, majority of them were set up between neighbouring countries, usually between towns and municipalities that once belonged to the same country (Kézay, Páthy, 2023). Twinning, in its traditional format, usually lacks particular thematic focus, the main purpose is socialisation, based on the principle of reciprocity (Langenohl, 2014). Although twinning basically targets cooperation at the local level, it is often subordinated to state-level policies. Twinning collaborations are usually distinguished from other ad hoc local government collaborations by their formalisation and agreement-based nature. There are cooperation agreements, joint sessions, declarations, plans, working groups (Jańczak, 2017). In establishing legal background for twinning the Council of Europe (CoE) played the key role, by adopting the Madrid Framework Convention, which has been ratified both by Hungary and Romania (Soós, Fejes, 2009).

Even if twinning was basically a bottom-up initiative, in Eastern Europe it was more characterised by top-down coordination. Fall of the Berlin wall not only reopened East-West relationships, but also intensified contacts between countries like Romania, where cross-border contacts were the monopoly of the central government (Hunya, Telegdy, 2003). The Romanian revolution in 1989 opened the border, twinning between Hungarian and Romanian municipalities has emerged: 33% of the Hungarian local governments had a Romanian twinning partner in 2002 (Giczi, Sik, 2014). This led to forming euroregions (Carpathian Euroregion and Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa – DKMT) and, recently, EGTCs (Țoca et al., 2021), which are reflecting the diversity of this long border section. Although the Hungary-Romania border zone was considered as a periphery, Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 changed this situation: cheap workforce has been a comparative advantage, particularly for Romania. it has and entered Schengen in 2024, which makes maintenance of cross-border cooperation barrier-free. Ethnic character is an important element of cooperation (Benczi, 2023), however Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes promote rather thematic cooperation, which needs a shift in approach to cooperation than done in traditional twinning.

The study, after outlining the relevant literature on twinning and Hungary-Romania cross-border cooperation in general, aims to identify the territorial patterns of twin town cooperation along the Hungary-Romania border, point out the relationship between twin town cooperation

and project-based cooperation: which twinning partnerships proved to be successful on project-level as well.

For identification of the twinning cooperations, the database of twinning municipalities of the National Association of Local Governments of Hungary, as of 2018, for the four bordering counties (Békés, Csongrád-Csanád, Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg). For identification of project-based partnerships, the database on the selected projects of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 programme were used. The programme targeted the four counties on the Hungarian side (Békés, Csongrád-Csanád, Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg) and the four counties on the Romanian side (Arad, Bihor, Satu Mare, Timiș). Besides the listed databases, four semi-structured interviews have been made with key stakeholders of the cross-border cooperation: the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (as national authority), BRECO as the operational programme management body in Romania, the University of Debrecen and the City of Debrecen.

Concerning the territorial patterns of twinning, there is a concentration of cooperating municipalities in the vicinity of the border zone. While in the Hungarian counties the cooperating municipalities show a relatively equal distribution in space, on the Romanian side there is a concentration in the direct border zone and in the internal counties of Transylvania (Covasna, Harghita and Mureș), where ethnic Hungarian population is more prominently present. While altogether Békés is the most active county in twinning with Romania, the highest number of cooperating twinning partners are Satu Mare–Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (30) and the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar (25) county pair. Concerning project-based partnerships, again, the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar county pair is the most active, on local level the Debrecen–Oradea and the Szeged–Timișoara partnerships are playing a dominant role, followed by Nyíregyháza–Satu Mare, which are all twin cities. Despite the dominant role of these cities, their joint projects were mostly performed by public bodies outside the local governments' institutions: governmental offices, state agencies and, primarily, the universities. The exception here is Debrecen, which has extensive cultural institutions that carry out everyday collaboration with their counterparts in Oradea. Outside the major cities the most sustainable twinning-based project partnerships are located in the more rural middle part of the border area. Also, there are many stable project-based partnerships between towns and cities having no twinning agreement.

Altogether, twinning is a decisive factor in establishing project-based cooperation, however many of these twinings focus on the internal counties of Transylvania with the highest rate of ethnic Hungarian population. Successful conversion of twinning to project based partnerships is detected in the major university cities of the border area (Debrecen, Oradea, Szeged, Timișoara), where the ethnic character does not play a role. Further active twinning partners are in the near-border rural towns of the central border zone. Even if the ethnic character remains an important element in twinning, project-based partnerships require a different approach, resulting different territorial patterns, more focusing on the directly bordering counties.

Keywords: twinning, cross-border cooperation, Hungary, Romania

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