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### Diversity and Development: Policy Entrepreneurship of Euroregional Initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe

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# Diversity and Development: Policy Entrepreneurship of Euroregional Initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe

Gergő Medve-Bálint\* and Sara Svensson

## Abstract

*The article builds on the authors' research into the formation of Euroregions in Central and Eastern Europe, addressing questions that may also be relevant on a broader European scale. Based on our empirical findings, in previous research we demonstrated why some local governments join Euroregions while others abstain. This article takes a further step and aims to discuss what happens once local governments become involved in them. How do motivations and expectations of local governments, as well as the power asymmetries between them, determine the capacity of these small-scale local cross-border collaborative initiatives to act as policy entrepreneurs? We take the three different Euroregional initiatives present in the Komárom–Esztergom region at the Hungarian–Slovakian border as illustrative examples. The empirical data were collected through personal interviews with the representatives of the Euroregions and with the highest political representatives of all local governments that are members on the Hungarian side. We find that differences in membership structure and in the motivational background influence their capacity to act as policy entrepreneurs operationalized as organizational development, diversification of resource base and appropriation of cross-border cooperation activities. We thus rely on a modified version of Markus Perkmann's theoretical framework built around the concept of policy entrepreneurship, but apply it to cases where we are able to control for variations in underlying macro-level conditions, such as politico-administrative or ethno-linguistic settings. The paper, therefore, highlights the differences in the internal dynamics of these initiatives and also challenges the perception of Euroregions as homogeneous institutions.*

## Introduction

After the collapse of the communist regimes Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has witnessed a remarkably quick proliferation of local cross-border initiatives in the form of Euroregions. While this trend was noted early on also in the pages of this journal (starting with Scott and Collins 1997),<sup>1</sup> we have only recently begun to understand its scope and relevance (e.g. Popescu 2008; Johnson 2009; Kaiser, Zimin, and Herrschel 2011; Medve-Bálint 2013; for earlier works, see Keating 2003 or Turnock 2002). The current article seeks to contribute to this specialized literature on CEE but also to the broader literature on European cross-border regionalism (e.g. Deas and Lord 2006; Smith 2004; Perkmann 2003, 2007a, 2007b; Jessop 2002) in two ways. First, we aim to establish whether there is convergence or divergence in terms of how these Euroregions operate. Second, we address the question of which factors influence their organizational development and capacity to act as policy entrepreneurs. Before discussing our methodology and the structure of the paper, we will briefly comment on each of these two questions. For our purpose we define a Euroregion as a formalized cooperation between subnational authorities, often including private and non-profit actors, located close to a border in two or more countries.<sup>2</sup>

The introduction and promotion of legal tools, such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and the European Euroregional Co-operation Grouping (ECG), established by the European

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Union and the Council of Europe respectively, seem to push Euroregions towards more similarity. Whereas the regulations of the funding period for 2007–2013 stipulated that member states “may make use” of the EGTCs for management and implementation of EU funds for cross-border cooperation (European Commission 2006, article 18), the proposed regulation for the 2014–2020 period states that these institutions “*should*, where appropriate” be involved (European Commission 2011, 10, *our italics*). According to Celata and Coletti (2011), who have analyzed a number of relevant policy documents, the European Union has consistently viewed the delimitation and “the definition of border regions as unproblematic, self-evident and guided by objective criteria” (Celata and Coletti 2008, 8).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the EU seems to indirectly push for a greater standardization of local cross-border initiatives by introducing legal tools like the EGTC, which also bears potential financial rewards in that it may grant easier access to EU funds for the EGTC members. This policy practice is in contrast with findings of earlier research that demonstrate significant variation in the set-up and function of Euroregions across Europe (Perkmann 2007a).

Through the example of three Euroregions at the Hungarian–Slovak border, we argue that in spite of these implicit top-down standardization attempts, institutional convergence is not taking place or, at best, it is highly limited. By examining Euroregions within a single NUTS 3 region,<sup>4</sup> we control for several factors (like local policy problems, linguistic and ethnic particularities and the availability of external financial resources), which may explain variance between Euroregions established in geographically, historically and culturally unrelated regions.

The paper builds on a previous study of the authors which addressed the question of why local governments join or do not join Euroregions in CEE (Medve-Bálint and Svensson 2012). In this current work we take a further step and seek to explore what happens to the Euroregions once local governments join them. We evaluate which factors influence the organizational paths of Euroregions and how the differences in their membership structure (internal power relations) and in the members’ motivational background affect their capacity in terms of policy entrepreneurship. We thus rely on a modified version of Perkmann’s theoretical framework built around this concept (Perkmann 2007b), but apply it to cases where we are able to control for variations in underlying macro-level conditions, such as politico-administrative or ethno-linguistic settings.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the second section we set the ground for the analysis by defining key concepts and outline the methodology used to answer the research questions. The third section briefly discusses the historical background and core attributes of the selected border region and introduces the three Euroregions present there. In the fourth section we analyze the factors at play based on the comparison of the three cross-border initiatives. The final section concludes and outlines the potentials for further research in this topic.

## Why Do Local Governments Join Euroregions and What Happens After?

How Euroregions emerge and what factors determine their development constitute questions that still lack persuasive answers. This field of inquiry is especially relevant for Central and Eastern Europe where borders have long been contested along cultural, ethnic, political, and economic lines (Balcsók, Dancs, and Koncz 2005; Hardi & Mezei 2003; Hardi 2007; van Houtum & Scott 2005; Eriksonas 2006). Moreover, after World War II, until the collapse of the communist regimes, borders posed almost impermeable barriers to cross-border exchange (Kennard 2004; Turnock 2002). This resulted in economic decline and led to the marginalization of many CEE border regions (Turnock 2002; Mezei 2004). In addition, the decades of isolation also indirectly reinforced existing fears and stereotypes towards ethnically different inhabitants living across the border (Yoder 2003). In spite of these factors, the number of Euroregions, understood as organizations rather than as territories, rose rapidly across CEE and now they are present everywhere along the state borders.

In this section we elaborate on the emergence issue by restating our previous research, and then continue to our argument that *policy entrepreneurship*, as interpreted by Perkmann (2007b), is a useful concept to capture variations in the development of Euroregions after they are established.

The ability of Euroregions in CEE to attract local governments varies to a great extent (Medve-Bálint 2013). In previous work (Medve-Bálint and Svensson 2012) we elaborated on why this is the case—why do some local governments in border regions join Euroregions while others abstain? Based on a case study on the Komárom–Esztergom border region in Hungary, we found that both instrumental and normative factors play a role in determining local government membership in Euroregions. Regarding the instrumental factors, besides the availability of external funding for cross-border cooperation, the administrative embeddedness of local governments also matters. This aspect means that groups of local governments belonging to a single administrative sub-regional unit (for instance a micro-region) are more likely to enter a Euroregional initiative together as they are able to solve collective action problems within the micro-regional framework. Furthermore, converging project plans of local governments also pose a significant incentive to join, while conflicting plans appear as serious obstacles. Concerning the normative factors, a common ethnic background of the inhabitants across the border and the presence of strong historical socio-economic and cultural ties facilitate local government membership in Euroregions. However, contrary to expectations, our research could not verify that support for ethnic cohesion shared among the local political elites would determine membership as such attitudes could just as well be channeled through other institutions like bilateral partnerships. Cognitive distance, which does not necessarily correspond to physical distance from the border, is another key normative element. The perception of how “close” the border is and the significance that is attributed to cross-border cooperation varies by local government and this variation cannot be fully explained by the geographic distance from the state border. It is important to note that the above factors jointly determine local government membership and, as such, the territorial coverage of Euroregions. In short, instrumental and normative factors affect Euroregion membership in conjunction with each other.

After having identified the reasons why local governments tend to join Euroregions, the next question is what happens to these initiatives once they are established? Following Perkmann (2007b), we use the concept of “policy entrepreneur” (Mintrom 1997) not in relation to individual actors but to organizations, as an analytic lens “to assess the degree to which Euroregions represent actual actors able to shape their environment” (Perkmann 2007b, 862). In his use of “policy entrepreneurship,” Perkmann emphasizes resource mobilization, which is in line with the standpoint we have taken throughout our current and previous research.

As with any other organisation, once a Euroregion is established as such, it will operate to secure organisational survival (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This will occur within the constraints and opportunities afforded by the organisation’s ability to mobilise resources and the specialist competencies it will be able to build up over time. Though mostly applied to social movements, resource mobilisation theory can thus be used to inform an operational framework to assess the success of Euroregions. In particular, it refers to the ability of these organisations to create and maintain a support base on a local level; in most cases, this will involve maintaining networks of local authorities as paying members. (Perkmann 2007b, 867)

In order to investigate if and how the capacity of Euroregions to act as policy entrepreneurs differs and what may affect such differences, we conducted an in-depth study of the Komárom–Esztergom NUTS 3 region in Hungary. We selected this region because three Euroregions are present there within a relatively small area, thus we held most external factors constant that could influence the differences. There is an abundance of micro-level case studies of Eastern European Euroregions or cross-border regions that usually focus on “key stakeholders,” such as representatives of organizations, regional administrative and/or political bodies and major urban centers (e.g. Haase and Wust 2004; Eskelinen and Kotilainen 2005; Grix and Knowles 2003; Knippschild 2008). Unlike these works, we argue that it is important to put

more emphasis on the political membership of Euroregions, including those representing smaller settlements, in order to gain a better insight into the mechanisms driving cross-border cooperation at the local level. Hence, besides using secondary literature, we base our analysis on a virtually complete set of interviews with the members of the Euroregions in the selected area.

We interviewed the highest political representatives, the mayors of all but one of the local governments that are Euroregion members on the Hungarian side and we also talked to current and past Euroregion leaders and managers. Altogether, we carried out 31 interviews, out of which 22 were conducted in person and 9 over the phone. The semi-structured interviews with mayors took place at the seats of the local governments and generally lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. In two cases high-level administrative officials received us, but the mayors subsequently approved their answers. All the interviews, except one, were carried out during the spring and summer of 2010 (see the full list in the Appendix).

The collected information allows for an informed comparison of the three Euroregions. It can be noted that the study responds to Perkmann's call in another recent article for more comparative work that "explore degrees of empirical variation" (Perkmann 2007a, 257) along such dimensions as political mobilization and governance, in order to shed light on how processes of re-scaling occur. We shall add here that outside the framework of the current study, we have also conducted similar, although more limited, fieldwork on the Slovak side and the information gained from those interviews does not contradict our argument outlined in this paper. The data allow for both qualitative and quantitative analysis, but for the present paper and research question, it proved most useful to apply qualitative analytic techniques.

## The Research Site and its Euroregions

### The Komárom-Esztergom Region

Komárom-Esztergom is situated in Hungary along the Danube on the north-west border with Slovakia. The county is divided into 76 local governments and seven micro-regions. The micro-regions were created in the 1990s for developmental purposes and upon the realization that numerous individual local governments were unable to effectively provide services they were required to offer. Given the massive inflow of foreign investments, the regional economy has developed substantially in the 1990s and 2000s.

The bordering Slovak region of Nitra, especially the three districts (*okres*) adjacent to Hungary, has a slightly different character with fewer urban centers and a regional economy relying mostly on agriculture and food processing. Overall, the Slovak region has 350 settlements and 15 of them bear the status of town. The three districts (or micro-regions) closest to the border have 192 settlements.<sup>5</sup> The major urban center of the Nitra region is the city of Nitra in the north, whereas the towns of Komárno and Štúrovo are the largest settlements located right next to the Hungarian border.

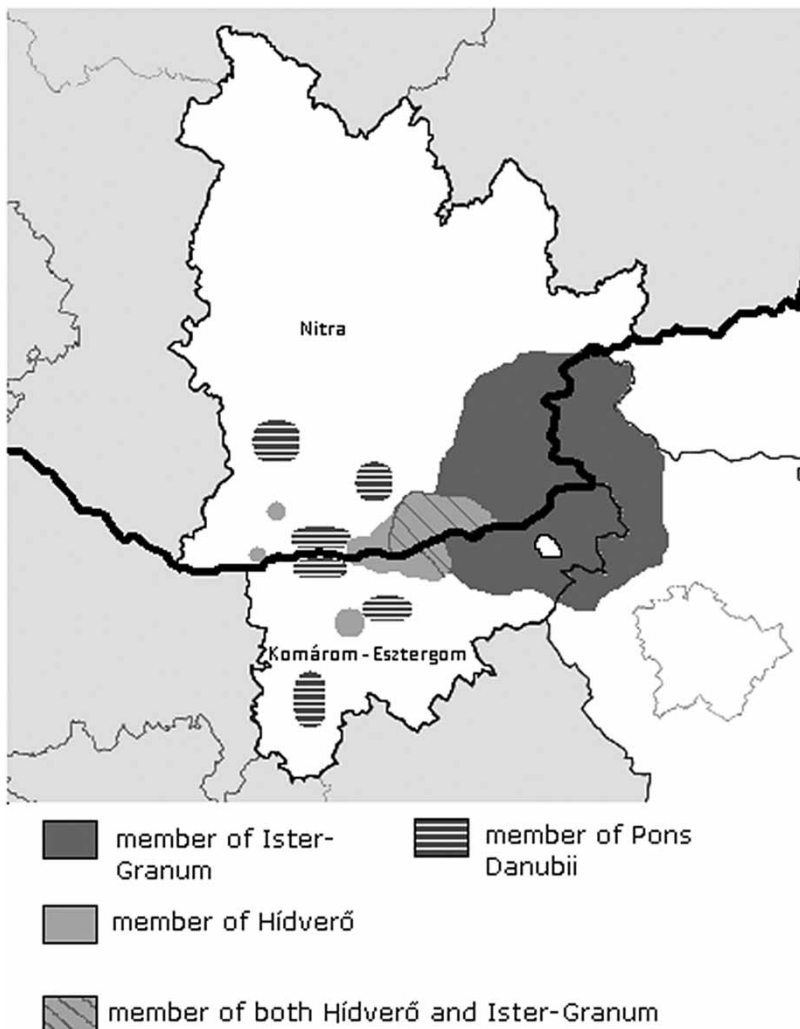
Before World War I Komárom-Esztergom and the Nitra region were parts of a larger Hungarian-inhabited area within the territory of "Great Hungary." Now much of this zone belongs to Slovakia. However, a significant ethnic Hungarian population still lives in the Nitra region right next to the Hungarian border. Hungarians in Komárom-Esztergom refer to the villages and towns on the other side of the border with their original Hungarian names, for instance the town of Štúrovo is referred to as Párkány, and the villages Zlatná na Ostrove, Sokolce and Marcelová as Csallóközaranyos, Lakszakállas and Marcelháza, respectively. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the long-standing tensions between Slovakia and Hungary regarding the Slovak government's policy towards the Hungarian minority.<sup>6</sup> However, we should note that from the perspective of local cross-border cooperation the historical past implies that there are strong external normative forces serving both as incentives (cultural-linguistic affinity) and obstacles (conflicts).

Within Komárom-Esztergom there are also numerous villages that preserved their Slovak or German character from the past: due to settlement policies during the Habsburg Monarchy, many villages of ethnic

Slovak or German population were established in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Currently, 10 settlements have Slovak while 22 have German “national self-governments” in Komárom-Esztergom and, in 3 of these, both minorities have established their own self-governments.<sup>7</sup> Events related to the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century greatly influenced the ethnic composition of many villages. Some German villages were affected by forced migration following World War II, and some experienced an influx of ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia who were resettled within programs aiming for achieving ethnically more homogeneous territories. It should be noted, however, that contrary to the Hungarians living in Slovakia, both the German and Slovak minorities in Komárom-Esztergom are largely assimilated and very few of their members use the Slovak or German language on a daily basis.

Currently,<sup>8</sup> three cross-border initiatives operate in Komárom-Esztergom, which meet our definition of Euroregion: the Ister-Granum EGTC, the Hídverő/Danube Association and the Pons-Danubii EGTC (see Figure 1). These organizations are the focus of this paper. In the next subsection we briefly describe their origins and structures before we move on to analyzing them in order to establish the relation between

**Figure 1.** The three cross-border initiatives (Hídverő, Ister-Granum and Pons Danubii).





their organizational goals, members' motivations and membership structure, and capacity to act as policy entrepreneurs.

## The Euroregions

Similarly to many other cases of cross-border cooperation across Europe, the origin of the Ister-Granum Euroregion<sup>9</sup> is largely determined by the (re)construction of the bridge that features in its logo. For more than half a century there was no permanent connection across the Danube between the twin cities of Esztergom in Hungary and Štúrovo (Párkány) in Slovakia, as the major bridge—destroyed during the Second World War—was not rebuilt due to political reasons, fully in line with the climate of distrust described above. When, in 1999, the Slovak and Hungarian governments reached an agreement to rebuild the bridge, it was perceived not only as the necessary precondition for setting up a regional cross-border cooperation framework, but also as an important symbol of unity.

The first declaration of intent to set up local cross-border cooperation was signed in 2000 by the Slovakian Juzný micro-region and the Hungarian Esztergom-Nyergesújfalu Microregional Development Association, which together covered 35 local governments across the border. After the preparatory stage, the Ister-Granum Euroregion was established in 2003 with more than 100 participating local governments from Komárom-Esztergom and the neighboring Pest region in Hungary and the Nitra region in Slovakia. At the time, Ister-Granum covered an area of 2,200 km<sup>2</sup> and had 220,000 inhabitants (Eck, Jankai, and Ocskay 2007), which made it small from an international perspective. However, in 2009, when the Euroregion adopted the legal personality of an EGTC, a dozen local governments, mainly from Slovakia, left the cooperation and its territory shrank a bit. While among the remaining members support for re-establishing the historical contacts among the Hungarians features as an important motivation for joining (and staying) in the cooperation, still, the dominant expectation of the local governments was to quickly benefit from financial returns through Ister-Granum (Medve-Bálint & Svensson 2012).

The Euroregion has a small secretariat located in the Esztergom town hall, consisting of a manager and a couple of assistants, depending on the number of active projects. The Euroregion has been leading, or taking part in, several project initiatives. The managing director considered the most successful projects to date to be formulating the plans for rebuilding the bridges and the construction of fish stairs on the river Ipoly (Ipel) and the support for the creation of a cross-border wine tourism area (Interview June 8, 2010). The town of Esztergom has frequently subsidized Ister-Granum and is generally acknowledged as the most important actor within the organization (Interviews with members March–August, 2010). As expressed by the mayor of Lábattlan: “Esztergom has an important role to play ensuring that this region is held together, so that we feel good inside it” (Interview June 2, 2010).

Although Ister-Granum is a small Euroregion in an international comparison, the Hídverő/Danube Association is even smaller, with only 60,000 inhabitants settled over 421 km<sup>2</sup> (Eck, Jankai, and Ocskay 2007). Cooperation dates back to the early 1990s when villages located along the Danube on both sides of the border began to organize annual cultural events called “*Hídverő napok*” (“Bridge-building days”), but a formal cross-border organization—the Danube Euroregion—was registered only in 2003. However, the membership and territorial coverage of the Euroregion has taken several turns. The formal membership was held together by Neszmély, the lead partner in the Tata Microregional Development Association and by the Slovakian “*Združenie Obcí Priateľstva*” or “*Hídverő Társulás*” (“Bridge-Building Association”) (Eck, Jankai, and Ocskay 2007). Even though all local governments of the Tata micro-region in Hungary were formally members, some were significantly more active in the cooperation than others. The Euroregion was subsequently tainted by allegations of corruption towards the mayor of Neszmély, who finally resigned in April 2008 (Népszabadság 2008; Népszava 2008). The organization was drawn into a criminal investigation and is, by any practical definition, defunct. However, the bonds joining the active members did not dissolve and the immediate solution was to create an organization hybrid, a combination of a

Slovak-registered nongovernmental organization (NGO) with five Hungarian settlements being honorary members (Almásfűzitő, Dunaalmás, Kocs, Neszmély and Süttő). These Hungarian local governments motivate their continued engagement by referring to the importance of enhancing the cohesion of the ethnic Hungarian population across the border (Medve-Bálint & Svensson 2012).

The Hídverő/Danube Association is characterized as a flat and slim organization. It neither maintains a secretariat nor a webpage, but still manages to pull together well-attended monthly meetings, the location of which rotates among the members. There is little initiative in terms of policy collaboration and project development and, to the extent it exists, it relies on external organizations, such as regional development agencies. However, the cooperation does provide a forum for active policy monitoring as the Hungarian mayors, in particular, gain a close insight into the daily practices and problems of the Slovak local governments (Interviews March 16, April 8, June 3, July 26, and August 12, 2010).

Pons Danubii, meaning “bridge over Danube” in Latin, is the latest one in the family of Euroregions in Komárom-Esztergom. Discussions about this initiative began in 2006 among Hungarian towns that were close to the border, and whose mayors aimed to strengthen bonds with Slovakia, but at the same time did not want to succumb to the leadership of Esztergom within the Ister-Granum Euroregion. Unlike the Ister-Granum and the Hídverő/Danube Euroregions, the motivation to reunite the Hungarian people played a less pronounced role in determining the coverage of the Euroregion. Instead, the key actors focus on economic development and try to gain better access to European funds (Medve-Bálint and Svensson 2012). In order to de-emphasize Hungarian ownership of the project, the six members<sup>10</sup> decided that they would register the initiative in the form of an EGTC in Slovakia and that Komárno would serve as the administrative center.<sup>11</sup> The EGTC was registered in December 2010, and is currently developing its working structures (Interviews June 7, June 16 and August 30, 2010).

## The Observed Differences and Their Possible Causes

The three Euroregions and their constitutive elements, the local governments in our study, have been subjects in equal measure to a set of external factors usually thought to influence the development of Euroregions. First and foremost, local and regional actors here, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, realized that the European Union promoted cross-border cooperation initiatives, and allocated financial resources for this purpose. In addition, many transnational entities, such as the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), did advocacy work in favor of cross-border cooperation and examples of other similar initiatives were also there to follow. Hence, there have been both external material and normative incentives promoting the institutionalization of Euroregions in Komárom-Esztergom. In addition, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity across the border also appeared as a further incentive or catalyzing factor. There was also no shortage of policy problems—not the least the general need for economic development—that could have been favorably addressed through cross-border cooperation. This is true even if local constraints, such as the lack of necessary financial, human, and technical resources, might have overshadowed the opportunities for joint interventions through cross-border cooperation.

Since the three Euroregions studied in this paper were created within a short time period and are situated along a limited part of a single state border, this significantly reduces the variation that might still exist in terms of financial resources, local policy problems or linguistic and ethnic particularities. In fact, our analysis shows no differences among the members of the three Euroregions in terms of perceived immediate policy problems or current financial constraints. Still, there is a striking diversity among the Euroregions in terms of what they are, and what they want to become. As this variation cannot be accounted for by the above factors, we have to look for other explanations at the local level. In the next section we first discuss the similarities and differences of the three Euroregions regarding their level of institutionalization and functioning and then we analyze the possible explanatory factors responsible for the differences.



### The Outcome: Euroregions as Policy Entrepreneurs

The study seeks to identify those factors that may influence the capacity of Euroregions to act as policy entrepreneurs. Perkmann (2007b) operationalized policy entrepreneurship as organizational development, diversification of resource base and appropriation of cross-border cooperation activities. We have previously worked with the notions of institutionalization to refer to the extent to which the Euroregion has formalized its operation, which roughly corresponds to organizational development in Perkmann's understanding. By appropriation of cross-border activities we mean whether it has become a major vehicle for its members in terms of policy coordination and cooperation, and what scope and type of activities and projects the Euroregion has undertaken.

In terms of the level of organizational development, Ister-Granum has the most formalized operation, which also follows from the requirements of establishing an EGTC. It collects membership fees, holds regular assemblies, and has a governing senate and thematic working groups and a secretariat responsible for day-to-day management. Although Pons Danubii has been registered as an EGTC only recently,<sup>12</sup> it still has a developed institutional structure with a functioning secretariat and a recently elected director responsible for the daily management. In contrast, Hídverő has little in terms of organizational structure, lacking, for instance, a secretariat and a website. It is very loosely institutionalized as its only formal attributes are the elected presidency (in 2011 the mayor of Patince performed this role) and the rotating monthly meetings. The Hungarian participating members are only honorary members, as the Slovak legal form that is used as a basis for operation does not allow for the formal inclusion of foreign members. The members of the Hídverő are to a great extent loyal to its perceived mission and working procedures, i.e. the monthly meetings. Although true policy coordination has not developed in any of the Euroregions, it should also be noted that Hídverő does not even have such aspirations. As for Ister-Granum, most of the interviewees claimed that communication between the secretariat and the members is rather one-sided, although at the same time few members take an active part in shaping the Euroregion. Projects are approved by the regular assembly meetings, but are usually initiated by Esztergom. Pons Danubii is yet to develop its policy coordination mechanisms, although plans about strengthening economic cooperation have already been formulated (Interview, August 30, 2010).

Securing European funds is an important goal for both Ister-Granum and Pons Danubii; however, the members of Hídverő rather consider it an extra bonus if some of their members secure funding through this source. All in all, Ister-Granum has the most diversified resource base, as the town of Esztergom has also contributed substantially to its operations.

Regarding appropriation of cross-border activities, Ister-Granum has actively applied for funds and engaged in relatively costly activities, as described above, whereas Hídverő has not pursued this at all. Pons Danubii has yet to demonstrate its functional capacities although the successful and relatively smooth establishing of the EGTC may provide a good start for the cooperation.

### Differences in Inputs: Motivational Background, Expectations, Power Relations, and Organizational Goals

In the previous section we briefly described to what extent the three Euroregions have developed into policy entrepreneurs. Now we turn to those factors that may determine these outcomes. First, we analyze the differences and similarities in the motivational background and the expectations of the members of the three Euroregions. The reasons why local governments decided to join them show significant variation across but not within the Euroregions. Although administrative embeddedness played an important role in each case (those local governments that belong to the same sub-regional entity were more likely to join a cross-border initiative together), the stated motivations for joining vary across the Euroregions to a great extent, but much less so among the members of a single Euroregion.

Members of Hídverő are primarily motivated by maintaining and nurturing the common Hungarian heritage and identity. They expect that cooperation helps to reinforce Hungarian identity across the border and will facilitate cultural exchange between Hungarians living on both sides. As the mayor of Süttő expressed it, “We did this for the sake of the Hungarians in Slovakia. The Euroregion can help a lot to maintain and nurture the historical roots, to make sure that this connection continues to live and builds up, and does not break.” Although the by-laws of the Slovak-registered organization states that the organization is set up to protect the interest of its members and solve common problems (Statutes, Article II), a key sentence is included at the end of Article II: “The Association can work together with towns and settlements of other regions in the country and abroad, too.”

Although this ethnically grounded motivation often appeared in interviews with mayors of Ister-Granum, in their case this view was nearly always accompanied by more materialistic expectations towards the cooperation. Most of the mayors were open about their expectations towards direct material gains for their settlements arising from the involvement in Ister-Granum. This sentiment was echoed by the management of Ister-Granum, emphasizing local economic development as the primary aim of the initiative (Interview June 8 and November 24, 2010). These mixed motivations can be illustrated by contrasting the statement that “Hungarians on the other side of the border need this” (Nyergesújfalu mayor, August 4, 2010) with the statement that “we saw some opportunities and fantasy in this—best practice exchanges and building connections, perhaps there is something in it for us as well” (Máriaalom mayor, Interview August 4, 2010). According to the statutes the focus of the Ister-Granum Euroregion is almost exclusively on economic (and social) development. Article I lays down that the emphasis is on “the full range of regional development activities ... for promoting and strengthening economic and social cohesion.” The text leaves no doubt about where resources for this development should come. The statutes specify that “the specific objective of the Grouping” is “that by the co-financing of the European Union” the economic and social cohesion should be achieved. Thus, curiously, the rationale for the organization would not exist if the European Union did not provide funding for cross-border cooperation.

Pons Danubii is the Euroregion that most visibly seeks to become such a vehicle that would enable greater access to development grants offered by the European Union. “Every local government wants to show itself, and we thought this could have mutual advantages. It was important for application purposes. You can reach real achievements only through cooperation” (Komárom mayor, June 16, 2010). “EGTC offered such an opportunity that when there is something important for the people living here, they do not have to turn to the government, but can turn directly to Brussels” (Tata mayor, August 30, 2010).

The expectations of the members are, therefore, closely related to the reasons that motivated their joining. Pons Danubii identified economic development as its dominant organizational goal and the members uniformly internalized this aim. It is too early to tell whether the strong anticipation of financial benefits will backfire on the cooperation if it is unable to deliver the desired results. The expectations of the members of Ister-Granum about future financial returns have mostly been unfulfilled. The growing discontent has triggered tension and evoked conflicts inside the organization: many members stopped attending the assembly meetings and some withheld the membership fees. As for the case of Hídverő, it is doubtful whether the stated support for the Hungarian “cause” has, indeed, been fulfilled. However, Hídverő members are convinced that the cooperation helped developing closer ties between the Hungarians in Slovakia and in Hungary and their overall evaluation of the cooperation is rather positive.

Regarding the membership structure and the power relations that arise from it, the role of the organizational goals has to be examined first. At the time of establishing Ister-Granum, the founding members formulated the goals of restoring historical ties across the two sides of the border and of enhancing economic development of the entire border area under the leadership of Esztergom and Štúrovo. Given that the organizational goals implied a relatively wide territorial coverage, most local governments in the broad neighbourhood that identified with these goals joined the cooperation. As Ister-Granum’s membership grew in numbers, asymmetric power relations between the lead partners, Esztergom and Štúrovo, and the other members have become more and more visible as well.

Power asymmetries to this extent are missing from Hídverő and Pons Danubii as they both lack a dominant actor. While both organizations have a limited number of members, their socio-economic characteristics are also similar: 18 small and middle-sized villages form Hídverő and 6 small towns compose Pons Danubii. Although Hídverő in spirit is open to new members, there are technical obstacles to extending its membership. On the one hand, the Slovak law does not allow for Hungarian settlements to join the association formally (which is a registered NGO in Slovakia), on the other hand, the by-laws of the organization contain the exact list of members and any changes involves restarting the whole registration process. Since it is possible to promote the ethnic cohesion of Hungarians in other forms, too, Hídverő's membership has not grown. In the case of Pons Danubii, it was the firm purpose of the founding members to have a homogeneous membership structure and a limited membership of towns of similar size. For instance, they intentionally did not invite Tatabánya, which is the biggest city in Komárom-Esztergom, as its inclusion would have created power asymmetries similar to those in Ister-Granum (Interview August 30, 2010).

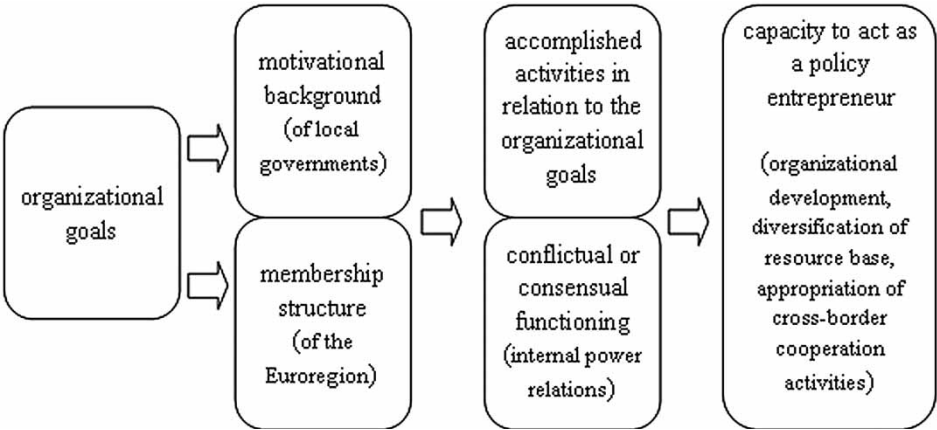
In the end, both Hídverő and Pons Danubii have remained small cooperative organizations with rather homogeneous membership structures lacking explicit power asymmetries among their members. In contrast, Ister-Granum is characterized by a number of internal conflicts. This is due both to the relatively large number of actors involved and the perceived mismatch between the stated organizational goals and the activities pursued. The abstention of several former members from the Ister-Granum EGTC was only one sign of these internal conflicts. Most mayors that expressed their discontent referred to the lack of projects directly benefiting their settlements. On the one hand, this makes them passive in the organization, on the other hand their passivity may not generate projects from which their settlement could benefit.

Development of Policy Entrepreneurship Capacity

We argue that the organizational goals, initially defined by the founders of the cross-border initiatives, influence both their membership structure and the motivational background of the members. The membership structure then directly translates into internal power relations, while the motivational background determines the expectations of the members towards the cooperation. Immediately after the Euroregion is established, the interaction between these three factors (organizational goals, expectations, membership structure) will jointly determine the future capacity for policy entrepreneurship (Figure 2).

Once the Euroregion becomes active, the members experience how the initially stated goals and their own expectations become fulfilled. In case the membership structure allows for dominant or more powerful

Figure 2. Factors determining policy entrepreneurship capacity.



actors to emerge, on the one hand operations may become conflictual, on the other hand, the scope and type of projects carried out may not satisfy all the members, even if they are in line with the stated goals. Some Polish–German Euroregions are examples of such outcomes (Osekowski 2000). The perceived discrepancy between the original expectations and the membership experience further raises internal conflicts, which may lead to the deterioration of the cooperation through significantly decreased activity of the unsatisfied members, as is the case with Ister-Granum. However, if the experience and initial expectations of the members meet each other over time, then that leads to their sustained, active commitment to the initiative, for which Hídverő provides an example.

We further argue that Euroregions aiming to promote cultural cohesion and identity, which are usually low-cost activities, are less likely to be characterized by conflictual operation. However, those Euroregions that emphasize the promotion of economic development as their primary goal are more likely to invite members that expect direct material benefits. On the one hand, this implies engaging in more costly activities; on the other hand, internal conflicts are also more likely to emerge once financial and economic interests are involved. Table 1 offers a general overview of the main characteristics of the three Euroregions.

Table 1. The main characteristics of the three Euroregions

		Ister-Granum	Hídverő/ Danube	Pons Danubii
General characteristics	Total number of members (local governments)	89	18	6
	Established in (year)	2003	2003	2009
	Common ethnic background of the members	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Current sub-regional administrative ties connecting the members	Yes	Yes	No
	Territorial coverage	Contiguous	Non-contiguous	Non-contiguous
Organizational goals	Aspiration to strengthen the ethnic cohesion of Hungarians	Yes	Yes	No
	Aspiration to secure external funding	Yes	No	Yes
Membership structure	Socio-economic character of the members	Dissimilar	Similar (villages)	Similar (towns of similar size)
	Power asymmetry among members	Yes	No	No
Motivational background	Dominant expectation of members	Direct material benefits	Strengthening ties with ethnic Hungarians	Direct material benefits
Functioning	Scope and type of activities in line with the stated organizational goals	Yes (partially)	Yes	N.A.
	Characterized by internal conflicts	Yes	No	No
Policy entrepreneurship capacity	Level of formalized operations (organizational development)	High	Low	Medium
	Appropriation of cross-border cooperation activities (extent of policy coordination and cooperation across various fields)	Low	Low	Low
	Diversification of resource base	Medium	Low	Low

While Hídverő is characterized by a homogeneous membership structure and organizational goals that imply engagement in low-cost activities, Ister-Granum is highly diverse in terms of its membership and adopted broad, ambitious, and costly organizational goals. Although Hídverő's level of institutionalization remained low, it is functioning smoothly to the extent of its initially stated purposes. In contrast, even though Ister-Granum has established a solid institutional structure and carried out activities that comply with its original aspirations, its functioning is contested internally by some of the members.

Still at the beginning of its operations, Pons Danubii seems to be a mixture of Hídverő and Ister-Granum: its organizational goals and the members' motivational background are similar to that of Ister-Granum but its membership structure resembles that of Hídverő. In terms of institutionalization, Pons Danubii still has to develop a fully-fledged system but it has already outperformed Hídverő in this respect. Unlike Ister-Granum, it did so without the presence of internal conflicts and tensions. The question now is whether Pons Danubii will take the path of Ister-Granum in the future or rather that of Hídverő. Given the small number of its members and their homogeneity, internal power asymmetries may not arise even in the long run but engaging in costly activities as prescribed by the organizational goals may eventually lead to conflicts that could backfire on the organization. What will determine this is most probably whether the experience of the members will match their initial expectations about the cooperation.

## Concluding Remarks

Our inquiry has been guided by the assumption that delimitations and emergence of border regions and their accompanying cross-border initiatives are neither unproblematic nor self-evident. We have previously demonstrated the complexities behind both the Euroregions' capacity to attract local governments and the local governments' decisions to join them (Medve-Bálint and Svensson 2012). The aim of this paper has been to go beyond this and look into the functioning of these initiatives. The study constitutes an effort to shed light on how Euroregions become what they are, and what may influence where they are going.

Within a small border region we found empirical evidence for the diversity of cross-border initiatives in terms of their capacity to act as policy entrepreneurs and how this could be attributed to two contrasting ways of entering the cooperation: one that focuses primarily on the economic dimension and one for which common ethnic roots are considered more important. In addition, our study bears policy relevance in that it shows that setting too ambitious or too vaguely formulated organizational goals for cross-border initiatives may lead to getting the membership "wrong." This, over time, may result in the disintegration of such initiatives, which, from a broad perspective, could also damage the European cross-border policy agenda.

All things considered, we believe that the study may be of value for further research both due to its hypothesis-generating capacity and policy relevance. Comparative research involving several border regions, or a contrasting case study from another part of Central and Eastern Europe would constitute valuable steps towards testing the above suggested causal mechanism and the underlying policy processes.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The first article in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* on cross-border cooperation in Europe (Scott 1993) dealt exclusively with Western Europe and saw developments primarily in the light of the introduction of the Single European Market and changing European regional policy. Special issues of the journal paid more attention to the developments in CEE (*JBS* 15 (1) 2000 and 20 (2) 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The definition builds on Perkmann's description of Euroregions as "more or less institutionalized collaboration between contiguous subnational authorities across national borders" (Perkmann 2002, 104).

<sup>3</sup> Celata and Coletti (2008) build their analysis on documents related to the 2000–2006, and 2007–2013 programming period of the European Union. The quote is from an English version published online. An extended version was published in Italian in 2011.

<sup>4</sup> NUTS (“Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics”) is the territorial statistical system of the European Union. In this paper we deal with the NUTS 3 level regions and with local governments as the lowest level of state administration, represented by the NUTS 5 or LAU 2 (Local Administrative Unit) level.

<sup>5</sup> Source: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/nuts\\_nomenclature/local\\_administrative\\_units](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/nuts_nomenclature/local_administrative_units) (accessed February 1, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> In 2009 tensions centered around a controversial Slovak language law that, among other things, aimed at enforcing increased use of Slovak geographic names. For somewhat longer reflection on the issue, see: [http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/36140/2/hungary\\_continues\\_to\\_criticise\\_slovak\\_language\\_law.html](http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/36140/2/hungary_continues_to_criticise_slovak_language_law.html) (accessed September 8, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Information provided by the German and Slovak National Self-governments (2010).

<sup>8</sup> The Vág-Duna-Ipoly Euroregion (established in 1999), which was a cooperation at the regional level (between Nitra county in Slovakia and Komárom-Esztergom and Fejér counties in Hungary) without involving local governments, has long ago terminated its activity. An overly optimistic scholarly assessment of this Euroregion in this journal (Dancs et al. 2000) shows the perils of making too early evaluations about the functioning of cross-border initiatives.

<sup>9</sup> As it is the case with numerous Euroregions, a Latin name was chosen to avoid giving preference to the Hungarian or the Slovak language. In this case Ister refers to the Danube, and Granum to the Garam river.

<sup>10</sup> Three on the Hungarian side (Komárom, Kiskőrös and Tata), and three on the Slovak side: Kolárovo (Gúta), Komárno (Révkomárom) and Hurbanovo (Ógyalla).

<sup>11</sup> While Pons-Danubii fulfils our definition of a Euroregion (a formalized cooperation initiative between subnational authorities in adjacent European countries), it does not form a geographically cohesive territory due to the deliberate exclusion of smaller settlements located in the neighborhood of the six towns. For a discussion at length on the crucial issue of whom to include (and exclude) in the formation process of the Euroregion, see Medve-Bálint and Svensson (2012).

<sup>12</sup> <http://portal.cor.europa.eu/egtc/en-US/news/Pages/PonsDanubii.aspx> (accessed April 2, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Answers subsequently approved by the mayor after an interview with an administrative official on the indicated date at the premises of the local government.

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## Appendix: Interviews

- Almásfüzitő: Lukács Karánsebesy, August 12, 2010 (via phone)
- Annayölgy: József Bánhidi, April 9 2010 (in person)
- Bajna: Tibor Pallagi, August 3, 2010 (via phone)
- Bajót: Zoltán Tóth, July 20, 2010 (via phone)
- Csolnok: József Bérces, August 4, 2010 (in person)
- Dág: Tamás Steiner, May 18 2010 (in person)
- Dömös: Lajos Novák, May 19, 2010 (in person)
- Dunaalmás: Péter Lévai, July 26, 2010 (via phone)
- Epöl: Imre Muszela, July 26, 2010 (via phone)
- Esztergom: Tamás Meggyes, June 3, 2010 (in person)<sup>13</sup>
- Kesztlőc: Lajos Gaál, June 11, 2010 (in person)
- Kisbér: Dr Erzsébet Udvardi, June 7, 2010 (in person)
- Kocs: Bódis Jánosné, April 8, 2010 (in person)
- Komárom: János Zatykó, June 16, 2010 (in person)
- Lábatlan: István Török, June 3, 2010 (in person)
- Leányvár: János Tóth, June 16, 2010 (in person)
- Márialalom: Kálmán Murczin, August 4, 2010 (in person)
- Mogyorósbánya: Tibor Havrancsik, August 24, 2010 (via phone)
- Nagyigmánd: Ferencné Szijj, August 4, 2010 (via phone)

Naszály: István Maszlavér, April 12, 2010 (in person)

Neszmély: Béla Horváth, June 3, 2010 (in person)

Nyergesújfalu József Miskolczi, August 4, 2010 (in person)

Piliscsév: Mária Nagy, August 2, 2010 (via phone)

Pilismarót: László Benkovics, May 19, 2010 (in person)

Sárisáp: Károly Kollár, August 3, 2010 (via phone)

Süttő: János Czermann, March 16, 2010 (in person)

Tát: Lajos Szenes, May 19, 2010 (in person)

Tata: József Michl, August 30, 2010 (in person)

Tokod: Mihály Pánczél, March 11, 2010 (in person)

Tokodaltáró: József Petrik, June 7, 2010 (in person)

Úny: József Pósfai, July 28, 2010 (via email)

Manager of Ister-Granum EGTC: István Ferencsik, June 8, 2010

Former manager of Ister-Granum EGTC: Gyula Ocskay, November 24, 2010