

## **The Process of Re-joining: Reconstruction of Social and Economic Relations between Two Hungarian Villages on Both Sides of the Ipoly River**

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**ABSTRACT:** After 1920 the Ipoly river has become the country border between Hungary and Slovakia. Villages that were organically linked to each other cut off the official social and economic connections for almost a hundred years. In the study, we show the survey results in two border villages that support the persistence of unofficial relations between the two villages despite the country border.

The study explains how the human, social and economic relationships were reconstructed on both sides of Ipoly river between the two villages, Ipolyhídvég and Drégelypalánk, after joining the European Union. The reconstruction of the organic unity of the two villages may not merely be the result of the economic cooperation between them. However, it is primarily the effect of living traditions and the trust created by families, relatives, and friends.

**KEYWORDS:** Border study, cross-border culture, reconstruction of social and economic relations, tradition, trust

**JEL Codes:** N00, Z13

### **Introduction**

As the vision of a “world without borders” created in the 1990s collapsed, the border studies have become more strongly at the center of interest in geopolitics, regional sciences, sociology, and cultural anthropology over the past decade. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. Thus, for example, geopolitical changes in the world, conflicts, and on the other hand, the changed border conditions due to the enlargement of the European Union to the East. Among these, the territorial changes that took

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place a hundred years earlier and mainly affecting the Kingdom of Hungary, including the Hungarian and Slovak border issues, are particularly significant factors. All of these factors indicate that, as Kolossov and Scott (2013) noted, boundaries are not permanent institutions but rather products of endless processes.

Our study aims to examine the development of a Hungarian-Slovak border micro-region relationship along the Ipoly river before and after joining the European Union, approaching sociology and cultural anthropology.

### **Literature background**

The volume on border studies, edited by Wilson and Donnan (2012), discusses the phenomena of interest in the topic on more than six hundred pages. This scope in itself indicates the multifaceted nature of the issues at stake and the multifaceted scientific approach that may be adequate in analyzing border areas. Border studies can be divided into several types. Sorting can also take place in several dimensions. We can talk about regional, cross-border economic relations and cooperation, which the European Union strongly promoted at the same time within the framework of the Euroregions, especially after the enlargement to the East.

Another essential part of border studies is the writings that consider the natural or the political definition of a region's borders as a starting point and social or even mental issues. This view, represented by, for example, Houtum (1999) and Müller (2011), is very close to the concept of our study. As we will see, our results also emphasize the importance of this approach.

We can talk about the study of inequalities. This approach has expanded the economic and geographical perspective with ethnic and cultural dimensions (Szczepański 1998). Still, we can also talk about the importance of border as a factor of conflict, which in many cases have led to armed conflicts in many other parts of the world.

A particular type is the group of border studies, which deals with the most violently “redrawn” border, which tore apart nations, ethnic groups, and the cultures they represent. They mostly tried to force the people living there to assimilate, contrary to political rhetoric, through processes. The ethnic groups in such a situation attempted to respond to the forced assimilation with the motherland's help by building their institutions and

making their relations closer. In this situation, in response to the threat to identity, the role of historical and cultural events and persons became more active in the community, in the public consciousness (Scott, 2012). We can see its representations like symbolic occupations of spaces (Bodó, 2007), expansions and “against occupations, expansions” such as the conflict of setting up of the Štúr statue Párkány (Štúrovo). The torn territories have lost a significant part of their economic and social relations. In several cases, the loss of this economic and cultural background also resulted in drifting to the periphery. This peripheral or semi-peripheral situation had a serious impact on development possibilities even after regime change (Pásztor, 2016; Lelkes, 2019). In this situation, a new element appeared as the European Union regulation, which aimed to eliminate internal borders. Cooperation within the new framework in border areas has not taken place without problems. Most of the highly anticipated Euroregions are now vacant, especially in the countries affected by Eastern enlargement. Jaschitz (2017) considered the role of European Territorial Associations to be promising rather than Euroregions, although he also reported cooperation problems in this area. The same language and culture is an advantage in the field of collaborations, according to Jaschitz, but other research findings (Péti et al., 2015 – cited by Jaschitz) are contradictory. Knotter (2002-2003) called the “border paradox” the totality of factors that hinder cross-border cooperation, such as different legal systems, living standards, price systems, languages and cultures, and differently judged and lived histories. However, he also pointed out that these inequalities also bring certain benefits to those concerned, such as shopping, services, social and cultural relations. Frątczak-Müller and Mielczarek-Żejmo (2016), like Jaschitz, were skeptical about the willingness of different language communities to cooperate in the Euroregion they studied in the German-Polish border region, mainly due to different culture and other “lived history”.

Belonging to the Schengen area, the openness of borders does not eliminate cultural boundaries in people's consciousness and thinking. Matusková et al. (2018) also pointed out this specific context in their analysis on Euroregions, as this change takes a long time in consciousness. As we have seen, cultural differences, prejudices, and the historical roots of aversion to cross-border cooperation are still very deep in people. Can even the cohesive, positive elements of the same culture and identity live and live just as profoundly after a long artificial separation? This question motivated our research as to how in a significant turn of history, from the

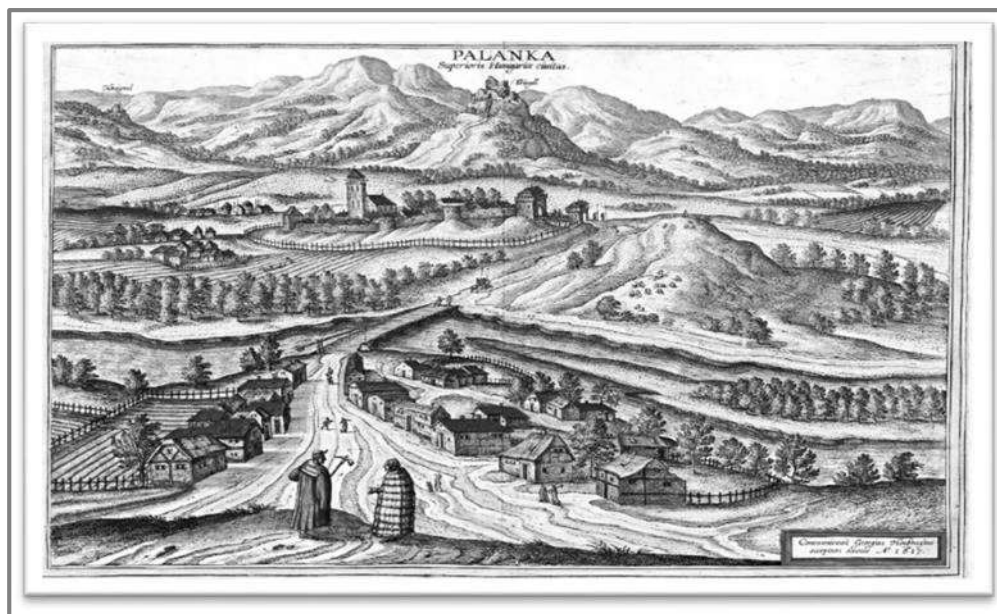
Great War to the new situation created by the EU membership, the series of events affected human, economic, cultural, everyday relations, the survival and revival of relations in settlements separated by an artificially created new border.

The relation of the frontier zones from the visual angle of the cooperations was examined by Martinez (1994). Many authors used his known typology, for example, Ilyés (2003), Wróblewski (2013), Hardi (2017), and more people complimented it in the years. Martinez assigned the frontier areas' relation into four types. The first type (1) is characterized by alienated, fundamentally conflict, secluding relation feature of the frontier areas, partly due to the different language, culture, history, and the two states' hostile relation. The motion between the borders, which can be observed often in this type, is becoming impossible. In the background of political rhetoric supporting the cooperation, serious counter-interests, frustrations last long many times. The second type (2), the kind of frontier zones beside each other, are characterized by emotional, cultural contacts making everyday life easier. The mutual interdependence represents the third type (3). Cultural, economic and social connections have developed, and this is especially important in underprivileged settlements. The fourth type (4) is the integrated frontier zone, where the most important feature is the free flow of people, services, products, and capitals in the interest of mutual insurance. Martinez typology's dynamism in our case is given because the processes of transformation of each type over history can be modeled.

### **The research field and method**

The locations of our research were villages: Ipolyhídvég can be found along the river Ipoly, and Drégelypalánk situated on the opposite side. The population of Ipolyhídvég was 633 people, of which 79% were of Hungarian nationality in 2011. The number of inhabitants of Drégelypalánk was 1459, 91% of Hungarian nationality in 2019. Before 1920, the two villages belonged to the integrated area, according to the Martinez category, although without border character. This situation meant that its family, social, economic, and cultural contacts were intensive with complementary characters from the beginning of the Middle Ages. A bridge connected the two settlements with heavy traffic, and the economic and

military significance of this crossing was already recognized by the Turkish army leadership (*Picture 1*).



*Picture 1: Ipolyhídvég and Drégelypalánk (Palánka) 1617.*

*Source: Ipolyhídvég and Drégelypalánk Houfnagel 1617. Repr. by K. Csáky*

*Picture 1* shows the bridge connecting the two settlements, which functioned in its modern form until the end of World War II, connecting people, cultures, and economies on both sides of the river. *Picture 2* shows the stone bridge from the 1930s, which fell victim to the war's destruction. Sociological-anthropological research was carried out in a village research camp framework in two phases in 2018-2019 in the two villages<sup>3</sup>. Semi-structural in-depth interviews (24) and a personal questionnaire survey (252) was conducted<sup>4</sup>. Older residents, the leaders of local governments and cultural institutions were interviewed, and the survey sample was based on a random selection of households in both villages. In the study, we show the results that support the persistence of relations between the two villages only.

<sup>3</sup> The organization and operation of the research camp was supported by the National Strategy Research Institute, Budapest.

<sup>4</sup> The research camp was attended by university students from Miskolc, Budapest, Sopron and Nitra under the guidance of authors. Special thanks to teacher Éva Sipos.

## Results

### *Time is on their side*

Political processes that grossly interfered in the two settlements' everyday life, including the accession of Ipoly to the border, could even have abolished the organic unity of the two villages. It could have made the revival of relations and cooperation unpromising. Elite groups in the majority nation tend to take such “solutions”, such as resettlement policies that change the population's composition. However, our research results showed that the cooperation and interdependence between the two settlements over the centuries provided a factual basis for the revival of more complex collaboration (*Table 1*).

*Table 1: Relationships between the inhabitants of the two villages (%)*

Existing family relations and friendships	Family relations	Friendships
In the past and at present	48.4	52.2
In the past, only	10.3	10.0
In the present, only	2.4	14.7
Do not exist	38.9	23.1
Total	100.0	100.0

*Source:* own research

Half of the asked people have relational and friendly contacts in the other village, which takes action today. The inhabitants of the two villages form a close attachment to each other. There was not enough time to develop new family contacts yet, but anyway, new friendly contacts already started in a considerable measure. The inhabitants of Ipolyhídvég visit the other side on averagely 2.4 occasions monthly. For people from Palánka (Drégelypalánk) it is an averagely of 2.0 events monthly. These numbers mean frequent contact keeping. The 20.5% of asked people go through Ipoly to the neighboring settlement on three or more occasions monthly. The living family and friend connections created the opportunity to restore the former organic relationship between the two villages.

*Figure 1* shows that according to the inhabitants of Ipolyhídvég, people from the other village come to them primarily due to their relationships, community events, and entertainment. In addition to the above, the inhabitants of Drégelypalánk mentioned the motives of buying and work-



ing. Examining the purposes of the passage from the other side, we obtained the same order. Ipolyhídvég's inhabitants also listed their reasons for visiting an equal extent as they were characterized by the people living in Drégelypalánk. Conversely, the situation was similar, so the other village's characterization was almost the same as they described themselves in terms of the visits' purposes. The corresponding views represent the established and realistically valued system of the relation between the two villages. On the other hand, it is also essential that the representation of the settlement regarding the motives of the relations coincides with the representation of the other village. This coincidence is a necessary condition for organically organized collaborations because it eliminates significant sources of tension.

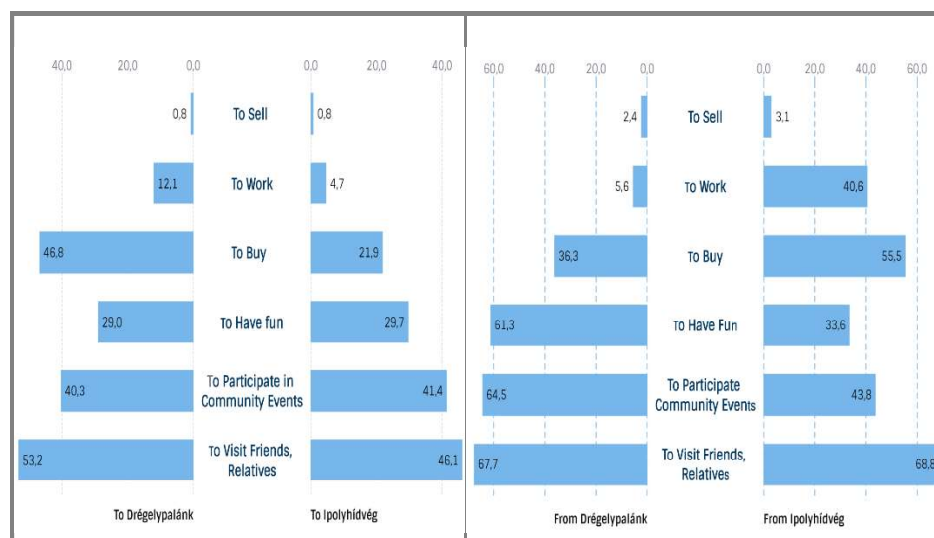


Figure 1. Opinions about the motives of the visit (%)

Source: own research

### *The bridge is no longer 'too far'*

The bridge, which was blown up in World War II and has not been rebuilt since meant a severe problem in the two villages' relationship. As the river became a border, the usual contacts along the whole of Ipoly tore apart the networks of relations that had formed organically over many years and centuries, which adversely affected the economy and in a short time classified the region as a periphery.



*Picture 2: The old bridge that connected the two settlements*<sup>5</sup>

The in-depth interviews revealed that people consider perhaps the most significant problem to be the fragmentation of the Hungarian communities on both sides of the river and the human, family, and community disadvantages that come with it. However, the organic relationship between the two villages' communities has not faded in the last hundred years. For the first time, they tried to take advantage of illegal border crossing opportunities, visiting and trade between them (see Knotter's category of "border paradox"). In the Martinez typology, this condition was closest to the second type. After the Schengen regulations took effect, the communities of the two villages, with the local governments' support, created one of the most critical conditions for the revitalization of relations independently. The inhabitants of the two villages built a bridge (they said "love bridge") without any state administrative or border police permit to freely cross the border without traveling many kilometers. This act was legally dubious, but it had particular sociological and anthropological significance. The bridge became the symbol of cohesion for the two villages. Some holidays (Christmas, New Year's Eve, etc.) are celebrated together on and around the bridge (see *Picture 3*). This period corresponds to the third Martinez type, approaching type 4. It also indicates that this typology

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<sup>5</sup> The pictures were provided by the local government of Ipolyhídvég.



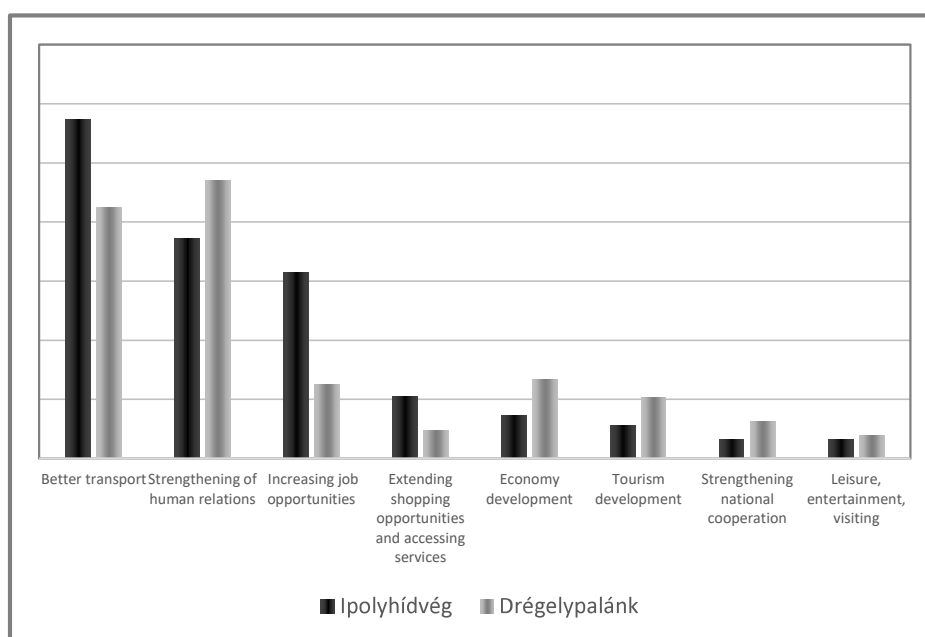
is not without its dynamics. The future will determine how the relationship between the two settlements develops towards the fourth type.



*Picture 3: New Year's Eve festive meeting on the 'love bridge'*

The construction of a new official road across the river will be co-financed over the next 1-2 years by the two countries and supported by the European Union. According to the vast majority of people (Drégelypalánk: 92.8%, Ipolyhídvég: 79%), the construction of the new official road bridge would not have any adverse consequences. Most of those who also indicated disadvantages mentioned the negatives of increased traffic – e.g., noise, congestion, “stink”. Still, many also said that the probable increase in crime and theft was mainly due to the easy passage of Gypsies. However, what would be the benefits of restoring the bridge according to people? The answer to this question is given in the following diagram (*Figure 2*). In both settlements, people highlighted the same two aspects: the change in transport and human relations development. Many of the inhabitants of Ipolyhídvég are even waiting for the expansion of job opportunities. The orientation is still pointing towards Hungary, as it did a hundred years ago.

It can be seen that the population of the two settlements attaches great importance to any change that revives their previous contact system of family and friends, of course regarding changes in society and the economy.



**Figure 2. What are the benefits of restoring the bridge between Ipolyhídvég and Drégelypalánk?**

*Source:* own research

### Summary

Therefore, it is apparent that the inhabitants of the two villages attach great importance to the changes giving rise to the revival of former family and friendship networks while also considering the changes taking place in society and the economy. The study provides an excellent example for the saying “that which belongs together grows together”. The centuries of togetherness implying organic socio-economic and cultural relations cannot be easily destroyed, though it can easily be revived. As has also been asserted by Jeřábek et al. (2018), one of the significant contributions of the accession to the European Union is that relations have become closer and

more intensive, with particular regard to the cases where there is historical and cultural “affinity” present. The studied region is exactly the case here. Human relationships are becoming enriched at a fast rate and, with all probability, this is also followed by the rise of economic and political relations to higher levels.

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