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# The Carpathian Basin as a ‘Hungarian Neighbourhood’: Imaginative Geographies of Regional Cooperation and National Exceptionalism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the geographical idea of the Carpathian Basin has been employed in post-1989 Hungarian conceptualizations of regional development across state borders. This involves understanding the tensions that have emerged between different and partly competing notions of the Carpathian Basin as a cooperation space that reflects “Europeanization” and as a geographical context that is central to Hungary’s sense of place (neighborhood) in Europe. These tensions are reflected in concerns expressed by neighboring states that regional cooperation in fact promotes Hungary’s ethnopolitical agendas. Our approach is based on the assumption that links between geography, geographical imaginaries and questions of national identity remain highly salient. We thus take inspiration from traditions of geographical research that emphasize the subjective nature of space–society relations and their representation in geographical imaginaries. The sources used reflect scholarly and political narratives, primarily geographic and regional research, and politically narrated geographical imaginaries. As part of this undertaking, we will highlight change and continuity in the use of the Carpathian Basin idea from the 1920s to the present. More specifically, we will consider the consequences of Hungary-centric neighborhood imaginaries for territorial cooperation as well as the difficulties involved in the institutionalization of the Carpathian Basin as a project region.

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## Introduction

Processes of European integration have produced a multitude of spatial imaginaries that reflect supranational, cross-border, and transregional visions of cooperation. While European spatial planning has been at the forefront of conceptualizing new regional spaces (Scott 2002; Haughton et al. 2009), territorial cooperation across state borders has received support within the

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framework of numerous initiatives funded, among others, by several different Cohesion Policy instruments (see Bachtler and McMaster 2008; Medeiros 2018). It has been argued that these processes contribute to Europeanization through “re-scaling” governance (Sielker and Stead 2019) and developing common understandings and practices that transcend traditional national orientations (Allmendinger, Chilla, and Sielker 2014; Dühr and Nadin 2007). As Bernard, Price, and Balsiger (2015) document, one source of common ground is that of shared geographies based on natural landscapes such as the Alps and other mountain ranges which, as “project regions,” have been created for the purpose of facilitating cooperation in environmental protection and other areas. Other regional projects cum cooperation spaces include the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Strategy, both of which span the territories of several states within and outside the EU. Nevertheless, few scholars assume that Europeanization is a straightforward process of convergence to a set of shared norms and practices. While project regions potentially facilitate spatial planning based on functional spaces rather than “hard” jurisdictional borders, Faludi (2010) has pointed out that fuzzy boundaries and “soft spaces” only represent a possibility, they are always in tension with national interests and temptations to “re-nationalize” Cohesion Policy. It is furthermore evident that the delineation of border-transcending project regions has not proceeded with equal momentum throughout Europe. For example, in the case of attempts to create Balkan contexts for cooperation in Southeast Europe, domestic political pressures and questions of territorial sovereignty have slowed progress despite prospects of EU accession for most nonmember states in the region (Fall and Egerer 2004).

Regional ideas within the EU context have certainly emerged in the guise of “project regions” in order to target specific cooperation goals, but they also reflect national self-images and narratives of national place and purpose within the context of European integration. They are thus not simply a question of co-existing relational and territorial spaces but also of complex geographical imaginations that relate to both national and European identities (see Kaplan, David, and Guntram 2011). Indeed, an intriguing question that emerges is that of the impacts of European integration on national geographical imaginations, particularly of newer member states. How has the integration process influenced the ways in which Central European states relate, in geographical terms, to the wider European context, including to normative goals of territorial cohesion? In order to address this question, it is necessary to link debate on regional ideas in Europe to long-standing traditions of geographical research that have emphasized the subjective and affective nature of space–society relations and the fact that the generation of geographical knowledge is often closely connected to national historical memories. Gregory (1994), Howie and Lewis (2014), Lowenthal (1961), Prince (1962), Paül and Trillo-Santamaría (2021) and many other scholars have studied geographical imaginations as forms of meaning-making with which individuals, communities and states orient

themselves in space and time and in specific relation to natural landscapes. Moreover, as Diana Mishkova (2019) argues, regional ideas evolve both as national self-representations and as interactions with neighboring and exogenous influences, often in terms of an interplay of scholarship and politics.

One salient case is the region known, depending on the observer's perspective, as the Carpathian, Danubian, or Pannonian Basin; a mesoregional space that encompasses Hungary and Slovakia as well as parts of Croatia, Czechia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine. The term Carpathian Basin (*kárpát medence*) is presently used in Hungary as an all-purpose geographical idea that represents an obvious regional neighborhood if only for the cold facts of location: the country shares borders with seven different countries within this space. However, the Carpathian Basin is also a microcosm of contested regional ideas in Central and Eastern Europe (Hajdú 2018), and its failure to be institutionalized as a European cooperation space reminds us of the limits to flexible territoriality. The central objective of the paper is to demonstrate how Hungarian interpretations reflect both national and European perspectives in terms of "re-integrating" the Carpathian Basin as a regional space. In terms of method, we focus on conceptual change and continuity as expressed in major themes that since the early twentieth century have characterized Hungarian geographical imaginaries of the Carpathian Basin. This involves understanding the tensions that have emerged between different and partly competing notions of the Carpathian Basin as a "Hungarian neighborhood" and European cooperation space. At the same time, contestations of the Carpathian Basin idea as reflected in concerns expressed by Hungary's neighbors will be addressed. The sources used in this study reflect major scholarly and political narratives that emerge from primarily geographic and regional research as well as political discourses that reference the Carpathian Basin. These sources thus reflect the intertwined nature of politics and scholarship in the generation of regional ideas.

While political interpretations of the Carpathian Basin reflect different perspectives on a national "place" in Europe, one common narrative is that of a fragmented but inherent, geographically given, regional unity. As a result, Hungarian understandings of regional neighborhood have partly mirrored shifts toward to a more European perspective in terms of geographically defined (and thus natural) spaces for regional cooperation, "de-bordering" and (re)integration. However, the central problem in this case is the close relationship between the territoriality of the old Hungarian Crown, the status of sizable Hungarian ethnic minority communities and the "objective" geographical (e.g. geomorphological) definition of the Carpathian Basin. Understood geopolitically, this relationship could be understood to downplay the emergence of new states, Slovakia in particular, challenge Romania's post-WW I territorial legitimacy and suggest a natural Hungarian dominance within the Basin. Consequently, regional cooperation agendas co-exist, and partly compete, with ethno-political ambitions related to the status of ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring states.

For example, national conservative appropriations of the Carpathian Basin have involved interventionist agendas that violate diplomatic protocol and suggest a natural Hungarian hegemony in the region, at least in economic terms. Moreover, right-wing groups have appropriated irredentist and revisionist discourses that do little to promote shared notions of region. Ultimately, the deeply self-referential nature of the Carpathian Basin idea has complicated dialogue with Hungary's neighbors who feel either excluded or directly challenged by reference to it.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin with theoretical discussion regarding the salience of geographical imaginations in the analysis of space–society relations and questions related to national identity. We then focus attention on processes of Europeanization as reflected in the production of geographical imaginaries of flexible, border-transcending cooperation spaces based on landscapes and geographical features rather than rigid territorial boundaries. This discussion serves as a context for framing the central research question: that of the impact of European integration on the ways in which individual states situate and integrate themselves within wider spatial contexts, reflecting both nationally oriented concerns and the need to engage in cooperation projects beyond their borders. The empirical analysis that follows reconstructs the conceptual development of the Carpathian Basin from the early twentieth century onwards, indicating how shifting political contexts, paradigm shifts, and European integration have influenced debate. The conclusion section summarizes the major findings of the study then provides a reflection on practical consequences of spatial imaginaries for meaningful border-transcending cooperation.

### **Theorizing the nexus between Europeanization and national geographical imaginations**

Broadly speaking, geographical imaginations involve processes of meaning-making that render legible space–society relations, allowing groups and individuals to locate themselves within the environment and larger social world. By establishing a degree of certainty about the world, geographical imaginations provide a basis for agency and the elaboration of scenarios of possible futures (Daniels 2011; Debarbieux 2019). As we will elaborate in the following, geographical imaginations and the spatial abstractions associated with them (e.g. regions and landscapes) are frequently linked to national identity and sites of historical memory (see Hoelscher and Alderman 2004). For the purposes of this discussion, we will explore the nexus between imaginative regional geographies and national “situatedness” within Europe, and the European Union in particular. At the same time, we also engage with the ambivalent nature of geographical imaginaries, driven as they are by a quest for knowledge about the world that that is at the same time informed by cultural biases and political

interests. While potentially empowering, imaginative geographies have often legitimized geopolitical hegemonies, colonial exploitation, racism, and images of the world that serve the interests of political and economic elites (Gregory 1994; Said 1979). They are, moreover, often informed by stereotypes of national others that collapse social complexity into easily identifiable tropes (Mamadouh 2017). Furthermore, Mishkova's (2019) elaborations on the "scholarly politics of region-making" remind us of the entangled nature of politics and the production of geographical knowledge; regional discourses as articulated by academic researchers and political elites often entail the projection of national identity and purpose onto a wider geographical area. According to Giesecking (2017) a critical approach to understanding the significance of geographical imaginations "(. . .) affords the user ways to pry open the power of assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations associated with space and place, and to delve into how and why they are linked."

One question that emerges is that of the significance of European integration as a context for imaginative geographies that transcend strictly national perspectives. In his seminal paper, Lowenthal (1961) related the role of imagination in geographical thinking to the creation of "world views," whereby he indicated that such world views are not hegemonic, but inherently mutable and subject to differentiated interpretations. This idea is echoed in Rietbergen's 1998/2021, xxxvii) cultural history of Europe: "(. . .) Europe always was and indeed always will be a set of world views, of people's perspectives of their realities, sometimes only dreamt or desired, sometimes experienced and realised." Similarly, the historian Paul Veyne (1971) has argued that regions understood in geographical, historical, and cultural terms are concepts representing "points of view" and are thus spaces for the elaboration of geographical perspectives that serve a variety of purposes. Europeanization implies the transformation of national societies and the emergence of a supranational political community as a result of interstate integration processes (Deltail and Kirov 2016). This is evident in conceptualizations of the European Union as a networked space that reflect the border-transcending nature of economic and social interdependencies within Europe and a search for new and territorially flexible perspectives on cooperation (Allmendinger, Chilla, and Sielker 2014). Moreover, EU-European geographies of cooperation as evidenced by the post-1989 burst of project-region-making are inseparable from agendas geared at enhancing the EU's political identity and coherence as a networked polity (Scott 2002). Within this context, it has been suggested that European planning cooperation practices are generating "soft," flexible, and non-state-centric spaces characterized by fuzzy boundaries (Faludi 2014; Haughton et al. 2009). Nevertheless, while regional soft spaces offer potential opportunities for those involved, they can also be notoriously hard as is evidenced by the lasting effects of national interests and borders (Svensson and Balogh 2018; Scott 2018).

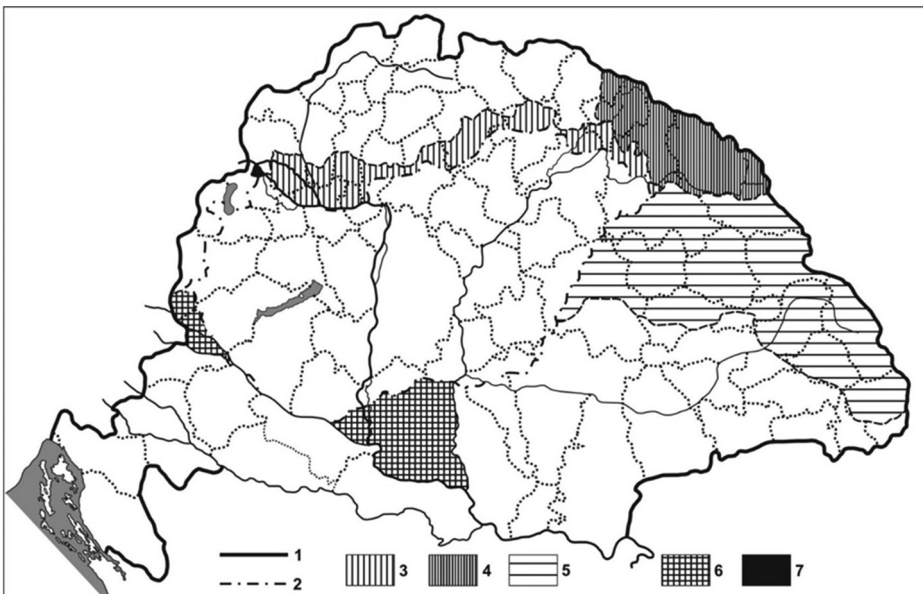
One means of understanding the relationship between Europeanization and national geographical imaginations is through narratives of national integration, or as the case might be, re-integration within a broader European context. Arguably, the idea of re-integration is particularly salient in the Central and Eastern European context. This is obviously an issue related to the post-Cold War reorganization of political relations within Europe, but it also has deep historical roots. Mishkova (2019, 66) reminds us that the long-standing idea of East-West “in-betweenness” is both a story of external perceptions of peripherality as well as “inside-out” narrations of integrative spaces and thus of European centrality. In a similar vein, Delanty (2012) has argued that regional ideas of Europe, including Central Europe, maintain considerable influence as interpretations of European and national identity and in fact represent specific paths to modernity. These ideas also suggest that, over time, (re)integration has been argued according, among others, to ethnic, geographical, cultural, economic, and environmental categories.

Landscapes such as mountains and mountain ranges have played a major role in this regard. On the one hand, as idealized spaces, mountain landscapes are integral elements of national spatial imaginaries (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Paül and Trillo-Santamaría 2021). On the other hand, “national” mountain landscapes are often border-transcending and in overcoming past European divisions and national egoisms, the Pyrenees, Alps, and other mountain areas have served to construct narratives of European integration and cooperation. As part of imaginative geographies of European spatial planning and territorial cooperation, for example, mountain landscapes have been identified as sites of “scalar innovation” linking communities, regions, and states in common projects of environmental governance (Bernard, Price, and Balsiger 2015). Central European member states have been active participants in the EU’s project of creating “spaces of meaning” in order to have a voice in the construction of interstate relations and contribute national perspectives to European spatial development (Scott 2002). Their involvement in fact predates EU territorial cooperation: the Alps-Adriatic community has existed since 1978 as a forum for cross-border interaction and in 1993 an ambitious Carpathian Euroregion was created with Hungarian, Polish, Slovakian, and Ukrainian participation. Presently, the Danube Region, and within it the Carpathian Region, serve as principle overarching frameworks for cooperation strategies (Jourde and van Lieroop 2019).

In the following, we will analyze the Carpathian Basin as a regional idea that simultaneously reflects national (Hungarian) and European perspectives on neighborhood, cooperation, and (re)integration. In its more than 100-year career as a politically salient geographical idea of Hungarian national embeddedness in Europe, the Carpathian Basin has undergone numerous



re-interpretations but it continues to convey a message of Hungarian exceptionalism that remains highly controversial. One key to understanding Hungarian elaborations of the Carpathian Basin as a geographical idea – and as a geographical imaginary of Hungary in Europe – lies in the ambition to reestablish a sense of social, cultural, and spatial continuity between Hungary and its neighbors. As will be discussed below, Hungary’s own project of defining national purpose in Europe is specific in the sense that it has been inseparable from the complex resolution of past “border traumas” (Teleki 1923). In this sense, geography is understood as national destiny and tragedy (see Für 2012; Vardy 1983), typified by the loss of territory and population resulting from the 1920 Paris Peace Treaty, known in Hungary simply as “Trianon,” and the confirmation of the 1920 borders in 1947 (see Figure 1). Indeed, the existence of sizable ethnic Hungarian communities in the surrounding countries and concern for the development, welfare, linguistic, and political rights of these communities have privileged the Carpathian Basin as a geographical reference in the reassessment of Hungary’s place in Europe. As a result, ethno-political imperatives and the question of reintegrating the regional neighborhood known as the Carpathian Basin has been a major policy issue for all Hungarian governments and particularly since the advent of national conservative government in 2010.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Hungarian crown’s shifting borders (1918–1947) legend: 1. State borders of 1918, 2. state borders of 1920, 3. territorial enlargement of 1938, 4. of 1939, 5. of 1940, 6. of 1941, 7. loss of territory of 1947.

Source: Hajdú (2001).



## **Carpathian Basin – Hungarian narratives of re-integration and neighborhood**

Locating the nation within a changing Europe has been a longstanding debate in Hungary and a source of tension between two major interrelated but conflicting interpretations (Gyurgyák 2007): a “back to our roots” alignment with often foundationalist notions of nation based on historical experience (traditionalism) and an alignment with notions of modernization and “progressive” ideas of material and social progress (modernism). The poet Endre Ady (1905) famously characterized Hungary as a “ferryboat country,” shifting back and forth from East to West, and thus embodying an “in-betweenness” that for Ady opened the question whether Hungary might succeed in defining itself as a modern European country (Kovács, Horváth, and Zsuzsanna Vidra 2011). For these and other reasons, the Carpathian Basin is highly significant to Hungarian understandings of national orientation within Europe and is expressed in different, often contested, geographical imaginations that have emerged at the interface of scholarship and politics. Consequently, literature on the Carpathian Basin, which is largely but not exclusively of Hungarian origin, represents a vast collection of monographs, maps, articles, treatises, educational literature, and political commentary that cannot be duly summarized here. What follows is a rather selective focus on geographical and historical perspectives on the Carpathian Basin as a Hungarian neighborhood and that reflect ideas such as unity, integration, and cooperation.

The significance of the Carpathian Basin as a geographical concept reflects a long evolutionary process influenced by scientific research, geopolitical framings of nation-state interests, and the production of geographic knowledge through education and cartography. During the nineteenth century, Central European science contributed to popularizations of morphological notions such as basin and peninsula based on geology, natural geography, phytogeography, archeology, and other disciplines. These studies gave rise to partly overlapping regional ideas such as the Pannonian, Hungarian, and Central Danube Basins as well as the subject at hand, the Carpathian Basin, that were politicized as nation-building proceeded. It was not until the Interwar Period (1920–1944) that the Carpathian Basin emerged as a clear-cut and widely used spatial category (Hajdú 2004). However, it has since remained a fundamental spatial concept in Hungarian understandings, suggesting a geographical unity coterminous with, cultural, linguistic, civilizational, and other expressions of historical continuity. Moreover, both implicitly and explicitly, the concept of Carpathian Basin is closely aligned to that of neighborhood (*szomszédság*) which has been a recurring element of Hungarian scientific and political thinking since the nineteenth century (Berend and Ring 1986). Specifically for this discussion, the Carpathian Basin has emerged as a neighborhood concept due to tumultuous geopolitical shifts. Under the terms of the 1920 Peace Treaty, the Kingdom of

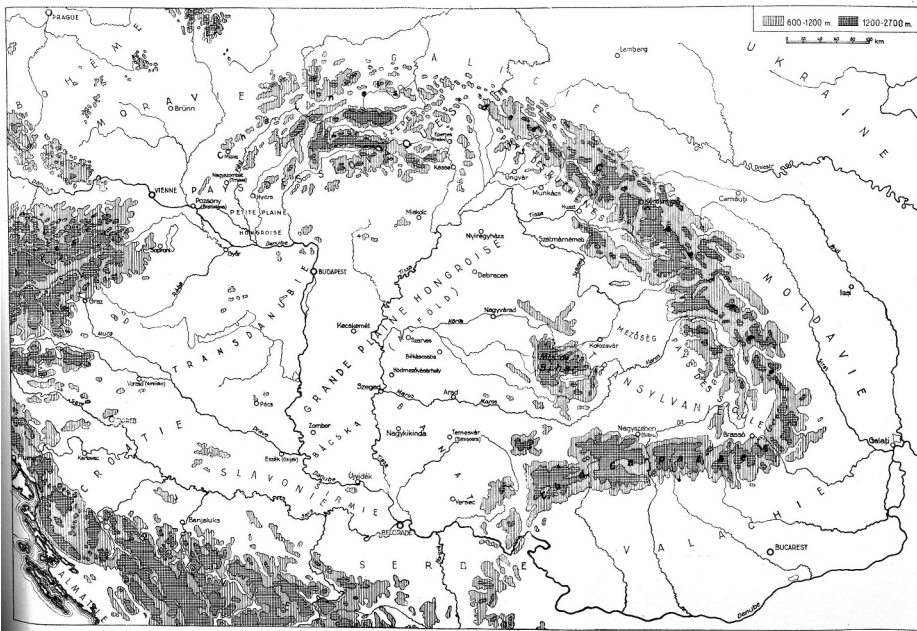
Hungary lost more than 70% of its territory and more than 60% of an original population of 20.8 million. This marked a fundamental structural break in the development of the country and decisively influenced post-1920 neighborhood relations. Within this context, the salience of the Carpathian Basin was, and continues to be, supported by an imperative of reintegrating a fragmented nation and natural space, although this imperative has been interpreted in quite different ways. During the interwar period, a notion of working neighborhood did not readily emerge after the redrawing of state borders, nor could it, given the political ambitions of Hungarian governments to reincorporate lost territories. It was only within the context of post-socialist transformation and European integration that the Carpathian Basin was reestablished as a widely referenced regional idea in Hungary and geographical reference for neighborhood relations.

### ***Arguing the Carpathian Basin's organic unity – interwar debates and political agendas***

Hungarian geographic research provided much of the scientific groundwork for arguing the historical and natural geographic unity of the territories of the Hungarian Crown and this has been reflected in school textbooks, scientific documents, public discourse, etc. (Hajdú 2018). Much of this work was informed by a notion of geography as national destiny and hence of geography as mandating Hungarian stewardship of the Basin. Inevitably, however, notions of Carpathian Basin landscape unity as suggested by Hungarian academics were called into question by others. This was already the case with Jovan Cvijić's 1918 delimitation of the Balkan Peninsula. Cvijić, a Serbian geographer, insisted that the peninsula in fact stretched deep into the southern reaches of the space referred to as the Carpathian Basin by Hungarian geographers. It bears mentioning that Hungary's neighbors, the newly created states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as well as the enlarged Romania, focused regional research in entirely different ways, necessarily shifting focus to the geo-historical contingency of their own national emergence.

Significantly, the redoubled focus of interwar Hungarian geographic research on the Carpathian Basin and its inherent organic unity was underlined by a (geo) deterministic and basically Ratzellian approach that was believed to provide an objective and scientific basis for the restoration of Hungary's original borders (Balogh 2021; Keményfi 2006, 2016; Krasznai 2012). Writing in 1940, for example, Hungarian geographer Bulla (1940, 3) complained that "... foreign literature tends to hide the original right of Magyars for this area by naming it the Danube Basin (...) though its geographic unity should be regarded as evidence." Arguments of geographic unity were exemplified by geomorphology, such as Gyula Prinz's (1936) suggestion that the Carpathian Basin was indeed a microcontinent or "Tisia Massif" that clearly distinguished itself from surrounding areas. Prinz (1938) also suggested

that the Basin's orography was the basis of a "Hungarian Mesopotamia," a civilizational cradle defined by the confluence of the Danube and Tisza rivers. Róbert Keményfi (2006) has documented Prinz's mesopotamic thesis in terms of a mythical core area concept, reminiscent of Pounds' and Ball's 1964 thesis, in which Hungarian culture and a Hungarian national idea were able to radiate outwards and consolidate themselves territorially. Natural Hungarian stewardship of the Basin was also argued by referencing the historical longevity of the Hungarian Kingdom's 1000-year borders as well as their coterminous nature with the Carpathian mountain range (Rónai 1943), see Figure 2. As a result, Hungarian interwar geography contributed to a widely shared view, reflected, among others, in public school curricula, that the Carpathian Basin's organic unity and the "natural laws" that derive from it, had been violated by arbitrary political decisions (Krasznai 2012). During the interwar era, Hungary temporarily regained some of its lost territories within the Basin; the Vienna Decisions of 1938 and 1941 resulting from Nazi Germany's occupation of dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, respectively, indicated a partial, if pyrrhic, success of Hungary's revisionist focus on the Carpathian Basin. In sum, during the interwar period we thus find highly diverging Central European perspectives with Hungary looking backwards toward the historical Kingdom, newly created states looking to the future and nation-building and Romania to the consolidation of its newly enlarged state territory.



**Figure 2.** A topographic map of the Carpathian Basin produced by geographer András Rónai for a French language publication. The map does not indicate actual state borders within the confines of the basin suggesting a unified and organic geographical space for Hungarian settlement and statehood.

Source: Rónai (1943).

The devastation that World War II brought to Central Europe had lasting effects in terms of neighborhood relations in Central Europe. The scholarly and political tenor changed abruptly with defeat and the definitive end to Hungary's border-revising ambitions. As a result, we find more "conciliatory" regional geographies, such as Bulla and Mendöl's major study published in 1947. These authors argued that the Basin's geographical character is given not only by topography but also by the Hungarian people's labors in transforming and shaping regional landscapes that coincided with the territory of historical Hungary, thus creating an almost all-encompassing unity. On the one hand, Bulla and Mendöl were unequivocal about the Hungarian nature of the man-made landscape and yet they realized, on the other hand, the need for cooperation and mutual understanding with neighboring peoples in order to effectively manage this politically fragmented regional space. In their conclusion, they state

A better exploitation of the potential opportunities is guaranteed by the peaceful labour of the peoples populating this area. The discernment of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin will decide if a durable period of peaceful creative labour is on the horizon. We must hope that the future will pave the way of mutual understanding. (Ibid, 588)

After 1948, the political realities of state socialism and Soviet bloc affiliation preempted the development of a regionally holistic view as most of the states within the region were forced to re-orient themselves toward the Soviet sphere of influence and national autarchy. As a result, the notion of Carpathian Basin as a political category or co-operation space rapidly lost favor. While the concept continued to be used in the area of geology, hydrology, phytogeography and physical geography, it was no longer the subject of comprehensive analyses or monographs.

### ***Post-1989: a regional idea within a new European context***

The transformations unleashed by the collapse of the Cold War order not only necessitated a re-thinking of national positionality within Europe but re-opened debates regarding historical experience and memory as well as national identity that had been largely silenced for almost four decades. Consequently, the production of geographical, historical, ethnographic, environmental, and other analyses of the Carpathian Basin, already underway in the latter part of the 1980s, experienced a significant boom after the end of state socialism. This scholarly work reflected a "pent-up" demand for literature that normalized a sense of Hungarian nation and place in Europe; it also reflected the reemergence of open ideological debate regarding Hungary's past and future role as a European state. In the politically and socially charged contexts of post-socialism this body of work contributed to the use of the Carpathian Basin as

an everyday concept, but it also reflected simultaneous framings of the Carpathian Basin both as a Hungarian social and cultural space and as a neighborhood for interstate cooperation. Except for the radical right-wing, the overall tenor of the post-1989 revival of the Carpathian Basin as a regional idea has been, circumspect and in many ways supportive of a transnational concept of the Basin as a cooperative and shared space. With the advent of a new European context of integration, hopes for a harmonious co-existence, economic development as well as a regional renaissance for ethnic Hungarian communities were voiced (Nahimi 1992).

As Jeszenszky (2019) states, following the end of the state-socialist order one of Hungary's greatest challenges was to conceive of its immediate neighborhood in terms of a new and more productive regional neighborliness while at the same time recognizing the expectations of 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine, and other adjacent countries. Indeed, the then ruling social-liberal coalition government, pursuant to the 1995 Act on Environmental Protection and the ensuing 1996 Act on Natural Protection, "reintegrated" the term Carpathian Basin into Hungarian legislation. This was confirmed later by Viktor Orbán's conservative coalition via Act I of 2000 on the "Commemoration of Saint Stephen's State Foundation and the Holy Crown." This indicates a shared interest of both left- and right-wing governments in the adoption and legal codification of the term Carpathian Basin.

At one level, Carpathian Basin history has been revisited as a means to understand Hungary as a process of settlement and subsequent nation and state-building and in order to preserve historical memories of Hungary, both as it once was before the Treaty of Trianon and as a space that continues to be defined by a Hungarian presence. A reassessment of historical experience and a coming to terms with the reasons for the loss of territory as well as the consequences of Trianon have thus been unavoidable. While comparisons with interwar literature are justified only to a limited extent, the narrative of "unity" nevertheless provides a degree of continuity. The geographic imaginary of the "1000-year borders," for example, continues to derive discursive and symbolic power from the stability and territorial integrity associated with it and the conterminous nature of the borders of the Hungarian Crown with the geographic limits of the Carpathian Basin (see Balogh 2021; Keményfi 2006). Moreover, the 1000-year borders idea resonates at an everyday level through the evocation of historical memories and images of past greatness and longevity (Antonsich and Szalkai 2014).

In some interpretations, Hungary's historical role as integrator and structuring force is the central issue, as in Lajos Für's (2012) and framing of the Carpathian Basin as a space of national destiny, a clearly definable geographical area where Hungarian settlement, culture, and civilization were able to emerge and thrive. Other scholars, such as László Gulyas (2012) have attempted to demonstrate that the fragmentation of Carpathian Basin unity was driven by

geopolitical interests bent on creating homogeneous nation-states out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Moreover, the work of Ignác Romsics (2005, 2013) has elaborated on the Carpathian Basin as an element of a broader European regional history, analyzing great power influence, particularly that of Germany, France, and Britain, on Hungarian historical development and interethnic relations within the Basin. A good deal of scholarly work has also sought to reconcile ambitions of European integration with those of post-Cold War national consolidation. Banai and Lukács (2010) address the restoration of the unity of the Carpathian Basin in terms of cooperation. These as well as other authors reflect in their work commonly voiced hopes for new dialogue, “spiritual borderlessness” between Hungarians, economic opportunities but also a new framework for intercultural cooperation and overcoming the legacies of the past, including marginalization and economic peripherality.

### **The Carpathian Basin as a context for regional co-operation and development**

Our attention now focuses on appropriations of the Carpathian Basin as a project of regional integration and in particular one of structural, social, and cultural development. Re-integration is understood here in two specific ways: as a means to reestablish links between Hungary as a state and ethnic Hungarian communities living beyond its borders and as a more inclusive cooperation effort to link the region to wider European development processes and thus address grave center-periphery imbalances. As part of these efforts, a wealth of regional knowledge has been produced in order to provide foundations for different cooperation and development agendas. In terms of academic scholarship, a number of ambitious regional, historical, and physical geographical studies of the Carpathian Basin have been elaborated, such as those either authored or edited by Sándor Frisnyák (1996), Zoltán Dövényi (2012), 1990 Gyula Horváth (see below) and others. Moreover, numerous empirical studies of population dynamics and ethnic-demographic change and, more specifically, mappings of Hungarian and other minority communities within the Basin have been produced. Indeed, Kocsis (1988, 1990) geographical studies of Hungarian minorities played a significant role in reviving the geographical idea of the Carpathian Basin as well as framing it in terms of a reintegration project through greater cultural and linguistic autonomies.

In terms of comprehensive regional analysis, the *Regions of the Carpathian Basin Series (A kárpát medence régiói)*, edited by Gyula Horváth (2003-2015) until his death in 2015, deserves specific mention. The series has been published since 2004 and is devoted to understanding socio-spatial, economic, and environmental processes and outlining potential for future development of the Basin. Planned as a 16-volume collection, the series is informed by European regional development doctrine based on processes of economic and political



decentralization and endogenous development. It thus represents an unequivocal rejection of hierarchical and nationally focused regional development traditions, such as those characterized by state socialism, which in the past had exacerbated the economic fragmentation within the Carpathian Basin and the economic marginalization of many regional centers. Instead, Horváth and his many collaborators sought to provide empirical foundations for a more collaborative, holistic, and growth-oriented vision of a networked macroregion. Along these lines, numerous analyses of regional disparities and other spatial development problems have been elaborated for the Carpathian Basin macroregion (see Benedek and György et al. 2016; Demeter 2020; Nagy 2016; Pomázi and Szabó 2010).

Consequently, a major concept within this context is that of re-integrating a fragmented Carpathian Basin as part of wider European-level projects of regional development and economic revitalization as well as better neighborhood relations in Central Europe. This project, supported by scholarly efforts of Hungarian regional studies, has also very much involved the issue of environmental vulnerabilities and sustainability and the role of cross-border cooperation in developing appropriate strategies (Duray et al. 2010). In this reading, Hungary's role as putative integrator of a fragmented space is legitimized by concern for environmental, economic, infrastructural, and administrative issues; such reintegrating might be realized through reestablishing and strengthening functional urban networks that existed before the two world wars. Within this context, urban networks which were truncated by the border changes and nationalism after 1920 are understood as a foundation for integration and cohesion. In particular, Hungarian settlement networks could be major positive factor in the reconstitution of the Carpathian Basin as an integrated economic, cultural, and social space under the condition of a greater degree of interstate cooperation (Hardi, Hajdú, and Mezei 2009). Characteristic of this perspective as well is the work of Hungarian geographer Béla Baranyi (2006) who has considered the Carpathian Basin "a region greatly burdened by historical, political, socio-economic and ethnic tensions" as well as an extremely fragmented space that requires re-integration.

Both for geographical and historical reasons, the Carpathian Basin has been understood within the Hungarian context as a logical and predestined space for reintegration and hence, broader cross-border cooperation. In general terms, the Carpathian Basin has been advanced within Hungarian regional studies as a neighborhood context for realizing potentials of European integration and the exploitation of endogenous potential in order to promote sustainable development and thus overcome peripherality as a common regional problem. Closely linked to this holistic regional development perspective is the issue of what might be termed "Hungarian-Hungarian" cross-border interaction and cooperation which has more specific ethnopolitical ramifications. The concept of cross-border Hungarians was institutionalized during József Antall's government



which entered power in 1990 as the first democratically elected in Hungary. By 1992, a Government Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad was established, the primary objective of which was to improve the situation of Hungarian minorities in the neighboring states.

The latter has logically followed from the possibility to engage in active exchange between different Hungarian-speaking communities and consequently since the 1990s predominantly Hungarian civil society organizations involved in social, economic, cultural, and educational cooperation have proliferated. This has also involved the foundation in 2019 of a “Carpathian Basin Business Promotion Chamber” by the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce. At the more political level, following Hungary’s accession to EU membership, a Forum of Hungarian Representatives in the Carpathian Basin (KMFK in Hungarian) was established in order to promote Hungarian interests and exploit development opportunities arising from European integration. Regional ethnopolitical cooperation is currently a framework for macroregional approaches to development and are embedded in Hungary’s National Development Strategy which targets the promotion of education and scientific cooperation within the Carpathian neighborhood. One example of this is the National Strategy Research Institute’s call for proposals for the topic regarding a macroregional approach to “community development and strengthening social responsibility”<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned above, the elaboration of ethno-linguistic maps and demographic databases provided a clearer idea of the post-1989 extent of Hungarian settlement within the Basin outside of Hungary proper. Kocsis (1990) and Kocsis and Kocsisné Hódosi (1991, 1998) subsequently wrote several essays that documented the situation of ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring countries and in doing so emphasized the significance of kin-state relations as well as the basis for regional autonomies. This was also reflected in Kocsis and Kocsisné Hódosi (1991) ethnic-religious regionalization of the “Carpatho-Balkan” space which serves as an example of imagining a future European space based on socio-cultural divisions and a means to deal with latent ethnic conflict through regional autonomies for minority groups. Along similar lines, the possibility of a “trans-sovereign” nation-building project has been argued (Bakk and Öllös 2010) based on a sense of nation beyond territorial sovereignty, but at the same time based on local autonomies and dialogue with neighboring states.

### ***Politicization, self-referentiality, and the ambivalent nature of the Carpathian Basin as a regional idea***

Between 2000 and 2006 (and especially after 2004), Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia received significant amounts of financial aid the EU’s Structural Funds. During this period, the INTERREG III B CADSES programme was the most significant spatial policy initiative for the Carpathian Basin and new member states. CADSES was a transnational co-operation area comprising

regions belonging to 18 countries and one of its main impacts was to incentivize cross-border environmental governance and coordinated flood prevention practices. Those areas of the Carpathian Basin which joined this co-operative project became part of a vast programme area territory lacking functional sub-units. After 2007, transnational programmes divided the vast CADSES area into two parts, making Hungary simultaneously a part of the Central Europe and South-Eastern Europe regions. Furthermore, Hungarian border areas became eligible to participate in calls for proposals and development projects. In addition to regional development programmes, more specific EU-driven instruments have emerged that represented opportunities for an integrated development approach for the Carpathian Basin. The EU Water Framework Directive (WD) which entered into force in December 2000 represents another platform for regional co-operation focused on improving the quality of surface and underground waters. This was followed by the adoption in 2010 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) within which Hungary played a significant its six months of EU Presidency. The Danube area could constitute a key element of the integration of the Carpathian Basin (Central Danube Basin) into Europe, particularly if its special status is preserved in the long run. The priorities of EUDRS are in total accordance with Hungarian interests and involve almost every element of the macro-regional integration of the country (Billo 2011; Borsa et al. 2009).

The Carpathian Basin has a rather ambiguous position in terms of territorial cooperation and governance. Following the European Union's regionalization logics, the Carpathian Basin potentially forms a coherent spatial entity within the South-European macro-region – and it was hoped that as a result of European integration and Croatia's EU membership in 2013 more comprehensive cooperation focused on the Carpathian Basin as a unit would be possible. Theoretically, the links between INTERREG, EUDRS and WD offer a basis for strong environmentally oriented cooperation. However, there exist to date no Carpathian Basin-wide organizations as such and, curiously, the map accompanying the Water Directive does not represent the Carpathian Basin as a single catchment area. What we do find is a Carpathian Convention largely based on the example of the Alpine Convention (Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians) that was established in May 2003 with the participation of the seven countries. The convention, which only affects mountainous areas, does not extend to the Carpathian Basin, nor does it contain any reference to it.

Despite the need to address grave spatial inequalities, Hungarian visions of the Carpathian Basin as a cohesive economic space do not resonate well with non-Hungarian speaking Romanian and Slovak political elites and academics. Fall and Egerer (2004) have pointed to the vicissitudes of delimiting certain INTERREG regions, including the Carpathian space, because of differing national perspectives. Hungary's "borderless" idea of a Carpathian region did not and

does not resonate, for example, with Slovakia's insistence in strictly adhering to national borders in the definition of cooperation areas. In terms of local autonomy for ethnic Hungarian communities, Hungary suggested that linguistic and other political rights could be based on the Swiss federal model of autonomous linguistic Cantons. However, autonomy along such lines was rejected outright by Romania and Slovakia. Furthermore, Hungarian–Hungarian cross-border organizations, have been greeted with skepticism. Slovakia and Romania, in particular, appear highly suspicious of any form of legal representation, the KMFK in particular, that might effectively sidestep the sovereignty of their state institutions.

Perhaps inevitably, the emphasis of ethnopolitical (i.e. Hungarian–Hungarian) cooperation has politicized the Carpathian Basin context and caused concern among Hungary's neighbors. This has not been helped by the irredentist and revisionist discourses of right-wing groups in Hungary; despite their marginality in terms of formal politics, popular geopolitical tropes such as the 1000-year borders and evocations of Hungarian cultural superiority only increase suspicion of Hungary's intentions. While distancing himself from the most radical expressions of revisionism, Victor Orbán has certainly profited from the culture wars related to national identity and one of the central objectives of his first government coalition (1998–2002) was to reconceptualize and reshape policies targeting Hungarian communities abroad (Pogonyi 2017). This included the 2001 ratification of the "Status Law" which gave special privileges to ethnic Hungarians regardless of nationality and 2010 legal amendments which facilitated dual citizenship. Moreover, the Hungarian Constitution of April 2011 includes a specific commitment to "... cherishing and preserving ... the natural and man-made riches of the Carpathian Basin." Furthermore, the continuity of the Carpathian Basin regional idea as a space of Hungarian cultural, linguistic, and ethnonational unity is reflected, for example, in pointed statements issued by the national-conservative political elite. The then head of the Prime Minister's Office, János Lázár, known for his xenophobic outbursts, argued during a February 2016 parliamentary debate for the "preservation of Hungarian hegemony in the Carpathian Basin" – a statement that received extensive press coverage in Hungary and abroad (Marosán 2016). Other officials, such as Minister of Human Resources Zoltán Balog, have insisted that the Carpathian Basin constitutes a unified Hungarian national space and that the Hungarian government regards the Carpathian Basin as a single national territory in terms of education, economy, health care, and culture.<sup>2</sup> At the inauguration of the "Memorial for National Unity" in October 2020, Prime Minister Orbán openly stated that Hungary, as the most populous and economically significant nation in the Carpathian Basin, was facing ineluctable responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> More controversial than such statements are the provocative extraterritorial practices of Hungarian political elites, suggesting a natural right to represent "all Hungarians" within the Carpathian Basin without need for diplomatic protocol,

such as the visit in August 2021 of László Kővér, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, to Somorja (in Slovakia). Ivan Korčok, Slovak Foreign Affairs Minister, has complained of continued breaches of diplomatic rules at the same time that the Hungarian government insists it is committed to good bilateral relations (Gál 2021).

If we turn to the question of Hungarian–Ukrainian relations, the politicization of Carpathian Basin cooperation becomes even more problematic, with serious regional repercussions and wider geopolitical consequences. In this case as well, dual citizenship for ethnic Hungarians has been a source of conflict between both countries, and Ukraine’s 2017 legislation banning minority languages from secondary school curricula severely heightened tensions. Relations took a turn for the worse with the expulsion in October 2018 of the Hungarian consul in the Transcarpathian city of Beherove (Beregszász) for allegedly providing Hungarian-speaking Ukrainians with Hungarian passports. As a result of these tensions, the Hungarian has demonized the Ukrainian leadership, criticized European Neighborhood and cross-border cooperation policies with Ukraine and blocked that country’s attempts to join the EU and NATO.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, Orbán’s pro-Russian stance has created major political fissures within Central Europe and the Visegrád Four (V4) cooperation. With Russia’s February 2022 invasion, the Hungarian government’s animosity toward Ukraine’s leadership and refusal to block Russian energy imports have only complicated interstate relations within the Carpathian Basin. To exacerbate things, Hungary’s April 2022 elections brought to parliament a far-right revanchist group in the guise of the “Mi Házánk” (Our Country) party which has suggested re-incorporating the region of Transcarpathia in the event of a Ukrainian defeat (Kalan 2022).

Above and beyond these complex ethnopolitical and geopolitical considerations, attempts at academic cooperation have revealed the basic difficulties that elaborating common regional geographies of the Carpathian Basin entail. Gyula Horváth’s above-mentioned regional monograph series is a case in point. The series succeeded in integrating a large team of Hungarian-speaking researchers within the Carpathian Basin who share common geographical and conceptual understandings. The series nevertheless reflects the ambivalence of regional research on the Carpathian Basin; it has not been translated and does not appear to have contributed to a more general dialogue, for example, with Slovakian geographers, regarding regional development in the Basin. Large regions (according to the EU-defined NUTS-2 level) were meant to serve as the basic analytical framework, an approach that was, however, already abandoned in the first volume on Székely Land (in Romania). In the case of the second volume, only South Slovakia was covered, and “region” referred to the southern part of the country populated by ethnic Hungarians. Hungarian geographers are certainly aware of this dilemma; in order to facilitate a dialogue with neighboring countries, Kocsis and

Tátrai (2013) have in fact suggested the use of more “neutral” spatial categories, such as the Carpathian-Pannon Region. With reference to this geographical term, Kocsis and Tátrai produced a series of detailed maps of changing ethnic patterns.

Despite the fact that Slovakia is situated geographically in the Carpathian Basin, and is in fact the land of the Carpathians according to school textbooks and public opinion, Slovakia’s political elites and media flatly reject this regional concept. Prime Minister Robert Fico and party leader Jan Slota have declared that Slovakia does not form part of the Carpathian Basin and that this spatial idea only promotes Hungarian revisionism. Secondary school history and geography textbooks published in Slovakia (as well as their Hungarian translations) naturally reproduce the dominant views held by the Slovak majority. Meanwhile, Hungarian-speaking members of the Slovak political elite are still inclined to appropriate a Budapest-centric view in the use of “obsolete” geographical terms such as “Upper Hungary” (*Felvidék*) when referring to Slovakia, implying a lack of consideration for Slovakian self-awareness as a sovereign nation. This also applies to the Hungarian category of the “South” (*Délvidék*) which, from a Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian perspective, makes little geographical sense.

It is therefore evident that the self-referentiality of the concept of Carpathian Basin – even without politicization – limits its direct applicability as a cooperation space. László Tőkés, an ethnic Hungarian pastor and politician from Romania (Transylvania), has stated (in Banai and Lukács 2010, 6): “It is tragicomical that today we are having to argue for the Slovak Academy of Sciences to graciously permit the use of the term Carpathian Basin.” On the other hand, it would be very difficult politically for Slovakia to accept a regional idea centered on Hungary. In trying to counter such aversions Prime Minister Orbán has signaled that “Hungary’s national and economic strengthening . . . (would) not threaten our neighbours but rather presents them an opportunity, signifying as well an enhancement of Central Europe’s importance within the EU.”<sup>5</sup> László Fejes (2011) has posed the provocative question whether Hungary is alone in the Carpathian Basin, suggesting that this regional idea is indeed a self-referential “Hungaricum.” He writes: “We take for granted that the geographical unit within which we live is called the Carpathian Basin. More precisely we call it so. Because we are alone in this. Others call it something else, if they call it anything at all.” This self-referentiality is due to the significance of the Carpathian Basin as an imaginary that has framed Hungary’s place in Europe, particularly after 1920, and that is reflected in narrations of the Basin as a space of national destiny.

## Conclusion

This research paper has sought to demonstrate how national geographical imaginations continue to have an impact on cross-border cooperation and interstate relations within the European Union. Three points are worth emphasizing. The first is that the co-existence of functional, ethno-political and geopolitically

oriented integration agendas indicates that there is no single Hungarian vision of regional neighborhood that might serve as the basis for cross-border cooperation. Moreover, in the case of the Carpathian Basin geographical imaginaries are closely linked to questions of national identity and historical memory and thus politically and geopolitically contentious. The second point concerns the process of Europeanization and the fact that geographical imaginations reflect multiplicity and regional context rather than convergence to singular ideals of territorial cooperation (Kaunert, Pereira, and Edwards 2022). Related to this, we also see in the case of the Carpathian Basin that Europeanization involves a simultaneous process of affirmation and contestation of EU norms (see Bürkner 2020).

The third point is related to the practical salience of geographical imaginations and spatial imaginaries and their political impacts in terms of cooperation. Certainly, Hungary has a vested interest in conceptualizing and implementing a politics of regional cooperation that references the Carpathian Basin as a neighborhood. The geographical position of Hungary at the lowest point of the basin and sharing common borders with each Basin country makes it an ideal promoter of basin-wide cooperation. Despite the fact that Hungarians constitute a minority in terms of population size, the central position of Hungary's settlement area and the large presence of ethnic Hungarian groups in each national community of the basin could provide a number of unexploited opportunities and responsibilities for Hungary. This also implies that the Hungarian speakers are in possession of the most extensive linguistic relationships and thus could be a major actor in the development of more effective economic relations.

However, the Carpathian Basin, despite its lack of formal institutionalization within European territorial cooperation, is hardly a "post-national soft space" in the sense of Faludi (2010). The conflation of geomorphology with the contours of the Hungarian Crown as it existed before 1920 is in many ways a logical frame of reference in ethno-political terms but it does not offer Hungary's neighbors a sense of mutually shared space. Furthermore, this neighborhood idea, at least as it has been generally articulated, can be easily construed as a negation of, or at least lack of respect of, the sovereignty of Romania, Slovakia, and other countries. Furthermore, the ongoing political tensions with Ukraine and Hungary's refusal to support a united EU position against Russian aggression serve only to fragment this neighborhood further, resulting in the potential demise of V4 cooperation. However, if the "organic" development of the Carpathian Basin as a coherent territorial unit within the European Union is to be taken seriously, joint legitimation on behalf of all constituent states is required. Rather than potentially nationalistic scenarios of a natural Hungarian stewardship for the region, alternatives oriented toward multilateralism and a wider regional context need to be explored more fully.

To conclude then, cooperation is the only realistic option for achieving a certain degree of integration within the Carpathian Basin. During the course of the twentieth century – and due in part to conflicts (co)generated by Hungary – the Hungarian nation has always emerged as a loser of territorial struggles. EU membership on the other hand provides a realistic platform for cooperation which can also benefit Hungarian–Hungarian relations. Among others, the Danube Strategy, more robust neighborhood relationships based on reciprocity, cross-border sub-systems as well as cooperation between Hungarian settlement areas could provide building blocks of a more sustainable regional future.

## Notes

1. Call text (in Hungarian) available at [http://nski.hu/efop-1-12-17-2017-00003\\_hu.html](http://nski.hu/efop-1-12-17-2017-00003_hu.html), accessed 27 August 2021.
2. <https://felvidek.ma/2015/05/balog-zoltan-a-karpat-medence-tobb-szemponbol-is-egyseges-magyar-nemzeti-ter/>, accessed 30 August 2021.
3. <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-az-osszetartozas-emlekhely-avatasan/>, accessed 30 August 2021.
4. <https://kafkadesk.org/2018/10/11/tensions-between-hungary-and-ukraine-escalate-whats-it-all-about>, accessed 21 May 2022.
5. Miniszterelnok.hu, 15 November 2019. “Tisztán magyar pártok tudják hatékonyan képviselni a Kárpát-medencei magyarságot” (Clearly, Hungarian parties can effectively represent the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin). <https://miniszterelnok.hu/tisztan-magyar-partok-tudjak-hatekonyan-kepviselni-a-karpat-medencei-magyarsagot>, accessed 30 August 2021.

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