

Carpathian Basin – Hungarian Narratives of Re-integration and Neighbourhood¹

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Introduction

Regionalisation projects between states have constituted a major political effort to both broaden and consolidate European integration since the 1990s. As has been well documented, cross-border and regional cooperation have been promoted within the framework of numerous initiatives and funded, among others, by several different Cohesion Policy instruments (see Bachtler and MacMaster 2008; Medeiros 2018). Moreover, territorial cooperation and development across borders contribute to “Europeanisation” through the development of common understandings and practices that transcend traditional national orientations. (Allmendinger, Chilla and Sielker 2014; Dühr and Nadin 2007). As Debarbieux, Price and Balsiger (2015) document, “project regions” based on natural landscapes such as mountain ranges have been “institutionalized” in Europe for the purpose of facilitating cooperation in environmental protection and other areas. In this case institutionalisation refers to the process through which regions become socially meaningful, for example as frames for action, identity and territorial referencing, much in the sense of Anssi Paasi’s (1991) geohistorical account of regional emergence. Debarbieux, Price and Balsiger (ibid) hypothesize that project regions, as flexible actor-based constructions, interact with formal administrative regions in ways that are consistent with re-scaling of territorial governance in Europe (see Sielker and Stead 2019). They thus argue that, as part of these regionalisation projects, complex multi-stakeholder networks have emerged that link bioregional with formal territorial perspectives and hence involve both competition and cooperation with formal state actors.

Without question, processes of regionalisation, state re-scaling and flexible governance are influencing territorial cooperation in Europe. Moreover, the emergence of numerous regional initiatives at the macro, meso and micro-level are to a certain degree success stories of European integration. Sustained material support and political benefits have ensured the continuity of these arrangements. At the same

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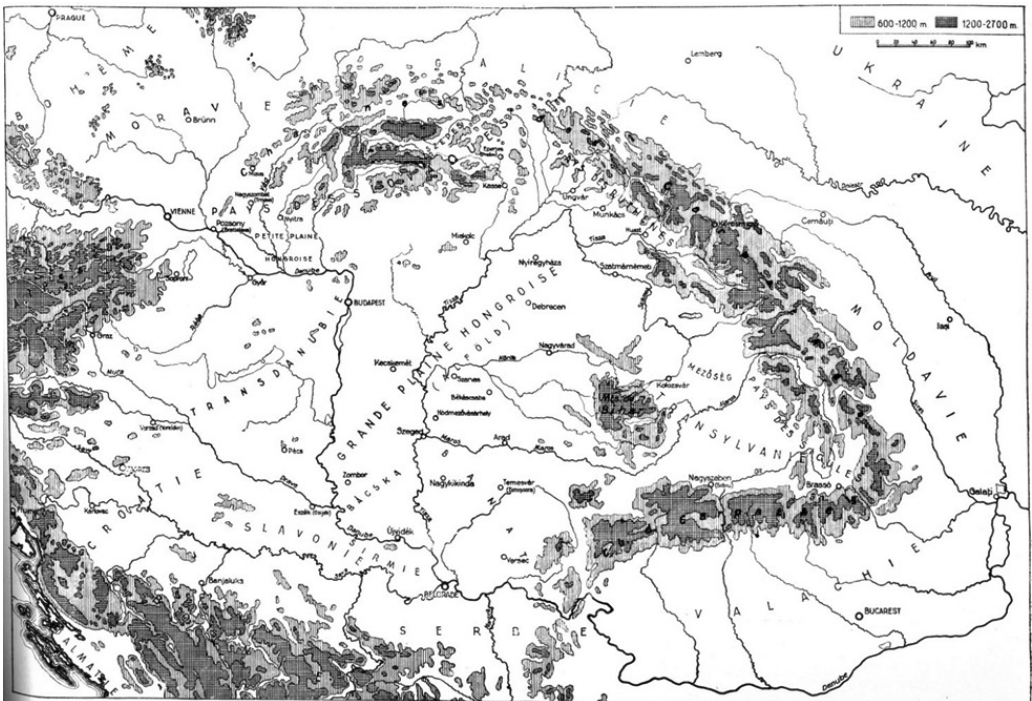
time, however, the delineation of project regions has not proceeded with equal momentum throughout Europe. For example, in the case of attempts to create Balkan contexts for cooperation in Southeast Europe, domestic political pressures and questions of territorial sovereignty have slowed progress despite prospects of EU accession for most non-member states in the region. Another 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 neighbourhood 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 lack of formalisation as a European cooperation space reminds us of the limits to flexible territorial governance. Indeed, regional soft spaces can be notoriously hard as is evidenced by the lasting effects of national interests and borders (Svensson and Balogh 2018; Scott 2018). 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.

This focus on regional cooperation as a contribution to the Cross-Border Review explores how the geographical idea of the Carpathian Basin has been employed in post-1989 Hungarian conceptualisations of regional development and territorial cooperation across state borders. This involves understanding the tensions that have emerged between different and partly competing notions of the Carpathian Basin as a “Hungarian neighbourhood” on the one hand and as a result of the concerns expressed by Hungary's neighbours on the other. The approach is based on the assumption that links between geography, geographical imaginaries and questions of national identity remain highly salient. More specifically, we will consider the consequences of Hungary-centric neighbourhood ideas for territorial cooperation as well as the difficulties involved in the institutionalization of the Carpathian Basin as a project region.

The Carpathian Basin as a geographical idea and neighbourhood

The central assumption that informs our paper is that narratives of what might be termed “regional neighbourhoods” within the European Union reflect tensions between national and European orientations and thus 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 neighbourhood have partly mirrored shifts towards to a more “European” perspective in terms of geographically defined (and thus natural) spaces for regional cooperation, “de-bordering” and (re)integration. At the same time, these understandings co-exist with regionalist agendas of an ethno-political nature related to the status of ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring states. Ultimately, the strong self-referential nature of the Carpathian Basin idea has complicated dialogue with Hungary’s neighbours who feel either excluded or directly challenged by reference to it. Bridging differences could very much depend on open dialogue based on the shared sense of regional history that the post-1989 “return to Europe” implies.

Figure 1: Bassin des Carpathes: András Rónai’s (1943) classic map of the Carpathian Basin representing a clearly bounded geomorphological space and catchment area.



Locating the nation within a changing Europe has been a longstanding debate in Hungary and 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 “ferry 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 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.

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 19th Century, Central European science contributed to popularizations of morphological notions, such as basin and peninsula based on geology, natural geography, phytogeography, archaeology 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 2001). 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 neighbourhood (*szomszédság*) which has been a recurring element of Hungarian scientific and political thinking since the 19th century (Berend and Ring 1986). Specifically for this discussion, the Carpathian Basin (has) emerged as a neighbourhood concept as a result of 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 neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood 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 re-established as a widely referenced regional idea in Hungary and geographical reference for neighbourhood 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 was reflected in school textbooks, scientific documents, public discourse, etc. (Hajdú 2018). However, perhaps inevitably, 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 neighbours, the newly created states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as well 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 Béla 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 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). 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 tempora-

rily 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 towards the historical Kingdom, newly created states looking to the future and nation-building and Romania to the consolidation of its newly enlarged state territory.

The devastation that World War II brought to Central Europe had lasting effects in terms of neighbourhood relations in Central Europe. The scholarly and political tenor changed abruptly with defeat and the definitive end to Hungary's irredentist ambitions. Revisionist interpretations of the Carpathian Basin gave way to 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 labours 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 manmade landscape and yet they realized, on the other hand, the need for cooperation and mutual understanding with neighbouring 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 pre-empted the development of a regionally holistic view as most of the states within the region were forced to re-orient themselves towards 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 favour. 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 re-emergence 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 contested framings of the Carpathian Basin both as a Hungarian social and cultural space and as a neighbourhood for interstate cooperation. As Jeszenszky (2019) states, following the end of the state-socialist order one of Hungary’s greatest challenges was to conceive of its immediate neighbourhood in terms of a new and more productive regional co-existence while at the same time recognizing the expectations of 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine and other countries in the Carpathian Basin.

The challenges of reconciling ambitions of European integration with those of national consolidation have thus been considerable. Even if irredentist claims are rarely voiced, at least in mainstream academic debate, there is an inherent political contestation due to the very close connection between territory and national identity. The geographic imaginary of the “1000-year borders” 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 Keményfi 2006). Moreover, the 1000-year borders idea serves as an everyday geopolitical resource that instils a sense of national pride based on images of past greatness and longevity (Antonsich and Szalkai 2014). 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 been unavoidable in the European context of open borders and cooperation. While comparisons with interwar literature are justified only to a limited extent, the narrative of “unity” nevertheless provides a degree of continuity, except for the most radical revisionist sources. The overall tenor of the post-1989 revival of the Carpathian Basin, as a regional idea, has been generally circumspect, and it is supportive of a transnational concept of the Basin in many ways, as a cooperative and shared space (see Banai and Lukács 2010).

At one level, the Carpathian Basin history has been and continues to be written as a means to understand Hungary as a process of settlement and subsequent nation and state-building and 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. In some interpretations, Hungary’s historical role as integrator and structuring force is the central issue, as in Lajos Für’s (2012) 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. In seeking to break with Marxist and post-Marxist interpretations of Hungarian history, scholars such as László Gulyás (2012) have argued that the Carpathian Basin's fragmentation was brought about by geopolitical struggles and parallel nation-building projects rather than Hungarian chauvinism. Moreover, the work of Ignác Romsics (2013) has elaborated on the Carpathian Basin as an element of a broader European regional history, analysing great power influence, particularly that of Germany, France and Britain, on Hungarian historical development and interethnic relations within the Basin.

In terms of geographic scholarship, Sándor Frisnyák's (1990) historical geography as well as Károly Kocsis' (1988) geographical study 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. Horváth's series on the CB elaborated a macroregional perspective based on development indicators (see below). Moreover, a wealth of empirical studies of population dynamics and ethnic-demographic change and more specifically, mappings of Hungarian and other minority communities within the Basin were produced. Kocsis (1990) and Kocsisné Hódosi (1991; 1998) subsequently wrote several essays that documented the situation of ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring 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' (1991) ethnic-religious regionalization of the "Carpatho-Balkan" space is 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 (see 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 neighbouring states].

The Carpathian Basin as a co-operation and development space

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 re-establish links between Hungary as a state and ethnic Hungarian community living beyond its borders and as a more inclusive cooperation effort to link the region to wider European development processes and thus addresses grave centre-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 elaborat-

ed, such as those either authored or edited by Sándor Frisnyák (1996), Zoltán Dövényi (2012), Frisnyák and Gál (2013; 2016), 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, Károly 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 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 Kocziszky 2016; Demeter 2020; Nagy 2016; Pomázi and Szábó 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 neighbourhood 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 reintegration might be realized through re-establishing 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, Hajdu and Mezei 2009). Characteristic of this perspective as well is the work of Hungarian geographer Béla Baranyi (2006: 151) who has consi-

dered 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 neighbourhood 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 specifically 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 neighbouring 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 macro-regional approaches to development and are embedded in Hungary’s National Development Strategy which targets the promotion of education and scientific cooperation within the Carpathian neighbourhood. 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.”²

Self-Referentiality and the Carpathian Basin as an Ambivalent 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

2 Call text (in Hungarian) available at http://nski.hu/efop-1-12-17-2017-00003_hu.html, accessed 27 August 2021.

was a transnational co-operation area comprising regions belonging to 18 countries. 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 role during 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 exists 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 scepticism 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.

In terms of academic cooperation it has become apparent that the elaboration of common regional geographies of the Carpathian Basin is difficult to achieve. 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 neighbouring 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. Former Prime Minister Robert Fico and party leader Ján 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.³ 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

3 Slovak textbooks, particularly of history and geography, refer to Slovakia as a country of the Carpathians but reject the term "Carpathian Basin" and the idea of a shared common neighbourhood associated with the Carpathians.

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 Lukacs 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 centred on Hungary. In trying to counter such aversions, Prime Minister Orbán has signalled 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.*”⁴ 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 as reflected in the depiction of geography as destiny and hence neighbourhood is often narrated as a space of national destiny.

Conclusion

Despite its lack of formal institutionalisation within European territorial cooperation, the Carpathian Basin, is hardly a “post-national soft space” in the sense of Andreas Faludi (2014). 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 neighbours a sense of mutually shared space. Furthermore, this neighbourhood 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. If the “organic” development of the Carpathian Basin as a coherent territorial unit within the European Union is to be taken seriously, joint legitimacy on behalf of all constituent states is required. Rather than Budapest-centric scenarios of a natural Hungarian stewardship for the region, alternatives oriented towards multilateralism and a wider regional context needs to be explored more fully.

4 Miniszterelnok.hu, 15 November 2019. “*Tiszán 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.

The co-existence of functional, ethno-political and geopolitically oriented integration agendas indicates that there is no single Hungarian vision of regional neighbourhood that might serve as the basis for cross-border cooperation. However, cooperation is the only realistic option for achieving a certain degree of integration within the Carpathian Basin. During the course of the 20th 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 neighbourhood 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.

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