

Babeş-Bolyai University

Faculty of European Studies

„International Relations and European Studies” Doctoral School

***Romanian-Hungarian institutionalized cross-border
cooperation.***

Historical dimension – contemporary perspective

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Keywords

Cross-border cooperation, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, EGTC, Romania-Hungary, border, cross-border integration

Introduction

The purpose of the research

The aim of the doctoral thesis is to investigate the impact that the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) have on the dynamics of cross-border integration in the Romanian-Hungarian border area. This investigation involves an exhaustive analysis of the functioning and influence of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) active in this border region. In the framework of the thesis, their role in promoting European territorial cooperation and in facilitating the process of cross-border integration is examined. This approach involves identifying the areas in which these entities operate, evaluating the actors involved and clarifying the objectives they pursue.

The importance of the research topic

The establishment of the European Union represented a significant moment in the history of the opening of borders, having a considerable impact on the border regions and the relations between them. From the beginning, cross-border cooperation played a crucial role in the concrete realization of the concept of Europe without borders (Wassenberg 2023b, 2:17).

The implementation of a borderless Europe already began in 1957 with the abolition of customs duties and was carried forward with the project of the European Single Market, followed by the establishment of the Schengen area (Wassenberg 2023a, 1:16–23). In parallel, the institutionalization of cross-border cooperation between subnational actors has been an essential pillar of the European integration process since the 1950s. In the beginning, in the absence of a supranational instrument, collaboration between actors was based either on interstate agreements or on non-binding understandings. Even under the provisions of the 1980 *Madrid Framework Convention*, subnational actors were still prevented by several factors from engaging in direct cooperation. Furthermore, after the launch of the *Interreg* initiative by the European Commission

in 1990, cross-border cooperation was integrated into a multi-level governance system (Wassenberg 2023a, 1:16).

In 2006, the European Union introduced an instrument intended to remedy this situation. The *Regulation on European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)* allowed the creation of a direct and legally binding cooperation based on a common legal personality. This EGTC regulation has been called the first European legal basis for territorial cooperation (Nadalutti 2013, 760), as it facilitated direct cross-border cooperation between a multitude of actors.

In this context, it is not surprising that the number of EGTCs has grown significantly since 2006. However, this expansion has been uneven within the European Union and, most of all, in the Central and Eastern European region.

An EGTC can be established by local, regional, or national authorities, including other bodies or associations governed by public law, with the possibility of including non-EU countries under certain conditions. EGTCs benefit from legal personality according to European Union law, and the decisions taken by them become legally binding. These entities have autonomy in managing their own budget, can employ staff and own property, thus providing a solid framework for cooperation and facilitating long-term commitments between partners. Therefore, they bring numerous advantages: they facilitate collaboration between participants from two or more countries on joint projects, without the need to sign a bilateral agreement, thus opening new opportunities for dialogue and multi-level governance. It also significantly contributes to reducing bureaucracy, facilitating easier access to funding sources. EGTCs can also act as managing authorities for cooperation programs or parts of them, thereby strengthening the efficiency and coordination of initiatives within these programmes.

In this context, the EGTC's contribution to promoting the harmonious development of border areas and strengthening economic, social, and territorial cohesion becomes increasingly valuable. Through this instrument, the integration processes in the border regions are supported, contributing to a more united and solidary Europe.

Since 2015, various crises in Europe have called into question the idea of a Europe without borders. Despite the re-bordering processes that some European countries went through because of geopolitical events such as the refugee crisis of 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion

of Ukraine by Russia, the continuation and intensification of cross-border cooperation remains essential for overcoming the peripheral situation of these regions, for their socio-economic development and for the consolidation of cohesion processes in them.

The eastern region of Hungary and the western region of Romania share a 448 km long border between two triple borders: to the south, the border between Romania-Hungary-Serbia, and to the north, between Romania-Hungary-Ukraine. Geographically, there is no natural barrier that disconnects the two border areas. Crossing the border is possible at 12 road points and 5 rail corridors, and another 10 crossing points await Romania's accession to the Schengen zone (Wassenberg 2023a, 1:51–53). The border region is neither legally defined nor institutionally constituted. The most frequently used definition is the one offered by the Interreg program, which delimits the border region based on the territory of the 8 counties adjacent to the border: Satu Mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiș (Romania); Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád-Csanád (Hungary). The eight counties cover an area of approximately 50,000 km² and comprise a total of 4 million inhabitants.

The present border line never existed before the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Due to the multiple movements of the border, both the Hungarian minority is present in Romania and the Romanian minority in Hungary. The territorial concentration of the population, the negative demographic trends and the economic characteristics of the region show that the two sides of the border have common challenges. Apart from the county seats, both parts of the region are largely rural, and in recent decades both have experienced population decline due to migration and negative natural reproduction trends. Moreover, in terms of economic productivity, the border regions are substantially below the national and European Union averages in terms of GDP per capita (Wassenberg 2023a, 1:51–53).

In 2004, with Hungary's accession to the European Union, the border became an external border of the EU, which reduced its permeability. Since 2007, with Romania's accession to the EU, the border functions as an internal border of the EU, but it also became an external border of the Schengen area. This involves the absence of customs control and the elimination of double border crossing, but the control of persons remains in place. In this perspective, the traditional role of the national border is partially diminished, but the respective region cannot be considered part of Europe without borders. This - transitory - border regime gives a special dimension to cross-

border relations and cooperation, at the same time underlining the importance of this institutionalized form of collaboration - EGTC - which can remove many barriers that come from this interim state.

Research objectives and questions

Based on these premises, the following central hypothesis was formulated: the establishment of the instrument of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in 2006 contributed to the creation of a favorable framework for stimulating the dynamics of integration in border regions. Under these conditions, the question arises: *How do the EGTCs established along the border between Romania and Hungary contribute to shaping the cross-border integration process?*

Thus, in the doctoral thesis we investigate the role played by the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) on the dynamics of cross-border integration in the Romanian-Hungarian border area. This main aim is supported by the secondary objectives through which a more detailed and comprehensive approach to the theme is achieved.

Research objective: Investigating the role played by the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) on the dynamics of cross-border integration in the Romanian-Hungarian border area.		Research question: What is the role of the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) along the Romanian-Hungarian border in the dynamics of cross-border integration?
Secondary objectives		Secondary questions
<i>Chapter I. – Research foundation</i>		
1.	Detailed investigation of the evolution of the border concept in geopolitical studies.	How did the thinkers of the geopolitical schools outline the concept of the border?
2.	Critical examination of the arguments and theoretical	Which of the theories of European integration provide a functional and relevant logic for explaining and understanding the process of

	foundations of European integration paradigms.	cross-border cooperation in the context of the European Union?
<i>Chapter II. – Interpretation of basic concepts</i>		
1.	Clarification of key concepts associated with cross-border cooperation, utilizing the existing literature.	What are the main concepts associated with cross-border cooperation identified in the literature and how are they defined in different theoretical contexts?
2.	Investigating how these concepts mutually influence each other to form a coherent theoretical framework.	How do the key concepts associated with cross-border cooperation interact with each other?
<i>Chapter III. – The European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) along the Romanian-Hungarian border</i>		
1.	Analysis of the evolution and legislative differences regarding the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) between Romania and Hungary.	What is a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and what were the factors that determined the need to create this instrument at the level of the European Union?
2.	Multidimensional analysis of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) along the border between Romania and Hungary.	What are the characteristics of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) established along the Romanian-Hungarian border?
<i>Chapter IV. – Multidimensional analysis of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation along the Romanian-Hungarian border</i>		
1.	Identification and analysis of the specific areas in which the EGTCs	What are the specific fields in which EGTCs carry out activities in the Romanian-Hungarian

	carry out activities in the Romanian-Hungarian border area.	border area and how have they influenced the socio-economic development of the region?
2.	Analysis of the impact of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) on the strengthening of relations and collaboration between entities of different levels involved in the process of cross-border integration in the Romanian-Hungarian area.	To what extent have the Romanian-Hungarian EGTCs managed to promote effective collaboration between different levels of governance and contribute to the process of cohesion and integration in cross-border regions?

Chapter I, entitled *Research foundation*, explores two key questions. First, the research seeks to reveal how the thinkers of the geopolitical schools have configured the concept of the border. Secondly, it is desired to find an answer regarding which of the theories of European integration provides a functional and relevant logic for explaining and understanding the process of cross-border cooperation in the context of the European Union. To find the answers to these questions, the first chapter makes a complex intersection between two seemingly distinct fields of study.

The concept of border within geopolitics examines the dynamics and meaning of borders between states. Borders represent a technical subject in international relations, being a constitutive element of states. Thus, the study of borders in geopolitics explores how they are perceived and managed by states, as well as their impact on their security, stability, and development. For example, in Ratzel's conception, the border influences the extent of the states' power and separates not only two states, but also two spheres of influence. Other authors, such as Haushofer or Maull, distinguish between good borders and bad borders based on different features. The thinkers of the French geopolitical school, such as Ancel or Lefebvre, placed a greater emphasis on the human factor, on the connection between man and space.

Since the 1990s, interest in the study of borders has grown considerably, evolving into an interdisciplinary field. At the same time, the issue of borders, although closely related to the

European integration process, was not initially explored within European Studies, a field that was more concerned with theorizing the integration process. In this sense, European integration can be viewed through several theoretical lenses: those included in the intergovernmental paradigm, such as conventional intergovernmentalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, which are concerned with maintaining and respecting the sovereignty of states, and those belonging to the supranational paradigm, namely federalism and functionalism, through which there is a transfer of competences from a national level to a higher level. However, traditional approaches have become insufficient to explain the complexity of the European Union, leading to the adoption of more integrated paradigms such as multi-level governance (MLG) theory.

Given that cross-border cooperation is based on close vertical and horizontal collaboration, it is considered an example of MLG. Therefore, the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) can be seen as concrete examples of the application of the principles of multi-level governance in cross-border regions. Thus, the answers to the two research questions are outlined.

Chapter II, entitled *Interpretation of basic concepts*, focuses on the investigation of two essential questions: what the main concepts associated with cross-border cooperation identified in the literature are and how they are defined in different theoretical contexts, respectively, how do the key concepts associated with cross-border cooperation interact between them.

Through the literature analysis it was found that the main concepts associated with cross-border cooperation are the frontier/border, the border region and cross-border integration. Between all these elements there is an intrinsic connection. Cross-border cooperation can be seen both as a distinct but interconnected process with the integration process and as a method by which this process is achieved. Various authors conceptualize cross-border cooperation as a linear process, composed of several stages. The connection of cross-border cooperation with the integration process consists, therefore, in consequence, the integration and spiritualization of borders representing the finality of the cooperation process.

In Chapter III, the exploration of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) established along Romanian-Hungarian border is proposed, addressing key questions such as: what is a European Grouping of Cross-Border Cooperation (EGTC) and what were the factors that determined the need to create this instrument at the level of the European Union, but

also what are the characteristics of the European Groupings of Cross-Border Cooperation (EGTC) along the Romanian-Hungarian border.

The development of cross-border cooperation has been a constant interest since the 1950s, but its organization has long been legally ambiguous. With the increase in the number of cross-border cooperation initiatives, the diversity of forms of collaboration has become increasingly problematic. This increased diversity has created significant legal and administrative obstacles. Moreover, launched by the *European Commission* in 1990, the *Interreg* initiative integrated cross-border cooperation into a multi-level governance system. In 2006, the European Union introduced the EGTC instrument to remedy this problem. Thus, the EGTC represents a response to the need expressed by numerous actors, including the *Association of European Border Regions* and the *Committee of the Regions*, to develop a legal framework for cross-border cooperation.

In our analysis, we identified four EGTCs in the Romanian-Hungarian border area, which are involved in collaborations at the local level and in various fields. Two of these are micro-regional EGTCs with continuous territories that assume an entrepreneurial role in the region, while the other two are inter-municipal EGTCs with discontinuous territories that act more as subsidy hunters.

Chapter IV brings into discussion a multidimensional analysis of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) along the Romanian-Hungarian border, focusing on the following questions: what are the specific areas in which EGTCs carry out activities in the Romanian-Hungarian border area and how do they influence the socio-economic development of the region, and to what extent the Romanian-Hungarian EGTCs managed to promote effective collaboration between the different levels of governance and contribute to the process of cohesion and integration in cross-border regions.

This analysis aimed to assess the contribution of the EGTCs to the cross-border integration process by investigating their fields of activity, identifying the involved actors and clarifying the objectives they pursue. Our findings reveal a significant variety in the EGTCs analyzed, each exhibiting distinct development rhythms and directions. The analysis also highlights some successes in strengthening communities through various projects and initiatives, but also the need for a more balanced and comprehensive approach to cover all essential aspects of regional development.

Overall, EGTCs in the Romanian-Hungarian border area seem to face challenges in implementing an effective multi-level governance. Cross-border cooperation at this border remains largely limited to the involvement of local authorities, without yet reaching a stage where citizens, civil society organizations and other stakeholders are actively involved. By analyzing the thematic distribution of the projects, a predominance of those from the sphere of culture in the ranking is noted. Following the analysis, it became evident that the groupings have not yet managed to assert themselves as key players in the development of their respective regions.

The motivation of the choice and the contribution of the topic and research

The motivation behind choosing this research topic was determined by both professional and personal considerations. Having roots in this region, I understand the situation and its particularities not only at a theoretical level, but I also benefit from the advantage of practical knowledge of the local context. Also, knowledge of both languages, Romanian and Hungarian, facilitates research and is crucial for obtaining a complete understanding of the specialized literature from both sides.

By focusing on the EGTC in a specific context, such as the Romanian-Hungarian one, a relatively less explored topic in the Romanian context, and considering both conceptual and empirical aspects, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on cooperation and sub-state territorial integration. This comprehensive approach brings to the fore not only the theoretical aspects, but also the practical realities of cross-border cooperation, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics and potential of this instrument in promoting territorial integration and cohesion in the specific context of the Romanian-Hungarian border region .

Exploring the evolution and change of state borders and border regions has become an extremely popular research topic in recent decades, and border issues and cross-border relations have attracted the attention of numerous authors. Most researchers are aware of the complexity of borders, which imposes the need for a comprehensive approach in the research process. Therefore, most scientific works analyzing cross-border processes are interdisciplinary in nature (Paasi 2011, 12). The authors involved in this sphere range from geographers, historians, economists, anthropologists and ethnologists, to lawyers or even psychologists. Significant for the

interdisciplinary nature of the research is the fact that the resources of specialized libraries in various fields, such as European Studies, Geography and Law, were used to carry out this research.

Although numerous studies have been carried out on the Romanian-Hungarian border region in recent decades, the present research offers a new perspective, since most of the existing studies focus specifically on some sub-regions of the border. We can say that there are few comprehensive and up-to-date works that analyze the processes of cooperation and integration in the Romanian-Hungarian border region, especially the significant role played by the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Therefore, this research presents and analyzes, for the first time in a comprehensive study, the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in the Romanian-Hungarian border region, providing current information. Thus, the present research has significant practical potential, and I hope that it can provide support to those involved in the planning and implementation of cross-border development programs and projects, helping them to understand the theoretical foundation of territorial processes in border areas.

Methodology

Research methodology designates a system of principles and rules for organizing research. There are two general methodological approaches in the social sciences: quantitative and qualitative (Miller and Brewer 2003, 192). Qualitative analysis involves a non-numerical evaluation of data and information, while quantitative analysis focuses on the numerical measurement of the researched aspects (Babbie 2021, 25). The qualitative approach, rather than condensing information, seeks to build understanding through depth (Miller and Brewer 2003, 193). On the other hand, however, quantification often makes our observations more explicit (Babbie 2021, 25). Both approaches make significant contributions to the development of knowledge. Although it is important and appropriate to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research, a full understanding of a topic often requires both techniques (Babbie 2021, 25).

In our analysis, we aimed to evaluate the quality of the cooperation in relation to the quantitative aspects, in order to determine the degree of impact of the groups in the process of recovery and revitalization of the border areas. Therefore, our strategy is mixed, combining both qualitative and quantitative elements.

Research methods

1. Document analysis

In our research, we focused on the collection and analysis of documents relevant to the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). This work culminated in the creation of a complete and comprehensive database, which is presented in the form of worksheets, detailed in Annexes 3-10 of the thesis. The data included in this database is the result of a rigorous research process, which involved the use of various sources. In the document analysis process, we went through several essential steps:

In the first phase we conducted an extensive search to identify relevant documents. This involved identifying where these documents could be found and how to obtain them. For the most part, the necessary documents are of a private nature and are drawn up by the four groups. A significant part of them are available online, especially in the case of the Banat-Triplex-Confinium EGTC and the Gate to Europe EGTC, which is also reflected in their transparency sub-index. At the same time, there are also documents that need to be obtained directly from the groups, as they are not public, especially those of the other two groups, the European Border Cities EGTC and the European Common Future Building EGTC. Unfortunately, these groups were not very willing to collaborate with us.

In addition, we consulted a number of databases of cross-border cooperation programs, such as *huro-cbc.eu*, *interreg-ipa-husrb.com*, *interreg-rohu.eu*, and *huskroua-cbc.eu*. I also accessed the *keep.eu* page, a comprehensive platform that gathers information about all projects financed from European sources.

Furthermore, we also obtained information from the databases of Hungarian entities that manage various funds for cross-border cooperation, such as the Gábor Bethlen Fund (*bgazrt.hu*). These databases have been essential to access specific information related to the groups' projects, information that cannot be found elsewhere.

Another important resource is the database of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which contains information on the activities of groups with Hungarian participation. Access to this database is the result of close and long collaboration with CESCO, which has provided us with this resource that fills some gaps in our database.

These sources are supplemented by various press materials, newspaper articles reflecting the activity of the EGTCs, as well as the web pages of the groups and other institutions.

In the evaluation stage of the documents, we carried out a careful analysis of their usefulness in the context of our research, ensuring that they provide the information necessary to answer our research questions.

Following the evaluation we proceeded to select relevant and useful documents for our research, eliminating documents that did not meet our requirements and objectives. This selection was a crucial step in ensuring the quality and relevance of the data we used in our analysis.

Based on these we built our database, which is the primary source for the detailed analysis carried out in chapters III and IV of the paper. This database is the foundation of our analysis and provides us with the data necessary to investigate and interpret the phenomena and processes relevant to our research.

Bryman makes a clear distinction between official documents originating from the state and official documents originating from private sources (Bryman 2012, 549–51). Private documents are usually issued by companies or individuals. This category includes the constitutive acts of the EGTC (the convention and the regulation), the financial reports of the groups, the decisions of the general assembly and the minutes of the meetings, as well as the strategies developed by them, or any other document that was created by these entities.

The category of official documents also includes any document issued by an authority, usually of the state, but not only. There are several types of official documents, and among them are those of a normative nature, such as laws, ordinances, decisions and regulations. These legislative documents are considered primary sources of official information and contain the rules that regulate various processes or phenomena. When studying a certain phenomenon it is recommended to start by studying the regulations that govern that field.

In our case, the research is based on the analysis of the relevant legislation for the research topic, including the decisions and regulations developed by the relevant actors in the European Union and the two countries, Romania and Hungary. Legislation on European territorial cooperation, cross-border cooperation and, respectively, the establishment and operation of European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) is structured on two distinct levels: the

supranational framework sets the basic conditions, while the national framework provides detailed procedures. At EU level, *Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC)*, and *Regulation (EU) No. 1302/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 amending Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC) as regards the clarification, simplification and improvement of the establishment and functioning of such groupings* constitute the European legal basis relating to the EGTC.

In Romania, *Emergency Ordinance no. 127 of November 12, 2007 regarding the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation* and *Government Ordinance 9/2015 for the amendment and completion of Emergency Ordinance 127/2007 regarding the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation*, and in Hungary *Law XCIX. of 2007 regarding the European grouping of territorial cooperation*, *Law LXXV. of 2014 regarding the European grouping of territorial cooperation*, and *Government Decree 485/2017. (XII.29) regarding the detailed rules of the approval and registration procedure of the European grouping of territorial cooperation* regulates their establishment and operation.

It should be noted that there are other documents, without legislative force, but with a significant impact on the regulatory context of these phenomena. This category includes the various publications and reports of the European Commission, such as *Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions*, *25 years of Interreg cooperation across and beyond borders*, *Easing legal and administrative obstacles in EU border regions*, *EU Cross-border cooperation survey*, *EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration*, and many others, which provide both a deeper understanding of, and often new data on, the situation of cross-border regions.

Also, the documents developed by other institutions of the European Union should not be neglected. For example, the Committee of the Regions publishes an annual monitoring report on EU EGTCs and issues resolutions on various EU legislative proposals, such as the *Committee of the Resolution of the Committee of the Regions on the Charter for Multilevel Governance in Europe* (2014/C 174/01), the *Own-initiative Opinion of the Committee of Regions on New Perspectives for the Revision of the EGTC Regulation* (COTER-V-004, Cdr 100/2010 fin), or the *Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'building a European culture of multilevel governance: follow-up to the Committee of the Regions' White Paper'* (2012/C 113/12).

Statistics play a fundamental role in documenting and presenting the studied phenomenon. A crucial source of statistical data for Romania is the *National Institute of Statistics*, while for Hungary it is the *Central Statistical Office*, both of which offer a wide range of statistical information accessible online. In addition, Eurostat is another significant resource in this area.

The use of statistical data is essential to profile each group. For example, we calculated the size and resident population for each of the four groupings, given that their constitutive acts state that the geographic area of each grouping represents the total administrative area of all members, without providing an exact definition of this data.

Apart from these, we also used other documentary resources, such as the documents reflecting the results of the calls for funding and the documents highlighting the amounts allocated through the aid granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Hungary.

2. Case study

Case study is a detailed research method of an individual or collective entity, using a variety of tools such as interviews, questionnaires, observations and document analysis (Popa 2016, 16). In this research, the object of the case studies are the four European Groupings Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in the border area between Romania and Hungary. The case studies are devoted to a detailed description of each grouping, as well as to the verification of the formulated hypothesis.

The method of analysis used in the case studies is based on the methodology developed by Erika Törzsök and András Majoros in 2015, but adapted and updated to the specifics of our research in order to objectively and quantitatively measure and evaluate the status and activities of the EGTCs. The *EGTC Maturity Index*, designed by Törzsök and Majoros in order to analyze the groupings along the border between Hungary and Slovakia, is a complex indicator based on a system of objective criteria, which can be used to measure and evaluate the level of development of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and their ability to achieve the set political and strategic objectives (Törzsök and Majoros 2016, 64). This system of criteria is based on 4 dimensions and contains a total of 40 quantifiable indicators. The four distinct dimensions are reflected in four sub-indices:

- a. *transparency sub-index*: measures the degree of accessibility of grouping information;

- b. *resources sub-index*: evaluates the quantitative and qualitative indicators related to the organization's financial and personnel resources;
- c. *regional development sub-index*: analyzes the organization's ability to play a significant role in the economic-social development of the border region;
- d. *sub-index of member satisfaction*: quantifies the level of satisfaction of group members with regard to the functioning of the organization up to the time of the survey.

We believe that this methodology offers the opportunity to analyze EGTCs systematically and comparatively, based on measurable data, eliminating subjectivity and preconceptions. Thus, a high level of objectivity is ensured in the evaluation of these groups, contributing to the understanding of how they fulfill their objectives. The original methodology of Törzsök and Majoros has been updated to adapt to post-2020 research requirements and has been adjusted to fit the specifics of the Romanian-Hungarian border context. The four dimensions were kept, but the indicators and calculation method were changed.

To evaluate the mentioned aspects, several essential indicators are used:

Transparency sub-index	Resource sub-index	Regional development sub-index
Web page Is there a dedicated web page of the grouping?	Activity history Has the group been active for at least 5 years?	Represented population Does the population of the region covered by the grouping exceed 100,000 inhabitants?
Romanian/Hungarian version Are there Romanian and Hungarian versions of the web page?	Income Has the group's total income increased compared to the previous year, regardless of its source?	Multi-level governance mix: Cooperation at the local level Do the members of the group include representatives of the local public administration?

<p>English version</p> <p>Is there an English version of the web page?</p>	<p>Other incomes</p> <p>In the previous year, did the group obtain income from sources other than membership fees?</p>	<p>Multi-level governance mix: Cooperation at the county level</p> <p>Do the members of the group include representatives of the county level public administration?</p>
<p>Constitutive acts</p> <p>Can the constitutive acts of the grouping (convention and regulation) be accessed on the website?</p>	<p>Non-refundable funding</p> <p>Has the group benefited from grants through a cross-border program in the previous year?</p>	<p>Multi-level governance mix: Cooperation at the state level</p> <p>Do the members of the group include representatives of the state level public administration?</p>
<p>Decisions, minutes</p> <p>Are there documents on the group's website that contain copies of the main decisions and minutes of its meetings from the last three years?</p>	<p>Director</p> <p>Is the director of the grouping employed full-time?</p>	<p>Development strategy</p> <p>Does the group have a development strategy?</p>
<p>Financial reports</p> <p>Are the annual financial reports for the last 3 years available on the website?</p>	<p>Staff</p> <p>In addition to the director, does the group have at least one full-time employee?</p>	<p>Current strategy</p> <p>If so, was it developed less than 3 years ago?</p>
<p>Actuality</p> <p>Is there at least one recent news item (published in the last 6 months) available on the group's webpage?</p>	<p>English language skills</p> <p>Does at least one of the group's employees possess conversational English?</p>	<p>Experience in cross-border cooperation</p> <p>Has the group implemented at least one project under the previous Interreg RO-HU program?</p>

<p>Strategic document</p> <p>If the group has a strategy, is it published on the website?</p>	<p>Experience in project management</p> <p>Does at least one of the group's employees have project management experience?</p>	<p>Participation in the consultation of the CBC programme</p> <p>Was the group involved in the consultation process for the current Interreg RO-HU programme?</p>
<p>Projects and initiatives</p> <p>Is essential information about the groupings' projects available on the webpage, such as project name, purpose, code, short description and funding amount / or at least about the last project?</p>	<p>Headquarters</p> <p>Does the group have its own headquarters?</p>	<p>ITI concept</p> <p>Has the group already developed at least one integrated territorial investment (ITI) concept?</p>
<p>Social media platforms</p> <p>Is the group present on social media platforms, at least on Facebook?</p>	<p>Working group</p> <p>Within the grouping, are there thematic working groups set up to achieve the development objectives?</p>	<p>Achievement of ITI</p> <p>If so, has it already implemented at least one integrated territorial investment (ITI)?</p>

Source: own creation

The indicators chosen to evaluate the degree of satisfaction of the members are:

Sub-index of member satisfaction	1	2	3	4	5
Strengthening cooperation in the field of environment, nature and disaster prevention					

Capitalizing on opportunities for tourism cooperation					
Strengthening cooperation in the social and health fields					
Strengthening educational and cultural cooperation					
Cooperation in research and capacity building					
Cooperation in the field of transport development					
Strengthening cooperation between NGOs					
Strengthening cooperation between SMEs					

Cooperation in the agricultural and food industry					
Cooperation in the field of employment and labor mobility					

Source: own creation

c. Survey and interview

The opportunity granted by the “Pálfi István” research grant allowed for a survey and several interviews to be carried out in 2021. It is regrettable that, given the context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not establish a closer collaboration with the four groups, the interactions taking place mainly online. In 2023, we tried to re-establish contact with these four EGTCs, but unfortunately our efforts were unsuccessful, encountering the same situation we encountered time and time again during our research. It seems that the groups are more willing to provide support for those who collaborate with CESCO. This lack of responsiveness clearly indicates a reluctance to cooperate with other entities or individuals.

Data collection by survey is a frequently used method of observation in the social sciences (Babbie 2021, 250). In this context, we conducted an online survey within the EGTC member localities with the aim of obtaining the relevant information for the analysis of the members’ perspective. Thus, the choice of the sample, respectively the group of subjects, was based on a single criterion: belonging to one of the four groups.

The Google Forms questionnaires, available in both Romanian and Hungarian, were distributed to the town halls of 123 member localities. The survey, conducted between March 15-31, 2021, gathered responses from 25 members, and the collected data was subsequently processed.

In conducting the survey, we paid particular attention to respect for fundamental ethical principles. All participants were informed about the purpose of the survey and how their data will be processed, expressing their consent voluntarily.

The interview, a research method involving direct communication with subjects (Babbie 2021, 268), was used to obtain detailed and subjective information about the groups. Between March and April 2021, we conducted structured interviews with two EGTC employees: Mrs. Tünde Tímea Csetnek, project manager within Gate to Europe EGTC and Mr. Attila Gajda from the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC. The questions addressed significant aspects such as the reasons for the establishment of the EGTC, the circumstances and difficulties encountered in the establishment process, the impact of administrative and legal regulations, implemented projects, available resources, future opportunities and obstacles, and the potential of the grouping to contribute to the revitalization and development of the border regions.

Of the four EGTCs investigated, only two, Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC and Gate to Europe EGTC, provided answers to our questions. In 2023, we resubmitted requests to all four groups to update the information, but none of them responded. During the same year, thanks to a close collaboration with CESCO, we obtained the database with the projects implemented or managed by groups of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade in Hungary.

The method of calculation

Using the listed research methods, we calculated the sub-indices and, by extension, the *EGTC Maturity Index*. For the first three sub-indices, each affirmative answer scored 0.5 points, while each negative or unknown answer received 0 points. For the member satisfaction sub-index, each response was valued at 0.1 points. Thus, each sub-index can reach a maximum score of 5 points. The first three sub-indices are based on secondary sources and information obtained during interviews, while the last sub-index is based entirely on the answers given in the questionnaires.

In our research, we chose to weight the sub-indices in the following way: transparency sub-index and member satisfaction sub-index - 20%-20%, resources sub-index and regional development sub-index - 30% -30% We chose not to give equal weight to the sub-indices, because the central objective of our research is to assess to what extent European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) along the Romanian-Hungarian border have contributed to the revitalization of the border region. Therefore, we paid more attention to the regional development sub-index, as we believe it is essential to understand the impact of these groupings on the economic and social development of the respective region. At the same time, we consider that the resources of an EGTC undoubtedly influence its ability to develop the region. Thus, the resources sub-index was

weighted to the same extent as the regional development sub-index to reflect the importance of this aspect. Regarding the transparency sub-index and the member satisfaction sub-index, we have chosen not to distinguish between them, as we consider both aspects to be equally important. The external (public) evaluation of the clusters as well as the internal (member) perspective provides a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness and impact of these EGTCs, which significantly complements our analysis.

Conclusions

The proposed aim of the thesis was to investigate the role played by the four European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) on the dynamics of cross-border integration in the Romanian-Hungarian border area. This approach aimed at evaluating the group's contribution to the cross-border integration process, investigating the areas in which they operate, identifying the actors involved, as well as clarifying the objectives they pursue in the cross-border integration process.

The analysis reveals some successes in strengthening communities through projects and various initiatives, but also underlines the need for a balanced and broader approach to cover all essential aspects of regional development.

The period 2007-2013 marked a significant stage in the evolution of cross-border cooperation, highlighting several outstanding key moments. This interval coincided with the launch of the new multiannual financial framework, representing a special first, because it was the first comprehensive initiative in which the two countries, Hungary and Romania, could participate in full. At the same time, this period also marked the beginning of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation as eligible beneficiaries within the Interreg programs. The groups, having a unique structure, legal personality and own budget, represent entities with increased potential for efficiency in the use of funding sources. For example, the EGTC, as a single body, fulfills the partnership criterion, eliminating the need to involve additional partners to fulfill the cross-border partner criterion.

Although the Romania-Hungary Cooperation Programs have recognized the EGTC as eligible beneficiaries from the very beginning, since 2007, it seems that these entities have not fully capitalized on this opportunity. As it appears from the analysis, the activities of the groups

are only partially covered by the projects in which they participate as beneficiaries or direct partners. There is a relatively high proportion of projects where they are not involved as beneficiaries but as external managers supporting implementation. It can be stated that, until now, EGTCs have predominantly functioned as consultancy entities and facilitators for accessing grants, providing assistance to their members in project development, completion of specific documentation, project implementation and advice on funding opportunities. This approach can have various explanations, but a notable one, derived from the analysis of the financial resources of the groups, indicates that this modality represents an opportunity to diversify their incomes.

Overall, the EGTCs' income is largely made up of funding, mainly from cross-border cooperation programmes, but also other public funding and member contributions. At the same time, the contribution of commercial activities to general revenues is relatively small, and this aspect could constitute an explanation. During the analyzed period, the groups ensured their survival, in large part, thanks to the funding provided by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade. Although Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC and Gate to Europe EGTC have seen an increase in income from other sources, this is not yet sufficient to allow them to operate independently. Regarding the European Border Cities EGTC and the European Common Future Building EGTC, these entities survived exclusively through the financial support granted by the ministry, and in their case no other sources of income can be identified in the absence of detailed information. It is obvious that, in the current financial context, this dependence represents a major vulnerability, underlining the need for a diversification of funding sources. As we identified in Chapter III, the European Border Cities EGTC and the European Common Future Building EGTC only have a role of “grant hunters”, while the other two groups fall under the “Entrepreneur” type.

However, there is a difference in approach between the two successful EGTCs. While the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC benefited financially from the projects, receiving a part of the project budget (between 0.5% and 57% of the total value), the Gate to Europe EGTC provided the same services voluntarily, the main beneficiaries being the members of the group and other active organizations from his area. This choice remains an intriguing decision.

Another explanation revealed in the analysis lies in the close synergy between these entities and local administrations. Analyzing both the resources and the activities of these groups, it becomes obvious that they all operate within the town halls where they are based. Often, the

director of the EGTC is also the mayor of the locality, and the headquarters of the group is located within these mayor's offices. Analyzing the addresses and contact details of these entities, a remarkable coincidence is found. Examined on social media, the groups' activities underscore the difficulty of separating them from local government. Thus, these groupings practically function as offices for the development and implementation of projects. However, the positive aspect is that they are not limited to the locality of their headquarters, offering their services to other members in the area.

The percentage of projects managed by EGTCs as non-project partners has remained largely constant in recent years, indicating a continued demand for this type of service, also appreciated by group members in the survey. However, despite the favorable trends, the high rejection rate of projects also suggests that groups still need direct or indirect support for the preparation of proposals.

If we break down the funding sources of the projects, we get a diverse picture: we find projects implemented within Interreg programs, but also projects financed from other national and international sources and national operational programs.

There are several national programs in Hungary that promote cultural cooperation between Hungary and the Hungarian communities in Romania. These funding programs facilitate cross-border collaboration, but there are restrictions on eligibility, which are mainly aimed at members of the Hungarian community. Most of the funds are allocated by the Gábor Bethlen Fund, which aims to protect the Hungarian cultural heritage present in Romania (Wassenberg 2023a, 1:141).

If we analyze the thematic distribution of the projects, we notice a dominance of those from the sphere of culture in the ranking. In our analysis, we categorized the projects based on their thematic descriptions, thus facilitating a more detailed understanding of the diversity and contributions of each individual project.

The analyzed EGTCs present a significant variety, exhibiting distinct development rhythms and directions. In contrast to the Hungarian-Slovak border section, where the economic development disparities between the western and eastern areas are reflected in the activity and performance of EGTCs (Törzsök and Majoros 2015, 73), the south-north development axis of the Romanian-Hungarian border it is not reflected in the success of the EGTCs. Furthermore, the most

prosperous EGTC is located in the northern part of this border section, while one of the two “sleeping” EGTCs is located in the southern part.

The European Border Cities EGTC and the European Common Future Building EGTC have so far not generated significant results. The northernmost EGTC was born out of a previous collaboration between twin cities. Although the founders initially had in mind the accession of a Ukrainian member, the delay in the incorporation procedure meant that the grouping was eventually formed with two members. Even though the EGTC could have had an important impact on Ukraine's European integration, it seems that it has not yet played a significant role. The EGTC should theoretically be a catalyst for peripheral and underperforming regions, but its success does not seem to be significantly influenced by the long-standing relations between the two cities. Although, due to its nature, the EGTC could be more efficient in the use of CBC resources, the cooperation between the two cities is still mainly carried out within the framework of the twinning relationship.

In the case of the European Common Future Building EGTC, the initial intentions of the founders are not clear due to the lack of available information. Although the continued development of church tourism in Békés and Arad counties, the development of a cycling training and awareness center, the increase of cross-border regional health standards in Békés and Arad counties are among the stated objectives of the member settlements (EGTC Building a Common European Future 2024), the lack of significant activity has prevented the achievement of these goals to date. The current weightlessness of the group in the development of the region is certainly a missed opportunity.

Currently, it is not yet clear what the actual role of these two EGTCs could be in the socio-economic development of the affected border areas in the coming decades. If their activity will not experience a significant increase, the possibility of dissolving these groups cannot be excluded.

Regarding the results but also their potential, there are significant differences between the two previous entities and the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC and Gate to Europe EGTC. The two micro-regional, entrepreneurial EGTCs stand out in the border region due to a higher level of maturity, this being explained by the significant role they already have in regional development. The well-defined goals of the EGTCs are focused on the development of the regions they cover,

considering aspects such as economic development, increasing competitiveness, protecting the environment, supporting cultural aspects, as well as advancing the fields of education and capacity.

However, achieving ambitious goals is a long-term process, requiring consecutive and well-planned steps. Their previous projects mainly focused on sporadic infrastructure investments, developing and strengthening networks between SMEs, building cultural relations and improving the quality of public services. Their prospects for the future become more promising if they continue to strengthen such activities, thus being able to assume, at a later stage, an intermediary role, or in the provision of public services, imposing themselves more deeply in development decisions for the border region. However, this development requires increased commitment from each member. Of course, their above-average maturity index is primarily due to their significant potential for regional development and resources.

The EGTC should be perceived as an “instrument for integrated territorial governance, (on several levels) in compact regions, separated by borders”, says the Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Cooperation Program 2007-2013. Although the EGTC tool allows the simultaneous collaboration of local, county and state authorities, the EGTCs operating in the Romanian-Hungarian border area mainly implement cooperation at the local level. This situation seems surprising in the context in which, after the regime change, the main initiators of cross-border cooperation relations were the larger cities, such as Debrecen-Oradea, Szeged-Timișoara, etc. (Baranyi, 2005: 25). Later, Euroregions and county-level collaborations were created, such as Hajdú-Bihar-Bihar and the DKMT Euroregion. However, currently, large cities seem to be less active in EGTCs. The only exception, the EGTC European Border Cities, only confirms the rule. A sad finding of the current research is that despite the extensive potential for collaboration, the EGTCs concerned fail to implement effective multi-level governance.

The predominant focus at the local level can create a focused perspective on the needs and concerns of small-scale communities, facilitating decision-making in the specific context of these localities. Although the contribution to multi-level governance may be narrower than in a format involving multiple levels of government, local authorities can play a vital role in ensuring that local interests are adequately represented and in facilitating governance that is closer to the needs of border communities.

However, the absence of representatives at the county and national level may limit the group's ability to address issues of broad importance and influence large-scale regional policies and initiatives. This finding suggests possible opportunities for expanding the network of partnerships so that clusters can better cover the various levels of government and increase their influence on regional and national development processes.

Thus, cross-border cooperation at the Romanian-Hungarian border remains largely limited to the involvement of local authorities, not yet reaching a stage where citizens, civil society organizations and other interested parties are actively involved. It would be timely and beneficial to extend the involvement of other actors, such as non-governmental organizations, universities and research institutes, either as members of collaborations or as partners. In this region, there are active universities in the field of border studies (in Debrecen, Szeged, Oradea or Timișoara), and the involvement of agricultural chambers or other organizations could strengthen the activities associated with agriculture carried out by associations, tourism management organizations or community initiatives. Likewise, labor market institutions at the county level could bring a significant contribution.

The EGTCs operating in the Romanian-Hungarian border area also encounter difficulties in attracting members from third countries. In this sense, they are completely dependent on the decision or indecision of the central authorities. Serbian observer members of the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC, for example, cannot participate in the grouping's activities as full members without the consent of the central authorities in Serbia. To remedy this situation, there are two options: the adoption and implementation of EGTC legislation or the conclusion of bilateral agreements with neighboring EU member states on the establishment and operation of EGTCs (CESCI Balkans, 2017: 3-4). To date, there has been no progress in either direction, and the grouping continues to depend on the will of Serbia. Similarly, initially the European Border Cities EGTC should have included the city of Berehove in Ukraine, but this did not happen due to the lack of agreement from the Romanian central authorities. In contrast, the Tisa EGTC provides a positive example through its success in establishing the first cluster with a Ukrainian member in 2015. This success could have served as a model for other EGTCs, including the integration of the city of Berehove.

In conclusion, there are significant opportunities to improve the functioning of EGTCs by actively engaging a wider variety of actors, both horizontally and vertically. Overall, EGTCs in the Romanian-Hungarian border area seem to face challenges in implementing effective multi-level governance and need to consider adjustments in their structures and practices to realize the full potential of cross-border collaboration.

It is regrettable that, overall, the EGTCs have underperformed compared to 2016, mainly due to the low level of member satisfaction. We also note with regret that the existing EGTCs so far have not been able to exert a significant influence in catalyzing collaborations at the Romanian-Hungarian border, having a limited impact on the relevant Interreg programs. This situation could be significantly improved by creating a new grouping that would involve both public administration entities, at least from the local and county level, from the four counties, as well as civil sector actors, thus having better adapted competences to the challenges facing existing groups today.

Considering these aspects, it can be concluded that the level of cross-border integration in the border region between Romania and Hungary is still in an early stage. We can observe a trend towards integration with an emphasis on borders, where the border becomes the central element around which local actors engage in collaborative processes. However, this cooperation is sporadic, covering only small and well-defined territories and involving only local actors. The groups involved have not yet succeeded in consolidating themselves as key development actors in their respective regions. With a few notable exceptions, the cross-border relevance of their activities is limited and short-lived. This finding provides new directions for research, opening the way to deeper and more detailed exploration of the factors that hinder the process of cross-border integration in the respective region.

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