

## Hungarian Border Research as a reflection of European integration and regional transformation

### *A magyarországi határkutatások válasza az európai integrációra és a regionális átalakulásra*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses ways in which Hungarian border studies have reflected processes of post-1989 transformation by moving towards a contextual perspective on different border-making (bordering) processes. Traditionally, Hungarian border studies, and with them geographical conceptualizations of Hungarian state spaces, have reflected changing historical and political contexts as well as dominant scientific paradigms that have shifted with time. In the past, this has also manifested itself in varying degrees of environmental determinism and ethno-nationalism.

In the contemporary context, Hungarian border studies have developed a plural, multilevel as well as critical focus that interlinks different areas where borders are politically and socially relevant. As will be elaborated in the following, several conceptualisations of Hungary's border situation have emerged that reflect: 1) new cross-border economic, political and social spaces, 2) the influence of European integration on Hungary's politics of borders and 3) the symbolic significance of contemporary and historical borders. These concepts, which will be dealt with below, express both historical continuity as well as conceptual innovation deriving from more recent experience. Above all, the development of Hungarian border studies, particularly since 1989, is of particular significance as it manifests a shift from an 'introverted' perspective to a conceptualization of Hungary both as a nation-state and as a borderlands society within contemporary Europe. This contribution makes no attempt at comprehensiveness and it is, admittedly, a highly selective overview of a very rich and multidisciplinary research field. In the interest of brevity, attention will focus on only a few representative strands of investigation that, in my view, have been formative in the more recent development of Hungarian border studies.

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*KULCSSZAVAK: határkutatások; Magyarország határai; határon átnyúló együttműködések; társadalmi egyenlőtlenségek; határok és történelmi emlékezet*

*ABSZTRAKT: A tanulmányom azt veszi górcső alá, hogy a magyarországi határkutatások, a poszt-szocialista átalakulásra reflektálva, miként mozdultak el a különböző határmegvonási folyamatok (bordering) kontextuális perspektívája felé. A magyar határkutatások, akárcsak a magyar állam térbeli szerveződésének földrajzi megközelítései, hagyományosan a változó történelmi és politikai viszonyokba, valamint a meghatározó, ám időben változó tudományos paradigmákba ágyazódtak. Ez tetten érhető a környezeti determinizmus és az etno-nacionalizmus megjelenésében a múltbeli kutatásokban. Napjainkban a magyarországi kutatásokra a plurális, többszintű és kritikai megközelítés jellemző, amely a politikai és társadalmi szempontból releváns problémák vizsgálatában értelmezési keretként tekint a határkérdésre.*

*Jelen tanulmány azonosítja a magyarországi határkutatások néhány meghatározó áramlatát, amelyek 1) az új határokon átnyúló gazdasági, politikai és társadalmi terekre, 2) az európai integráció magyarországi határpolitikára gyakorolt hatására, valamint 3) a jelenlegi és történelmi határok szimbolikus jelentőségére reflektálnak. Az itt tárgyalt határkonceptiók a történelmi folyamatosságot éppen úgy kifejezik, mint a közelmúlt tapasztalataiból fakadó elméleti megújulást. A magyarországi határkutatások fejlődése, elsősorban 1989 óta, különös jelentőséggel bír, mivel egyfajta „introvertált” perspektívától egy olyan elméleti megközelítés felé mozdult el, amely Magyarországot mint nemzetállamot és egyúttal mint a határok társadalmát (borderlands society) értelmezi korunk európai politikai kontextusában. Jelen tanulmány nem törekszik minden részletre kiterjedő elemzésre, és kétségkívül igen szelektív áttekintést nyújt egy gazdag és multidiszciplináris kutatási területről. A tömörség kedvéért csak néhány meghatározó kutatási irányt tárgyalok, amelyek véleményem szerint jól tükrözik a magyarországi határkutatások jelen folyamatait.*

## Introduction

During the last two decades, research on state borders and their economic, political, social and cultural significance has developed both conceptually, in terms of ways of understanding the societal significance of borders, and methodologically, in terms of new interdisciplinary approaches (Gerst, Klessman, Krämer 2021; Hastings, Wilson 2012; Scott 2020). This has been motivated by the great political changes of our times, such as the complexities of European integration, the collapse of the Cold War order and, ultimately, the political, social and economic impacts of globalisation. In the Hungarian case, the salience of border studies is reflected in a wide spectrum of issues that relate to socio-economic and territorial development, integration within a wider European context and, significantly, national identity and belonging.

The present state of Hungarian border studies confirms that borders, formal and informal as well as real and ‘imagined’, are vital to our understanding of the complex socio-spatial transformations taking place in Europe and beyond. This paper discusses major themes that have emerged in Hungarian border studies and thus complements Márton Pete’s (2018) systematic review of thematic and methodological evolution in Hungarian border research since 1988. Particular attention will be directed to the ways in which Hungarian border studies have reflected processes of post-1989 transformation by moving towards a contextual

perspective on different border-making (bordering) processes. In the interest of brevity, attention will focus on only a few representative strands of investigation that, in my view, have been formative in the development of Hungarian border studies and are at the forefront of contemporary international debate.

Traditionally, Hungarian border studies, and with them geographical conceptualizations of Hungarian state spaces, have reflected changing historical and political contexts as well as dominant scientific paradigms that have shifted with time. In the past, this has also manifested itself in varying degrees of environmental determinism and ethno-nationalism. In the contemporary context, Hungarian border studies have developed a pluralistic, multilevel as well as critical focus that interlinks different areas where borders are politically and socially relevant. As this discussion will indicate, the development of Hungarian border studies has also been profoundly influenced by political, economic and social crises and, most recently, by the Covid-19 pandemic which for a time severely limited cross-border mobility. Hungarian borders scholars have focused on the consequences of numerous post-1989 crises for society-at-large through interpreting tensions as well as points of connection within interstate and intercultural relations. By engaging with the many challenges of systemic transformation, these scholars have also pointed to the possibilities for societal development as well as the need to respond to contradictions that are both inherent in processes of European integration. For example, while the potentials of cooperation and development across borders have been studied at length, considerable attention has been drawn to geopolitical and geo-economic consequences of dependency relations as well as the impact of everyday stereotypes and mental borders.

Discussion begins with a brief review of the present state of border studies which is characterised by conceptual heterogeneity as well as multidisciplinary despite the clear geographic and spatial focus of much border research. Following this discussion, several thematic areas of research will be elaborated that reflect Hungary's border and borderlands situation and that express both historical continuity as well as conceptual innovation deriving from more recent experience. Furthermore, these research themes are closely interlinked as they involve regional conceptualisations, particularly in reference to processes of cross-border interaction, cooperation and regional development. The nexus between border and regional studies is also evidenced by geopolitical analysis which discusses Hungarian positionality in wider regional contexts such as the Balkans. Above all, the development of Hungarian border studies, particularly since 1989, is of particular significance as it reflects conceptualizations of Hungary both as a nation-state and, as I will argue here, as a borderlands society within contemporary Europe. This essay makes no attempt at comprehensiveness and it is, admittedly, a highly selective overview of a very rich and multidisciplinary research field. Hungarian border studies reflect various strands of socio-economic inquiry and regional analysis as foundations for understanding shifting

interrelationships between different actors, (national) states and borders – from the geopolitical to the level of social practices at and across the border. In line with Hajdú's (1995) prescient observations, Hungarian border studies indicate that there is no 'objective' reading of Hungary's territoriality and borders – neither from a historical nor a geographic standpoint.

### **State of the Debate and Hungarian Border Studies**

Since the early 2000s border studies have dedicated considerable energy towards exploring different ways in which borders are produced socially. In abstract terms borders can be understood as results of a social and political negotiation of space; they frame social and political action and are produced through institutional and discursive practices at different levels and by different actors. Concretely, borders help condition how societies and individuals shape their social and political environments, development strategies and identities. They also represent formal and informal institutions that affect economic activity and the development of economic networks. As a result, instead of privileging linearity and functionality, contemporary border studies recognize the fluid and changing nature of borders, their increasing sophistication, and the complexity of border-making processes by different agents (Laine, Casaglia 2017). As Paasi argues "(...) borders can be exploited to both mobilize and fix territory, security, identities, emotions and memories, and various forms of national socialisation" (Paasi 2012, 2307.). Moreover, borders have a 'time print' - they symbolically reflect historical memories and can, in the sense of Megoran (2012), 'rematerialize' within changing national political trajectories. This has opened up possibilities for investigating socio-political border-making or *bordering* practices that take place within society. With the mainstreaming of the bordering concept, a conceptual transition has also taken place from seeing the border as a physical and often static geographic outcome of socio-spatial dynamics to a 'multiperspectival' context in which the borders are themselves understood as dynamic functional processes (Rumford 2012).

At its most basic, the process of bordering can be defined as the everyday construction of borders, for example through political discourses and institutions, media representations, school textbooks, stereotypes and everyday forms of transnationalism (Scott 2021). Bordering, as a socio-spatial practice plays an important role in shaping human territoriality and political maps - every social and regional group has an image of its own territory and boundaries. Christophe Sohn (2016) has captured this ontological multiplicity, or heteronomy, of borders with the concept of 'assemblage' in which borders emerge through the many different meanings and practices that are attached to them. Where are borders located? As Anthony Cooper (2015) has suggested Europe's borders are

not necessarily made in Europe according to realist notions of territoriality and sovereignty. but that borders of Europe are actively negotiated as well as imagined at many different scales and sites. One consequence of the bordering paradigm is an increasing appropriation of the *borderscapes* concept. Borderscapes are multilocal socio-political arenas that emerge around border(ing) contexts and are thus diffused beyond the physical border. With a borderscapes approach, the realm of high politics is connected to with that of communities and individuals who are affected by and negotiate borders and hence it represents a highly promising tool for 're-assembling' border complexity (Brambilla 2015) we can also study how and why borders also serve as resources for dialogue, cultural expression and political empowerment (Deiana, Komarova, McCall 2019; Mezzadra, Neilson 2012).

How does Hungarian research relate to this wider contemporary debate? On the one hand, Hungarian border studies are very much influenced by the context of European integration and normative paradigms of 'debordering' that inform policies of territorial cooperation. On the other hand, Hungarian research provides clear evidence that political and socio-cultural borders cannot be separated from the specific contexts that explain their societal salience and impact. Moreover, Hungarian border studies build on a long and rich tradition in the study of state borders and Hungarian research institutes, universities and institutional advocates of cross-border cooperation have been active members of the wider European borders research community. Significantly, Hungarian border studies have reflected the historical contingency of geographical conceptualizations of Hungarian state space which have been influenced by change in terms of political thinking, geopolitical contexts and paradigm shifts in the social sciences. As such, geodeterminism, positivism and critical constructivism have also found their respective places in the geographical study of Hungary's borders since 1867. In the present context, moreover, Hungarian border studies have been an important driver of European research on the changing significance and wider societal impact of state borders. This is not a coincidence; indeed, the fact that Hungary so dramatically and simultaneously experienced, on the one hand, consequences of systemic change and, on the other, EU integration, has given considerable stimulus to research and the search for new approaches.

Given the country's history, geographical location and complex relations with seven very different neighbouring states, border issues are never far from political debates, media attention and everyday life. Among the challenges facing Hungary within the new European setting have been the re-establishment of regional economic and political ties, the promotion of Central European and wider regional cooperation and furthering the rights and interests of Hungarian minority communities. As a result, borders are also often studied in order to reveal the nexus between local and everyday patterns of cross-border interaction

and changing geopolitical contexts. At another level, however, it is clear that despite processes of European integration, EU-internal borders have not become 'irrelevant' – they continue to influence, for example, political and social behaviours and the development of urban and economic networks. As a result, an extensive research community focusing on borders has emerged in Hungary that includes scholars and research institutes that deal with questions of minority rights, governance, international relations and numerous other areas. Alongside the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, and its Centres for Regional Studies in particular, scholars working at the Universities of Pécs, Debrecen, Győr, Szeged, the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and policy advocates such as the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI) deserve specific mention as key actors in the development of Hungarian border research.

### **Major Themes in Hungarian Border Studies: Continuity and Change**

Contributions to Hungarian border studies have come from several disciplines: among these are geography, sociology, ethnography, political science, history and economics. There is, moreover, a clear link between border and regional studies. Presently, Hungarian border studies pursue two major objectives: 1) relating shifts in the significance of state borders to fundamental social, economic and geopolitical transformations that have taken place in the past decades, 2) studying the implications of these transformations for Hungary and changing conceptualisations of economic relationships, territorial development and socio-political spaces. In this way Hungarian border studies have analysed and sought to understand the socio-spatial consequences of post-1989 transformations of Central Europe, Hungarian society in particular, by investigating bordering processes operating at different levels and via different mechanisms. This involves exploring changing geopolitical imaginations, geo-economic and functional understandings of state borders and everyday practices of border crossing.

As Judit Timár (2007a) has suggested, one of the most significant contributions of Hungarian borders studies has been a nuanced analysis of shifting border regimes since 1989 and relative 'de-bordering' processes in Central Europe Hungary which are reflected in the *complex construction of new border contexts* by a multitude of actors – not just public actors but everyday citizens, migrants, economic actors, civil society groups, etc. Border constructions, an intentionally broad term, have thus been studied as processes of networking and cooperation as well as products of life at borders. Such constructions also reveal the cross-border impacts of power relations and dependencies that operate at different levels. The complex construction of new border contexts has, in the broadest terms, also involved responses to new opportunities but also to

the manifold crises that systemic change generated and that globalisation continues to produce. Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the restrictions on mobility it precipitated, have drawn attention to the everyday impacts of crisis at borders but also to the resilience of border areas in coping with disruption and closure through informal modes of cooperation.

In the following, several conceptual strands of Hungarian border research will be discussed that exemplify the present state of the art. To begin with, critical border geographies have been instrumental in reassessing legacies of border politics, in particular those of the irredentist interwar period, and in analysing the conditions impacting on present-day cross-border cooperation between Hungary and its neighbours. In addition, as part of developing more productive forms of cross-border cooperation, regional contexts loom large in the research literature, and questions of 're-integrating' Central Europe and the Carpathian Basin (a term which has been often politicised) have followed from specific understandings of European integration and its economic, environmental and political consequences. While there is a strong normative element to this strand of border studies, motivated as it is by European Union policies of territorial cooperation, there are critical voices as well that focus attention on geographies of inequality, the geoeconomics of dependent development, and political uses of borders that often complicate cooperation. Clearly, these various research strands are interlinked in many ways and in recognising these overlaps I have attempted to highlight as best as possible the major points of specific perspectives.

To preface the following discussion, it is appropriate to underscore the significance of the research field as a constant reminder that Hungary is in fact a 'borderlands society', and not only in terms of ethnopolitical considerations (see Barta 2006; Hajdú et al. 2009; Kukorelli et al. 2000). Beyond the popular geopolitics of the Greater Hungary trope (see Antonsich, Szalka 2014), new patterns of cross-border interaction and governance (Medve-Bálint, Svensson 2015; Nagy 2011; Svensson 2015) as well as changing geopolitical considerations (Csaba, Jeszenszky, Martonyi 2009; Romsics, Király 1999), give evidence of the multidimensional impact of border shifts and border-crossings. The borderland character of Hungary is also a result of historical memories attached to the country's shifting borders and the role they play in defining national identity (see Egry 2010; Kürti 2006). At the same time, the ways in which Hungarian border narratives are exploited politically and socially also reflect impacts of European integration and post-Cold War reconciliation. One of the greatest contributions of contemporary Hungarian border studies has been to break with a 'bordered' and introverted view and thus open up the research context, linking Hungary with its neighbours, its wider geographic and geopolitical context within Europe and, of course, to more general international developments. In this way, the notion of a borderlands society acquires considerable importance in emphasizing mutual dependencies between Hungary and its neighbours.

### ***Legacies of the Past and Critical Border Studies***

As part of the turn towards a more inclusive and critical approach, Hungarian border studies have actively engaged in a critical assessment of the political instrumentalisation of borders and the historical memories that are associated with them. For example, much research attention has been focused on the problematic trajectories of Hungarian border studies during the 1919-1944 interwar period. Since 1989, Hungarian border studies have provided much background research in the critical analysis of Hungary's 'border trauma' as a result of the 1920 Peace Agreement and its complex aftermath Hajdú (1998a,b), Keményfi (2006) and Krasznai (2012), for example, have offered critical analyses of the ethnopolitical character of Hungarian geography during the first half of the 20th Century and the fact that the ethnopolitical was generally legitimized by reference to historical longevity, as in the case of Rónai (1945), and/or to physical spaces and geomorphology, such as Gyula Prinz's (1936) elaboration of the Tisia massif idea. Furthermore, although different approaches and opinions characterized Hungarian geography, a certain degree of consensus emerged around the idea that 'natural law' determined Hungary's historical central organizing role within the 'Carpathian Crescent'. With interwar reference to natural law, questions regarding 'good' and 'bad' borders took on considerable significance. However, the geodeterminism of Hungarian geography cannot be separated from the racialising and nationalising endeavours of everyday politics, more general academic debate and culture and literature during the 1920s and 1930s. In addition, the ethnic, linguistic and racial elements of geographic thought reflected clear nationalist inspiration, based on politicized interpretations of Ratzellian political geography (see Hajdú 1998b). 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).

The present-day context offers a rich field of analysis of border politics that seek to exploit historical memories linked to borders as well as more general questions of national identity (Oláh 2015; Pap, Glied 2017). Although no longer a normative category in terms of political geographies of borders, the concept of the *Thousand Year Borders* remains a powerful border narrative, both in Hungarian popular imaginations as well as - but in rather more subtle ways - in political discourse (Hajdú 2018). This is particularly true in the case of neo-nationalist and 'illiberal' instrumentalisations of Hungary's borders as instruments of exclusion (see Pap, Reményi 2017). If this motif is partly one of a nostalgic harking back to the period in European history in which the Hungarian Kingdom constituted a relatively stable territorial formation, elements of a national remembrance of



historical injustice, of the Trianon decree in particular, are clearly present. The concept of the Thousand Year Borders continues to derive discursive power from the stability and territorial integrity associated with them as well as from the conterminous nature of the state border with geographic frontiers – the Carpathian Basin (see Keményfi 2006). While the irredentist message of the 1000-year borders theme was ubiquitous in the interwar period, this has now been largely (at least by the political mainstream) been partly converted into an argument for greater autonomy for Hungarian communities in the region, although the ethnopolitical attempt to promote transnational citizenship has been highly criticized by neighbouring states (Hajdú 2018). Moreover, the 1000-year borders idea resonates at an everyday level through the evocation of historical memories and images of past greatness and longevity (Antonsich, Szalkai 2014).

### ***Cross-Border Cooperation***

National historical memories do not always unite countries. Given the difficult legacies of the past and the lack of true cooperation between Hungary and its neighbours for close to seven decades, Hungarian border research has been a major driver of investigations into the potentials and challenges related to cross-border cooperation (CBC) in Central Europe and beyond. Within the context of European integration, CBC can be understood as an exercise in the symbolic dismantling of borders and the consolidation of political community. CBC is not only a political but also a social and cultural arena; it has provided a framework for new regional ideas and re-evaluations of regional and national histories within the European context. Arguably, the process of Europeanisation – which involves a gradual diffusion of supranational understandings of political community, citizenship, territoriality, identity and governance – is closely related to changing concepts of borders, both within the EU and beyond. Europeanisation also involves the transcendence of strictly national orientations in public policy, development strategies but also everyday forms of cross-border interaction and intercultural exchange. As part of this, cross-border co-operation (CBC) at the interstate, regional and local levels is seen to provide ideational foundations for a networked Europe through symbolic representations of European space and its future development perspectives. CBC has been a source of institutional innovation and a driver of a more integrated and cohesive Europe; it has promoted collective learning processes in territorial cooperation in dealing with economic development, environmental issues, social issues and services, etc. (Cappellano et. al 2022).

Hungarian research on cross-border cooperation can be situated at the nexus of socio-economic research, policy analysis and cooperation advocacy; it also reflects a logical continuity that connects regional studies and border studies understood in broad terms. The opening of borders has certainly led to

greater functional interrelationships within the Carpathian Basin and cross-border labour markets and shopping patterns indicate (Mezei 2008; Nagy 2011). In addition, various processes of social and cultural interaction across borders have been studied. The identity-shaping impacts of borders on local communities has been an important aspect in this regard as exemplified by the work of Wastl-Walter and Váradi (2004), Szabó and Koncz (2006) and others.

Through vigorous analysis of cooperation contexts and dynamics Hungarian border studies have, at least indirectly, promoted the idea of CBC as something progressive and 'European'. Among many others, the work of Hakszer (2017), Lados (2005), Pámer (2011), Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives – CESCO (2015), has provided a rich longitudinal perspective to the development of local- and regional-level cooperation institutions along Hungary's numerous borders. A considerable amount of attention has been dedicated to environmental protection and ecological areas that straddle state borders. While generally supportive of cooperation programmes and projects, the insights of Hungarian border studies on cross-border cooperation have also been critical. Despite general positive results in terms of the creation of cross-border networks and successful local initiatives, such cooperation has generally not lived up to expectations. As Pálné Kovács (2009) has indicated, institutional legacies, such as strong central control, have clearly influenced CBC processes. Other factors have been documented within a rich body of research and include: lack of local capacity to promote cooperation, cumbersome EU regulations and project management rules, interstate tensions and ethnolinguistic conflict, as well as local orientations to national centres and European core regions rather than to neighbouring states (see, for example, Baranyi 2008; Hajdú et al. 2009; Hardi 2010; Mezei 2008).

### ***Borders, Cooperation and Regional Development***

Local-level CBC is often difficult to disentangle from other scales of interstate interaction and regionalist aspects have indeed emerged as a major element of border studies in Hungary. Reasons for this are many, but perhaps the main driver has been a perceived imperative of 'reintegrating' a regional space that has been fragmented by conflict, geopolitical divisions and non-cooperation. While the Carpathian Basin has received particular attention in this regard, the notion of re-integration has been also applied to Central and South Eastern Europe and the Balkan region (Pap 2010; Rácz 2017).

Hungarian understandings of wider regional development have mirrored shifts towards a more 'European' perspective in terms of geographically defined (and thus natural) spaces for regional cooperation, 'de-bordering' and (re)integration. Within this context Hungarian border studies have dedicated much attention to regional development concerns linked to socio-economic transformation, environmental protection and new forms of territorial governance. Furthermore, Hungarian border

studies have consistently focused on state borders, primarily in Central Europe, as a regional development context and political challenge. With EU-inspired notions of 'de-bordering' and regional cooperation gaining currency in the 1990s, and as new possibilities for re-establishing regional ties emerged, Hungarian borders have been conceptualised as regional development contexts in close alignment with a wider European reading of Cohesion Policy (see Barta 2006). For example, in the case of Hungary, 'post-socialist' regional studies since the first studies of Rechnitzer (1990) very much focused on the development of new local economic networks between Hungary and its neighbours and the roles that border regions play in their creation. This set of studies edited by Rechnitzer largely focused on structural data as a basis for close economic cooperation with Austria and also included some discussion of early form of cooperation with Austrian partners.

Nine years later, thematic discussion of the Hungarian-Austrian border give evidence of much broader, encompassing issues and sociological factors such as life on the border, local perceptions of the border as well as more functional aspects such a cross-border cooperation (Nárai, Rechnitzer 1999). The singularity of this border (the 'border development model') was emphasised because of its openness and dynamism and pioneer role in the accession process. By the same token, as development trends in the early 1990s clearly indicated, post-socialist economic transformation and differential border effects contributed to the exacerbation of core-periphery relationships. Distinctions were made in terms of characterising Hungary's borders between successful and dynamic Western border areas (those with Austria and Slovakia) and declining eastern border regions neighbouring Romania, Eastern Slovakia and Ukraine (Bihari, Kovács 2005; Kukorelli et. al. 2000). These distinctions were perhaps most vigorously expressed by Baranyi (2001) who depicted Hungary's eastern border regions as 'peripheries of the periphery'. Based on a comprehensive regional analysis of demographic, economic, and cultural processes, Baranyi developed a number of arguments in which border areas and settlements were clearly identified as regional development problems where cross-border cooperation held out prospects of linking into more general EU development processes. Baranyi also discussed the role of cross-border cooperation as part of more general European development.

In the Hungarian case, regional cross-border cooperation implies more than development per se. It is also about a project of defining national purpose in Europe while at the same time attempting to resolve past 'border traumas' and loss of territory and population resulting from the 1920 Paris Peace Treaty, known in Hungary simply as 'Trianon'. Indeed, the existence of sizable ethnic Hungarian communities in the surrounding countries and concern for the development, welfare, linguistic and political rights of these communities have privileged the regional idea of the Carpathian Basin as a geographical reference

in the reassessment of Hungary's place in Europe. Cross-border ethno-geographies and mappings of Hungarian and other minority communities within the Carpathian Basin (Kocsis 1988, 1990) played a significant role in reviving this geographical idea as well as framing it in terms of a reintegration project through greater cultural and linguistic autonomies. Admittedly, it was not until after 1919 that the Carpathian Basin emerged as a clear-cut and widely used spatial category (Hajdú 2004). However, it has since remained a fundamental spatial concept in Hungarian understandings, suggesting a geographical unity coterminous with cultural, linguistic, civilisational 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, Ring 1986). 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 neighbourliness while at the same time recognizing the expectations of 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine and other adjacent countries. Hence, ethno-political imperatives and the question of reconnecting urban networks and communities within this regional space (see below) has been a major policy issue for all Hungarian governments, particularly since the advent of national conservative government in 2010.

As a result, a major concept within this context is that of re-integrating the fragmented Carpathian Basin as part of a wider project of regional development, economic revitalisation and better neighbourhood relations in Central Europe (Lux 2010). This also very much involves the issue of environmental vulnerabilities and sustainability and the role of cross-border cooperation in developing appropriate strategies (Duray et al. 2010). At the same time, the Carpathian Basin is a central bordering narrative in the Hungarian case and Hungarian scholars have recognised its inherent self-referential and Budapest-centric nature (Fejes 2011; Hajdú 2018). The geographic imaginary of Carpathian Basin as a 1000-year border coterminous with the territory of the Hungarian Crown continues to derive discursive and symbolic power that is often mobilised by the present government in its suggestions of a national destiny to assume stewardship and 'integrate' the region (see Balogh 2021; Keményfi 2006). However, this imagery is not conducive to good neighbourliness nor to more effective cross-border cooperation above and beyond 'Hungarian-Hungarian relations'.

### ***Cross-border Constructions, Peripherality and Resilience at Borders (transformative power)***

Research on cross-border cooperation is often generally informed by normative assumptions regarding its desirability and inherent benefits. Here, Hungarian border studies have often adhered to this perspective, reflecting the

desire for greater openness to and interaction with neighbouring states that systemic change inspired. Nevertheless, the de-bordering momentum of European integration and 'Europeanisation' has also been questioned due to clear economic imbalances and new dependency relationships that have emerged since 1989. As indicated above, the problem of peripherality has, indeed been a major element of the regional studies focus on Central European (and thus Hungarian) borders. Gál and Schmidt (2017), for example, outline a de-facto process of geo-economic bordering within Europe, measurable as a degree of dependency on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and reflected in increasing inequalities at the European level but also with regard to intensifying spatial imbalances domestically. Moreover, the political economy of local cross-border relations has also been interrogated, particularly within the context of exacerbated East-West differences within Hungary. As Timár (2007b, 105.) has suggested, the River Tisza represents an internal border within the country "that cannot be crossed, with 'virtually redlined' areas of the global economy to the East of the river." These spatial imbalances are thus evident in the vast differences in economic opportunities offered by the Austrian-Hungarian-Slovakian border area compared to border regions in the East of the country. This is exemplified by studies undertaken in cities and communities at Hungary's eastern borders and in the case of Gyula, Nagy, Nagy and Timár (2012) describe a border city that is not only peripheral to the national and European economy, but that is in fact decoupled from core-periphery relations. Erika Nagy's (2013) study of the cross-border area that includes Bihar County (Hungary) and the city of Oradea (Romania) indicates a much more dynamic economic situation but also an extreme concentration of jobs, services and opportunities in the regional centres to the detriment of smaller settlements and less mobile population.

Other examples of recent research along these lines is a series of projects carried out by the Borders Research Group of the Institute for Regional Studies, which focuses attention on borders as development resources and as conditioning factors for Hungarian and Central European development (Balogh 2017; Gál, Schmidt 2017; Faragó, Varró 2016; Hardi, Uszkai 2017; Rácz 2017; Scott 2018; Varjú 2016). The results indicate that a complex panorama of simultaneous fragmentation and regional cooperation makes an objective assessment of cross-border regional integration quite difficult. Moreover, it is evident that despite the opportunities provided by European integration, the problems of regional cooperation, including extreme core-periphery imbalances, environmental concerns, dual economies and poor connectivity, remain unresolved.

The final point that will be made in this paper is that both explicitly and implicitly border research in Hungary has responded to multifaceted crisis situations as well as opportunities that have accompanied the transformation of border regimes and border regions in Central Europe. The transformational

aspect of cross-border cooperation, as a multi-actor border construction par excellence, has been highly significant at Hungary's borders in terms of local economies, cultural exchange and 'softer' areas of development. Above and beyond the often contrived project of Euroregions, Gábor Nagy (2011) and other scholars have demonstrated how local communities, such as Gyula, negotiate the Hungarian-Romanian border as a part of everyday routines and mobility patterns. Nagy's study also gives evidence of the durability and robust nature of cross-border urban networks between Hungary and Romania. Here, functional networks and relationships are drivers of cross-border interaction between Hungarian and Romanian towns. Nagy also states that the cross-border centrality of Hungarian cities such as Gyula is not a mere function of ethnic relations but involves Hungarian – ethnic Romanian interaction as well.

Research has also revealed that CBC has provided and still provides an important level of institutional learning despite changing central-local power relations (Soós, Fejes 2009; Soós 2014). More recently, the concepts of 'innovation systems' and 'resilience' have been developed by Hungarian scholars and their international partners, elaborating contextual approaches to innovation, partly anticipating the appeal of Capellano et al. (2022) to 'bring borders back' to considerations of regional innovation. Within this context, Hungarian-Slovakian borderlands have received considerable attention (Mezei 2008; Nagy 2014; Ocskay 2008; Törzsök, Majoros 2015). Péter Balogh and Márton Pete (2018) have investigated cross-border activities between Esztergom (Hungary) and Štúrovo (Slovakia) confirming the existence of a specific local and highly integrated borderlands culture, supported by use of a common language and a cross-border Hungarian but also Slovak identity. However, Balogh and Pete also direct attention to the vulnerability of interaction to policy decisions affecting border openness – a situation confirmed by the Covid restrictions put in place in 2020.

Applying a somewhat different perspective, Svensson, Balogh and Cartwright (2019) have documented the border-crossing activities of local food communities (the Kiskosár network between Esztergom and Štúrovo), which in their view provide a counter-movement to nationalism and nationalist rhetoric through building local solidarity and a sense of self-sufficiency across borders. Péter Balogh and Sara Svensson (2021) have developed this line of research by applying a resilience approach to three different Hungarian cross-border situations in which they documented cooperation activities involved commuting, food solidarity during the Covid border closures and humanitarian aid for refugees. They conclude that borderlands integration is strengthened by self-help networks, distinguishing locality from monolithic narratives of a Budapest-centred Hungarian nation.

## Concluding Remarks

This relatively brief and rather selective overview of Hungarian border studies has attempted to highlight major themes that link socio-economic research to processes of societal and socio-spatial transformation. What we find within this rich research tradition are multiple ways of interpreting the significance of borders, thus piecing together the many factors and processes that condition border-making practices. Moreover, the research strands discussed above give evidence of both continuity and conceptual change in Hungarian border studies. And it is most likely that – similarly to the more general European situation – Hungarian border studies will continue along this multilevel and multidisciplinary trajectory. The principal reason for this is the realisation that borders – whether of an international, national administrative, cultural, linguistic or mental nature – clearly play an important role in structuring socio-spatial processes and the thus the positionality of Hungary within a wider European context. Moreover, according to research findings, both EU-internal and external frontiers remain an important factor in the achievement of broader cohesion and sustainability goals, despite considerable political obstacles to more forceful forms of cooperation. This is especially the case in Hungary, where borders continue to condition the development trajectories of numerous regions and cities and accentuate centre-periphery relationships (see Balogh 2015; Baranyi 2008; Hakszer 2017; Hajdú et al. 2009; Medve-Bálint, Svensson 2013).

In concluding we can ask the question where the specific significance of Hungarian border studies lies. Understood as an interlinked and multidisciplinary research field, the contributions of border studies offer critical insights into Hungarian and wider European geographies of borders and political, economic and social issues associated with them. Border studies have contributed in large measure to uncovering relationships between domestic development challenges, shifting geographical notions of regionness, the development of regional neighbourhood and Hungary's politics of borders. In this way, local, national, regional and wider European levels of investigation have come together. Furthermore, various strands of border studies research, be they geographic, historical, economic, political, sociological or anthropological in orientation, have complemented each other in providing a contextual perspective on different border-making processes that have emerged since 1989.

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