BACKGROUND PROFILE

HUNGARIAN – UKRAINIAN REGIONAL CASE STUDY

SUMMARY

CENTRE FOR REGIONAL STUDIES OF THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, PÉCS

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POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The basic political determinants of the cross-border and bilateral relations across the Hungarian–Ukrainian border are as follows:

- It's a relationship between two countries that are significantly different size;
- The two countries are parts of two, for the time being rather different political and macro-regional systems;
- The importance of the relations is especially great on the Hungarian side, as the foreign relations, foreign trade and logistics ambitions of Hungary are strongly linked to this border section;
- This border section is strongly “infected” with illegal trade and employment, immigration and Asian refugees, with chaotic border crossing conditions and political tensions;
- A special but dominant characteristic is the approximately 12% proportion of the Hungarian ethnic minority living in the Ukrainian border region, which is a factor basically influencing the Hungarian foreign relations strategy;
- The connecting character of this border, important from so many aspects, is limited, however, by the responsibilities of Hungary coming from the Schengen norms;
- For the future of the relations, fundamental changes are promised by the new neighbourhood policy of the European Union.
DIMENSIONS OF THE EXISTENCE AS A BORDER REGION – ACTORS OF CO-OPERATION

The cross-border co-operations and movements can be seen in a large number of aspects, and what can be said with certainty is that they became livelier after the systemic change:

Between the governments of the two countries the relationship is continuous, settled by agreements and institutionalised by joint committees. The relations include economic, environmental aspects and cultural aspects concerning the situation of the Hungarian ethnic minority (it is important to mention that the Hungarian government was among the first ones to officially support the accession of the Ukraine to the European Union).

Along the border there is a close co-operation among the local governments. (The geographical designation is not an easy task, as in Hungary Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county, the neighbour to Transcarpathia in the Ukraine is substantially – four times – smaller than its Ukrainian counterpart; so at the comparisons we calculate not with Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County but the whole of the NUTS 2 level region of the North Great Hungarian Plain on the Hungarian side.) The co-operations have been institutionalised in different governmental and non-governmental forms: Carpathians Euroregion, Interreg programmes etc. It is important to remark that these co-operations have strongly been motivated by the Union supports. It is a factor setting back the efficiency of the co-operations, on the other hand, that the Ukraine has not comprehensively regulated yet the legal and organisational conditions of the international co-operations of local governments, and the fact that the local public administration in the Ukraine has hardly a self-governance character.

The economic relations are contradictory. The low performance and the problems of the Ukrainian economy are visible in the relations. A significant part of the Hungarian import (a total of 132 billion HUF) is
energy, while the majority of the export is processed goods. In the foreign trade relations of Hungary the Ukraine has a small proportion (which is even more true on the other way round), the number of joint ventures is low, and a considerable part of the economic relations are in the shadow economy.

Today there are several special regional development co-operations that are mostly manifested in infrastructure and environmental and also business development projects. Záhony in Hungary has an outstanding role as an international logistic centre. The total length of the Hungarian–Ukrainian border is 136.7 kilometres, the total of five border crossing stations (four of which were opened after the systemic change) is an optimal number. Of these, the oldest border crossing station the one at Záhony, is still the most important. For the development of the economic relations, development agencies and offices have been established on both sides, the co-operation of the banks has already started etc. The local governments and development actors of the respective Hungarian territories definitely calculate with the Union’s support to cross-border co-operation. In their concepts they feature the creation of a “Hungarian–Romanian–Ukrainian” Interregio, the joint construction of the flood prevention system, the construction of the M3 motorway to the border – as part of the Trans-European corridor No. 5 –, the establishment of complex tourism packages etc. Interestingly, the Hungarian government played a role in the making a separate development concept for the minority-inhabited territories of Transcarpathia in 2005.

It is an especially important feature of the region on the two sides of the border that the respected areas are the most rural ones in both countries, with a weak urban network, except the dynamically developing Nyíregyháza. The economic and social problems come from the rural character. In the border regions of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County in Hungary, unemployment is extremely high and the mobility of the labour market is extremely low (the proportion of the
Roma population is very high). At the same time, a large number of legal employees come from the Ukraine, accepting the very bad conditions of employment, thus being no competitors for the Hungarian labour force, despite the fact that a high proportion of them are skilled, approximately 30% of them have higher education certificate. The estimated number of illegal employees is high; nevertheless the employees of Ukrainian nationality but typically Hungarian mother tongue do not mean a danger for the labour market of the Hungarian region.

The non-governmental forms of co-operation are spreading too, the ethnic minorities have organised themselves at the national level in both countries (parties, ethnic minority self-governments), and there are many other co-operations, of churches, youth organisations, educational and cultural institutions etc. It is important to note, however, that the “bottom-up” character is not always valid for these non-governmental organisations. The Hungarian government for example strongly supports the relations to the Hungarian minority in the Ukraine, an example for which is the “Motherland programme” after the failed referendum (on the double citizenship of Hungarians living in the neighbouring countries). The activity and density of the organisations are often motivated top-down.

Due to the special situation of the Hungarian ethnic minority, presumably a dense network of individual, friendship and relatives relations is also present in the border region.

When assessing the sociological and mental issues in the border regions, in addition to the assumption of opinions, attitudes and phenomena coming from the objective determinations, the findings of empirical surveys are also available.

For the government of the Ukraine, a “poorer” and not yet EU member country struggling with economic social problems and the
problems of the systemic change, and even more for the local governments and the Hungarian ethnic minority in the border region to Hungary, having Hungarian relations means a prestige. The difference between the scales, on the other hand, is considerable; so on the whole the mutuality of the Hungarian–Ukrainian relations is more existing in foreign policy and diplomacy.

On the other hand, if we concentrate on the narrower, border region, the situation is different. The image of this region is basically negative, “chaotic conditions prevail” at the border, the movement of the population is almost one-way, from the Ukraine to Hungary. According to the findings of a questionnaire survey conducted in 2002 by the Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Hungarians have a rather negative image of the Ukrainians (poverty, backwardness, Soviet block, militarism, corruption). On the Ukrainian side, on the other hand, the respondents associated Hungary with economic well-being, Europe, the possibility of individual progress, and with nostalgia for the mother country, especially by the ethnic Hungarians.