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On the Possibility of Extending the European Green Belt to the Hungarian-Romanian Border Region

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In our present paper we make an attempt to put together some relevant information, based mainly on regional statistics and administrative data, in order to outline a blueprint of a greenway plan for the Hungarian-Romanian border area that could be able to create more opportunities for the sustainable development of the region through the green belt development. The target-area consists of eight counties, four on each side of the common border: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád in Hungary, respectively Satu Mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiș in Romania. Protection of nature and, in general, environment is an important issue because there are 235 ha of protected natural areas (natural parks and landscape protected areas) in the region representing 4.7% of its total territory (Final Evaluation Report). Our main purpose is to identify potential factors that could positively contribute to establishing a green belt in this area, such as: usage of agricultural terrains, existing experience in the environmental domain, as well as the potential effects of establishing a green belt in the border area.

Although recent events could suggest the contrary, one of the most important targets of the European Commission is to continue increasing border transparency within the Union. This process is supported financially by the cross-border funds and politically by the Schengen Agreement. On the other hand, Europe, as a whole, is highly committed to nature conservation and sustainable development. One of the most remarkable initiatives meant to achieve these goals is the so-called European Green Belt, an area that connects national parks, nature parks, biosphere reserves, transboundary protected areas and non-protected valuable habitats along or across the former Iron Curtain. In case of a positive scenario, in the near future Europe will have to accept the expansion of the Schengen Area. This means that in a not too far future there will be a possibility to expand the European Green Belt by the Hungarian-Romanian border-region.

The European Green Belt is a more than 12.500 km long ecological network ranging from the Barents Sea to the Balkans and the Black Sea. It consists of four main regional units: Fennoscandia and the Baltics, in the North, the Central European and the Balkan (South Eastern European) Green Belts. It connects 16 EU countries (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland,

Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, four candidate countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Turkey), two potential candidates (Kosovo, Albania) and two non-EU countries (Russia and Norway) and gathers almost 150 governmental and non-governmental organisations from these countries (European Green Belt).



Figure 1. The European Green Belt (European Green Belt)

Hungary belongs to the Central belt and Romania to the South Eastern one, their border area being the natural linking zone between the two. While Romania is still pretty inactive, Hungary cooperates with even three of its neighbours. On the 9th October of 2003 there was established the Goričko Nature Park in Slovenia as part of the Goričko-Raab-Őrség three country nature park in the border triangle with Austria and Hungary. Later, in 2012, at the border between Hungary and Croatia a biosphere reserve of 6.310 km² was established along the river Drava (Fact sheet).

As one can notice it from figure 1 (European Green Belt), the border zone of the two countries could be a natural side-extension of the Hungarian-Serbian, respectively Romanian-Serbian sections. Once established, the belt could serve as a starting base for further extensions along the Ukrainian frontiers of the two countries, even until Slovakia or Poland. In this case, the belt could reload, at least partially, some features of the Carpathian Euroregion. It would also have a strong symbolic pan-European meaning by replacing one of the best-guarded frontiers under communism, although the fact of being coordinated by different institutions, Hungary by the BUND-Project Office and Romania by Euronatur, could lead to some difficulties in managing the project (The European Green Belt - a Pan-European initiative).



Figure 2. Natura 2000 areas ((Natura 2000 Network Viewer)

The border crosses two major and numerous smaller rivers and there is a considerable number of lakes, of various size and nature, in its vicinity. Noticeably, about one third of the region is made up by Natura 2000 areas,

therefore it has a remarkable potential to develop local and regional touristic attractions. From our point of view, the main question is: could the existing Natura 2000 sites in the area constitute the emerging points of a quasi-continuous linear green corridor?

As one can see in figure 2 (Natura 2000 Network Viewer), there are pretty many sites in the border-counties, but these usually are small, fragmented and, with few exceptions, not located in the vicinity of the frontier. On the other hand, the existing sites cover both, habitats directive and birds directive, and a significant part of them do belong to both of them. The greatest and most important sites are located, as follows:

- the north of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, adjacent to the Ukrainian border, which constitutes a quasi-continuous region following mainly the Tisza and Túr rivers, with a short prolongation into the Romanian Satu Mare county;
- the Hortobágy National Park in the west of Hajdú-Bihar and some adjacent sites located south and south-east from it, towards Salonta, in Bihor;
- the boundary between Satu Mare and Bihor counties is crossed by two sites located one at the border (Urziceni – Valea lui Mihai) and the other one on the other side of the main road (Tiream – Diosig);
- the most significant sites in Bihor and Arad are located in the Apuseni Mountains, 50-100 km from the border;
- in the southern part, the most important sites are situated along the Maros and the three Körös rivers in Romania, respectively Maros and Tisza in Hungary.

The fragmentation of the sites in our target region can, at least partially, be explained by its highly populated character. There are several areas with continuous urban fabric, which usually are also industrial and commercial centres. This is true especially for the county-centres: Nyíregyháza, Satu Mare, Debrecen, Oradea, Békéscsaba, Arad, Szeged, Timișoara, but there are some smaller towns too, like: Mátészalka, Carei, Berettyóújfalú, Valea lui Mihai, Săcueni Bihor, Gyula, Salonta, etc. The region is characterised by a high settlement-density, especially along the main traffic arteries: roads and railways. These are two main roads oriented north-south on both sides of the border and several roads oriented east-west, usually along the riverbeds.

Until the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, the upper part of this region (approximately north from the river Maros) was one single unit, from cultural, economic, geographic and historical point of view, known as Partium, while the southern one was part of the so-called Banat, a highly developed region of the empire. As a consequence of the

formation of the new nation-states and their isolationist and autarchic policies, formerly existing natural relations were systematically dismantled. Now there is a strong need to rebuild the natural attraction-zones of the economic, commercial and cultural centres by overlapping the border (Szilágyi, 2013). In this regard, the building of a green belt could be a meaningful tool in directing and coordinating joint effort.

Nowadays, the border region of Hungary and Romania consists mostly of agricultural land, but due to several economic, social, demographic and legal factors not all of it is in permanent use. At least a part of these terrains could be used to bind elements of the green belt, e.g. Natura 2000 sites, but evaluating the total amount and position of these territories is very difficult, for their size and use changes whimsically. On the other hand, finding out by what means could the unused agricultural terrains in the border region be transformed into components of a green corridor would be a real challenge, from legal point of view.

As one of the authors tried to present in some former papers, (Zakota, *Működő határmenti együttműködések a bihari és szatmári térségben*, 2014) and (Zakota, *Hungarian-Romanian Cross-Border Co-Operation between 2007 and 2013*, 2015), the Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Co-operation Programme 2007-2013 was an excellent opportunity to broaden cooperation between representatives of business, civil sphere, local and regional administration from both sides of the border. They all gathered a considerable amount of experience and now there are actors who could attack such a complex task as the establishment of an almost 450 km long green belt. We also have to mention, that this region suffered several environmental catastrophes in the last decades. Such risks are borderless, so their prevention and eventual treatment evidently has a cross-border character and in consequence they were tackled by the cross-border Programme. The Programme encouraged the joint protection and management of natural resources, with a sum accounting for 18% of the total Programme budget, by covering four project categories, as follows:

- protection of nature and natural values,
- water management,
- waste management,
- studies and plans.

Table 1 presents some global figures related to these categories, based on the Final Report, which illustrates the relatively high interest for them in the target-region. On the other hand, table 2 emphasizes the capability of the environmental topic to bring together actors from different social and administrative segments for joint action (Final Evaluation Report).

Table 1. Budget of Cross-Border Environment protection

Category	Nr. of projects	Committed ERDF funds (mEUR)	Percentage of committed funds
Protection of nature and natural values	39	13.8	37%
Water management	13	15.2	40%
Waste management	5	7.0	19%
Studies and plans	15	1.7	4%
Cross-Border Environment protection	72	37.6	100%

Table 2. Beneficiary division of Cross-Border Environment protection by categories

Category	NGO, Chamber of commerce	Other public institution	Educational institution	Local and county self-government
Protection of nature and natural values	32%	11%	6%	50%
Water management	-	66%	4%	30%
Waste management	27%	24%	-	48%
Studies and plans	10%	21%	8%	62%

As a conclusion, we can affirm that establishing a green belt on the Hungarian-Romanian border could use the existing environmental and economic planning experience gained while implementing the Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Co-operation Programme 2007-2013. It also could offer several ideas for reusing the dismissed constructions in the border region infrastructure with alternative purposes. When talking about how the whole construct could affect the newly rebound social, cultural and economic relations between the settlements on the two sides of the border we cannot forget the important outbreak possibilities lying in the multicultural character and the rich historical heritage of the region too and its direct implications on developing regional tourism, respectively its indirect ones on sustainability, employment, business and even R+D cooperation and education.

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