

Triple Border Regions in Central Europe:

The Case of Hungary and its Neighbours



György Éger

One of the most distinctive present day European phenomena is the spread of regionalism: at the end of the 20th century Europe is becoming increasingly a continent of regions, in which the Western and Northern European regional models are leading the way. It is desirable that academic research investigate this phenomenon and develop accordingly. It represents an interesting challenge to observe life and conditions in certain formerly homogeneous, organically developing regions which later became divided on the basis of political decision.

Theoretical outline and aim of research

One of the objectives of this study is this to show similarities and differences in the development of individual parts of a number of regions now under the authority of two or more states.

At the same time, the generalisation of experience in this respect allows us to draw certain conclusions concerning sociological traits of the peripheria. As a result of particular political decisions the areas forming the subject of this study came under the jurisdiction of two (or more) states and thereby automatically became border regions, i.e. peripheria.

György Éger, László Teleki Foundation, Central European Institute, Multiethnic and Border Regions. Budapest, Hungary.

Therefore the subject matter may also be described as a study of the sociological aspects of border location and peripheria, the operationalisation of terms used to describe it, the study and separation of individual aspects of the phenomenon in question. (According to the hypothesis underlying the present study border location is a special variety of peripheria, its essence so to speak.)

Another objective of our research is to investigate the meaning and interrelation of such terms as *regionalism*, *border location* and *peripheria*. The empirical basis of this is the research itself: an analysis reflecting the concrete conditions of individual regions primarily based on statistical assessment and sociological study.

A further important goal of this study is to explore the relation between regionalism and its ethnic and religious aspects.

Regionalism and minority relations have also been among the outstanding social and political phenomena in Western Europe since the age of "ethnic revival". It is an undisputed fact that in Western Europe the *regional state* had been established by the 1980s. Ethno-regionalism — geographical, regional and ethnic interest coincidence and enforcement — has played a decisive role in the emergence of the regional state.

Regionalism and minority relations are equally important in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, the considerable ethnic diversity in this region makes this ques-

tion one of the most important political — national security and national policy — questions today. This topic presents an exciting challenge for any researcher.

From a pragmatic point of view interstate regional co-operation necessarily affects border regions. Border regions have a peripheral location and the peripheria — as unanimously viewed by both sociological and socio-geographical research — are as a rule significantly less developed than internal or central regions of the relevant state, the so-called centrum. This is the point where the third aspect of regionalism, that is, the minority (ethnic) question is linked to questions of border location and peripheria. As a result of the Versailles Treaty a number of states came into being in the region between Germany and Russia, the border regions or peripheria of which concentrated significant minority groups separated from their mother nation (Silesia, Sudeten Germany, Alsace, South Tirol etc.). This was a source of severe disadvantage in itself, quite apart from the disadvantages resulting from minority existence. What does this mean in practical terms? As a rule these disadvantages include insufficient or significantly underdeveloped infrastructure as compared to the centrum, a lack or scarcity of state development resources, demographic erosion, etc.

Border regions may play an outstanding role in the interaction of different ethnic groups, religions and cultures, as they concentrate many problems of a wider region. Despite this, to my knowledge, no research into this topic has been carried out in the region of Central and Eastern Europe: the novelty of such research further increases its significance. *Triple border regions* are presumed to be of special value in this respect as they feature a special mixture of cultures, at least this is often the case in respect of identical

meeting points between highly developed European countries. (See for example the regions of the Upper Rhine and the Swiss-French-German triple border). At the same time border location — especially triple borders — in underdeveloped regions may lead to accumulated disadvantages. In the triple border regions of Hungary there are cases of both.

What, therefore, are the concrete implications of border location, peripheral location, and minority-ethnic-existence in Central Europe, in respect of Hungary and its neighbours?

As far as Hungary is concerned, peripheral regions formed under the Trianon border settlement are important population areas for ethnic minorities. According to the 1990 census the decisive majority of Romanians, Croats and Slovenians, the majority of Germans, Serbs and Slovaks, and approximately two-thirds of Gypsies in Hungary live in border regions. The majority of ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries — with the exception of Transylvania, an area which was part of Hungary for centuries — are also located in border regions. Therefore cross border co-operation, division of labour, the formation of regional institutions and the development of relations between respective mother nations are questions of outstanding importance for ethnic minorities in the countries concerned. The widening of the range of regional co-operation is a task of outstanding importance for ethnic minority regions.

The study of border regions provides unique opportunities for empirical-historical research whereby the researcher can study under virtually laboratory conditions the process of how the institutional framework of individual states structurally determines the living conditions, life style and life course of individuals constituting particular ethnic groups. When

conducting comparative sociological research in respect of ethnic individuals and groups living on different sides of a triple border, the mobility of the individual must be placed in focus as such an approach allows us to understand and compare the totality of historically conditioned macro particularities at a micro level.

In view of its objectives research must use a theoretical and methodological paradigm able to: (1) integrate micro and macro levels, (2) provide a systematic understanding of the chronological and historical dimensions of social change, (3) process variables operationalised in accordance with the above based on mathematically and statistically well founded procedures, (4) update research and the studies resulting therefrom to international standards.

Based on the above considerations the ideal method appears to be the paradigm worked out by Karl Ulrich Mayer for the purpose of comparative research in social mobility. According to the Mayer approach, which is becoming more and more dominant in German and Anglo-Saxon sociology, the life course of the individual is a constituent of the social structure and so social structure is partially derivative of individual actions and action strategies and partially of institutional processes and historical forces becoming institutionalised, and is never to be interpreted in and by itself but always in the context of the life course of the relevant generation.

The Mayer paradigm is based on a multi level and multi time dimension system of theory and terminology. The terminology consists of a number of levels in that it is capable of linking features pertaining to individuals with historically defined parameters pertaining to formal institutions (school, workplace, etc.), age groups, ethnic groups, regions and states.

Terminology has a multi time dimension in that it is capable of interpreting individual time (e.g. age) with institutional time (age of a school or workplace) in the context of a given historical period (e.g. war time) or extraordinary historical events (change of borders, promulgation of new laws). All this is made possible by the method called *event history analysis* developed by Mayer and his team based on which relations between particular levels and dimensions may be integrated into formalised and testable models.

Because we are dealing with concrete regions and historical periods, in the course of his ethnic studies the researcher cannot restrict himself to the exclusive use of one paradigm, however excellent that paradigm might be. In the regions looked at in this survey ethnic particularities have an outstanding contextual significance. When studying living conditions, life styles and life courses the researcher cannot of course do without studying interethnic relations of the most varied kinds and levels (formal/informal, family/institutional, material/symbolic, etc.). Therefore substantial attention must be devoted to the historical study of local prestige and power structures and the cultural-symbolic world of each local group.

Operationalisation of research objectives

The complexity of the subject of this survey required an interdisciplinary approach focusing primarily on the following: politology, history, sociology, political economy, geographical economy, ethnology and cultural anthropology. However individual disciplines and the analysis of individual problems had to draw on primarily sociological methods and instruments with a view to making

its findings compatible with previous research.

The main sociological methods used were the following: case studies concerning particular conditions in the relevant regions, questionnaires and interviews.

Given the subject and objectives of the research it was best to conduct investigations in regions combining border regions of several countries. Between 1945 and 1990 there were five so-called triple borders between Hungary and its neighbours:

- Hungary-Czechoslovakia-Soviet Union,
- Hungary-Soviet Union-Rumania,
- Hungary-Yugoslavia-Rumania,
- Hungary-Yugoslavia-Austria,
- Hungary-Austria-Czechoslovakia.

Historical events resulted in the creation of two other triple borders: the Hungarian-Croatian-Serbian and the Hungarian-Croatian and Slovenian border (Mohács-Pélmonostor-Zombor and Lenti-Csáktornya-Lendva regions).

Our research concerned the five "classical" triple borders, in four of which field work was carried out in 1993. Field of research (regions):

- Hungary-Slovakia-Ukraine,
- Hungary-Rumania-Ukraine,
- Hungary-Austria-Slovenia,
- Hungary-Austria-Slovakia.

Selection criteria:

Different geographical environments, very different types of regional development, significant distance from each other, different successor states, religious and ethnic diversity. (We have — at least temporarily — omitted studying the Hungarian-Rumanian-Serbian triple border region due to financial and political reasons.)

The scope of our survey included settlements within 30 km of the theoretical

crossing point of the three borders in question. (According to our hypothesis and preliminary experience this 30 km circle is where the direct effects of border location unfold.) Within this selection criteria are included:

- distance from the border,
- size of settlement,
- accessibility of settlement (roads, railroads, road end village),
- distance from urban centres,
- administrative standing of settlement,
- ethnic structure,
- religious structure.

Based on the above criteria 30 settlements have been selected per region, i.e. 10 settlements per country. A total of 120 settlements have been included in the survey. Their distribution by country is as follows: Hungary 40, Slovakia, 20, Ukraine/Subcarpathia 20, Rumania 10, Slovenia 10, Austria 20.

Data were obtained mainly from questionnaires: two types of questionnaire were used per settlement, the so-called municipal and personal varieties. The municipal questionnaire was aimed at recording the current situation with regard to local institutions, infrastructure and businesses. The basic unit of the personal questionnaire was the household. The data of 1,200 households have been recorded within the framework of the survey. It seemed expedient to make up the sample from various cohorts.

The main topics of the survey are:

- (1) History of ancestors: grandparents' and parents' hard data, milestones in their lives,
- (2) The individual's life course: housing, school career, marriage and employment history,
- (3) Life course of the individual's brothers, sisters and children (see Point 2.),
- (4) material circumstances, family assets and property,
- (5) cultural consumption,
- (6) national identity, religious orientation,
- (7) politi-

cal and social involvement and attitudes, (8) social and interethnic relations.

Methodologically speaking the most vulnerable point of data collecting was sample taking because in respect of the neighbouring countries we could not hope to obtain the reliable population records so crucial for the preparation of samples.

Therefore, as a bridging solution, we intended originally to make data at least largely representative by way of instructing research leaders with local background knowledge to select a given number of households with the requirement that their selection should reflect all types of local household as proportionately as possible in respect of spatial and topographical location as well as social criteria. Sample taking was thus carried out based on instructions reflecting a clear order of preference.

We are planning to supplement the questionnaire method by interviews with local authorities and public figures. A further task is to prepare a monograph describing in detail the history of the relevant settlements based on strictly specified criteria.

Our plans include also a control survey in two locations, namely Hungary and the Western part of Central Europe. The survey to be conducted in Hungary shall focus on central areas, i.e. non-border and non-ethnic-minority regions; while the survey to be conducted abroad would look at the effect of border location in regions to the West of Hungary. (In connection with the latter a similar survey based on the same research methods is being negotiated in respect of the Austrian-Swiss-Italian triple border region to be financed by our Austrian partner institution.)

Expected findings of the survey

It is our firm belief that this survey would contribute to the rethinking and clarification of questions of border location and the role of border regions through the clarification of a number of connections and different aspects of the question. Therefore it can — in addition to featuring new findings — provide state development strategy, regional policy and regional development with new considerations to be taken on board. Comparative surveys may provide information on how the relevant regions may be brought out of their multiply disadvantageous situations.

It may prove to be of assistance in addressing problems faced by these regions today. What are the economic, political and cultural instruments which could make these Central European regions where different nations and cultures meet into an important driving force similarly to their counterparts in more highly developed regions of the world?

The survey at the same time allows us to conduct a historico-sociological comparative analysis and it is likely that the phenomena observed in triple border regions will have a wider relevance for Central Europe of mixed ethnic structure.

The expected methodological experience of the survey is also an important factor to be considered as it may introduce innovations and new criteria into ethnic studies. The methods selected by us will most probably prove useful for the study of other regions with success.

Following the analysis of survey results we intend to publish our findings in the form of a book, preferably to be published in Hungarian and English at approximately the same time.