

LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION: INSIGHTS FROM HUNGARY – ROMANIA



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The current border between Hungary and Romania was drawn by the 'Great European Powers' in 1919/1920. Thus, the delineation of these two states occurred at about the same time as the partition of the island of Ireland. Divergence and disconnect grew from the 1920s onwards, and were accentuated by authoritarian communist systems from the late 1940s to 1989. Thus, cross-border collaboration is a relatively new phenomenon for local authorities in both states, and many experiences in Oradea (Romania) and Eastern Hungary over the past fifteen years have parallels with the experiences on the island of Ireland.

This article begins by looking at political and geographical features of the Hungary-Romania border and the impacts it has had on the local economy and society. The communist period (1946-1989) marked the greatest severing of connections and conferred a severe infrastructural and governance deficit on border territories, the legacy of which continues to pose difficulties. The social, political and economic transitions that began in 1989, the aspiration of acceding to the European Union (EU) which occurred in 2005 in Hungary and 2007 in Romania, and newly delegated decision-making powers for local authorities prompted local authority councillors and officials to begin the push towards inter-municipal and cross-border

collaboration. What began as conversations among local politicians soon led to the formation of local authority associations, of which the Oradea Metropolitan Area Association (OMAA) has emerged as the single most significant driver and enabler of collaborative ventures.

This article, therefore, focuses on the initial drivers and technical support that helped launch the OMAA and considers its structure, role and outputs. It looks at its approaches to promoting cross-border collaboration, the types of projects generated and the impacts these have had locally. The article also considers how experiences of cross-border collaboration involving Oradea (Ro), Debrecen (Hu) and the adjoining rural communities may resonate with those involved in promoting collaboration along the Republic of Ireland (heretofore referred to as Ireland)-Northern Ireland border.

Political and Geographical Context

The lack of correspondence between the political/administrative border and the ethnic composition of the population is a feature of the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and that between Hungary and Romania. The latter context is also further complicated by linguistic and other cultural factors, and for many Hungarians, the loss of Transylvania to Romania, under the Treaty of Trianon¹ (July 1920), was a bitter blow to national pride (Cartlede, 2011). The post-war period, and particularly the 1960s and 1970s, were marked by tensions between the governments of Hungary and Romania. Although both were members of the Warsaw Pact², they openly disagreed on several issues, and the Transylvanian question was frequently the source of stand-offs between the two regimes (Shafir, 1985; Treptow, 1997). Thus by 1989, as the centrally planned economies in Hungary and Romania began their respective

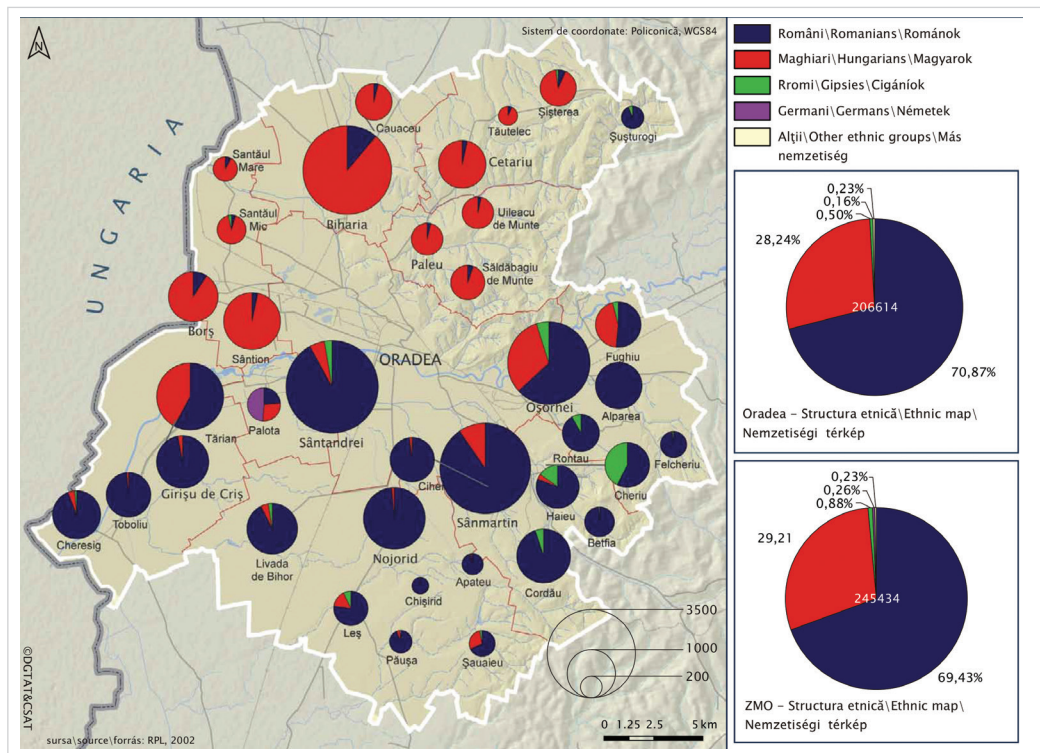
transitions and new democratic structures were introduced, Oradea, Debrecen and their surrounding communities had become severely disconnected from one another in every sense; institutions and the economies in both jurisdictions were very weak, and the context from which cross-border collaborations developed was more challenging than that which pertained on the island of Ireland.

As along the Irish border, political and ethnic considerations play a part in shaping cross-border dynamics. Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland have, understandably, been keener than their unionist neighbours were initially to engage in collaborations with communities in the South (Creamer *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, Hungarians in Oradea and surrounding communes in Romania have been the main political protagonists in initiating

cross-border collaboration. Of the nearly 250,000 people who live in the Oradea Metropolitan Area today, almost 30% are ethnic Hungarian, and Hungarians are the majority population in four of the communes that surround Oradea (see Figure 1).

Most Hungarians are either Roman Catholics or Reformed Protestants, while almost all Romanians adhere to the Romanian Orthodox Church. As in Northern Ireland, ethnicity is associated with voter behaviour; with the vast majority of Hungarians supporting the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania in local and national elections. The Union currently holds 38% of the local authority seats in the Oradea Metropolitan Area. In Eastern Hungary, the ethnic composition of the population is much more homogenous; with Hungarians forming the overwhelming majority - although the lure of lower

Figure 1: Ethnic Composition of the Population in the Oradea Metropolitan Area



(Source: Oradea Metropolitan Area Association and Faculty of History & Geography, University of Oradea (2007: 31))

property prices in Hungary relative to Romania, has, in recent years, resulted in up to 1,000 people moving to the Hungarian side of the border to live, while continuing to work in Oradea. There are significant Roma gypsy populations on both sides of the border and throughout Transylvania. Roma communities suffer greater poverty and insecurity than the rest of the population and their integration into society is generally poor (European Network of Legal Experts in the Non-Discrimination Field, 2012).

Geographically and economically, the city of Oradea (pop. 206,614), which is the tenth largest urban settlement in Romania, is very much at the core of the space in which inter-municipal and cross-border collaborations have emerged over the past decade. The city centre is located just 8km from the border with Hungary, and there is only one official border crossing between the Oradea Metropolitan Area and Hungary. The city's economic base has modernised considerably over the past two decades, and the services' sector now accounts for 80% of total employment. The recent establishment by local authorities of industrial parks has enabled the attraction of external investment, and Oradea and adjoining municipalities now host significant employers in electronics, international transport and energy.

The unemployment rate (6%) is below the regional and national averages. However, underemployment is a problem, particularly in rural communes where agricultural systems are still affected by the legacy of a command economy³, land resources are under-utilised and rural villages have experienced outward migration. Agriculture and food processing predominate the rural economy today, and prior to the establishment of the border, Oradea would have been the main service centre for many Hungarian communities such as Biharkeresztes and Artánd. The City of Debrecen (pop. 200,000 and located 50km from Oradea) is Hungary's second city, and throughout most of its history it has served as a market centre for an extensive and productive agricultural area.

The Post-Communist Transition and the Beginnings of Collaboration

At the same time as the peace process was beginning in Northern Ireland and paramilitary ceasefires were being mooted, the peoples of Hungary and Romania were embarking on profound and extensive political and economic reconstruction, as both countries made difficult, but largely peaceful transitions to market economies and democratic institutions. In the mid-1990s, local government reform transferred competencies to local authorities such as local economic development, urban planning and administration of land, protection of the environment and responsibilities for services including water supply and sewerage, local roads and transport. New legislation in 1998 provided greater fiscal autonomy in generating and using local revenue. This reform of local government was taking place during a period of rapid transition from a public sector-led economy to a market-led economy, and where local authorities became increasingly involved in local economic development and attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to create both employment and local revenue streams. These trends made local governments more aware of opportunities for regional cooperation and competition. In the case of Oradea, with a growing population, the potential of leveraging a key location along a major transportation corridor and a border crossing with Hungary began to open up a dialogue. As travel restrictions were lifted, cultural and religious associations, particularly Hungarian, began to organise social gatherings on a cross-border basis. It was at a social event (a dance) that the mayors from Romanian communes first began to talk to one another about the possibility of developing inter-municipal and cross-border linkages. Later, at a September 2000 Executive Seminar on Urban Planning and Economic Development, co-sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Design and the City of Oradea, the Mayor of Oradea and the Chief Architect noted their interest in revisiting the approved Oradea City Development Strategy to identify:

- concrete instruments the City could use to stimulate economic development;
- a clear direction for city growth; and
- regional cooperation opportunities with the communes surrounding Oradea.

Technical assistance and training were provided to Oradea and the neighboring communes to explore key areas and structure for cooperation⁴. A series of seminars among the Mayors and senior staff began to build a mutual understanding of where cooperation would be beneficial, with areas subsequently identified including:

- Economic development;
- Public services;
- Transport and accessibility;
- Quality of life; and lastly
- Community/culture.

Building on a 2001 memorandum for inter-communal cooperation among the local councils, the next step in the process was developing specific projects that both filled an important existing demand and, through cooperation, began to build trust. Projects proposed included:

- A desperately needed new eco-landfill; bringing the national gas network to the metropolitan area;
- Developing a GIS mapping capacity for the entire region;
- Aligning land-use plans along development corridors under rapid growth pressure, including the alignment of a proposed ring road;
- Coordination of regional bus service to better serve residents; and
- Joint applications for EU infrastructure funding.

A Mayor's Council was formed to guide this cooperation, and a secretariat supplied by the municipality of Oradea provided both technical studies and background reports, and coordination of meetings. As these activities evolved through 2005, it became evident that for the Oradea Metropolitan

Area, regional cooperation had evolved to a point where a new structure was required, hence the formation of the OMAA - the Oradea Metropolitan Area Association - as an NGO.

Since its formation by nine communes (local authorities) in 2005, the Oradea Metropolitan Area Association (OMAA) has grown to include the City of Oradea and eleven neighbouring communes (covering an area of 704km² and with a population of 250,000). As well as being the main engine of cross-border collaboration with Hungary, OMAA represents a model of inter-communal collaboration (within Romania) that enables local authorities to plan collectively, implement joint strategies and work collaboratively to lever external funding. The Association's main aim is to secure "the sustainable development of the metropolitan territory... following all the necessary principles for coagulated territorial cohesion" (2012: 6).

The OMAA has enabled individual communes to develop partnerships and projects in conjunction with municipalities⁵ in Hungary. Thus, the first step involved the establishment of a cooperative forum for the Oradea Metropolitan Area, with the second and subsequent steps focusing on reaching across the border to Hungary and participating in relevant EU programmes.

The OMAA's governance model emphasises ownership by the local authorities⁶. Regardless of population, all twelve members have one seat each on the Association's Council of Directors. The Council meets monthly to guide and oversee operational matters. The Association's General Assembly is required to meet at least annually, and is responsible for formulating and reviewing the annual work programme and budget. Its membership currently stands at over forty councillors, who are appointed by each commune on the basis of one seat for every 10,000 citizens, with no commune having fewer than three seats. The General Assembly is responsible for long-term strategic planning and governance.

Core funding is provided by the member communes (local authorities) themselves (at a rate of €1 for every person in each commune), while EU funds represent the dominant funding stream through which the Association has managed to finance activities.

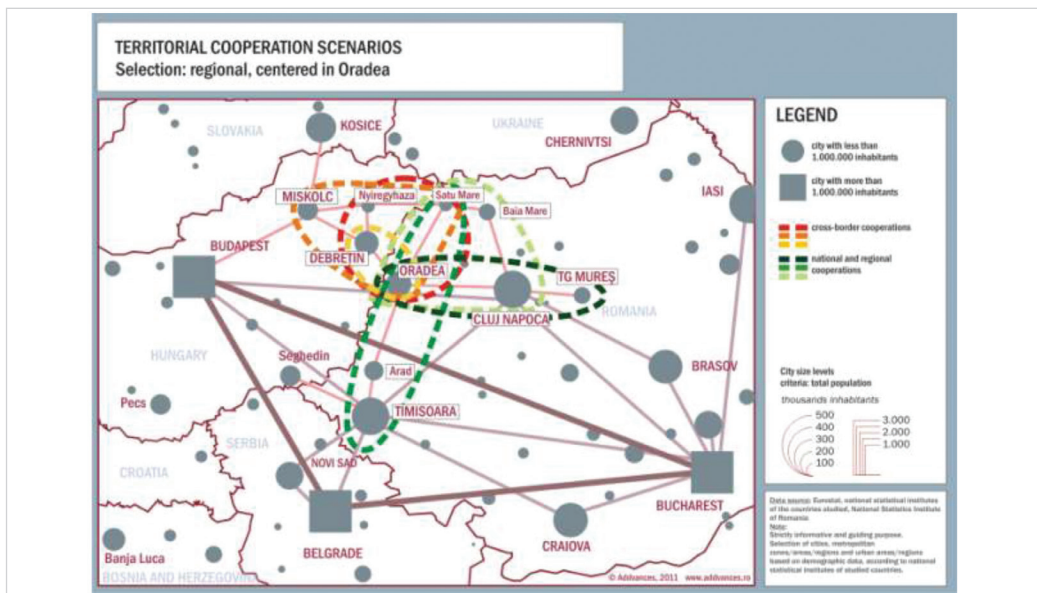
The Association's eight staff members are skilled in the areas of spatial planning, financial management and project animation. Working with the Council of Directors and the mayors and councillors in each of the communes they have formulated multi-annual strategic plans for each commune (all are posted on the OMAA website - see <http://www.zmo.ro>) as well as an overall integrated development strategy for the entire metropolitan area. As the following map shows, polycentrism and inter-jurisdictional collaboration are at the core of the Association's current strategy (see Figure 2).

The OMAA envisages scenarios for inter-regional co-operation within Romania that focus on improved road connectivity to other cities (Timișoara and Satu Mare), and there is strong support among its

membership and among the local population for the completion of the Transylvanian Highway that would connect Oradea to Cluj-Napoca and, ultimately, to Romania's capital - București⁷.

Scenarios with respect to cross-border collaboration envisage bilateral partnership between Oradea and Debrecen, together with a wider polycentric approach involving urban settlements to the north, namely Satu Mare (Ro) and Nyiregyhaza (Hu). This geographical expansion beyond the Debrecen – Oradea corridor marks a relatively new departure for the OMAA, and should redress the reported dissatisfaction with the lack of communication from the Oradea Metropolitan Area perceived by some communes to its north (Interview L). This potential expansion of the collaborative corridor between Oradea and Satu Mare will, if pursued, provide a link to the 'Gate to Europe' EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation)⁸ and potentially enhance Oradea's connectivity and institutional standing. The OMAA's advocacy of increased polycentrism and more integrated territorial planning, as outlined in its current strategic plan (published 2013), are

Figure 2: Territorial Cooperation Scenarios as promoted by the Oradea Metropolitan Area Association.



(Source: OMAA, 2013: 104).

considered somewhat ambitious by mayors and councillors in some communes. While keen to support collaborative ventures, they need to be assured of the benefits that can accrue to their individual communes, which continue to need investments in road, water and sanitation (Interviews F, G and H).

The Dynamics of Collaboration

The greatest external impetus towards collaboration has been EU membership and the associated ability of local authorities to attract and lever EU funding⁹. As one mayor observed with regard to funding applications, “alone, I submit for 4,000 people. Together, we submit for 250,000” (Interview I). Consequently, local authorities have been willing to enter into cross-border projects, in which EU funding is a ‘carrot’. The most notable downside with this form of incentive has been that cross-border collaboration tended to focus on single-ticket projects rather than on any long-term territorial development strategy; and once projects (e.g. road building) were completed, contacts have tended to become less frequent.

The fact that local authorities in both countries are responsible for similar aspects of spatial planning, infrastructure provision (road, water and sanitation), elementary/pre-school education, heritage and some aspects of cultural and tourism promotion has enabled them to progress from identifying common problems to being able to propose joint solutions and collaborative projects. Moreover, the leadership provided by councillors and mayors (and vice mayors, of which Oradea has three) in leading communities and guiding council staff has been a further driver of collaboration. Thus, aligned political competencies, a localised approach within public administrative systems, proactive local democratic leadership and the technical support and facilitation roles played by the OMAA have combined to generate a scenario whereby there are more cross-border projects along this part (i.e. Debrecen-Oradea corridor) of the Hungary-Romania border than anywhere else. Moreover, the projects from

this micro-region are also more balanced sectorally and geographically than is the case in other border territories (KPMG, 2013), and as the evaluators noted, Bihor County “is ahead of the pack” (2013: 31).

There are, however, some concerns over inter-urban competition, particularly among city authorities in Debrecen who question the merits of Oradea expanding its airport (owned by Bihor County Council), while Debrecen has an international airport. Notwithstanding these, and considering the low economic base and historical complexities associated with the border, collaboration has been facilitated by a number of factors, some of which emanate from outside the local area. These include similar rates of taxation (income and business) in both countries. Moreover, unlike on the island of Ireland, there are no restrictions on public transport operators and those holding transport contracts dropping and collecting passengers on either side of the border.

Outputs and Achievements

In terms of scale and impact, the cross-border projects in which the OMAA has been involved, either as a facilitator or as the lead partner, are the most significant. Infrastructure projects represent the single largest absorbers of funds invested to date, and the construction and upgrading of roads remains a strategic priority for most councillors and mayors. This is hardly surprising given the area’s long-standing infrastructural deficits. A number of inter-village road projects have been undertaken based on plans formulated by the OMAA and funded by the EU through the HuRo Cross-Border Programme¹⁰ (see Figure 3).

These hard infrastructure projects include constructing and up-grading cross-border roads and minor routes that connect villages to roads that transect the border. The projects are highly-visible and are well-regarded by local citizens (Interviews F, H, I and J). All were delivered on time and local authorities report that they were pleased with the

Figure 3: Acknowledgement of EU Funds in Support of Infrastructure Projects



(Source: Author)

commitment, pace and performance of their partner commune/municipality in delivering the projects (Interviews B, C and M). Thus, while collaboration is reported to be satisfactory at the local level, external factors have conspired against the completion of one of the road projects, namely the construction of a new road between Körösnagyharsány (Hu) and Toboliu (Ro). This project was planned by the OMAA and relevant local authorities and approved by the Hungarian and Romanian governments and by the EU at a time when Romania's accession to the Schengen Area was anticipated. However, subsequent objections from a number of EU governments have caused a slippage in the timetable for Romania and Bulgaria joining the Schengen area. Consequently, their citizens do not yet enjoy the same freedom of movement across EU borders as do those of other EU member states (except Croatia). Romania's exclusion from the Schengen Area obliges Hungary and Romania to maintain border patrols including passport/identification checks at

dedicated crossing points. This obligation carries with it significant costs in terms of the construction, maintenance and staffing of border posts, and neither government (Hungary or Romania) has had the required finances to put such infrastructure in place. Therefore, the newly constructed cross-border road between Körösnagyharsány and Toboliu has never been opened, and a six metre hiatus separates the points where the Romanian and Hungarian tarmacs end.

The capacity and performance of the private sector have benefited from cross-border projects promoted by local authorities, with the OMAA acting as the lead partner. The Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Debrecen and Oradea collaborate with one another and with their respective local authorities and local universities to promote cross-border trade. The Chambers have utilised cross-border funds to construct new buildings with facilities for meetings, conferences, training and hosting exhibitions. They

have also delivered training to SME owners and managers, with equal numbers of trainees coming from the Debrecen and Oradea areas.

The development of free WiFi hotspots at almost thirty locations on both sides of the border has helped to increase the connectivity of rural communities, and while such facilities are not limited to the promotion of cross-border contacts, the ability to maintain relationships using ICT is acknowledged by councillors and community leaders (see Figure 4). This virtual infrastructure has been strategically positioned adjacent to schools and cultural centres, so as to maximise its take-up and to promote digital literacy. The OMAA views this initiative as much more than a cross-border communication mechanism, but as a means of promoting the micro-region's capacity to attract suitable external investment (Interviews A, E, G).

While the development of basic infrastructure (e.g. a ring road for Oradea) will continue to be a high priority for local authorities in Hungary and Romania, stakeholders, and in particular, local authorities along the border are increasingly focusing on the development potential of local resources and the competitive advantages that accrue from focusing

on territorial distinctiveness. In this respect, the physical landscape and local energy resources are being valorised to a greater extent. In the case of Hungary – Romania one photovoltaic park has already been established, and renewable energy centres are planned for Hajdú-Bihar and Bihor (see Figure 4). In Oradea and environs, the focus is on the development of industrial parks to attract external investment and to promote clustering of manufacturing and service industries based on domestic and foreign firms. The tourism sector is also providing a forum for collaboration in Debrecen-Oradea. Trails (walking, cycling and hiking) are being developed and heritage amenities restored. As part of the programme to develop integrated transport in Greater Oradea, a new cycle path has been constructed that extends 30km into Hungary. Such infrastructure will benefit tourists and commuters alike.

The rehabilitation of the rivers Crişul Repede, Barcău, Tur, Crasna and Someş involved activities at 61 locations on both sides of the border. In addition to mobilising local authorities, the various elements of this project including installing boons, organising clean-ups and testing water quality, involved local communities and NGOs. The heightened intensity

Figure 4: Sample Projects Realised through Cross-Border Collaboration



(Source: Author)

and frequency of flooding events in Central and Eastern Europe over recent years have increased the willingness of local and national authorities to engage with one another in cross-border projects to alleviate flood damage and to protect water quality and sensitive natural habitats (Interviews E, K, and L). Therefore the work done to date under the aegis of the OMAA is likely to act as a platform for future cross-border collaboration on environmental initiatives.

Barriers and Challenges

While the similar socio-economic profiles of their catchment areas mean that local authorities on both sides of the border can identify common problems and solutions, authorities in Debrecen have tended to prioritise connectivity with Budapest and with the rest of Hungary over the promotion of linkages with rural municipalities and locations in Romania. This has led to perceptions among some local authority figures in rural areas, that the city is not interested in them, and that they are being marginalised (Interview J). There are also some concerns on the Romanian side of the border that Oradea may become marginalised in the reconfiguration of sub-national government that is taking place. Thus, in both countries, local authorities' perceptions of, and experiences with, other types of government have not always been conducive to cross-border collaboration. This situation contrasts with other examples of inter-municipal collaboration highlighted by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) (O'Keeffe, 2011).

Governance emerges as a key issue for the OMAA and for local authorities more generally in Debrecen-Oradea. The leadership roles played by mayors and other councillors have been vital in initiating and maintaining collaboration, and councillors must be credited with bringing executives and local populations along with them. However, the nature of electoral politics is such that some councillors are not always keen to confer authority on the OMAA that may delimit their abilities to 'fix' problems for local citizens. Therefore, on-going training and capacity-building of councillors and officials

remains a priority for the OMAA. As on the island of Ireland, the legislative framework (at government and inter-governmental levels) has lagged behind the progress achieved by local authorities and civil society in promoting inter-municipal and cross-border collaboration. Romania still lacks legislation for metropolitan areas that would allow associations such as the OMAA (and its constituent members) the autonomy they desire to make their own decisions regarding their geographical and sectoral remit¹¹. This centrally-imposed limitation is viewed universally among local authorities as a barrier to meaningful collaboration, and a failing to give effect to the principle of subsidiarity.

Future Trajectories

Despite unfavourable economic, political and infrastructural legacies and on-going financial and governance challenges, clear signposts can be identified on the future development trajectory for the Debrecen-Oradea corridor. Mayors are keen to expand the range of actors involved in cross-border collaboration, and they note the merits of enabling greater participation by civil society organisations in governance arrangements, decision-making and project delivery (Interviews G,H and I). Their sentiments echo with those of an evaluation of cross-border programmes throughout Central and Eastern Europe that

the requirement to include civil society actors should be implemented across all CBC programmes... The EU should open funding calls that are suitable for local (small) government participation. Following the model worked out in the LEADER programme might be one route (Demidov and Svensson, 2011: 3).

Mayors and councilors also advocate more socially-oriented projects, and they want to see greater involvement by Roma communities in all aspects of civic life.

The OMAA 'Oradea Metropolitan Area Development Strategy' published in 2013 provides a clear framework for action up to 2020. The strategy

identifies collaboration as an over-riding and under-pinning principle (2013: 98), and it sets out development priorities with respect to improving the quality of public services, making Oradea more attractive for businesses, stimulating tourism and enhancing governance. Significantly, the strategy identifies distinctive and complementary roles for each municipality, so that each capitalises on its strengths. This focus on complementary functions is embellished by a commitment to the knowledge economy and linking Oradea to the 'Gateway to Europe' cross-border Euroregion. This move towards integrated area-based planning represents a considerable advance for Oradea and its environs. Next steps ought to include mechanisms for civil society to input into the evaluation of strategic actions and the expansion of the review to cover governance issues and citizens' perceptions of territorial development. While the strategy is clear on the merits of, and mechanisms for, cross-border collaboration, evaluation indicators in this respect need to be developed. Indeed, in the absence of Hungarian municipalities on the Council of Directors and General Assembly of the OMAA, procedures need to be put in place for more formal consultations with them.

In the absence of legislation to support deeper inter-municipal and cross-border collaboration, and given the limited roles played by county councils heretofore, the onus is on actors at the local level, and on the OMAA in particular, to continue to promote dialogue and trust between local authorities and with the wider society. As local authorities identify the development resources and potential within their own areas, they need to ensure avoidance of competition and duplication. Local authorities will also need to develop their financial capacity as they embark on more extensive and larger-scale cross-border projects, as the regulations governing the disbursement of funds under EU Operational Programmes oblige partners to complete projects (or at least well-defined elements thereof) before drawing down their grants. This will require local authorities to collectively set-aside funds to enable them to bank-roll projects. They may also

look at the European Investment Bank as a source of bridging finance.

Parallel Experiences with the Irish Border

As this case study has highlighted, there are some interesting parallels between the Oradea Metropolitan Region and the Irish border corridor. The transboundary nature of physical spaces such as river catchments underscores the need for cross-border approaches to environmental resource management and landscape conservation, and there are successful examples along both borders, such as the aforementioned Crisul River Rehabilitation Project (Ro-Hu). Rural accessibility and the stimulation of rural economic diversification are essential in the promotion of balanced development, and the need for ongoing investment in rural broadband has been well demonstrated in Oradea and in Ireland (e.g. ICBAN, 2012). Experiences along both borders also reveal the importance of soft supports, and the provision of training to local authority councillors and officials has strengthened the ability of local government to lead, facilitate and enable inter-institutional collaboration, the progression towards collaborative spatial planning and the implementation of projects for the benefit of citizens on both sides of the border.

While both countries have been classified as centralised states relative to other countries in Europe, (Condurache, 2013; Courier *et al.*, 2009), local authorities in Hungary and Romania have similar competencies and structures, and their functional parallels have helped to advance collaboration. Moreover, Hungarian municipalities and Romanian communes have maintained their roles and functions, unlike Irish county councils which have lost power to central government over recent years. Indeed, Romanian communes have consolidated their position within the territorial system, while Irish town councils were abolished in 2014. Thus, while sub-national government has been subject to considerable reforms particularly at the regional and county tiers, the 'fit' between municipal (local) authorities in both countries and their consolidation within institutional systems puts

local authorities in Hungary and Romania in a strong position in terms of ensuring tailored interventions at the micro-regional level to meet local needs and develop local potential. In the case of the Irish border corridor, this institutional void has tended to be filled by an active civil society, and community and voluntary groups in Ireland and Northern Ireland have tended to progress beyond building cultural connections – a key first step in promoting cross-border collaboration (in both contexts), and are responsible for strategically important human resource, social, environment and economic development initiatives.

In addition to convergence between both border contexts with respect to strategic priorities (although from different baselines), similarities can also be observed with respect to the methodologies being applied. Training delivered by the ICLRD over the course of 2013, for example, has enabled local authority elected members and executives from both sides of the Irish border to deepen collaboration and to advance on the structures and achievements of the existing three cross-border networks, so as to promote greater institutional collaboration. Similarly, the OMAA continues to focus on mechanisms to promote collaboration between its constituent local authorities, and while its operating principles are similar to those of the local authority networks along the Irish border, its structures are more formalised and its ability to facilitate, influence and direct the agendas of local authorities is better established. Although the OMAA is firmly established in Oradea and environs, and its activities transcend the border, its formal governance model is, as of yet, exclusive to authorities based in Romania.

Conclusion

As has been the experience on the island of Ireland, collaboration requires trust and leadership. Cross-border contacts between cultural and community organisations provided a stimulus that enabled mayors and councillors in Oradea and Eastern Hungary to come together, and these contacts ultimately led to the formation of the Oradea Metropolitan Area Association (OMAA).

This association has provided a useful structure and mechanism to enable local authorities to work collaboratively across the border to formulate and implement projects. While there is scope for greater integration in the delivery and review of projects, trust has been established and councils have willingly bought into a collaborative model. Collaborative networks also exist along the Irish border through which councils have been enabled to collaborate. The OMAA differs from these in that it has a dedicated technical support unit and benefits from the legal authority associated with the offices of executive mayors and the leadership they have shown.

The national spatial strategies of Hungary and Romania, like that of Ireland and the *Regional Development Strategy* for Northern Ireland include provisions for cross-border collaboration; although in all cases there is greater emphasis on infrastructural connectivity than on integrated territorial development or collaborative governance. Moreover, Ireland, Hungary and Romania all lack a strong tier of regional government. Consequently, local authorities cannot count on the levels of exogenous support that are enjoyed by their equivalents in more decentralised states elsewhere in Europe. Despite the absence of an all-island cooperation framework (up to late 2013) in Ireland and the lack of legislative frameworks to enable subsidiarity in Hungary and Romania, local actors along the respective borders have made progress in establishing fora for collaborative decision-making, although in the case of Hungary-Romania, it is well-recognised that such mechanisms need to provide for greater citizen participation, community development and more formalised cross-border dialogue.

While the tardiness and shortcomings with respect to central government providing active support for cross-border collaboration tend to be negatively perceived by local authorities, there is widespread acknowledgement of the positive role played by the EU. Funding streams, including INTERREG and specific programmes such as HuRo have enabled projects to happen that would otherwise not have

been possible. There are, however, concerns in both sets of jurisdictions regarding the growing bureaucratisation associated with accessing and administering EU funds. The lessons from both border contexts point to the need for on-going emphasis on capacity-building of local actors and multi-level collaborative governance.

As local authorities on the island of Ireland come to terms with, and buy into, the current round of reforms proposed by Dublin and Belfast, they can take heart from experiences in Hungary and Romania, where the alignment of local authority functions proved to be a catalyst for collaboration. The reforms being delivered through *Putting People First* (Ireland) and the RPA – Review of Public Administration (Northern Ireland) will see local authorities on both sides of the border acquire similar competencies and be governed by similar legislation with respect to planning and territorial development. This represents a considerable advance in terms of giving effect to the all-island cooperative framework. In addition to aligning functions and institutions, it is essential that the appropriate geographical scale and

remit be applied, and experiences in Hungary and Romania provide strong evidence that micro-regions comprising economically and socially cohesive units represent the optimum spaces in which to promote territorial competitiveness.

Investing in the capacity of local authority members and civil society bodies, on-going EU support and increased government backing will enable local authorities and other stakeholders in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Hungary and Romania to build on their achievements to date, and progress from delivering projects to ensuring more integrated and sustainable cross-border territorial development.

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Listing of Interviewees

- A. Executive, OMAA (Oradea Metropolitan Area Association)
- B. Elected Member, OMAA
- C. Local Government (Hungary)
- D. Business Representative (Hungary)
- E. Executive, OMAA
- F. City Council (elected member), Oradea
- G. Rural Mayor (Romania)
- H. Town Mayor (Romania)
- I. Village Mayor (Romania)
- J. Civil Society Leader (Hungary)
- K. Executive of Cross-Border Body
- L. Senior Officer, Cross-Border Body
- M. Local Government Executive (Hungary)

Endnotes

- ¹ Following the conclusion of World War One and the Versailles negotiations, the Treaty of Trianon was signed between Hungary and Romania on 4 June 1920. It formally recognised the incorporation of Transylvania into Romania.

- ² The Warsaw Pact (formally, the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance), was a collective defence treaty among eight communist states of Central and Eastern Europe in existence during the Cold War. The Warsaw Pact was the military complement to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CoMEcon), the regional economic organisations for the communist states of Central and Eastern Europe
- ³ Romania's planned economy was characterised by a high degree of central government control over all aspects of economic activity. While centralised planning was a feature of communist regimes in Eastern Europe generally, Romania was perhaps the most extreme example. For a discussion of this economic model and its impacts on the transition to the free market, please see Van Frausum *et al.* (1994).
- ⁴ Applied research and technical assistance was provided by a joint team of regional and international experts led by the Center for Urban Development Studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The programme, entitled Urban Planning and Local Economic Development (UPLED), was financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
- ⁵ Romanian local authorities refer to themselves using the French term 'commune,' while Hungarian local authorities generally refer to themselves (when using the English language) as 'municipalities'. Hungary has 3,152 municipalities – with every traditional village and hamlet having its own municipal authority and functions. Communes in Romania are generally larger, and may contain a number of villages. The largest rural commune in the Oradea Metropolitan Area (after Oradea City) is Nojorid, and this has seven villages. The other communes have between two and six villages each. For further information about territorial organisation and sub-national government systems in both countries; please see www.ola-europe.eu (Observatory on Local Autonomy).
- ⁶ The Association has adopted a Charter of Good Local Governance, which outlines its principles of metropolitan cooperation. These include the principles of partnership, subsidiarity and additionality.
- ⁷ At present only limited sections of the highway have been constructed, and journey times to Cluj-Napoca (150km) can take up to 3 hours, while car and train journeys to Romania's capital – Bucureşti (580km) - generally take 10 to 12 hours. Debrecen is already connected to Budapest by rail and motorway, and were a section of motorway to be constructed between there and Oradea, journey times on the 250km to Budapest would be cut dramatically. While Debrecen is relatively well connected to Budapest, there is no onward direct road or rail link to Oradea (it was severed with the advent of the border) and the two routes most generally used by motorists go through several villages, such that drivers and their passengers are frequently obliged to contend with delays due to horses, tractors, cattle and fowl on the roadway. Train journeys from Oradea to Budapest take 5-6 hours and delays at the border can range from 20 to 50 minutes. The OMAA has formulated plans for a direct rail connection between Oradea and Debrecen.
- ⁸ Further information about the 'Gate to Europe' EGTC can be obtained at <http://www.europakapu.eu/>
- ⁹ Most cross-border projects have attracted EU funding at a rate of 80%. In Hungary, projects were generally funded as follows: EU 80%, National Exchequer 10 -17%, Local Sources 3 -10%. In Romania, the EU contribution tended to be greater, and the mean local contribution was in the order of 2%.

- ¹⁰ This programme has been operational since 1996, and prior to Hungarian and Romanian accession to the EU, it was funded through EU Phare. Between 2004 and 2007, it was supported through INTERREG III C. The general objective of the current programme is to bring the different actors – people, economic actors and communities – closer to each other, in order to better exploit opportunities offered by the joint development of the border area. The key areas of intervention are: transport, communication, environmental protection, business cooperation, R&D, health care, skills development/education and community development. The Programme is one of a number of cross-border support mechanisms in Central and South Eastern Europe (Grama, 2011).
- ¹¹ The legislative provisions are contained in Law No. 215/2001. These allow local authorities to form cooperative structures, but do not permit transfers of competencies, financial resources or provisions regarding the limits of public service management.

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