

# TWINNING AND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE HUNGARY-ROMANIA BORDER REGION

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## Abstract

For a long time, the traditional method of cross-border cooperation was the establishment of twinning partnerships, which has a long history in Europe. The development of inter-municipal cooperation began after the First World War, but it gained serious momentum after World War II, in order to rebuild Europe and create a global order based on peaceful cooperation. The Romanian revolution in 1989 opened the border, twinning between Hungarian and Romanian municipalities has emerged: many Hungarian and Romanian municipalities set up cooperation, in the near border area, as well as in other parts of Transylvania. This was followed by the forming of euroregions and, recently, EGTCs. which is reflecting the diversity of this long border section. Although ethnic character has always been an important element of cooperation, the start of Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes oriented the local players towards thematic cooperation.

The study aims to identify the territorial patterns of twin town cooperation along the Hungary-Romania border, point out the relationship between twin town cooperation and project-based cooperation: which twinning partnerships proved to be successful on project-level as well. For the analysis the twinning database of the National Association of Local Governments of Hungary was used, as well as the project-level database of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 programme. The results underline the added value of an existing twinning in project-based cooperation, highlighting the role of major cities and their institutions, which are the key for sustainable cooperation in the border area.

**Keywords:** twinning, cross-border cooperation, Hungary, Romania.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Town twinning – literature review

Although there is information about inter-municipal cooperation in Europe already in the Middle Ages, the beginning of institutionalised cooperation is usually associated with the end of the "long nineteenth century". Twinning is typically a formal, long-term cooperation between two local governments (Zelinsky, 1991), based on jointly formulated cooperation agreements (Handley, 2021). The aim of the cooperation is to promote peace and provide good examples on local level, combat xenophobia, establish personal relationships that could evolve into sympathy (Langenohl, 2014). Establishment of twinning was typically built on common historical roots, following a territorial logic. Thus, majority of them were set up between neighbouring countries, usually between towns and municipalities that once belonged to the same country

(Kézay & Páthy, 2023). Twinning, in its traditional format, usually lacks particular thematic focus, the main purpose is socialisation, in which reciprocity played a key role (Langenohl, 2014). An important element of relationship building is language, whereas a common language may significantly ease communication (Langenohl, 2017). Although twinning basically targets cooperation at the local level, it is often subordinated to state-level policies and even politics. Border towns have been the pioneers of twinning, from the very beginning. Their key role has even been strengthened after the fall of the Berlin Wall and opening of Eastern Europe to the West (Jańczak, 2017).

Twinning collaborations are usually distinguished from other ad hoc local government collaborations by their formalisation and agreement-based nature. There are cooperation agreements, joint sessions, declarations, plans, working groups (Jańczak, 2017), which are complemented by joint political and cultural events. The permeability of the border, the national, cultural, linguistic composition, and the availability of political and economic resources are key to the sustainability of the relationship (Jańczak, 2017).

The Council of Europe (CoE) has played a key role in promotion and regulation of twinning. In 1980 the Madrid Framework Convention has been drawn up, with the aim to simplify cooperation between local and regional authorities and to integrate it into a single legal framework (Perkmann, 2003), which should be facilitated also by national legislation. The Madrid Convention has been ratified by Hungary in 1994, by Romania in 2003 (Soós & Fejes, 2009).

As a Europe-wide civil organisation, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) has been established in 1951, in Geneva (Even & Hebbert, 2007, Furmankiewicz, 2001), which is still operational today and coordinates twinning cooperation at the European level. CEMR plays a key role in promoting the principle of subsidiarity in the EU. The European Commission has set up a financial framework for the support of twinning already in 1989. An upheaval of twinning funding took place in the 2007-2013 period, with the start of the Citizens for Europe programme (CERM, 2007). This envelope is currently part of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, worth 191 million EUR for the period 2021-2027 (EC, 2021). In addition to the mentioned centrally coordinated programmes, the Interreg is by far the most extensive instrument for cross-border cooperation and twinning. Interreg was started as Community Initiative in 1990, later it had been integrated into cohesion policy, with a continuously increasing budget. Strand "A", with the highest budget, is devoted to cross-border cooperation (Pámer, 2021), financing typically bilateral programmes, both between members states and countries outside the EU (Pámer, 2019).

## 1.2. Twinning and cross-border cooperation between Hungary and Romania

Twinning in Eastern Europe was even more influenced by top-down coordination and adherence to centrally determined objectives. In Hungary the period of socialism was characterised by intensive relations with East Germany, Poland and Finland (Giczi & Sik, 2014). Fall of the Berlin Wall not only brought the intensification of relations with the West (Austria and Germany), but also a more widespread partnership with the neighbouring countries having Hungarian minority. According to a survey in 2002, Romania has been the most popular country for twinning among Hungarian local governments: 33% of Hungarian local governments had twin town/municipality relationship, 27% with Romania, which was followed by Germany (21%) and Slovakia (13%) (Giczi & Sik, 2014).

The Hungary-Romania border is 448 km long, without any major geographical obstacle. Its line is bound to the Trianon peace treaty and historic trauma on the Hungarian side (Scott, 2022). It has been considered by a number of scholars as peripheral, as Scott (2022, 38) quotes Baranyi (2001), “peripheries of the periphery”. The core areas are concentrated around the big cities: Debrecen and Oradea showed a dynamic economic situation (Nagy, 2013), with several areas affected recently by daily job-related mobility (Nagy, 2011).

In demographic terms the border area (which is understood in the context of the current study as the bordering NUTS 3 counties) faces a decline, particularly on the Hungarian side, which is also the smaller in terms of population, which may have an implication on the symmetry of cooperation as well. The share of GDP in the border area is below the respective national averages. The Romanian side is more characterised by industry, while on the Hungarian side services and public administration are the dominant sectors (Border Orientation Paper, 2019).

The Hungary-Romania border showed different stages of activity. The current border does not have any natural, historical or ethnical foundation (Hunya & Telegdy, 2003). In the interwar period the border area experienced intensive cooperation: crossing the border was possible through many points, only with an ID card. After World War II many crossing points had been closed (Ilies, 2005), the border had become a de facto closed one: cross-border contacts were a political monopoly of central governments (Hunya & Telegdy, 2003). The revolution in Romania in 1989 resulted renewed and intensive interactions, which intensified economic cooperation as well. The Romanian side of the border area could successfully capitalise its closeness to the Western markets, particularly after Hungary’s accession to the EU in 2004. Cheap workforce has been a comparative advantage for the entire border area, particularly for Romania. While on the Hungarian side the companies were more export-oriented, the Romanian side could supply the larger internal market as well (Hunya & Telegdy, 2003). The border has become an internal border of the EU in 2007 (Toca & Czimre, 2006), which opened up further opportunities. In terms of institutionalising

cooperation, the border area has caught up rather quickly: establishment of various cooperation frameworks dates back to the early 2000s. On the Southern part of the border area the Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa Euroregion (DKMT) has been established in 1997, which was followed by the Carpathian Euroregion and the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion in 2002 (Badulescu et al., 2015), being one of the oldest and still functioning such cooperation frameworks in this area. As regards European groupings of territorial cooperation (EGTC), this border area has been also very active: the Banat Triplex Confinium (seated in Mórahalom) and the Gateway Europe (Nyíradony) are to be mentioned (Țoca et al., 2021).

The analysed border section may be divided into two big parts. The Northern cooperation area consists of Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties of Hungary and the Romanian counties of Bihor and Satu Mare. This is basically identical with the area of the Carpathian Euroregion in Hungary and Romania (Cucerescu, 2016). This area is characterised by the intensive cooperation of Debrecen and Oradea, which is co-organised by the two local governments and their institutions, as well as the two universities. The intensive cooperation could create a growing cosmopolitan mentality: a joint euroregional study institute has been established by the Jean Monnet European Centre of Excellence in 2005, a joint development strategy was elaborated for the Eurometropolis Debora (Horga & Brie, 2013). The heyday of cooperation was the 2007-2013 period, the 2014-2020 period was characterised by a slow-down. Despite these achievements, the two cities look at the other often as competitors (FRONTEM, 2022). The Southern border area is characterised by the Arad–Szeged–Timișoara triangle. Key players are here, again, the universities of Szeged and Timișoara. Cooperation frameworks in this area are often trilateral, like the DKMT Euroregion and the trilateral Interreg IIIA Neighbourhood Programme in the 2004-2006 period (Csoka, 2018). For the middle part of the border area, it is important to mention the cooperation zone around the town of Gyula. Gyula, although a peripheral town in Hungary, is a relatively big sub-centre located directly at the border, being the centre of the Romanian minority in Hungary, with all the related institutions and their collaboration projects (Nagy, 2011).

Twinning in the Hungary-Romania border area has a strong ethnic character. According to Benczi (2023) minorities are important promoters of cooperation. The municipalities located closer to the border have a higher chance to have a twinning partner on the other side. In case of the big cities rather the institutions are the carriers of cooperation. Analysing the data of cross-border cooperation projects from the period 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, ten projects were found with strong minority character (Benczi, 2023). The dominant minority linkage are the ethnic Hungarians living in Romania. An opposite example may be the presence of ethnic Romanians in Gyula.

Besides euroregions and, recently, EGTCs, the existence of cross-border cooperation programmes is an important added value, turning the border area from a closed one into a cooperative one. Cooperation

started with a PHARE cross-border cooperation programme, which was followed by the first Interreg programme that involved two, then, non-EU member countries (Romania and Serbia-Montenegro – Csoka, 2018). This programme financed altogether 148 projects, with 384 partners and 344.7 million EUR budget spent, including co-financing.<sup>1</sup> The 2007-2013 programming period brought a dedicated bilateral Hungary-Romania cross-border programme that focused on sustainable development, social and economic cooperation, allocating 224.5 million EUR co-financing, for the eight counties directly located along the border (Hungary-Romania, 2008).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research sought to find answers to the following questions:

- What are the territorial patterns of twin town cooperation on the Hungary-Romania border?
- What is the relationship between twin town cooperation and project-based cooperation, based on the data of the 2014-2020 programming period?
- Which twinning cooperations proved to be successful on project basis?

For the quantitative research the following databases were used:

- For identification of the twinning cooperations, the database of twinning municipalities of the National Association of Local Governments of Hungary, as of 2018, for the four bordering counties (Békés, Csongrád-Csanád, Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg), was used. The database has been made available for the purposes of this research in tabular format, however also available online<sup>2</sup>. As changes might take place since 2018, the database has been updated in collaboration with the National Association of Local Governments in Hungary in 2024. This survey has generated some additional entries, however response from the local governments was very limited.
- For identification of project-based partnerships, the database of the selected projects of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 programme were used, which was made available by the Regional Office for Cross-Border Cooperation Oradea (BRECO).<sup>3</sup>

Besides the listed databases, four semi-structured interviews have been made with key stakeholders of cross-border cooperation: the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (as national authority),

<sup>1</sup> <https://keep.eu/programmes/213/2000-2006-Hungary-Romania-Serbia-Monte/> [accessed: 09/02/2026]

<sup>2</sup> <https://testvertelepulesek.hu/>

<sup>3</sup> List of projects available at <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/lists-of-financed-projects/> [accessed: 11/08/2025]

BRECO as the operational programme management body in Romania, the University of Debrecen and the City of Debrecen.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 3.1. Twinning in the Hungary-Romania border area

Figure 1 shows the municipalities of the four Hungarian bordering counties and the location of their twinning partners in Romania. As concentration of the dots shows the municipalities located closer to the border have a greater chance to have a twinning partner on the other side. While on the Hungarian side the distribution of twinning municipalities is more equal in space, on the Romanian side there is a visible concentration along the border, particularly in Bihor, Satu Mare and Arad counties. While in the Western Transylvanian counties (Alba, Cluj, Maramureş, Salaj) twinning municipalities are only in a limited number and no such cooperation with Hunedoara, a significant concentration is visible with the so called Szekler counties (Covasna, Harghita and Mureş).

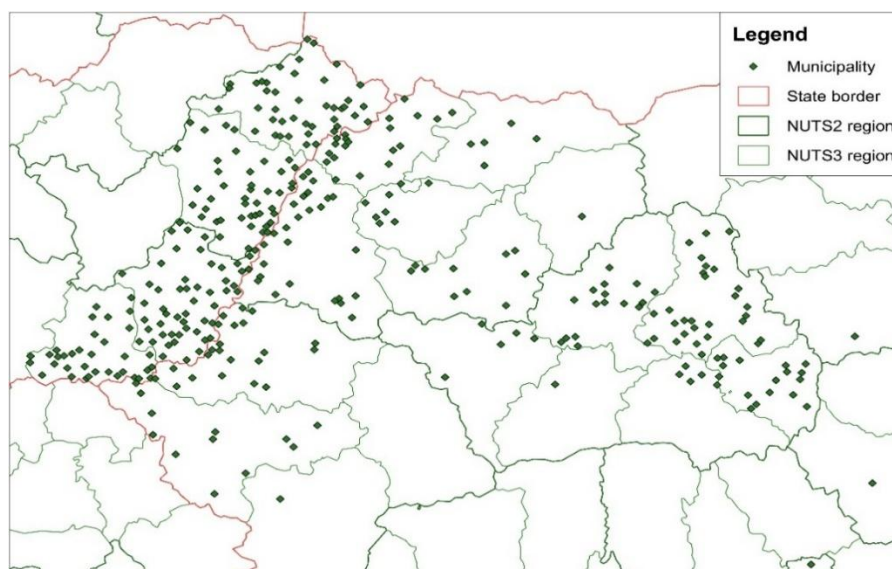


FIGURE 1 - TWINNING MUNICIPALITIES ALONG THE HUNGARY-ROMANIA BORDER.

Source: Own compilation based on national association of local governments of Hungary, 2018.

As Table 1 shows physical closeness is key on county level as well. Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg dominantly cooperates with the neighbouring Satu Mare, Hajdú-Bihar with Bihor. In the case of Békés county Arad is the dominant partner, however the Bihor and the Szekler counties are also significant. Csongrád-Csanád cooperates primarily with Timiş, with a strong presence of Harghita (Table 1). Thus, while the northern part of the border area prefers the direct neighbouring counties, the two southern counties have a stronger orientation towards the internal counties of Transylvania, including the Szekler ones. Twinning partners outside Transylvania are, in fact, non-existent (Table 2).

TABLE 1 - TWINNING COOPERATION BETWEEN HUNGARY AND ROMANIA BY COUNTIES

Counties	Békés	Csongrád-Csanád	Hajdú-Bihar	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	Total
Alba	3	1	2	0	6
Arad	23	4	1	3	31
Bacău	0	1	0	1	2
Bihor	17	2	26	3	48
Bistrița-Năsăud	1	0	0	0	1
Brașov	4	2	0	0	6
Caraș-Severin	1	0	0	0	1
Cluj	4	1	6	3	14
Covasna	19	4	1	1	25
Harghita	10	13	9	9	41
Ifov	1	0	0	0	1
Maramureș	1	2	1	3	7
Mureș	3	7	8	1	19
Salaj	0	0	3	6	9
Satu Mare	0	0	2	30	32
Sibiu	0	0	1	0	1
Timiș	2	14	1	0	17
Total	89	51	61	60	261

Source: Own compilation based on National Association of Local Governments of Hungary, 2018.

TABLE 2 - TWINNING COOPERATION BETWEEN HUNGARY AND ROMANIA BY TYPE OF COUNTIES

County categories in Romania	Békés	Csongrád-Csanád	Hajdú-Bihar	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	Total
Border	42	20	30	36	128
Szekler	32	24	18	11	85
Other Transylvania	14	7	13	12	46
Other Romania	1	0	0	1	2
Total	89	51	61	60	261

Source: Own compilation based on National Association of Local Governments of Hungary, 2018

### 3.2. Project-based partnerships

For the assessment of project-based cooperation the database of the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme was used, which was implemented in the 2014-2020 programming period. Thematic focus included environment protection, resource efficiency, regional green mobility, sustainable employment, health care and social infrastructure, disaster resilience and institutional capacity building. The final version of the programme amounted to 177.79 million EUR, with co-financing to 209.165 million (Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary, 2015). For each submitted project at least one partner from the Hungarian bordering counties and one from the Romanian bordering counties was necessary. Counties outside the programme area were generally excluded, however, in some special cases they could be involved. Out of the totally 333 local governments affected by the programme, from the Hungarian side 144, from the Romanian one 189 were involved in the projects. This shows a significant advantage on the Romanian

side, which may be a consequence of the asymmetry of the border area, in terms of population and economy. The distribution of project partnerships is shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 - PROJECT-BASED PARTNERSHIPS ACCORDING TO NUTS 3 REGIONS (COUNTIES) IN THE INTERREG V-A ROMANIA-HUNGARY PROGRAMME

Counties	Budapest	Békés	Csongrád-Csanád	Hajdú-Bihar	Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	Total
Arad	0	21	7	0	0	28
Bihar	0	29	1	49	1	80
Bucureşti	0	0	1	0	0	1
Mureş	0	0	1	0	0	1
Satu Mare	1	0	2	3	30	35
Timiş	0	4	21	1	0	26
Total	1	54	33	53	31	172

Source: Own compilation based on Interreg Romania-Hungary programme data

The picture of project-based cooperation is very similar to the county patterns of twinning (Table 1). Bihar was by far the most successful county, while on the Hungarian side distribution of activity is more balanced: the dominance of Békés and Hajdú-Bihar is not that outstanding. Concerning cooperation, the Bihar–Hajdú-Bihar connection was dominant. Similarly dominant is the cooperation between Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, as well as between Csongrád-Csanád and Timiş. Unlike in the case of twinning, on project level Békés has a more intensive cooperation with Bihar than with Arad county, which shows that the towns of Békés, which were the most active in cooperation (Békés, Békéscsaba, Gyula, Szarvas) had a strong connection to Oradea, as well as some other towns from Bihar (Aleşd, Sinteu). The involvement of partners from Budapest, Bucharest and Mureş county took place only in a few exceptional cases (Table 3).

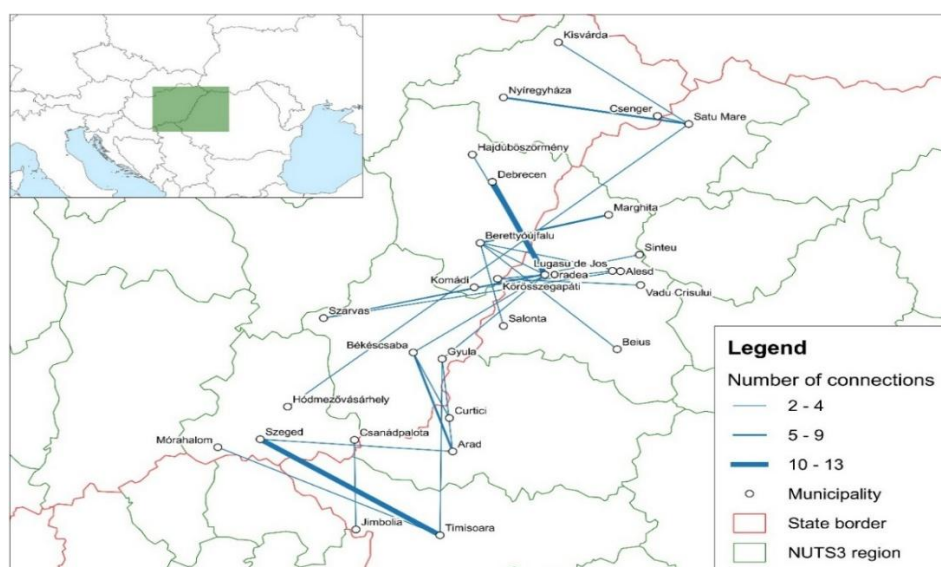


FIGURE 2 - PROJECT PARTNERSHIP CONNECTIONS GENERATING AT LEAST TWO PROJECTS

Source: Own compilation based on Interreg Romania-Hungary programme data and National Association of Local Governments of Hungary, 2018.

Majority of the projects, altogether in 75 cases, generated one-off partnerships. The number of partnerships that implemented at least two projects amounted to 25. These connections and shown on Figure 2. The connections with at least three projects are particularly listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4 - PROJECT PARTNERSHIP CONNECTIONS GENERATING AT LEAST THREE PROJECTS

Town/city	Békéscsaba	Berettyó- újfalú	Debrecen	Gyula	Hajdú- böszörmény	Móra- halom	Nyíregyháza	Szeged
Aleșd		3						
Arad	6			3				3
Marghita		5						
Oradea	4	3	13		4			
Satu Mare							8	
Timișoara						3		12

Source: On compilation based on Interreg Romania-Hungary programme data

On local government level, similarly to the county-level distribution, the Debrecen–Oradea and the Szeged–Timișoara connections were the most active, that are followed by the Nyíregyháza–Satu Mare and the Arad–Békéscsaba connection. Beyond these major cities several smaller towns show remarkable activity. Important is to point out the active role of Berettyóújfalú, which had altogether six project-level partnerships, including three partners with at least three projects. Similar diversity is detected in the case of Békéscsaba, with nine project partnerships, including two with more than three projects and one connection with two projects (Figure 2, Table 4).

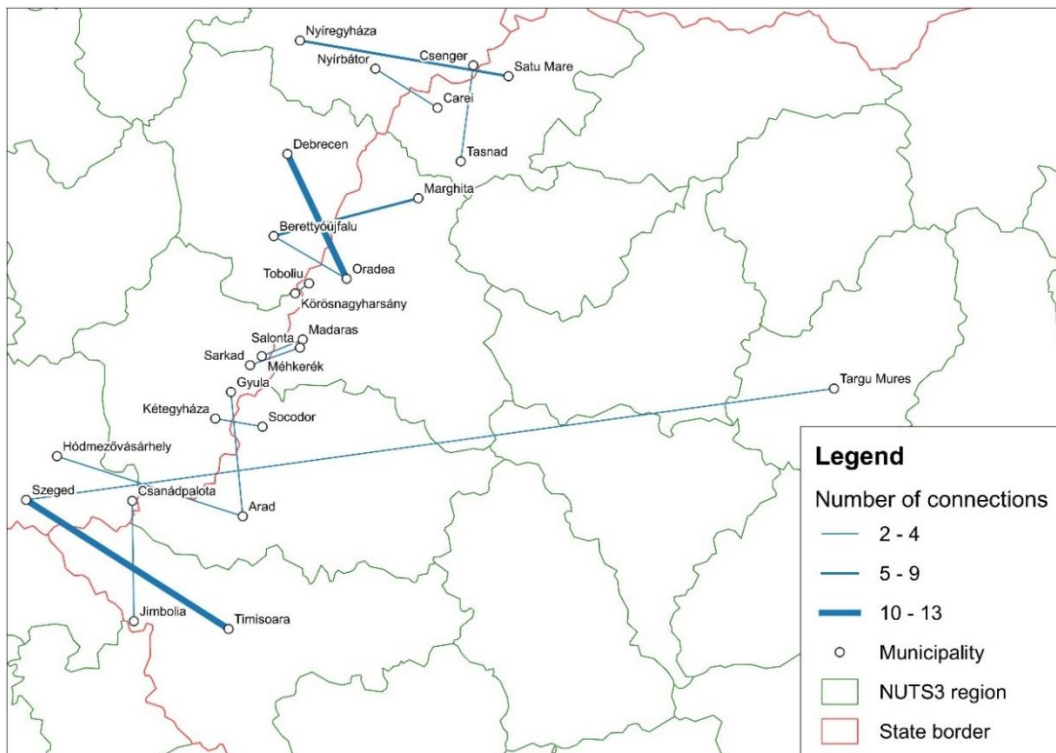


FIGURE 3 - PROJECT PARTNERSHIPS OF TWINNING PARTNERS GENERATING AT LEAST TWO PROJECTS

Source: Own compilation based on Interreg Romania-Hungary programme data and National Association of Local Governments of Hungary, 2018.

### 3.3. Project-based partnerships between twin towns

Out of the 261 existing twin town partnerships, their vast majority, 246 did not have any project. Eight twin partnerships had one project. The twin partnerships with two or more projects are visualised in Figure 3. Among them the Debrecen–Oradea and the Szeged–Timișoara connections are, again, the most important, followed by the Nyíregyháza–Satu Mare and Berettyóújfalú–Marghita connections.

When taking a closer look at the projects, it is important to emphasise that cooperation is not necessarily implemented between the towns and cities themselves or their own organisations. Although local institutions are the dominant players in cooperation projects in general, they play the strongest role in the case of municipalities and towns. In the county seats the composition of project partners show a rather colourful picture: regional organisations play the dominant role, but the activity of national institutions is also remarkable. Altogether, Hungary and Romania show a very similar picture in this regard (Table 5).

TABLE 5 - TYPE OF COOPERATING INSTITUTIONS IN THE DIFFERENT SETTLEMENT TYPES.

Settlement type		National	Regional	Local	University and research	Other education	Health	Church	Civil	Total
Hungary	Municipality	0	0	13	0	0	0	1	7	21
	Town	2	0	30	1	1	12	1	6	53
	County seat	6	21	14	8	3	3	2	12	69
	Capital city	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Total	9	21	57	9	4	15	4	25	144
Romania	Municipality	0	0	36	0	0	0	1	0	37
	Town	0	0	33	0	1	0	0	1	35
	County seat	9	38	10	7	1	13	4	34	116
	Capital city	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Total	10	38	79	7	2	13	5	35	189

Source: own compilation based on Interreg Romania-Hungary programme data.

TABLE 6 - THE SHARE OF VARIOUS TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS IN THE CASE OF SETTLEMENTS HAVING AT LEAST FIVE PROJECT PARTNERS.

Town/city		National	Regional	Local	University and research	Other education	Health	Church	Civil	Settlement type
Hungary	Békéscsaba		62.50%	18.75%		6.25%			12.50%	County seat
	Berettyóújfalú			62.50%			37.50%			Town
	Debrecen	16.67%	5.56%	50.00%	16.67%				11.11%	County seat
	Gyula	14.29%		14.29%		14.29%	28.57%		28.57%	Town
	Mórahalom			60.00%					40.00%	Town
	Nyíregyháza		58.33%	8.33%			25.00%		8.33%	County seat
	Szeged	13.04%	13.04%	4.35%	21.74%	8.70%		8.70%	30.43%	County seat
Romania	Aleșd			100.00%						Town
	Arad		50.00%	14.29%					35.71%	County seat
	Marghita			83.33%					16.67%	Town
	Oradea	14.29%	23.21%	14.29%	8.93%		5.36%	7.14%	26.79%	County seat
	Salonta			100.00%						Town
	Satu Mare		45.45%				13.64%		40.91%	County seat
Timișoara		34.78%		8.70%	4.35%	30.43%		21.74%	County seat	

If we take a closer look at the most active towns and cities, the highest share of local institutions in project-based cooperation was detected in Debrecen (50%). In all the other Hungarian county seats the regional and civil organisations played the dominant role. On the Romanian side in the case of Arad and Oradea 14% of the cooperating partners belonged to the realm of the local governments, in the other two county seats local organisations did not participate in any project (Table 6).

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis provides an addition to past related researches. Benczi (2023), besides the minority character, also argued that a closer location to the border makes the chances higher to have a project partner on the other side. As the present analysis showed, proximity to the border is really an impetus to have a twinning partner. In terms of project partnerships, the major cities clearly play a dominant role, however, the near-border rural areas (particularly along the border of Hajdú-Bihar and Bihor, as well as Békés and South of Bihor) with physically closely located municipalities have also stable project-based cooperation. These municipalities are well represented among those with twinning relationship and stable project-based cooperation.

Similar analyses on the border area of Croatia and Hungary (Pámer, 2019, Pámer, 2023) brought similar conclusions. Although large cities there also dominate cooperation, their activity comes from the projects of state bodies, regional institutions and universities. In the comparison of the two countries, Hungary proved to be the more state-oriented and Croatia the more decentralised, due to its stronger regional institutions. In the Hungary-Romania context, however, the involvement of national and regional institutions in cooperation projects is very similar, reflecting to a generally similar governance system in the two countries. The local level is the dominant player in both countries, however for Hungary a stronger involvement of education and health care institutions is visible, which are, in fact, state-controlled bodies.

Similarity is an important factor in twinning, as it was concluded by Pámer (2025). In the case of Hungary and Romania the most stable twinning and project-oriented relationships were made between similar towns and cities. As the present paper has shown, the Debrecen–Oradea, Nyíregyháza–Satu Mare and the Szeged–Timișoara axes are the most stable linkages, connecting similar regional centres from the two sides of the border. This similarity is also present on the lower levels of the settlement structure, in the case of the small towns and municipalities located along the border. The role of Oradea is, however, pivotal in the border area, as it had partners from all levels of the settlement structure in Hungary.

As the above-presented analysis shows general contractual cooperation, in the form of twinning, and thematically focused project-based partnership mutually strengthen each other. Vectors of twinning, with the major cities in the focal point, significantly overlap with the vectors of project-based partnerships,

however a dominant majority of the twinning partnerships did not have any project. This means that a contractual agreement between two local governments does not necessarily turn into an operational and thematic cooperation, which would be required by a cross-border Interreg project. Intensity of project-based partnerships are easier to measure, on the basis of the number of realised projects. More intensive project-based cooperation may have a positive impact on twinning as well: enhancing focus, opening to new players, finally generating new projects. This, altogether, leads to a more intensively cooperating border area.

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