

COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE BORDER. A EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE FROM WESTERN ROMANIA

Adina Palea

“Politehnica” University of Timisoara

adina.palea@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The present article analyzes the challenges faced by the European Union in its endeavour of implementing and developing cross-border cooperation as a means for reconciliation and regional development. It also presents the context in which Euro regions appeared as a form of institutionalized cross-border cooperation and focuses on the Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euro region, highlighting the opportunities and threats faced by this particular Euro region. Acknowledging that mass-media is a mirror of the society, the paper aims to establish, by analyzing the regional mass-media, if DKMT can be considered a case of good practice.*

Keywords: cross-border cooperation, euro regions, DKMT, regional media

JEL Classification: M38, R11

1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the European Union is a historical process with profound implication in the architecture of the large Europe seen as a union of free, democratic and prosperous states. The geopolitical situation of Europe has changed a lot after 1989, especially in the Central and Eastern parts of the continent. On the one hand, the relationships between the former communist countries have improved considerably – Romania-Hungary, Romania-Bulgaria, Hungary-Slovakia, etc. – and, on the other hand, there have appeared new states, new borders, as a result of the dramatic dissolution of the former Yugoslavia – Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Montenegro.

The improvement of the relations between the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe is based on the attention given to cooperation among the mentioned states, cooperation which transcends the current borders. Van Houtum emphasizes that, in a situation where borders cease to limit the space for action, we speak about a border that no longer functions as a barrier, but rather as a bridge connecting the two sides of a border together, creating a meeting place for actors from

various levels (van Houtum 1998, 171 in Laine 2006, p.5) and setting the scene for cross-border cooperation.

2. CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

The main objective of cross-border cooperation is to ensure the long-term development of the local communities situated on the two sides of the border. It is a precise objective, attainable through concrete projects and programmes, and which implies the participation of numerous local promoters.

Such a local promoter is the Euroregional Center for Democracy (CED). It is a regional resource center that plays a key role, both as facilitator and as resource center, in materializing the concept of regional cooperation in Central and South-Eastern Europe. CED is located in Timisoara, the city representing an ideal learning location for a laboratory seeking to devise programs of great importance for the future of democracy and regional stability. CED is presently involved in programs regarding regional cross-border cooperation, education for democracy, training and consultancy, and advocacy (<http://www.regionalnet.org/misiunea.php>).

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CLRA) also plays an important role in enhancing regional cooperation and development. CLRA is a pan-European political assembly, representing over 200,000 authorities in 47 European states. Its role is to promote local and regional democracy, improve local and regional governance and strengthen authorities' self-government. It pays particular attention to application of the principles laid down in the European Charter of Local Self-Government. It encourages the evolution and regionalization processes, as well as transfrontier cooperation between cities and regions (<http://www.coe.int/t/congress/presentation/>).

Cross-border cooperation as a means for reconciliation and regional development, going back to the 50s of the last century, proved to be an important tool for the integration and development process in Europe after World War II. One can follow the experience and the tangible results achieved through “Euroregions”, being established as tools for intensified cross-border cooperation between local and regional communities at the borders mainly between D/F and D/NL or later, after 1989, at Central and Eastern European borders. The main motives, hereby as motors for such initiatives, can be described through the main challenges, which border regions were and are still facing:

- the transformation of the border from a line of separation into a place of communication and cooperation between neighbours;
- the overcoming of mutual animosities and prejudices between peoples of border regions which result from historical heritage;
- the strengthening of democracy and the development of operational regional/local administrative structures;
- the overcoming of national peripherality and isolation;
- the promotion of economic growth and the development and improvement of living standards;
- the rapid approach towards and integrated Europe, just to mention a few of them.

If on the level of national governments and their official foreign policy it sometimes seems that the “close cross-border cooperation and good relations of neighbours”- declarations, tend to keep a certain abstract approach, such cooperation on the level of local authorities is based on tangible common needs and interests, at the same time being much more close to the citizens. Nowhere more so than in the border regions of neighbouring states is the necessity of avoiding a return to the previous state systems clear to everyone. That which is often merely a European theory for "Inlanders" is usually the daily practical reality for those people living on the border regions. It is these people who mostly suffer the consequences of the existence of the borders and, as such, they would like to remove the cause of their problems. It is therefore the aim of the work in the border regions and of the cross border cooperation to remove any barriers and separating factors within these regions and to achieve the eventual surmounting of the border, or possibly a reduction in the significance of the administrative border¹.

2.1 Euroregions

During the early 1990s, cross-border cooperation became one of the most dynamic areas of EU regional policy. By the late 1990s, there was not a single border in the EU that was not covered by some type of cross-border cooperation scheme (Jonsson, Tagil, & Tornqvist, 2000 in Popescu, 2008, p.423). In this context, Euroregions emerged as the most common form of institutionalized cross-border cooperation.

¹ <http://www.eurobalkans.net/enstrane/introduction.htm>

The first Euroregions appeared in the 1960s in the Dutch-German borderlands and were primarily the outcome of bottom-up social action aimed at addressing issues of peripheralization generated by nation-state borders. The mid-1990s saw the EU, together with national governments, become actively involved in promoting and guiding the establishment of Euroregions, imagining them as part of a broader strategy addressing issues of a borderless European space in the making.

The process of integrating the East European post-communist states after 1989 constituted another factor with significant impact on the development of EU geopolitics. The main strategy behind the EU's enlargement policy was the eastward transfer of its spatial vision of European unification through encouraging a variety of interregional, cross-border, and transnational institutional links between the EU member states and the East European applicant countries (Kennard, 2003 in Popescu, 2008, pp.424).

The EU policymakers came to see cross-border cooperation, institutionalized in the form of Euroregions, as one of the pillars of their enlargement policy. Euroregions were intended as a territorial framework where East Europeans would prepare for EU membership by practicing multilevel governance, learning to address cooperatively border-related issues, and working on reducing cross-border economic asymmetries. EU funding schemes, such as INTERREG, TACIS, and PHARE, were designed to support the implementation of this strategy. In this context, by the early 2000s Euroregions straddled most of the east European national boundaries (Popescu, 2008, pp.423-424). In this way, the EU "space" of cross-border cooperation was extended to Eastern Europe before any of the countries in the region gained EU membership.

Therefore we can say that the strategy of using cross-border communication to prepare the East European states for accession, follows Winston Churchill's famous words: "Let us build wisely, let us build surely, let us build faithfully, let us build not for the moment, but for the years to come" (<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/>).

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the efforts for creating strong Euroregions are supported by local promoters. The Euroregional Center for Democracy (CED) is located in Timisoara, because the city represents a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural space which encourages the dialogue between individuals and institutions that promote democratic values. Timisoara is actually the biggest city in the Banat region, and it mirrors the exemplary relations between people of different ethnicity, typical for the entire region. As Barna Bodo wrote "the remarkable minority relations in Banat" might serve as "a model of contemporary trans-national communication" (Neuman, 1998, pp.162).

In 2001, the Euroregional Center for Democracy was the nexus of a network of NGOs and institutions from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro-FRY, Serbia-FRY, Slovenia,

Hungary, Bulgaria, FYR of Macedonia and Romania, comprising more than 430 member organizations.

In order to maintain and further build this network based on partnership and collaborative agreements, the Center has elaborated a set of principles to be taken into consideration by the non-governmental organizations engaged in effective regional cooperation projects. It is often referred at as the “Decalogue of Regional Cooperation”. It reads as follows:

1. Partners have agreed upon the mission and the shared values, as well as upon the common goals and the measurable outcomes of the partnership.
2. The relationship between partners is characterized by mutual trust, respect, genuineness and commitment.
3. The partnership builds upon identified strengths and assets, but also addresses areas that need improvement.
4. The partnership balances the power among associates and enables resources to be shared.
5. There is a clear, open and accessible communication between the partners, making it an on-going priority to listen to each other and to validate/clarify the meaning of terms, developing a common project language.
6. Roles, norms, and processes for the partnership are established with the input and agreement of all partners.
7. There is feedback to, among, and from all stakeholders in the partnership, with the goal of steadily improving the partnership and its outcomes.
8. Partners share the credit for the partnership’s accomplishments.
9. Partnerships take time to develop and evolve over time.
10. The partners will build and sustain the existing network (Mihăieș, 2003).

2.2 New Dimensions of Cross-Border Cooperation

In 2000, in a report of The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe entitled *Democratic Stability in Central and South-eastern Europe through Cross-border Cooperation*, a new aspect of cross-border cooperation was emphasised: that of generator of stability in South-Eastern Europe (Coifan, 2003).

At the 19th Conference Europe of Regions, in 2001, Klaus Schumann mentioned that “within the present Stability Pact for South-East Europe the Council of Europe supports a strategy of combined efforts to strengthen local democracy institution and to promote the development of cross-border cooperation structures (Euroregions)” (Schumann, 2002, p.19).

The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe was an institution aimed at strengthening peace, democracy, human rights and economy in the countries of South Eastern Europe from 1999-2008. It was replaced by the Regional Co-operation Council (RCC) in February 2008 (<http://www.stabilitypact.org/about/default.asp>). The RCC focuses on regional cooperation in South-East Europe (SEE) through a regionally owned and led framework that also supports European and Euro-Atlantic integration (www.rcc.int).

Nevertheless, cross-border cooperation can be enhanced only through successful communication. It has been accepted that an unsolved problem of the European construction is connected to the deficit of communication, deficit which has conceptual, organizational/institutional or structural problems (Lianu, 2009). Understanding these problems, the Committee of the Regions has initiated, in 2008, a new decentralized communication policy, which intends to bring the EU information at a local level.[...] The decentralized communication regarding Europe mainly aims to:

- integrate the European dimension in the political administration at a local and regional level
- facilitate interaction with the local and regional mass-media
- make use, at a local and regional level, of the new communication technologies. (Vasile, 2009, pp.96)

3. LOCAL/ REGIONAL/ NATIONAL MEDIA

Mass-media's crucial role in the formation of people's opinions, values, desires and behaviours is well known and accepted nowadays. It facilitates public communication, it conveys messages from the national/regional/local authorities, it discusses the citizens' major causes of dissatisfaction, it presents success stories or unfortunate mishappenings, etc. Based on these and other roles it assumes, mass-media also becomes a mirror of the society. Thus, any attempts of addressing audiences, with the purpose of changing their opinion and/or behaviour, is closely related to the media appropriate for convey the required messages.

In the case of Euroregions, building awareness, raising support and creating cooperation relies on the communication media available in that particular region. Choosing or creating the right local/regional/national newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, websites, online news portals or blogs is essential for the successful implementation of any project.

Press is called local, regional or national based on a series of elements:

- the area for collecting information/opinions
- the broadcasting area
- the assumption of a position/attitude regarding the messages

Unfortunately, more than five decades of authoritarian regime have developed the extremes of press types: national, respectively local or county at the most. In order to be able to speak about regional press in Romania, a constant, balanced and coherent effort of covering the region should exist. This effort of identifying and disseminating worthy news should be correlated with the values and cultural-spiritual landmarks of the respective area (Cernicova, 2009). Sadly, the myth of the universal journalist is sufficiently powerful and professionally credible to cast shadow over the efforts of the journalist anchored in the realities he presents.

3.1 The Region in the West Romanian Context

After five decades of politics oriented towards the elimination of differences between Romania's historical regions (among others by replacing the term of "community" through "collective"), two decades of establishing the idea that success is based on individualism, egoism and scarification of community relations followed. Therefore, post-Revolution Romania was, from a political point of view, afraid to tackle the regional policies. The fears had various sources:

- the lack of experience in handling the subject;
- the examples of regionalism with political consequences like autonomism, enclavization, federalization;
- the lack of credible partners in the territory, who would remain loyal to the central leadership.

It was only the existence of regional policies at European Community level that exerted enough pressure on the state authorities, forcing them to accept the development of some regional policies and institutions. To support this opinion, we mention the fact that in 1992, for example, the association between counties from West Romania (Arad, Caraş-Severin și Timiș), with the purpose of socio-economic development, was blocked by the Government. Neither the process of decentralization, nor the creation of institutions at a regional level did not happen smoothly, decisively, with will on the part of the competent authorities (Cernicova, 2003). The trans-county regrouping did not lead to stable formulas, except in the case of Szekely Land. In Western Romania, however, we speak of:

- The Historical Banat – of which only the Timiș and Caraș-Severin counties are clearly and entirely part, as Arad is spiritually, mentally and historically split between Banat and Crișana, and Mehedinti has a dual identity split between Banat and Oltenia. We could also add Voivodina and an insignificant territory from Hungary.
- The Region (V) Vest – with Arad, Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara and Timiș counties. At this level there are institutions and coordinating forums, but there is no regional awareness.
- DKMT Euroregion – with partners from Hungary, Romania and Serbia (alphabetical order). In this case too, there are coordinating bodies, public policies, but also difficulties in stimulating the sense of belonging, and attachment to the geographical area.

3.2 The DKMT Euroregion

The protocol for the creation of the DKMT Euroregion was signed in Szeged, Hungary, on November 23, 1997. It was considered then that the appropriate structure for the coordination of activities within the DKMT Euroregion was the Presidents' Forum. In the meanwhile there have appeared other specific structures of cooperation, between chambers of commerce, universities, cultural institutions, etc. (Coifan, 2003, pp.93). We present hereinafter a SWOT analysis of the Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion:

Table 1 – SWOT analysis of DKMT Euroregion

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(positive aspects, internal to the entity)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(negative aspects, internal to the entity)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuable natural resources • Multicultural traditions • Varied and attractive landscapes, divergent cultural heritage – excellent tourism related endowments • Developed R+D and innovation potential • Joint strategic planning • Availability of international airport • Important European corridors intersect the Euroregion • There are three internationally acknowledged higher educational centres in the region that have been working together • Working media relationships and cultural cooperations • Developing international and EU system of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence / possibility of EU membership • Differences in EU sources, tendering possibilities, support systems. The EU harmonisation of economy is significantly divergent • Shortage of capital, lack of interest on behalf of investors, low level of own sources, relative poverty in all three areas • Weak transport connections within the region, outdated infrastructure • Border crossing stations with insufficient capacity • Underdevelopment of tourism infrastructure, lack of integrated tourism information • Lack of Euroregional tourism marketing • Polluted surface and ground waters • Lack of the system of tools necessary for the management of cross-border environmental

relationships	<p>pollutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficiency of the institutional system of cross-border regional and local level co-operation • Lack of innovation disseminating aspects • Negative demographic tendencies
OPPORTUNITIES (positive aspects, external to the entity)	THREATS (negative aspects, external to the entity)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of relationships, stabilizing circumstances on the Balkans • The region can function as a Southeast European gate with the enlargement of the EU • Availability of EU support for cross-border cooperation • The university centres of the region are capable of catalysing European level development • The Euroregion is able to integrate the connection of regional development and the knowledge base • The development of Trans-European Networks intersecting the region enables the reconstruction of transport networks torn apart, and thus connecting the region to the circulation of the European economy • Strengthening the international logistical role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes of the political situation might negatively affect co-operation • Relatively high environmental risk of serious natural disasters • The slowness of infrastructural developments restricts co-operational possibilities • Failure to close up economy and especially agriculture may cause social problems • Shortfall caused by the insufficient financing of R&D and the sector of higher education • The different dates of EU accession may cause tensions • The Schengen border control may hinder co-operation • The tourism related marketing activity is not realised because of the lack of resources

Source: apud Erika Oskó, Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euroregional Development Agency PUC.

Achieving the objectives of DKMT is closely related to the ability of organizing successful communication between the partner countries. In order to attract funds, a region must prove trustworthy, capable of managing the relations among the members. If communication media between them exists their level of cooperation, involvement and awareness can be easier to identify and asses. That is why regional mass-media plays a key role in the successful implementation of any projects.

3.3 Regional Media

Except for the territorial studios of the public radio and television, *Radio Timișoara* and *TVR Timișoara*, which have all the characteristics of regional press and which host cross-border shows directed at the public of the DKMT Euroregion, there are very few instances of regional press.

In the form of written press, we mostly deal with local or county press, directed at a cross-county audience. Usually, most of the information published covers the town where the headquarters of the editorial team is. This can be seen in the media products edited in Timișoara:

Ziua de Vest, *Focus Vest*, *Evenimentul Zilei – Vest*, the *Transilvania-Banat* supplement of the daily newspaper *România Liberă*, (when it was launched), *Bănăţeanul*, *Cronica de Sud-Vest* etc. (some of these newspapers no longer exist), as well as in the products of other towns: *24 h* – in Reşiţa or *Noul Observator* – in Jimbolia, *Tăt Banatu'i Fruncea* – in Făget, *Nyugati Jelen* – la Arad etc.

Some cross-border attempts are worth mentioning: *Délvilág és Temesvári Új Szó* – between 1991-1993, *Régi(j)óvilág* - in Hungarian, founded in 2006, or *Licurici*, Romanian publication broadcasted around the border area between Romania, Serbia and Hungary, launched in 2003. The authorities from the Euroregion have also tried to produce a full-colour euroregional magazine, in the beginning under the name of *Euro Trio* (1998-1999), and later of *Euro Régió* (2000-2001). However, because it contained information exclusively from the promotion area, the magazine did not last on the media market. In the audiovisual department only *Radio Banat Link* undertakes a regional editorial policy and the cable radio and television channel *Analog* are exploring regional audiences (Cernicova, 2009).

The only large regional media products which can be considered as a real success are in the area of electronic media:

- the www.zoro.ro portal, with information presented in German;
- the news portal www.ericinfo.eu, with information written in four languages (Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian and English).

3.4 ERIC Euroregional Information Centre

The aim of the project is to help the multilingual communication of the DKMT, to motivate the euroregional integration and innovation related efforts of cross-border regions and to provide assistance for the stabilization and EU integration processes of the region with special tools. The overall objectives focus on:

- Eliminating the peripheral nature of the cross-border region
- Increasing the level of euroregional information supply and awareness in the border region
- Supporting the formation of euroregional co-operations and the principle of subsidiarity
- Activating the economic life, economic relationships of partner countries, strengthening regional business relationships

The direct objective of the project is the establishment of an information centre, which helps the operation of euroregional relations with news agency activities and multilingual multimedia press service. Other objectives consist of:

- The establishment of the DKMT Euroregional Information Centre and the Serbian contact office, operation of a news agency, on-line information services;
- Building of euroregional relationships and networks ;
- Developing own professional press network of the border region;
- Delivery of knowledge, experiences, accentuated management of information regarding the European integration (no longer valid);
- Strengthening coherence in everyday life.

Ericinfo.eu addresses a wide audience (more than 800000 visitors) comprised of:

- Media of the DKMT Euroregion: local and regional newspapers, radios, televisions;
- County newspapers published in a large number of copies and local radios, several dailies and weeklies published in a large number of copies in the Vojvodina;
- Media websites, which means an alternative media on the one hand and further readers on the other hand;
- Professional organizations, chambers of commerce, educational and cultural organizations, civil organizations of the cross-border region (<http://www.ericinfo.eu/>).

Unfortunately, the ending of external financing for the project and the lack of sufficient financial resources threatens to put an end to this successful project and turn it into just an example of good practice in the archives of the European institutions.

4. CONCLUSION

The dynamics of the European Union and the changes brought about by the expansion of its borders have countless effects on the lives of the communities living within it. Some of these effects are positive, some are negative, some are intensively discussed and others are intentionally or unintentionally overlooked. Cross-border cooperation is obviously a positive aspect which sets the scene for socio-economic development of a particular region.

As we mentioned throughout the paper, Euroregions have appeared as a form of institutionalized cross-border communication. They have allowed for the absorption of funds and consequently have boosted the economy and infrastructure of the regions. The social interactions have also intensified, especially among those directly involved in regional projects.

After analyzing the current state of the regional mass-media, within Western Romania and the DKMT Euroregion, we noticed that written press is declining. On the other hand, online news sites have an increasing number of visitors. This trend is in accordance with the current changes mass-

media faces all over the world, but it is also heightened by the type of target audiences. It is the institutions, NGOs, promoters and implementers of regional projects, or other stakeholders that are interested in being informed about regional affairs and, because of time constraints, they mostly use online media.

The online news portal *ericinfo.eu* represents a success story. It has a user friendly design, a complex structure which provides visitors with advance search options, and, most importantly, it provides, simultaneously, the same information in four languages. Unlike the portal *zoro.ro*, which delivers the information only in German, therefore considerably reducing the target audience, *ericinfo.eu* caters for the needs of the citizens from all the three countries part of DKMT Euroregion. We can conclude that, even if one of the weaknesses of DKMT identified earlier refers to the lack of innovating dissemination, the successful implementation of the *ericinfo.eu* project highlights the ability of the Hungarian, Romanian and Serbian project partners to capitalize on the multi-lingual region-specific expectations.

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