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# CROSS BORDER CO-OPERATION IN RURAL AREAS GIVING THE EXAMPLE OF BIHAR REGION

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**Abstract:** After the political changes in 1990-ies in Hungary and in East-Central Europe the process of forming cross-border regional co-operations reached a new period. The border regions of the different national states join to encourage co-operation. The most remarkably connected system in our region is the Carpathian Euroregion. This paper deals with one of the most successful initiatives started between Hungary and Romania. The most outstanding co-operation of the past few years exists between the settlements of the former Bihar County which territory today belongs to two countries. The aims of the paper are to research the development of the border region; to reveal the factors of the cooperation and to observe the possibilities for the development. To obtain the goals desktop research, cluster analysis and data analysis were used, as statistic methods. The results emphasize that the development and renewal of the cross-border co-operations were supported by historical factors and good practices adapted from Western Europe. Although economic backwardness or the administrative problems are against the cooperation, historical economic connections facilitate the common work in the Hungarian-Romanian border region.

**Key words:** Rural areas, cross border co-operation, Hajdú-Bihar/Bihor

## Introduction

### Type of borders in Europe

Before 1990 but following the changes of regimes in Central Europe, research into border regions has been increasingly adverted (Ratti 1993, Csatári 1995, Aschauer 1996, Csordás 1998, Baranyi-Mező 1999, Hardi.-Rechnitzer 2003, Horga 2012). However, various suggestions of researchers came into light on the definition and role of borders (Mező 2000).

Border regions and cross-border cooperations in Europe are classified into three types (Martinez 1994, Pál – Szónokyné 1994, Tóth – Golobics 2006, Süli-Zakar et al. 2000, Sersli-Kiszel 2000, Baranyi-Dancs 2001). The first type has been developed in a Western European environment where regions with several common features (backwardness, underdeveloped infrastructure) meet. Such are the French-Italian or the Spanish-Portugal border regions. The second type is a somewhat modified version of the above with the difference being that problems originate, in general, in the cross-border planning (environmental, infrastructural or border crossings) deficiencies of the neighbouring regions. The third type includes countries either bordering EU countries or not as such. This type can be further divided into three subtypes. The first subtype includes the border regions of countries classified as developed regions of the continent as e.g. Austria, Switzerland, Norway or Finland. The second subtype, the so-called Central European type includes the border regions among the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary. The third subtype is the so-called Eastern European including the Baltic States, the European

member states of the former Soviet Union and the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. These areas can be described by peripheral features; they are basically the peripheries of the periphery (migration, ageing, high unemployment). The Hungarian-Romanian border regions belong to this type.

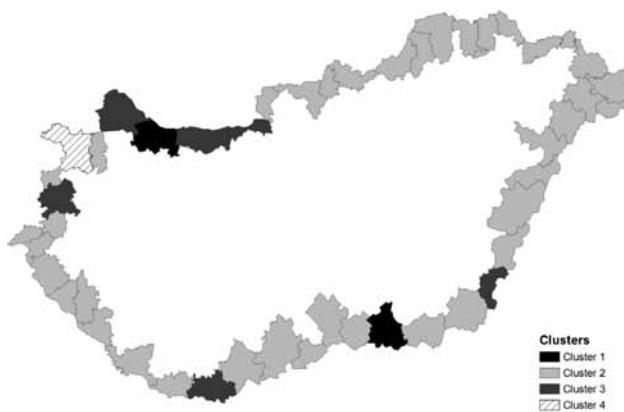
## Material and methods

Data collection has been carried out in two stages. Desktop research included the analysis of the relevant documents related to the studied area while during secondary data collection data were collected from institutions (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, local governments). Furthermore, cluster analysis was carried out with the aim to classify the border regions of Hungary. The objective of cluster analysis is to classify objects into homogenous groups disjunctive for each pair and covering the entire carrier. In our study, among the non-hierarchical methods of cluster analysis, K-means algorithm was applied. K-means algorithm classifies each element to the cluster that has a mid-point closest to the given element. By applying cluster analysis, our results and the statistical study of the division of objects comprising the heterogeneous population into homogenous groups can be demonstrated simultaneously. Such groups are called clusters.

## Results

The Bihar regional cross-border co-operation developed on the territory of two undeveloped, economically backward

regions for which the term “periphery meets periphery” may be applied. To analyze the border regions in Hungary a cluster analysis was carried out for 5 indicators related to economy and society (Tagai et al. 2008, Bujdosó et al. 2011). As the *Figure 1* shows Cluster 2 includes the vast majority of border micro-regions, i.e. approximately 39 micro-regions out of 154. As their general feature, a low value for all 5 indicators is observed. All of the micro regions among the Hungarian – Romanian border belong to this Cluster.



**Figure 1:** The competitiveness of the border regions in Hungary in 2011  
Source: Bujdosó et al., 2011

Lots of ideas came to light in order to resolve the peripheral situation, but most of them remained unsuccessful.

The backwardness of the area is not a new phenomenon and it has got several reasons. Since historical factors played highly significant role in this process, we analyzed them in details. Before doing so, a few words should be said about the disadvantageous natural circumstances which obstructed the territory in joining the modern socio-economic development during time.

The swamp which was fed by the rivers Karas and Berettyó was drained too late. Only at the end of the last century the river and flood control let the settlements to enlarge their territories (earlier only the “island-like” territories above the water level were inhabited) and the arable land which was the base of their living. The economic development can actually be traced from that time, though the circumstances of the river control still exist.

**Table 1:** The change of the territory and the population of Bihar county

Year	Area (km <sup>2</sup> %)	Population (inhabitants%)	Population density (inh./km <sup>2</sup> )
1787	11,082/3.8	317,871/3.9	28.7
1910	10,609/3.3	582,132/2.8	55
1930	2,771/2.9	176,002/2.0	63.5
1941	6,511/3.8	447,000/3.0	69

Source: Frisnyák, 1995

Besides the sodification caused by the alternating groundwater level, the danger of inloading water and floods are common due to the deforestation in the catchment area in Romania. So, nature was cruel to the inhabitants and was one of the reasons for the backwardness. But even more important reasons – as mentioned above – are found in the historical political processes.

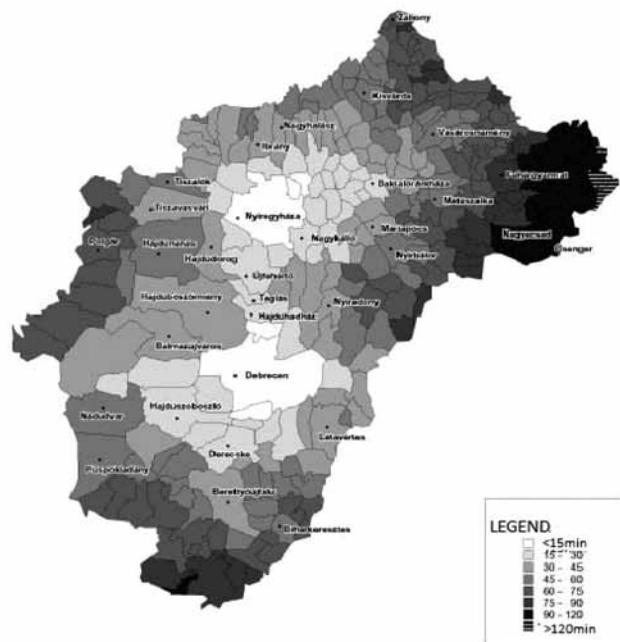
Let us examine the factors which determined the economy and society of Bihar county. The territory of “Bihar county” experienced significant changes throughout the history, often separating or connecting the population (Table 1).

Radial road and railway system was connecting the rural settlements with the central town Oradea, so the region depended on Oradea both administratively and commercially. The town was the centre of the municipal district of Oradea, regional finance-directorate and public prosecutor’s office, tax office, head post office and directorate of public construction. Relying upon these functions, the city became the regional centre not only of the county but of the Great Plain

After the WW I the county was divided into two unequal parts belonging to two states: Romania and Hungary. Bihar county on the Romanian side is still existing administrative unit (Béres- Súli-Zakar 1990, Demeter-Radic 2009). The part on the Hungarian side was disconnected from its centre Oradea and had no transport network: (1) there was no connection among the routes and other roadsections; (2) and there was almost no spatial connection among the settlements. Most of the population on the Romanian side of the border was Hungarian so the border separated families from each other. The Treaty after the WW II built the permanent borders and the administrative reform of 1949/50 terminated the meanwhile existing “Incomplete Bihar” on the Hungarian side: the settlements of South-Bihar were annexed to Békés county, while the other were annexed to the newly created Hajdú-Bihar county. As a consequence of this, it got into a marginal and peripheral position in relation to the axis of the spatial system and to the former county capital (Kovács 1990).

The regional development policy of the following 40 years led to the preservation of Bihar’s backwardness, because the sources of development were principally given to the county capitals and cities. Nevertheless, a significant withdrawal of capital from the Hungarian regions has started (Béres-Súli-Zakar, 1990). Berettyóújfalu, the newly created micro-regional centre, together with the key rural settlements were unable to play a significant role both administratively and economically along the borderline. Furthermore, the Hungarian population of the divided territory had lost its communicational possibilities from the 1950s as the border’s role became more separating.

As mentioned above, Oradea has been connected with Budapest and Europe through the Püspökladány-Berettyóújfalu-Oradea corridor. The regional line, which developed on the peripheral territory, is the main road No. 47. The settlements could connect to the county road system, even semi-peripherally, via this road but still had difficulties to reach the centre towns (*Figure 2*).



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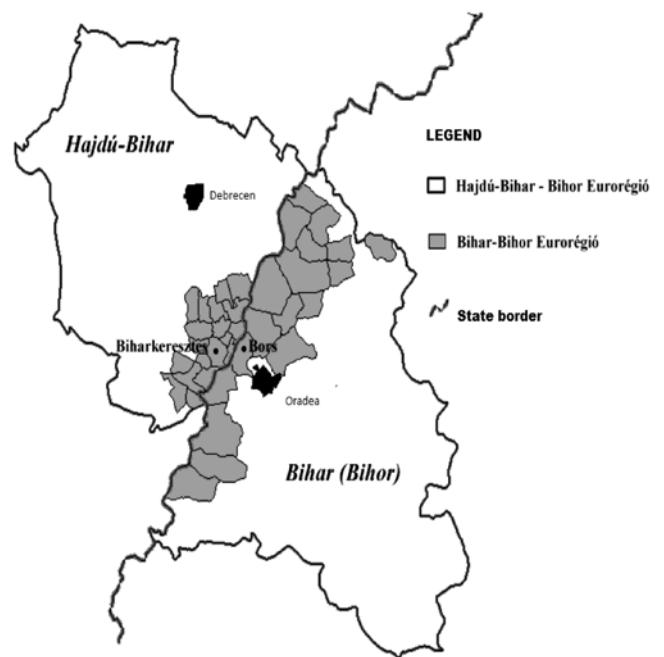
**Figure 2:** The availability of the county centre from the settlements in the Hungarian–Romanian border region  
 Source: Balcsók et al. 2011

On the Romanian side the villages connected to Oradea are still strongly linked to it, and the centre is easily accessible. The regional line of Oradea – Cluj-Napoca (which is the only major international corridor) is linked to the other structural corridor of north-south direction (Satu Mare- Arad-Timisoara), which strings the villages. The Romanian policy after the WW II, similarly to the Hungarian, promoted to retain the low living standards in the bordering regions which was further decreased by the agrarian character of the economy.

The size of the settlements became different on the two sides of the border. The Hungarian part of Bihar is characterized by small villages, while Bihar has large villages with large population. These once neighboring villages became far away from each other due to the border and they nearly lost all their connections. To reinforce this fact we examined the settlements which belong to the Regional Agreement of the Borderland Settlements of Bihar (*Figure 3*).

There are only five border crossings among the settlements on both sides of the frontier, and only two of them is on the Hungarian side (Biharkeresztes and Ártánd). Only 8 of the 20 studied Hungarian settlements have railway stations, while on the Romanian side the rate is 11 out of 16, and only Biharkeresztes, Mezőpeterd, Salonta and Valea lui Mihai lie along an international railway line. The situation with the road network is not better either. Only three of the Hungarian settlements lie along main roads, – although it is the busiest road 42 (E60), which is essential in respect of the Hungarian – Romanian connections. The most of the Bihorian villages (11) are stringed by this and the Carei (Nagykaroly) – Salonta road.

So the political changes have put a closed border between Hungary and Romania, which made any co-operation impossible. "Bihar County" used to be adjoining but later



*Figure 3: The Bihar-Bihor Euroregion*  
Source: MTA RKK Debreceni Osztálya, 2010

almost totally isolated territory with a previously co-existing population, which later became separated (Dövényi 2002).

The changes after the WW II caused changes not only in the spatial structure or in the administration. Oradea, which was a prospering centre at the turn of the century, together with at the time rising settlements along the roads between Oradea – Budapest and Oradea – Cluj-Napoca fell low in an instant. “Oradea developed in the so called “trade route” and the effective town-planning forces raised the town amongst the most significant commercial and industrial towns of the country” (Fleisz 2002). The surrounding settlements embodied the efficient town-village connection as they provided food for the employer town. This connection was ruined by the introduction of hard border. Bihor had kept its centre, administrative and transport network, and it developed relatively freely.

Although Bihar kept most of its administrative and territorial infrastructural, the policy of the Ceausescu regime pushed Bihar to the background, especially its border region. The rural region with its one-sided agrarian character became the “outcast” of the otherwise underdeveloped Romanian economy and the development funds were mostly given to Oradea. The disadvantageous state of Hungarian part of Bihar has also deepened especially after 1950, and the differences became even more dominant within Hajdú-Bihar. The county management treated this Bihar region as a “stepchild” during the past 40 years. The backwardness was intensified by the dominant agrarian character of the region, and only Berettyóújfalu could rise from this inherited state. Although the economic activity of the region became stronger in the 1970s, migration and unemployment increased, and the employment situation worsened after the political change in the 90-ies.

As mentioned earlier, the borderline is in marginal situation. To reinforce this, we examined some indexes, which clearly show the region's backwardness. The decrease of population is serious in the studied settlements. "The rates of population decrease of the Biharian villages are higher than the average rate of the disadvantaged regions" (Béres -Süli-Zakar 1990). Some say, that the harmful shift of the age distribution or the ageing problem is typical of these territories. So it is in most settlements of Bihar. Considering the data of the studied 35 settlements, it turns out that the rate of the people aged over 60 is more than 20% higher in case of the 15 Hungarian than in the 12 Romanian villages

In case of 6 Hungarian and 9 Romanian settlements the situation is really depressing, the rate of the young (0-19 years) is quite low. The high rate of the young is due the high natural increase of the gypsy minority. The age distribution of the distribution of the territory is shown by *Figure 4 and 5*.

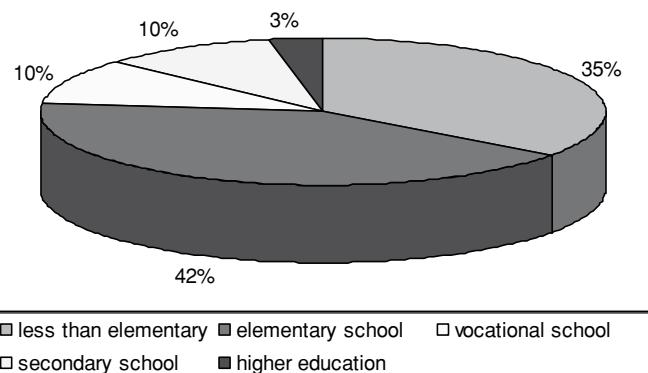


*Figure 4:* The age distribution of the examined Hungarian settlements  
Source: Author's work based on the data from Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2011



*Figure 5:* The age distribution of the examined Hungarian settlements  
Source: Author's work based on the data from Institutul National de Statistica, 2011

Besides the ageing, the migration of the young people of working age is a problem, too. The lack of housing, the unfavorable educational and living conditions and bread-and-butter worries play a significant role in the migration from this territory. Possibilities of employment can only be found in the neighboring cities, although in limited numbers. Nowadays, the labour market is more and more looking for highly qualified workforce. From this point of view the Bihar region is also disadvantaged. The figure 6 shows the average educational level of the studied settlements



*Figure 6:* The distribution of educational level among the population of the examined settlements

Source: Author's work based on the data from Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Institutul National de Statistica, 2011

It is depressing, that only half of the population has finished only or has not even finished elementary school. In case of the Romanian settlements the situation is even worse, because more than 40% of the population has not even finished elementary school. The same problems are the low rate of people with university degree, the low average salary, the remittances, the unfavourable structure of economy. The employment level is the essential reason and a consequence as well for the living standard below the average in the disadvantaged regions (*Table 2*). It means that there are not enough workplaces for the population of working age, they cannot work in their dwelling-place, the incomes are low.

*Table 2:* Unemployment rates of the studied area

	The rate of earners within the population (%)	The rate of unemployment within the population of working age (%)
Hajdú- Bihar	43,7	20,3
Bihor	48,3	16,7

Source: Author's work based on the data from Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Institutul National de Statistica, 2011

Being an agricultural region, industrialisation has hardly reached this area, and there is no local industry, except for some craftsmen. Hence, the dominance of agricultural workers doesn't reflect the good condition of the primary sector, but the underdevelopment of the industrial and service sectors.

The supply of public utilities in the settlements of Bihar is at really low level. Although the supply of public utilities in the Hungarian settlements is quite good, there are settlements on the Romanian side which lack the supply of drinking water. The state of sewage system is even worse, because only a couple of settlements have a sewage system. The lack of gas distributing system in the most of Romanian settlements is another example of the backwardness of the region.

Besides the low level of infrastructural supply there are other factors that caused backwardness. Foreign investors consider this region as weak, so it is unprovided with capital. The western capital invested into this region is represented by a couple of firms.

## **The development of the crossborder co-operation in Bihar**

The regeneration of the border region connections was the evident consequence of the political change, because “due to the active integrational trends in the area and the decreasing central resources the co-operation became of vital importance for the settlements” (Bokor 1996.). The factors, which led to the establishment of the co-operation are very different. Firstly, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, Bihar county due to the border change after the WW II had lost its former centre, Oradea. The consequences still exist in the region. Despite the development of Berettyóújfalu couldn't act as a real county capital. With the deliberation of border crossing Oradea partly restored its former socio-economical and commercial function, and it positively influenced the development of the Bihar region.

The economic connections between the two countries also revived after the political change and Romania became an important economic partner. Transylvania became the demand market for a great deal of the Hungarian capital export. It's even more obvious in the borderland, where dense economical networks are created due to the geographical closeness. In 2010 more than 200 Hungarian-Romanian mixed companies worked in the border region. This number is quite high, but there is a problem that most of the companies are in the towns, mainly in Oradea and Salonta. Almost no companies had settled down in the villages. The lack of interest is probably due to the poor infrastructure (Lengyel 1996.). It characterizes the lack of initiative of the Romanian part, that 85% of the companies have Hungarian owners.

We also said that there were practical reasons adopted from Western Europe for the establishment of the borderland co-operation. In the western part of the continent and in the EU the settlements along the borders and the borderlands became pronounced and the development of these regions became reevaluated. Bihar is in a fortunate position as after joining the EU the Hungarian-Romanian border became a particularly promoted region (a similar example was the Hungarian-Austrian border with Burgenland and Vas county), where the cross border co-operations have good chances for public financial supports.

Romanian-Hungarian Cross-Border Co-operation Frame began in 1996 with the Phare CBC Programme which was extended up to the EU integration (the period 1996-2003).

Multilateral and multiple factors made it clear and reasonable, but the borderlands of the two countries had to coordinate their previously individual activities. The idea of the cooperation in the region firstly emerged in the early 1990's although amongst only the Hungarian settlements. Due to the legal opportunities four villages, by names Szentpeterszeg, Gaborjan, Hencida and Vancsod decided to work together and to form a smaller region. Shortly after its creation 13 other settlement of the borderland (Artand, Bedo, Berekboscormeny, Biharkereszes, Bojt, Esztar, Kismarja, Korosszegapati, Mezőpeterd, Mezosas, Nagykereki, Pocsaj, Told) joined this initiative titled Agreement Borderland Settlements of Bihar

(Tamás 1998). The number of members became final with the inclusion of Korosszakal, Magyarhomorog and Letavertes. The delegates of the settlements voted for Biharkereszes to be the centre, which is the largest town in the region. The leading president of this alliance is the mayor of Biharkereszes.

The real crossborder co-operation came into being later, and it was encouraged by the factors mentioned earlier, but mostly by the Phare CBC program support. Firstly, in 1994 the EU implemented this type of support in the Austrian-Hungarian border region. This encouraged some borderlands to get in touch with their neighbouring territories.

The initiative of Bihar met a warm response in the settlements of Bihar county on the other side of the border. As a consequence they declared the agreement in 1995 and established the Regional Development Agreement of Borderland Settlements of Bihar and its legitimacy was provided by the Hungarian-Romanian Fundamental Convention. Bors became the centre of the Romanian side.

It was followed by the Hungary-Romania Cross-border Co-operation Programmes 2004–2006 and respectively 2007–2013 in frame of the cross-border co-operation program Phare CBC. It was supposed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the cross-border area, by capitalizing the previous experience (Ilies et al. 2011).

Another way of support to the partnership between the border regions was the Interreg IV Programme, available within the whole territory of the EU. Regarding tourism the set up of the authorities in the field of tourism, protection and promotion of the cultural and natural heritage can be mentioned as beneficiaries.

Within the framework of the South-East Europe Programme trans-national partnerships were also created. The Romanian-Hungarian Cross-Border Co-operation Programme is continuing the crossborder co-operation programs in frame of the Interreg IIIA in Hungary and Phare CBC in Romania, being implemented within a joint institutional structure by using joint funds, extending and developing the previous experience and results (Ilies et al. 2011).

## **Conclusions**

The results of our study emphasize that the development and renewal of the cross-border co-operations were supported by historical factors and good practices adapted from Western Europe. Although economic backwardness or the administrative problems are against the cooperation, historical economic connections facilitate the common work in the Hungarian-Romanian border region.

The factors that helped the co-operation are the following:

- The common history and traditions: the united/integrated development of Bihar County and the Biharian consciousness might be a driving force in the region
- National homogeneity: most of the settlements in the borderland have Hungarian population, and Romanian people integrated into the Hungarian community

- historical economic connections/relations: the economic connections amongst the settlements of the Bihar region formed a wide network before the change of borders with Oradea as the economic and administrative centre
- importance of borders: the EU programs made the significant capital inflow possible
- The creation of the Bihar Association: the Hungarian government even indirectly tried to support the regional development of Bihar. Factors against the co-operation:
- Periphery meets periphery: the disadvantageous and underdeveloped regions of the two countries meet each other on the Hungarian-Romanian border
- Economical backwardness, one-sided agricultural character: almost all the development indexes are below the national and the county means
- Weak co-operation between the local governments: the developments of smaller regions and joint settlements organized from below started in the early 90's in Hungary in the hope of co-operation.
- Different administrative system: the difference between the administrative systems and the level of bureaucracy of the two countries are also against the co-operation
- Weak personal relations: the shift of the borders after the WW II has strongly influenced the personal and family relations. Due to the newly developed and closed border the families on opposite sides of the border became separated from each other. The once flourishing connections almost disappeared.
- Emigration: due to the unfavourable economic and infrastructural conditions the young, qualified age-group, which is capable of work, leaves the region. This active layer of the society could be the key factor of the co-operation
- Lack of infrastructure and the difference in the economic, social, customs and tax system
- Regulations are also against the co-operation

The creation and implementation of the cross border cooperation go through several stages which are as follows:

- Get to know the partner region, recurrent arrangements/actions, purpose: confidence building (Michalkó 2004). The roots of the crossborder co-operation in Bihar already existed, so the partner regions started to get to know each other. Temporarily the connections are mainly cultural, and Hungarian-Hungarian rarely Hungarian-Romanian programs are organized on both sides of the border. Such a co-operation was organized by the local leaders (mayors, economical and regional development expects) and their purpose was to get to know the policy and the rules of the EU. The economic interactions were rather personal initiatives (meetings of businessmen). The difference between the two administrative and regional development systems is an extremely big problem, so it is hard to create connections in this field between the two sides of the border. It would be important for the administrative levels to find the partners.

- The development of crossborder conception and strategy: the second stage of the cooperation is the working out a development conception and strategy based on the known possibilities, and the harmonization of the planning strategies of the region. In favour of this implementation EU programs are used to work out the co-operational strategies on both the Hungarian and Romanian sides of the frontier. In relation to the local level, the experts and decision makers have to join the working out of the strategy. Many development strategies were created for Hajdú-Bihar/Bihor region either regional or sectorial (touristic, economic, etc) (Kozma 2006).
- The aim of the third stage of the plan is to set up an organization and a group of workers the previous bases. This group is competent and responsible for the case at the field of co-operation. In the course of the office work and administration their aim is to use the already existing structure and the co-operation between the organizations, and not to create a new structural level.

The long-range strategy aim of Bihar is to create a common development program based on the known advantages and everyday connections, which helps the union of the borderland. The small region of Bihar, with the help of EU programs, submitted a completion, in connection with economical and institutional improvement.

The cultural relations appeared as occasional co-operations, mainly traditionally bound and folkloristic cultural organizations. We might see, shut the crossborder co-operation of the former "Bihar Country", which was divided after the WW II, is after the initial stage. It is good, that the connection has been created, although it is mainly of protocol character, but considering the Western European model and the experiences, in case of good financial circumstances the establishment of the Regional Development Agreement of Borderland Settlements of Bihar might be a good example for the borderlands.

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