

## **DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN THE ISTER-GRANUM EUROREGION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON TOURISM**

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**Abstract:** The tourism of the Ister- Granum Euro region is quite remarkable, since it presents a significant part of the Hungarian-Slovakian tourism industry. The potentials of the region are not exploited fully, therefore, the marketing activity and marketing communication needs to be improved, in order to create a unified image. It is important to stress the importance of working out collaboration, network service and thematic packages. Health tourism, wellness programs, cultural tourism, village tourism and wine tourism bring development and they can create workplaces for people who live there. The strength and power of the Euro region depends on the national representation. Defining and accomplishing common aims will make the Euro region stronger economically. The main aim of the co-operation is achieving regional improvement with donations from Europe. The border does not prevent any more the joining of the regions. That is why there are several Euro regions created in the area.

**Rezumat:** Strategii de dezvoltare în euroregiunea Ister-Granum cu accent asupra turismului. Turismul, în euroregiunea Ister-Granum este remarcabil și reprezintă o parte semnificativă a industriei turistice ungaro-slovace. Potențialul regiunii nu este exploatat în întregime, de aceea, marketingul trebuie îmbunătățit, cu scopul de a crea o imagine unitară. Trebuie subliniată importanța realizării de colaborări, rețele de servicii și pachete tematice. Turismul de sănătate, programele de îngrijire, turismul cultural, turismul rural și turismul viticol asigură dezvoltare și pot crea locuri de muncă pentru cei care trăiesc acolo. Puterea euroregiunii depinde de reprezentarea națională. Definierea și atingerea de țeluri comune vor face euroregiunea mai puternică din punct de vedere economic. Principalul scop al cooperării este îmbunătățirea situației regionale prin fonduri europene. Frontiera nu mai trebuie să fie un obstacol în calea legăturilor regionale. De aceea au fost create mai multe euroregiuni în zonă.

**Keywords:** *tourism, cooperation, cross border, hungarian-slovakian border region*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *turism, cooperare, regiune transfrontalieră, regiunea frontalieră ungaro-slovacă*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this research is to find opportunities for tourism in the region of the Slovak-Hungarian border.

There are major differences in economic and social aspects in the border area. For these differences the economic processes, infrastructure and the human capital are

responsible. Since joining the European Union it has become more important to encourage the inhabitants to remain in the area.

One of the possibilities is the improvement of the ecological and agricultural tourism. This improvement is particularly emphasised in the area of the Slovak-Hungarian border with respect to the economic diversification.

The Mária-Valéria Bridge is symbolic, since it symbolises the relationship between the two countries.

## **2. THE BORDER REGION CO-OPERATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The characteristics and functions of the borders have changed in the course of time. The word 'border' has a diverse definition. A border is a line or zone which divides the countries from each other. (SÜLI-ZAKAR I.2003.)

The nature of the border determines the life and opportunities of a settlement. A border does not only divide but connects as well. It offers advantages and disadvantages to the people who live there. In those regions where the border divides the peripheral character dominates.

On the other hand, there are regions where there is a strong relationship and co-operation among people and there are traces of improvement in local developments. (RECHNITZER J.2000).

The definition of a border area: an area where the economic and social life is influenced by the border in a direct way. Therefore, we distinguish open and closed regions. (HANSEN 1977.)

A closed region encourages peripheral processes, including all the geographical, economic and social aspects.

A defensive policy prevents any infrastructural and economic investments. It also hinders the development of market regions. Border control makes it more difficult for people to cross the border. The border region becomes a peripheral area with an ageing population and deteriorating conditions of life. It is an area from where people migrate.

An open border is where the inhabitants' economic activity is not restricted, including their crossing the border. In this case, the border is not an obstacle but a developmental potential. There are three types of areas on both sides of the border: outskirts (or with another word periphery) meets outskirts, outskirts meets centre and centre meets centre. (HARDI, T. 1999)

In the case of the peripheral regions the relations are rare. Border crossing points develop the relations between settlements and interactions within the region will become stronger. The opening of the Mária-Valéria Bridge is a good example if this. Euro regions are the most developed co-operating structures.

## **3. SLOVAK-HUNGARIAN BORDER REGION CO-OPERATION**

There are four Euro region organisations along the Slovak-Hungarian border which is a 679 km long border. The Hungarian and Slovak law encourages the co-operation of self-governments (on regional and on twin city level as well). This co-operation is not only important in diplomatic aspect but in a certain region it also helps to develop the social and economic integration.

The European Union encourages the existence, operation and development of the Euro regions.

However, there are major differences in the functioning and aims of these regions.

The contract signed in Paris 19<sup>th</sup> March in 1995 regulates the co-operation between Hungary and Slovakia. This document helps to develop relations along the border and it also promotes to integrate with the European Union.

#### **4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACROSS THE BORDER TOURISM IN THE AREA OF ISTER- GRANUM EURO REGION**

Although they are very similar areas geologically, the border prevented the economic and infrastructural development. Many people migrated from the border areas to the centre areas. It is very important to mention that the economic, political, technological, infrastructural, demographic, social and cultural processes can be encouraged by the economy.

Tourism is a very significant aspect in the development of an area.

Borders influence the tourist industry in a negative way. The lack of transport and economic infrastructure makes it very difficult to reach the border regions. It has also been made more complicated to cross the borders; therefore, these areas have become especially disadvantageous for tourism. The lack of information and the unexploited marketing processes makes the development even slower. Normally, there is no connection between the representatives and the public institutions. The more global the tourism the more dependent the neighbouring destinations will become, since for them this is the only way to remain in the growing market.

The destination is a complex unique product which is in relation with several products.

The destination marketing is the foundation of the tourism marketing and the heart of the tourist industry.

The border region is a special destination. In these regions the most significant aims are the development of co-operation, working out common plans, common products for tourists and common strategies. Tourism is absolutely necessary in order to develop certain regions because it offers opportunities to sell products and services, for instance, village tourism and ecological tourism. The tourism industry requires significant human capital; therefore, it has a positive effect on the work-force industry. In order to improve the tourism industry it is necessary to develop the level of the infrastructure and services.

Border destinations can invite some foreign investors; consequently tourism can operate as a multiplier in a certain region.

In the case of the across the border destinations the infrastructural circumstances are quite varied. It is necessary to work out the destination image on both sides of the border and their trademark potential.

#### **5. THE ISTER- GRANUM EURO REGION**

The Ister-Granum Euroregion is situated on the Hungarian-Slovakian border. Its territory exceeds 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 200,000 people. The region, the heart of

which is the Mária Valéria Bridge connecting Esztergom (Hungary) and Šturovo (Slovakia), forms a natural geographical unit. Here the Garam and Ipoly Rivers flow into Europe's second largest river.

For these reasons, a bridge is always more than a simple transport monument; it also has an influence on the economic and social conditions. This is especially true in the case of bridges, which re-connect areas that previously organically belonged together. The Mária Valéria Bridge is such a construction. Since 11th October 2001 it has united two (once contiguous) areas along the border that were closed off in passed decades, where roads abruptly ended and the two border towns were unable to fulfil their original function.

On 17th November 2003 the Mayors of 100 settlements founded the Ister-Granum Euroregion, the territory of which exceeds 2,000 km<sup>2</sup>, the number of its inhabitants is over 200,000.

### **5.1. The aim of the co-operation is to make the region more attractive**

The improvement is especially important in the following aspects: economic, tourist industry, scientific and innovative basis, area development and area arrangement, co-operation in the field of environmental protection, water protection, preventing catastrophes, transport development, humanitarian and social co-operation. The region is at the meeting point of two big European developmental regions: Vienna-Budapest region and the Velence Trieste Ljubljana-Budapest region.

It is important to mention that Nyitra is part of the Western- Slovakian region which is the second most developed area of Slovakia. It has a major role in the political, cultural life of the country. It comes after Pozsony the capital city of Slovakia. The economic progress of the area is dynamic. Komárom-Esztergom county are the centre of the development.

In respect of the Ister- Granum Euro region the Danube does not only divide but connects the regions and areas as a VII. Corridor. The Danube has always had a strong social-economic influence during the course of the history. Now it can be characterized by the word economic modernisation. The heart of the economic improvement is the developed processing industry and service industry, for example tourism.

The attractive geographical environment is not only spectacular as a scenery but it also has its positive effects. The Danube adds to this attractiveness.

### **5.2. The touristic dimension of the ister- granum euro region**

The improvement of tourism was extensive in Slovakia after 1989. This interest was aroused by the open border and the natural endowments of the area. For a well functioning tourist industry several conditions are necessary, for instance good geologic, geomorphologic terms, flora, fauna, natural and artificial lakes, springs and numerous historic and cultural sites. These are all given; still the tourism in the area is quite scarce. The Ister- Granum Euro region has its potentials for hiking tourism, holiday tourism, water tourism, hunting tourism, cultural and inheritance tourism, gastro tourism and village tourism.

In the Euro region there are many historic buildings and a busy cultural life. These are the main attractions. Health tourism also has a main role (Párkány). 190447 tourists visited Nyitra in 2002 and the number of nights spent in the region per person were 2.9.

Accommodation is available mainly in the cities and towns: in Slovakia in the traditional bath towns, in Hungary in the towns.

The aims of crossing the border are very different. Some people go on business trips, visit friends and relatives and there are leisure time trips. Tourists normally go to see the hills and historic sites. Many people go to health resorts requiring wellness services. Thermal tourism is popular for families and elderly people. Another important group is the cycling and hiking tourism and the cultural-inheritance group.

Business and conference tourism is another potentially lucrative area.

After the change of regimes there was a decrease in the discretionary salary which families could spend on free time activities. With the opening of the borders the solvent tourist groups chose exclusive resorts to spend their holiday in. The internal (or domestic) tourist turnover decreased. It especially applies to the depressed areas along the border.

Tourism is a more promising sector because a tourist does not go on holiday for the hotel service but for the scenery and climate of the holiday destination. Therefore, destination areas are important points of the tourism industry.

The tourism and its sectors provided 7 percent of the GDP and the employment.

Slovakia gives 0.7 percent of the income of the world's tourism industry.

#### **Strengths**

- Because of the natural gifts there are hilly areas and plains, national parks, arboretums with unique fauna and flora.
- Thermal waters have a high salt concentration; thus, they are suitable for health and wellness tourism in the area of Párkány and middle Transdanubia in Hungary.
- There are numerous cultural and historic sites which are necessary for tourism. These are the castles, monasteries, farm houses under the protection of historic buildings. They represent the cultural heritage of the two countries. There are also places of pilgrimage for religious tourism.
- For recreational tourism there are nice areas near Guta, Zsitva, Pilis, Vértes. The Danube is important for water tourism, but there are several other rivers which are significant too, for instance Garam, Ipoly.
- Riding, archery and village tourism can become very important too.
- Agro tourism is another potential. Wine growing is strong and progressive on both sides of the Danube, in the wine-growing region of Nyitra and Párkány.
- The Highland Wine route is towards Hilltop Neszmély, Keszölc, Tokod, Esztergom - Kürt, Kéménd, Párkány: International Way of Wine.
- Living traditions are the Béla castle and the wine museum in the case of wine and gastronomic culture.
- Accessibility: there are several European traffic corridors in this region. Good bicycle routes-Euro Velo crosses the region.

#### **Possibilities/Chances**

- The co-operation of travel agencies and representation at national and domestic markets and exhibitions.
- Exploitation of health tourism and its services.
- Offering topic packages.
- Developing area relations (aerial, water and road network, such as ports, sport airports and bicycle routes).

- Dynamic development of wine tourism: organising wine routes and the renewing of historic wine-growing areas.
- Water and bicycle tourism is in progress along Danube.
- The conditions of the national tourism are improving as the borders become more formal.
- Improvement of town tourism: historical sites, festivals, markets, exhibitions and conferences. Across the border development (with the help of Interreg).
- Joining the Vienna-Budapest-Pozsony region.
- Exploitation of the village tourism and thermal tourism.

#### **Weaknesses**

- There is no effective representation of the Euro region. The communication and the marketing activities are not satisfactory.
- Travel agencies do not operate effectively enough.
- Unsatisfactory representation of the historic sites and scenes.
- There are not enough touristic products.
- There is no law in Slovakia regulating tourism.
- Lack of signposts and lack of knowledge of languages.
- Infrastructure needs to be developed.
- Neglected buildings and architectural monuments are severely damaged and left in ruins and as a result, they not serve the development of tourism.
- Potentials of tourism are not exploited properly.
- Communication is not satisfactory between the supervisory organisations.
- Exploitation of capacities is seasonal. Concentration time and area wise.
- Unsatisfactory gastronomical choice. Unable to satisfy requirements.
- Accommodation is not available in minor settlements.

#### **Dangers**

- Organised communication of the Danube region in respect of potentials of tourism.
- Unclarified legal ownership.
- Setting up a network of high standard catering establishments.
- The quality of the road system is not appropriate, some settlements are not accessible.
- Lack of regional management and marketing in respect of tourism.
- Unexploited advantageous circumstances.
- Lack of communication between the settlements of the region.
- Sudden improvement that cannot be tolerated by the local inhabitants.
- Intensification of competition.
- Unequal area development ( too much emphasis Esztergom)
- Slow infrastructural improvement, mosaic-like development.
- Accomplishment of organised planning.

## **6. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES**

For these reasons, a bridge is always more than a simple transport monument; it also has an influence on the economic and social conditions. This is especially true in the

case of bridges, which re-connect areas that previously organically belonged together. The Mária Valéria Bridge is such a construction. Since 11th October 2001 it has united two (once contiguous) areas along the border that were closed off in passed decades.

The fords and bridges crossing large rivers have always been in focus in the surrounding region. All roads run to this connecting point.

The place becomes of key importance for everybody. In this way a bridge is never simply part of a transport network, as its effects can be seen not only in the economic and social sphere, but also in the way it influences space in geographical sense: it organizes and arranges it bringing about the development of a land of culture and civilisation. This effect is especially strong, if there is no other similar establishment nearby. The Mária Valéria Bridge is such a construction. Since 11th October 2001 it has supported the reshaping of an organic space, which by now is known as the Ister-Granum Euroregion.

By the beginning of 2005 the strategic development program of the Euroregion was completed and it was the first of the Euroregions of the newly joint EU-member states to be represented in the European Parliament in Brussels on 21st September 2005.

The bridge rebuilt originally for transport opened the way to a cooperation in the true spirit of European unity.

Developments strategies:

An inventory of the Euroregion has been completed with all of the conditions that are useful for tourism taken stock of. Village tourism, cultural tourism and spa tourism can all be branches of tourism developments building on the excellent conditions. They would like to popularise the natural and touristic values of the Euroregion in publications, professional forums and exhibitions.

Strategic Objectives

The main aim of the regional development programme is to make the region unified and cooperative concerning tourism. Through the objectives of the development plan the role of tourism and that of cooperation among settlements is being emphasized. Since the region is ready to meet the requirements of the sector, tourism will be able to cause radical changes for both the economy and the society of the area and the people living there.

The main objectives of the planning period are as follows:

- creation of a developed area from the perspective of both the economy and tourism
- creation and long-term application of a maintainable tourism development policy
- facilitation of cohesion among settlements in the area.

Feasibility of these objectives are followed by the priorities, related actions, and certain projects used in the development programme.

**Priorities:**

- creation of a unique tourism feature for the area that will make it a target destination for tourists
- improvement of living standards of the people in the area
- improvement of cooperation within the settlements in the area by creating a standard development strategy in the region

**Projects:**

**Realized Projects:**

**Strengthening of the regional civil sphere (2002/2003)**

*The aim of the project:* Developing the relationships between the non-profit organisations operating on both sides of the border, as well as laying the foundation for successful co-operation and therefore the visible expansion of the number of projects completed for the development of the Euro-region as well as the number of co-operating participants. The final aim being to increase the awareness of regional identity.

**Information map signs (2003/2004)**

*The aim of the project:* Providing wide scale information about the tourism facilities of the region for visiting tourists, thus increasing the time spent here and in addition raising the presence of the settlements in the region.

**Pilis Hills touring cycle routes (2003/2004)**

*The aim of the project:* marking out the routes on the one hand expands the network, thus increasing the touristic attraction of the region; on the other hand it regulates cyclists movements within the forests. We would like to continuously expand the road network and the services offered, involving also the areas lying on the other side of the border.

**Regional Economic Portal (2004/2005)**

*The aim of the project:* Ensuring business relations and information flow between the enterprises operating on both sides of the border and therefore the vitality of the economic life and labour market of the region.

**Ister-Granum Enterprise-Logistics Belt, New Danube Bridge: feasibility studies (2005)**

*The aim of the project:* Laying the foundation for the establishment of the logistics infrastructure connecting the industrial core area of the Euroregion, commencing the planning work for the New Danube Bridge that fundamentally determines the further development of the region.

**The development of the Civil Portal of the Euroregion (2005/2006)**

*The aim of the project:* Increasing the number and intensity of interactions between the civil organisations operating in the Euroregion, establishing the principal tool for information flow, increasing the number of tenders and joint projects

**Examination of the connections of civil organisations of the Euroregion (2005/2006)**

*The aim of the project:* By examining the financial potential and the existing network system of the civil organisations operating in the region, the researchers were looking at the opportunities for regional civil integration.

**Designing of the bridges over the River Ipoly (2006/2007)**

*The aim of the project:* The initiation of the integration processes between the two sides of the River Ipoly, and the preparation for the reconstruction of the bridges.

**Fish ladder on the River Ipoly**

*Brief description of the project:* As a result of the project near the Ipolytölgyes dam (built between 1982 and 1986) and the dam at Ipolyszakállos (built between 1984 and 1987) a fish ladder will be developed enabling fish migration. In connection with the investments, eco-tourism developments will also be carried out (e.g. publications, a study path).

**Ongoing Projects:**

**Határtalanul (2008/2010)**

**EGTC URBACT- project (2008/2010)**

From 1 August 2007 non profit organisations that are aimed at the successful cooperation of the municipalities, local and regional authorities of two or more member states can be established in Hungary.

The European Union created an opportunity for members to establish EGTCs, bodies with legal personality in 2006 to facilitate the efficient use of Union resources and the success of the already existing or future cooperation.

EGTC is an abbreviation, it stands for European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation. Within the frame of this new instrument cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation can be implemented.

A new opportunity for municipalities, regions and states to establish cross-border, transnational or interregional cooperation with similar players of another member state and to fulfil their common objectives this way.

Its aim is discriminationlessness: the local players get the same opportunities within the borders and across the borders.

EGTC is the first legal instrument of the European Union that provides legal personality and frame to the cooperation of European municipalities and regions and the efficient use of Union grants.

The grouping brings the players of at least two member states (municipalities, regional authorities or the state) into a joint organisation. The legal conditions of the grouping are governed by the law of the state where the centre is located. EGTC has legal personality and full legal capacity, may act as an independent legal subject. The grouping has its own budget, organisation and contracting capacity, may acquire mobile or immobile properties, act before a court.

The member elect the chief executive and set up the public assembly consisting of the representatives of the members jointly.

**What was the aim of the European Union with the creation of EGTC?**

Territorial cooperation could not be implemented efficiently because of the lack of regulation or the difference in member state regulations. Because of this in 2006 the Committee of Regions initiated the creation of a new European legal instrument, the EGTC to facilitate the cooperation of local players and the more efficient use of Union sources.

The regulations concerning EGTCs are to be applied in each EU member country, so a grouping can be established anywhere under the same conditions.

They have legal personality, full legal capacity, own budget, personnel and contracting capacity.

Border region, cross-border, interregional, twin town, transnational cooperation can all be realised within their frame

They cover all types of cooperation opportunities: management of EU programs, implementation of EU projects or cooperation without EU support.

The legal subjects of non-EU member can also participate

The EU created this new instrument in 2006, a long time is required to become familiar with it and use it

The practical experiences are not available yet, in Hungary there is one registered EGTC (Ister-Granum EGTC), in Europe about one dozen

EGTC has a concrete achievement a cross border theme way, the Ister Granum wine way involving wine makers from Hungary and Slovakia. The unique feature of this

wine way will be achieved by the fact that it is fulfilled on an international platform and not a national one.

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