

Bridging borders in practice: lessons from the DKMT Euroregion and the BTC EGTC

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Abstract

Cross-border cooperation has emerged as a key area of interest for both policymakers and scholars in the context of growing regional interdependence, European integration and shifting border dynamics in Europe. This research paper investigates the Hungarian and Serbian border area as a distinctive geopolitical interface where the European Union structures converge with non-EU territories, namely Serbia, thus offering a valuable space for analysing regional governance models, institutional cooperation, cross-border strategic planning and implementation. This research draws on secondary data analysis and expert interviews conducted in a semi-structured format to research the legal frameworks, institutional arrangements and policy mechanisms underpinning these platforms, while also identifying the processes of implementation and practical barriers, too. Subsequently, the research examines two major institutional platforms that operate along the Hungarian, Serbian and Romanian frontier. One is the Euroregion Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa (Euroregion DKMT), while the other one is the Banat-Triplex Confinium European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (BTC EGTC). These platforms represent key efforts to formalise and operationalise cross-border cooperation in a historically fragmented region. While the DKMT provides a profound coordination framework across three territories, the BTC EGTC focuses on programme delivery at the municipal level within the EGTC format. However, some constraints limit their performance, like the lack of EGTC-enabling legislation in Serbia, Schengen-related border frictions and administrative fragmentation among the cooperating members.

Keywords: border, cross-border cooperation, DKMT, BTC EGTC, European integration



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Introduction

In the context of increasing regional interdependence and evolving border dynamics within Europe, cross-border cooperation has emerged as a critical area of study for both policy-makers and academics. This importance has been particularly evident along the internal and external borders of the European Union, especially following the EU enlargements in 2004, 2007 and 2013. These developments have elevated the role of cross-border cooperation not only in national policies, but also within the broader framework of the EU's cohesion and neighbourhood policies. As a result, cross-border cooperation has become a key instrument for promoting regional integration, addressing shared challenges and supporting territorial cohesion across Europe¹.

The policies of the European Union, like cross-border cooperation, regional development, neighbourhood policy and engagement have provided new institutional frameworks and funding mechanisms to promote joint development across the borders in the Central European space². Although, Serbia is not an EU member state, but it strongly moves toward the EU; consequently, the region is a highly appropriate space for researching the topics, like EU integration, its effects on local governance structures and cross-border partnerships. Moreover, Serbia, as a candidate country, is a key participant in various cross-border programs, including those tools that were/are co-financed by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA I, II, III).

This research study aims to explore the mechanisms and effectiveness of cross-border cooperation along the Hungarian and Serbian border, with particular attention to the roles that are played by institutional frameworks, such as the Euroregion Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa (DKMT) and the Banat-Triplex Confinium European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (BTC EGTC). These two cooperation platforms perform key efforts in order to institutionalise and operationalise cross-border cooperation in a historically fragmented region that has become increasingly interconnected during the decades. The former one was established in 1997 with the goal of bringing together counties and districts from Hungary, Serbia and Romania. The latter one was founded in 2010; hence it utilised the advantage of the EU's legal instrument for formalising cross-border cooperation structures. Subsequently, the more institutionalized form opens up space for a more effective, targeted and legally coherent governance model. The BTC EGTC primarily focuses on the Banat region, with cooperation between Hungary, Serbia and Romania.

As a fundamental part of the research design, desk research of the Hungarian and Serbian border region was applied. This method, also referred to as secondary data analysis, involves the systematic collection, review and interpretation of existing and published material relevant to the research topic. The desk research helps to research the institutional landscape of cross-border cooperation in the region, including legal frameworks, organizational structures and policy objectives. It is able to ensure empirical insight into past and ongoing cooperation efforts, highlighting achievements and obstacles. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with experts, such as project coordinators, were made that provided thoughtful information about the practical challenges and opportunities of cross-border cooperation.

The research paper is structured into several key sections in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of cross-border governance in the Hungarian and Serbian context. The first section examines the nature and evolution of cross-border governance and cooperation along the Hungarian and Serbian border, with particular emphasis on the historical, political and institutional background that shapes current realities. This part explores how the legacies of state socialism, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the process of European integration have influenced cross-border relations in the area. The second and third sections investigate the Euroregion Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa and the Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC, focusing on their historical origins, institutional development and key achievements. The fourth section offers a comparative insight into the DKMT Euroregion and the BTC EGTC, underlining their

¹ Fejes, Zsuzsanna. "Evolution of Cross-Border Cooperation in the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities". *Društveni Horizonti* 3, no. 5 (2023): 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.5937/drushor2305055F>.

² Soós, Edit, and Zsuzsanna Fejes. "Határon Átnyúló Együttműködések Magyarországon". *Európai Tükör* 12, nos 7–8 (2007): 104–20.

complementarities and differences, while the final section gives the conclusions and summarises the research findings.

Historical and political background of cooperation between Hungary and Serbia

Hungary and Serbia has a shared and complex history that is characterised by shifting borders, ethnic diversity and evolving political landscapes. Both countries have experienced centuries of intertwined histories, from medieval times through the Ottoman period, the Habsburg Empire and the 20th century conflicts that profoundly redefined the region.

In the medieval period, Hungarian Kingdom and Serbian Kingdom, later the Serbian Despotate, maintained complex political and military relationship. Nevertheless, with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries, both medieval state entities faced external diplomatic and military pressure and the threat of foreign military occupation. The territory of Kingdom of Hungary was divided into three separate political units as a result of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman-Habsburg wars, while the territory the Serbian Despotate was fully absorbed into the Ottoman Empire.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the European continent experienced widespread national awakening and struggle for national independence³. This process had serious impact, like the shifting allegiances and rivalries, dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the emergence of new nation-states with new strict borders. In these processes, Hungary lost significant territory, including Vojvodina (Vajdaság), which became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes that was later renamed as Yugoslavia. This period was marked by tense relations, territorial disputes and concerns over minority rights.

The Cold War period represented another layer of complexity. Hungary became part of the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc, while Yugoslavia, under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, pursued rather a non-aligned path, hence representing an independent political direction and distancing itself from both the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Although, some ideological differences existed between the Eastern Bloc and the non-aligned path, but there was also a practical cooperation in trade, transport and culture in the 70s and 80s.

The 1990s experienced serious tension in the Balkan region that was mainly generated by the breakup of Yugoslavia and the following ethnic conflicts and wars. The violent confrontations led to widespread human suffering, including genocide, mass displacement and serious destruction of infrastructure. The international community responded with a combination of peacekeeping missions, diplomatic interventions and war crimes tribunals with the aim to restore stability and justice in the region.

During this period, Hungary was transitioning toward liberal democracy, and it aimed to integrate itself into Western and Trans-Atlantic institutions, like the EU and NATO. This involved significant political and economic reforms, including privatization, the establishment of democratic institutions and alignment with Western legal and governance standards. Hungary followed a proactive foreign policy; thus it supported the broader international efforts for peace and regional stability. Moreover, Hungary continuously expressed its concerns for the ethnic Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, especially amid reports of repression.

Since the early 2000s, Hungary and Serbia have made significant steps towards reconciliation and cooperation. A major turning point was in the 2010s, as both countries emphasised mutual respect, minority rights and economic partnership. Hungarian-Serbian intergovernmental summits are regularly organised since 2014. These summits aim to manage bilateral cooperation and interactions. The last session of the Serbia-Hungary Strategic Cooperation Council was held in November 2024. The delegations signed agreements in the areas of justice, culture, science, European integration and diplomacy.

Hungary is a strong supporter of Serbia's attempt to achieve membership in the European Union, thereby Hungary provides political support and technical assistance. This support was openly thanked by Elvira Kovacs, Deputy Speaker of the Serbian Parliament and Chair of the Integration Committee, who

³ Hobsbawm, E. J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2nd edn. Canto. Cambridge University Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521439612>.

highlighted “*We owe Hungary immense gratitude for its persistence in keeping Serbia's EU accession on the agenda, even at times when it appeared that many member states, primarily citing political reasons, remained opposed to it.*”⁴

Moreover, economic cooperation between Serbia and Hungary has been flourishing, particularly in energy, infrastructure and trade. Regarding energy cooperation, several very important bilateral initiatives can be mentioned. First, the Serbian state-owned company Srbijagas and Hungary's MVM CEEnergy decided to set up joint natural gas company, SERBHUNGAS⁵. This pipeline is planned to have a capacity of 4-5 million tons, and its building may begin in late 2025 or early 2026⁶. Second, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, expressed that construction of a new oil pipeline will begin between Hungary and Serbia. The pipeline will be 180-190 kilometres long and it aims to ensure fuel supply into the entire region⁷. Third, Hungary offers gas storage facilities to Serbia. In 2024, Minister of Mining and Energy, Dubravka Djedović Handanović, spoke about 163 million m³ Serbian gas in Hungary. Even more, Hungary and Serbia are jointly building the Pannonian Corridor. This Corridor is expected to double the electricity transmission capacity between Serbia and Hungary upon completion⁸. Fourth, Serbia, Hungary and Slovenia made an agreement to integrate their electricity exchange under the ADEX Group (Alpine-Adriatic Danube Power Exchange). It is a common platform for trading, and it encourages the development of a reliable regional electricity market⁹.

Regarding infrastructure, the most important project is the high-speed rail line, crossing Budapest and Belgrade, which was also openly supported at the Serbia-Hungary Strategic Cooperation Council. The project is expected to be completed by the beginning of 2026 and the Rőszke-Horgoš border crossing will be transformed into a modern border crossing¹⁰.

Regarding trade and investments, bilateral trade between Serbia and Hungary has been experiencing a significant growth. In the recent decade, there was a spectacular expansion of trade. Serbian export to Hungary increased from 245M EUR (2012) to 1.5B EUR (2022), while the Hungarian export to Serbia increased from 1727M EUR (2012) to 2.1B EUR (2022)¹¹. What is even more, Hungarian companies are strongly present on the Serbian market. OTP Bank is the second-largest bank in Serbia, specifically OTP Banka Srbija a.d. had a market share of 14.22% in 2024; MOL company (MOL Serbia) has more than 70 filling stations in Serbia; Masterplast operates its largest and fastest-growing manufacturing base in Subotica; Tisza Automotive (member of the Tisza Group) operates manufacturing plants in Senta, Bečej and Kikinda; and the UBM Group (animal feed producer) has its plant in Šid.

Moreover, both countries underline the importance of minority rights and their protection. Hungary highlights the Hungarian community in Vojvodina, while Serbia emphasizes the Serbian diaspora in

⁴ Kozma, Zoltán. “Hungary Plays Key Role in Serbia's EU Accession”. *Magyarnemzet.Hu*, 28 January 2025. <https://magyarnemzet.hu/english/2025/01/hungary-plays-key-role-in-serbias-eu-accession>.

⁵ Stojanovic, Milica, and Edit Inotai. “Serbia and Hungary Set Up Joint Natural Gas Company”. *Balkan Insight*, 20 June 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/20/serbia-and-hungary-set-up-joint-natural-gas-company/>.

⁶ Reuters. “Hungary Could Meet Serbia's Oil Needs with New Pipeline from 2028, Minister Says”. *Energy. Reuters*, 2 April 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-could-meet-serbias-oil-needs-with-new-pipeline-2028-minister-says-2025-04-02/>.

⁷ <https://kormany.hu>. “Új Kőolajvezeték Épül Magyarország És Szerbia Között”. 23 May 2025. <https://kormany.hu/hirek/uj-koolajvezetek-epul-magyarorszag-es-szerbia-kozott2>.

⁸ <https://mre.gov.rs>. “Djedović Handanović and Szijjártó: The Goal of Regional Cooperation Is Greater Energy Security and Independence”. *Mre.Gov.Rs*, 2024. <http://www.mre.gov.rs/vest/en/396/djedovic-handanovic-and-szijjrt-the-goal-of-regional-cooperation-is-greater-energy-security-and-independence.php>.

⁹ Baletic, Katarina, and Gyula Csák. “Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia Agree to Integrate Electricity Exchanges”. *Balkan Insight*, 10 April 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/04/10/hungary-serbia-and-slovenia-agree-to-integrate-electricity-exchanges/>.

¹⁰ *Railway Technology*. “Belgrade-Budapest Railway Project, Europe”. 2024. <https://www.railway-technology.com/projects/belgrade-budapest-railway-project-europe/>.

¹¹ “Čadež: Good Relations between Serbia and Hungary Are the Foundation for Even Stronger Economic Cooperation”. 2023. <https://en.pks.rs/news/cadez-good-relations-between-serbia-and-hungary-are-the-foundation-for-even-stronger-economic-cooperation>.

Hungary. This mutual approach has contributed to positive political and neighbourhood relations, thereby establishing a favourable space for a more intensive cross-border interactions.

Euroregion Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa (DKMT)

The Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa Euroregional cooperation connects the border regions of Hungary, Romania and Serbia. These borders were established following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, which significantly reshaped Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War. As a result, historically interconnected communities found themselves divided across national frontiers, making regional cooperation initiatives, like the DKMT, particularly important for fostering cohesion and mutual development.

Following the collapse of communist regimes in the region, the initiative for cross-border cooperation started to emerge early in the 1990s, especially as Romania and Hungary began to explore their cross-border relations. A key milestone was reached in 1992, when a protocol was signed by the involved partners. Subsequently, the first official agreements were signed between the cities of Timișoara and Szeged, as well as between Arad and Békéscsaba. These were followed by the agreements between Timiș and Csongrád counties and between Arad and Békés counties in 1994¹².

During the initial period of cross-border interactions, the initiative faced several challenges, including changes in administrative structures, politically charged tensions between Hungary and Romania, regional instability, the Balkan War, NATO bombings, the UN-imposed embargo on Yugoslavia amid its civil war and the Kosovo crisis. The embargo was lifted only in 1996, the same year Hungary and Romania resolved their longstanding dispute by signing a fundamental treaty of good neighbourliness. Despite these setbacks, the cooperation framework evolved into a stable platform for regional development, dialogue and integration¹³.

Formal establishment of cooperation took place in 1997, when the representatives from 44 Hungarian and Romanian counties, along with the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, signed the founding document in Szeged¹⁴. The territory of the DKMT Euroregion is approximately 71,879 km² and it has a population of about 5.3 million. Membership of the DKMT Euroregion includes the counties of Bács-Kiskun and Csongrád-Csanád (Hungary); Arad, Caraş-Severin and Timiș counties (Romania); Vojvodina Autonomous Province (Serbia).

The population is relatively evenly distributed in the cross-border region, resulting in a well-organised settlement pattern. Timișoara (Romania) is the largest urban centrum in the area, with a population around 250 thousand¹⁵, based on the 2021 census. Nevertheless, the urban agglomeration of the city reaches a population more than 306 thousand¹⁶. The second largest urban settlement is Novi Sad (Serbia) with a population of around 260 thousand, while the population of its urban agglomeration is approximately 325 thousand¹⁷. These two big urban centres are followed by Szeged (Hungary) with 158

¹² Rieser, Hans-Heinrich. "The DKMT-Euroregion: An Instrument for Cross Border Regional Development". *Romanian Review of Regional Studies*, 2005, 27–34.

¹³ Ibid Rieser, The DKMT Euroregion: An Instrument for Cross-Border Regional Development

¹⁴ Gyelnik, Teodor. "Euroregion Danube-Kriş_Mureş-Tisa (DKMT)". In *Critical Dictionary on Borders, Cross-Border Cooperation and European Integration*, edited by Bernard Reitel and Birte Wassenberg. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b15774>.

¹⁵ "UNdata | Record View | City Population by Sex, City and City Type – Romania". Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=Romania+City+population+by+sex&d=POP&f=tableCode%3a240%3bcountryCode%3a642>.

¹⁶ "Timisoara, Romania Metro Area Population (1950-2025) | MacroTrends". Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/cities/22214/timisoara/population>.

¹⁷ "UNdata | Record View | City Population by Sex, City and City Type – Serbia". 2025. <https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=serbia+City+population+by+sex&d=POP&f=tableCode%3a240%3bcountryCode%3a688>.

thousand city population, and the urban agglomeration reaches 203 thousand¹⁸, while Arad (Romania) has 145 thousand population¹⁹. These major cities serve as important hubs for commerce, education and research. Beyond the urban centres, the cross-border region is characterised with a widespread network of smaller towns and rural communities. In contrast, the hilly and mountainous zones are home to much smaller villages, which often struggle due to aging populations and outward migration.

The DKMT cooperation involves a variety of different border types. Romania became a Schengen member in 2025, which has significantly eased border crossings. However, for nearly two decades, the cross-border region had to operate under strict border control measures. In contrast, the Serbian border represents the external boundary of the European Union, where crossing restrictions remain even more prevalent. As a result, the cooperation must navigate diverse border control systems and varying degrees of openness. Additionally, national minorities, particularly the Hungarian communities living in both Romania and Serbia, play an important role in cross-border cooperation. This shared cultural and linguistic heritage helps to facilitate smoother and more effective interaction across the borders.

The main decision-making authority of the DKMT Euroregion is the General Assembly. It is composed of the leaders from regional public administration bodies and serves as the preparatory, coordinating and strategic forum for making key decisions. The General Assembly includes full members, both founding and associated, as well as other participants. The General Assembly implements its annual meeting on the Day of the DKMT Euroregion, at the Triplex Confinium memorial located at the Hungarian-Romanian-Serbian tripoint border²⁰.

The General Assembly elects the President of the Euroregion each year from the leaders of its members. The President's primary responsibilities include leading the Euroregion, coordinating its activities and ensuring the implementation of decisions made by the General Assembly²¹.

The DKMT Euroregion seeks to enhance the overall competitiveness of the area by improving its capacity to attract and effectively utilize development resources. At the same time, it aims to strengthen connections between local communities and authorities across the participating regions by promoting cross-border cooperation in key sectors such as the transport, education, culture, science, tourism, health care and sports. An additional strategic objective is to facilitate the region's integration into broader European structures, to support democratic stability, to encourage deeper interpersonal connections and to break down the existing stereotypes and prejudices. What is more, it aims to overcome the peripheral position of the member counties through coordinated efforts and shared development strategies, thus contributing to a higher quality of life and supporting dynamic regional growth.

Currently, the DKMT Euroregion manages several projects simultaneously. Perhaps the most significant ongoing initiative led by the DKMT is the Szeged–Timișoara 'Dream Railway'. The Szeged–Timișoara railway project addresses a key transport gap in the DKMT Euroregion by proposing a direct rail connection between the two major cities. Currently, travel between Szeged and Timișoara is slow and inefficient, with routes taking 6–7.5 hours due to detours. This lack of connectivity negatively affects passenger and freight transport; consequently, it seriously hinders regional economic and social development.

The planned railway aims to improve mobility, support environmental sustainability and strengthen cross-border cooperation. It also has the potential to become part of a larger freight corridor connecting the Adriatic and Black Sea, further enhancing the region's strategic importance in European transport and trade networks. Moreover, the project focuses on preparing feasibility studies, environmental assessments (including Natura 2000 and climate resilience) and organising stakeholder workshops.

¹⁸ "UNdata | Record View | City Population by Sex, City and City Type – Hungary". 2025. <https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=Hungary+City+population+by+sex&d=POP&f=tableCode%3a240%3bcountryCode%3a348>.

¹⁹ Ibid UN Data. for Romania

²⁰ 'DKMT'. Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://dkmt.net/en/rolunk/>.

²¹ Ibid DKMT's website

The 'Dream Railway' project is a grassroots initiative led by the DKMT and regional governments and it gained official support when Hungarian and Romanian ministers signed a memorandum in July 2024. The project promises long-term benefits for commuting, education, logistics, tourism and regional integration across the tri-border area between Hungary, Romania and Serbia^{22,23}.

Other current projects can also be mentioned, such as the DKMT's advisory role in cross-border healthcare, particularly regarding health insurance and ambulance services between Hungary and Romania²⁴; innovation of public sector between Hungary and Romania through the lenses of cross-border cooperation; transport and border crossing improvement between Hungary and Serbia, where stakeholders from both sides are directly involved in brainstorming to find appropriate solutions; or cross-border tourism development between Hungary and Serbia with the help of the artificial intelligence.

Some of the DKMT Euroregion's earlier completed projects also deserve mention. First is the 'Euroregional Information Centre', which was implemented from the Programme 2000 - 2006 Hungary - Romania - Serbia and Montenegro (HU-RO-SCG). The DKMT region faces challenges in cross-border cooperation due to poor information flow, limiting entrepreneurship and investment. To address this obstacle, the 'Euroregional Information Centre' encouraged communication, it provided regional and EU-related updates and distributed content free of charge to media in the Hungarian and Serbian territories. By offering information in local languages and promoting cultural understanding, the 'Euroregional Information Centre' aimed to strengthen regional cohesion and long-term cross-border interactions²⁵.

The next former successful project was the 'Routes and adventures without borders in the DKMT Euroregion'. It was implemented from the Programme 2007 - 2013 Hungary - Romania (HU-RO). The project aimed to improve tourism in the DKMT Euroregion by developing thematic tourism routes that connect attractions across the Hungarian and Romanian border, hence addressing the low visibility and limited tourist engagement in the region. The initiative tried to improve the attractiveness and the overall tourism by clustering attractions around shared cultural or historical themes, and by promoting them with coordinated tools and test trips. The project targeted a wide range of stakeholders, from local tourism providers and municipalities to tour operators and residents, thereby enhancing cross-border cooperation and integrating the region into the broader international tourism network²⁶.

Despite numerous achievements, the DKMT Euroregion still faces several obstacles. Perhaps the most significant challenge is the border with Serbia, which slows down border crossing processes. Crossing times are unpredictable, hence the travellers may pass the border quickly or they may face long hours of waiting. This uncertainty poses a serious problem for cross-border tourism, as it discourages visitors and complicates planning for both tourists and local businesses. Subsequently, addressing this barrier is crucial for enhancing regional cooperation and boosting economic and cultural exchange across the border.

The Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC

The Banat-Triplex Confinium European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (BTC EGTC) grew out of a distinctive institutional environment at the Hungarian-Romanian-Serbian triple border. During 2009, a coalition of roughly fifty mayors met in Mórahalom (Hungary) to explore an instrument that could deliver cross-border projects even more efficiently, which was followed by a ceremonial founding

²² Keep.Eu. "Project - Szeged-Timisoara Dream Railway". Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://keep.eu/projects/30384/SZEGED-TIMISOARA-DREAM-RAIL-EN/>.

²³ "DREAM | Szeged-Timisoara Dream Railway | ROHU 632 – Interreg". Accessed 9 September 2025. https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/project_library/dream-szeged-timisoara-dream-railway-rohu-632/.

²⁴ B-Solutionsproject. "Public Services". Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/public-services>.

²⁵ Keep.Eu. "Project - Euroregional Information Centre". 5. <https://keep.eu/projects/5148/Euroregional-Information-Cen-EN/>.

²⁶ Keep.Eu. "Project - Routes and Adventures without Borders in the DKMT Euroregion". Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://keep.eu/projects/8456/Routes-and-adventures-withou-EN/>.

session on 10 December that year²⁷. The initiative acquired legal personality in January 2011 when it was registered by the Budapest Metropolitan Court, thereby shifting from a political commitment into a durable, rule-bound organisation with its seat in Mórahalom²⁸.

The legal architecture surrounding EGTCs helps to explain the early design choices. Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 created the instrument for public bodies from EU Member States, and the subsequent amendment – Regulation (EU) No 1302/2013 – clarified procedures and opened a route for participation by authorities from neighbouring third countries, provided that domestic law made this possible²⁹. This matters for a triple-border grouping that always intended to involve Serbian municipalities alongside Hungarian and Romanian ones; although, Serbian local governments engaged from the outset, the absence of an enabling framework in Serbia meant they could not accede as full members and instead joined as observers³⁰. That asymmetry has persisted.

Institutionally, the BTC EGTC developed a structured governance model³¹, namely the internal organs comprise the General Assembly, a hybrid President-Director, a five-member Board, a three-member Supervisory Committee and elected officers. The Board is appointed for five years and balances Hungarian and Romanian representation via a president-director, two deputies (one per side) and one additional member from each side. It meets at least annually and decides by open vote (secret ballots are reserved for personal matters), with the president-director holding a casting vote in case of ties. The General Assembly can meet physically or by electronic means, and – where appropriate – can even take decisions by written procedure; its sessions are recorded, and minutes must include verbatim decision texts with a yearly serial number. Resolutions are entered into a public register and communicated to affected parties, typically within 30 days, while an explicit transparency regime allows any member to inspect the decisions ledger. Beyond the standing bodies, the Assembly may constitute ad-hoc working and expert committees; their operation is set in internal by-laws consistent with the Convention and Statutes. Lawfulness oversight is exercised by Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and – unless otherwise provided – financial audit falls to the Government Audit Office.

Financial governance is codified in detail. The EGTC is a non-profit legal person; it may not distribute surplus and is limited to activities that directly serve its objectives. Budgets and year-end accounts are approved by the General Assembly, with accounting rules aligned to Hungarian public-benefit and association law; income may derive from grants (EU/national), donations, events, advertising, institutional services and other lawful receipts. Assets are managed on approved annual budgets; bank-account and cash-office procedures are laid down in internal regulations, and transactions above HUF 1 million require Board authorisation with prompt notification to members. Office-holders may receive honoraria or reimbursement of justified expenses only. Together these provisions create a clear chain of authorisation, disclosure and control.

²⁷ Fejes, Zsuzsanna. "Republic of Serbia Towards the European Territorial Cohesion and Cross-Border Cooperation - with Special Focus on Vojvodina". *DETUROPE - The Central European Journal of Tourism and Regional Development* 5, no. 3 (2013): 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.32725/det.2013.022>.

²⁸ Molnar, Iren Gabrić, and Edit Soós. *The Instruments of the European Union Cross-Border Regional Cooperation*. 52 (2016).

²⁹ EU (2006) Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Official Journal of the European Union, L210, Pp. 19-24. and EU (2013) Regulation (EU) No 1302/2013 Amending Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 on a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Official Journal of the European Union, L347, 303. Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2006/1082/oj/eng>.

³⁰ CESCIBalkans. "Legal Accessibility - Serbia's Participation in EGTCs". CESCIBalkans, 2017. https://egtcmonitor.cesci-net.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CESCIBalkans_CESCI_2017_EGTC_and_Serbia.pdf

³¹ "Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC". *EGTC-Monitor*, 26 February 2021. <https://egtcmonitor.cesci-net.eu/en/egtc-infohub/hungarian-egtc/banat-triplex-confinium-egtc/>

Strategic planning supplied direction and continuity. An Integrated Regional Strategy³² adopted in 2014 and its accompanying action plan articulated priorities across economic development, environmental management and cultural co-operation; these were complemented by targeted concepts, such as a proposed Hungarian-Serbian international incubator in Mórahalom to support entrepreneurship and technology transfer. The sequence – grass-roots coalition, legal consolidation, streamlined governance and strategy-led programming – turned an ad-hoc mayoral initiative into a place-based institution capable of navigating successive funding cycles.

Cultural cooperation has been a visible strand in the BTC EGTC's portfolio, serving both as a trust-building arena and as an instrument for everyday cross-border contact. One early example is 'Dance and Music Without Borders' project (2012-2013), which linked Makó (HU), Sânnicolau Mare and Jimbolia (RO) through concerts, a folk-dance festival and a mayors' forum that deliberately invoked Béla Bartók's regional cultural legacy as a shared reference point. The same logic of cultural connectivity underpins the current MIKROKOSMOS initiative³³ (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary, 2025-2027), led by the BTC EGTC and built around an eight-partner consortium with a budget in the order of €1.9 million. In both cases, soft interventions – festivals, workshops, thematic series – have lowered the social and administrative 'transaction costs' of living and working in a multi-lingual borderland.

Support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitutes a second policy field. Under the Hungary-Serbia IPA Cross-border Co-operation programme, the 'ExpoTrain SME' project³⁴ (2013-2014) organised cross-border fairs and training to strengthen competitiveness and buyer–supplier relations, with a total budget reported at approximately €87,771. Complementary interventions under the Hungary-Romania programme focused on updating municipal development strategies and elaborating sectoral operational programmes – smaller, technical steps that nonetheless create a shared pipeline of project ideas across borders. The strategic concept for a Hungarian-Serbian International Incubator Centre in Mórahalom sits within this economic strand, signalling an ambition to shift from episodic fairs to steadier forms of enterprise support.

Risk prevention and public safety form a third field where the EGTC and its partners have moved beyond purely 'soft' networking. The ROHU-72 project³⁵ within the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme invested in interoperable equipment – including a multifunctional fire and snow-clearing vehicle for hard-to-access farmland – and in joint training for volunteer and municipal responders, with a total budget of about €2.68 million. The shift here is substantial: rather than symbolic cooperation, these investments produce tangible, everyday benefits in dispersed agricultural landscapes exposed to fire, snow and flood risks that do not respect national borders.

Programming and soft infrastructure knit these fields together. The Integrated Regional Strategy and action plan offer a backbone for identifying and sequencing projects; recurring cultural series and municipal counselling days on cross-border social policy (for example, information on pension entitlements) keep relationships active between major funding rounds. The resulting portfolio cuts across culture, SMEs and risk management – all domains where relatively small investments can have outsized effects in peripheral border areas.

A first achievement lies in institutional consolidation. By securing registration in January 2011, placing its office in Mórahalom and maintaining a lean but continuous staff, the BTC EGTC has anchored a durable governance node able to coordinate dozens of municipalities across two Member States while remaining close to residents' concerns. That durability matters in a policy domain where projects come

³² CESCO. "Integrated Regional Strategy of Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC – Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy – CESCO Budapest". n.d. Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://budapest.cesci-net.eu/en/integrated-regional-strategy-of-banat-triplex-confinium-egtc-action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-strategy/>.

³³ "MIKROKOSMOS". *Hárfa*, n.d. Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://harfaalapitvany.hu/en/projects/mikrokosmos/>.

³⁴ Keep.Eu. "Project - Organization of Cross-Border Expo and Training Sessions for the Benefit of Empowering SME's". Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://keep.eu/projects/6611/Organization-of-Cross-border-EN/>.

³⁵ ROHU-72 – CBN – Banat-Triplex Confinium EGTC. n.d. Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://www.btc-egtc.eu/rohu-72-cbn/>

and go with programme cycles: an institution that persists beyond individual grants can curate a pipeline, learn from experience and preserve networks.

A second achievement concerns the portfolio effect across policy fields. Cultural projects help build legitimacy and routine sociability; SME-oriented interventions translate social capital into economic ties; and risk-prevention investments deliver visible co-benefits, from quicker incident response to improved winter accessibility for farmsteads. The ability to lead a sizeable, two-year, multi-partner cultural programme in 2025-2027 indicates that the EGTC can still mobilise Interreg resources and orchestrate cross-border partnerships at scale.

A third achievement is incremental policy learning. The adoption of an Integrated Regional Strategy and action plan signals a move away from ad-hoc project-making. Strategies and concept papers function as common frames for diagnosis, prioritisation and sequencing, helping municipalities to align local development documents and prepare joint proposals more efficiently. In a tri-border setting with multiple languages and administrative traditions, even modest standardisation of concepts and timelines reduces friction.

Limitations are nonetheless real and, in some respects, structural. The most consequential constraint is the legal status of Serbian municipalities. Although the 2013 reform of the EGTC Regulation opened possibilities for third-country participation, domestic legal alignment remains a precondition; in Serbia, the lack of an enabling act has prevented municipalities from becoming full members, relegating them to observer roles. That status weakens parity in agenda-setting, complicates budget execution and blunts the legitimacy of decisions that affect genuinely trilateral issues.

Capacity and scale constitute a second constraint. The EGTC's staff complement is small and its member municipalities are predominantly small to medium-sized; as a result, administrative bandwidth is limited and average project budgets have tended to remain modest. The organisation is largely dependent on programme-based finance, which can make it difficult to assemble larger, multi-annual capital investments – such as cross-border transport improvements – that require multi-level commitment beyond municipal remits. In practice, this pushes the grouping towards interventions that are meaningful at borderland scale but do not necessarily transform structural peripherality.

A third limitation arises from the complexity of multi-layered governance. Even between two EU Member States, divergent administrative routines, language regimes and sectoral regulations add to transaction costs; incorporating a non-EU third country with a different legal framework compounds those frictions. The very genesis of the BTC EGTC – an explicit attempt to overcome the perceived 'structural problems' of the DKMT Euroregion – signals how institutional fragmentation can impede delivery and how difficult it is to sustain cross-border action when higher-level frameworks are misaligned³⁶.

Comparative insights and policy implications

The Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa (DKMT) Euroregion and the Banat-Triplex Confinium (BTC) EGTC co-exist across the same borderland yet operate at different scales, through different legal instruments, and with distinct repertoires of action. The DKMT is a meso-regional political forum that aggregates county and provincial authorities under a general assembly and rotating leadership. Its remit spans brokerage among regional executives, articulation of tri-lateral priorities, and the curation of initiatives that require county/provincial coordination, often with a visible public and diplomatic dimension. The BTC EGTC, by contrast, bundles municipalities under the EU's EGTC instrument, giving them a legal personality geared to programme-compliant preparation and delivery. Its membership structure reflects this micro-scale proximity: dozens of Hungarian and Romanian municipalities participate as full members, while interested Serbian municipalities remain confined to observer roles for want of an enabling act in Serbia.

³⁶ Fejes, Zsuzsanna. "Republic of Serbia Towards the European Territorial Cohesion and Cross-Border Cooperation - with Special Focus on Vojvodina". *DEUROPE - The Central European Journal of Tourism and Regional Development* 5, no. 3 (2013): 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.32725/det.2013.022>.

The result is a layered governance landscape in which the DKMT sustains the political ‘roof’ and the BTC EGTC provides the implementation ‘workbench’ for local projects.

This differentiation is visible in their respective portfolios. DKMT’s long-running capacity to convene counties and ministries is exemplified by work on cross-border mobility and service provision – most prominently the Szeged-Timişoara ‘Dream Railway’, a county-backed initiative that has advanced through feasibility and environmental screening. The project is cast as a rectification of a historical connectivity gap, with expected spill-overs for commuting, education, tourism and logistics across the tri-border area. BTC’s track record, in turn, clusters around municipal-scale cultural, SME and risk-management interventions organised through Interreg strands, underpinned by a strategy - action plan sequence that stabilises programming from one funding cycle to the next. Together, these strands suggest complementarity: DKMT supplies scale, visibility and inter-governmental brokerage; BTC supplies municipal proximity and a pipeline of auditable, project-formatted outputs.

The instruments also diverge in legal reach. As an EGTC, the BTC is constrained by Regulations 1082/2006 and 1302/2013, which allow third-country participation only where national law provides a basis. Serbia’s absence of such an act keeps Serbian municipalities at the edge of the BTC EGTC’s decision-making, even where day-to-day cooperation is strong. The DKMT, as a classic Euroregion, seats Vojvodina as a full partner and thus preserves a fully tri-lateral framework at meso-regional level. From an analytical perspective, this asymmetry is consequential, it simultaneously explains why the BTC EGTC can deliver bi-national projects with high compliance fidelity and why some tri-lateral ambitions continue to require a Euroregional – or intergovernmental – frame.

The principal operational challenge is the coexistence of different border regimes within a single functional space. With Romania’s accession to Schengen, the Hungary-Romania line now behaves as an internal Schengen border, whereas the Hungary-Serbia line remains an external EU/Schengen frontier. This geometry produces uneven frictions. On the Serbian axis, waiting times at crossings remain variable and sometimes protracted; the unpredictability itself depresses everyday mobility, tourism and firm-to-firm interaction. On the Romanian axis, by contrast, cooperation can be organised under free-movement conditions, with fewer discontinuities between project design and daily use. In practice, cross-border services must therefore be ‘dual-prototyped’, specifically one set of dispatch, documentation and reimbursement routines for internal-EU conditions and another adapted to external-border controls.

A second challenge arises from the depth and variety of coordination tasks that sit below strategic declarations. The Dream Railway encapsulates this logic. Even with feasibility studies, environmental due diligence (including Natura 2000 and climate resilience) and a political memorandum in place, performance will ultimately depend on granular interoperability at stations and depots, the reliability of timetable synchronisation, and – where relevant – the choreography of policing and customs at crossing points. Without these micro-arrangements, the promised gains for commuting and logistics remain vulnerable to small operational failures. Similar dynamics are visible in DKMT’s problem-solving forums on HU-RS crossing improvements and in advisory work on HU-RO ambulance and health insurance cooperation. The immediate obstacles are procedural, technical and linguistic as much as they are financial.

A third challenge is structural capacity. Both the DKMT and the BTC EGTC rely on small executive cores interfacing with multiple legal orders, languages and programme families. For municipalities, the meetingpoint between internal-EU Interreg and IPA Interreg is particularly demanding: calendars, eligibility and controls are not identical, and the external border adds audit and security layers on top of standard procurement and state-aid compliance. The consequence is a bias towards ‘small but many’ interventions – cultural series, SME fairs, risk-prevention kits – that are meaningful at borderland scale but that require deliberate sequencing if they are to accumulate into recognisable territorial change. The BTC EGTC’s strategy-led programming and the DKMT’s county-level brokerage are partial answers to this puzzle, but the underlying asymmetry between internal and external border conditions remains the organising constraint.

Finally, overlapping arenas impose coordination costs that are not always internalised. In the absence of a clearly codified division of labour, actors ‘forum-shop’ among the DKMT, the BTC EGTC and programme fora, multiplying meetings and elongating decision cycles without proportionate implementation gains. The comparative material assembled in this study suggests that clarifying mandates – the DKMT as tri-lateral broker and agenda-setter; the BTC EGTC as municipal-scale implementer – reduces redundancy, though such clarification does not by itself resolve the third-country legal asymmetry on the Serbian side. In other words, comparative scholarship flags the possibility of “oversizing/entropy” in large Euroregions (with DKMT frequently cited) when mandates blur or coordination across multiple structures weakens delivery; this critique implicitly argues for smaller, task-oriented vehicles like EGTCs to shoulder implementation³⁷.

When it comes to the integration into EU and Serbia’s relations and cross-border cooperation frameworks, the DKMT / the BTC EGTC ecosystem is nested within a broader interface composed of the Stabilisation and Association framework, a dense set of bilateral political and economic ties, and the architecture of internal-EU and IPA cross-border programmes.

At the programme level, the division between internal-EU and IPA strands organises practical possibilities along each border line. On Romania-Hungary, free movement and internal-EU Interreg rules facilitate relatively standard municipal cooperation; on Hungary-Serbia (and Romania-Serbia), IPA rules and external-border controls require designs that absorb additional compliance, security and audit layers. The comparative evidence thus supports a functional reading of the two institutions: the DKMT aligns tri-lateral priorities across states and sectors, while the BTC EGTC and its member municipalities deliver bi-national projects that programmes will fund, sequencing them so that residents experience continuous rather than patchwork improvement. Yet the ceiling remains legal. Without an EGTC-enabling act in Serbia, the BTC EGTC’s governance cannot become fully tri-lateral; the Euroregional format can include Vojvodina, but the EGTC cannot include Serbian municipalities as full members.

In sum, the comparative perspective highlights a workable, if imperfect, division of labour. The DKMT provides the tri-lateral canopy under which cross-border priorities are negotiated and political attention is mobilised; the BTC EGTC anchors a programme-compliant delivery system at municipal scale. The asymmetries between internal and external borders, and between EU and third-country legal orders, explain both the achievements recorded to date and the persistent frictions encountered in moving from strategy to everyday practice. Situating both platforms within EU-Serbia relations and CBC frameworks clarifies why some initiatives scale quickly on the RO-HU axis and others require longer gestation on the HU-RS axis, and why the legal status of Serbian municipalities in EGTCs is not a technical footnote but a key determinant of what ‘tri-lateral’ cooperation can mean in operational terms.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Danube-Kriş-Mureş-Tisa (DKMT) Euroregion and the Banat-Triplex Confinium (BTC) EGTC operate over the same frontier but at different scales and with distinct toolkits. The DKMT convenes counties and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina to provide tri-lateral political brokerage and a channel to national administrations; the BTC EGTC aggregates municipalities under the EGTC frame and specialises in programme-compliant delivery. When they are synchronised, strategic intent converts more readily into implementable projects with lower local transaction costs. Three structural constraints nevertheless bound performance, specifically the absence of an EGTC-enabling law in Serbia, which leaves Serbian municipalities as observers in the BTC EGTC and weakens parity; the external Schengen border on the Hungary-Serbia line, which imposes mobility, policing and customs frictions absent on internal EU borders; and the administrative complexity of operating across two Member States and one candidate country, amplified by seams between internal-EU Interreg and IPA Interreg rules.

³⁷ Sanguin, André-Louis. “Euroregions and Other EU’s Cross-Border Organizations: The Risk of Confusion, Redundancy, Oversizing and Entropy. A Critical Assessment”. *Annales* 23, no. 1 (2013) and Popescu, Gabriel. ‘The Conflicting Logics of Cross-Border Reterritorialization: Geopolitics of Euroregions in Eastern Europe | Request PDF’. *Political Geography* 27, no. 4 (2008): 418–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2008.03.002...>

Despite these limits, the BTC EGTC has delivered a coherent portfolio effect. Cultural initiatives build trust and routine sociability; SME measures translate social capital into trading links; and risk-prevention investments yield visible co-benefits, from faster incident response to improved winter accessibility in dispersed settlements. A strategy-led pipeline and a lean ‘core-plus-experts’ working method have enabled multi-field activity without inflating overheads. The DKMT remains the principal tri-lateral umbrella, brokering national commitments and articulating macro-priorities that municipalities can translate into projects. Both layers are nested in the Stabilisation and Association framework and Interreg/IPA programmes; progress on Chapter 22 and Serbian legal alignment would tighten the interface between political commitments and delivery.

At the same time, a concise policy agenda is advisable. First, the preparation of a staged pathway from observer to full Serbian membership in the BTC EGTC would be beneficial. Immediate measures could extend committee voting rights for Serbian partners, establishment of joint lines for tri-lateral pilots and formalisation of their presence at decision points. In parallel, pre-drafting amended statutes and due diligence packages could facilitate rapid accession once the legal basis is in place. Second, codifying a DKMT-BTC division of labour – the DKMT for tri-lateral coordination and macro-priorities; the BTC EGTC for municipal preparation and implementation – supported by a quarterly programme forum with Managing Authorities and a brief, public mandate map might also be considered.

To move from intention to reproducible practice, the establishment of a small Tri-Border Public Services Lab to prototype services that function under external-border constraints could be beneficial (interoperable emergency dispatch, joint winter maintenance, coordinated health referrals, multilingual e-government touchpoints), each accompanied by a legal troubleshooting note, standard operating procedures and a replication kit. Where needs exceed typical grant sizes, even more efforts could be made to blend financing stacks combining Interreg/IPA with national co-funding and, where appropriate, complementary EU instruments.

Furthermore, a joint Tri-Border Data Observatory could maintain baselines on demography, labour flows, travel times and business dynamics; a shared theory of change would make explicit how small and medium-sized projects aggregate to territorial effects; and alignment between internal indicators and programme metrics would ease reporting. Structured advisory panels in culture, SMEs, emergency services and environment, feeding into the programme forum, would anchor agendas in practitioner insight and sustain activity between major calls.

The overarching conclusion is pragmatic, the current architecture – the DKMT for tri-lateral coordination and the BTC EGTC for municipal-scale delivery – works when mandates are disciplined, programme seams are managed and learning is institutionalised. Immediate gains lie in targeted legal and programme fixes, joined-up pipeline management and clearer lines from strategy to resident-visible outcomes.

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