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The Resilience of the Hungary–Serbia Border Region's Economy during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the economic changes that occurred in the Hungarian–Serbian border region during the COVID-19 pandemic and to evaluate the resilience of this region. The border, currently functioning as the external Schengen frontier of the European Union, is subject to strict controls; nevertheless, the two sides remain closely interconnected through a range of social and economic relations. For the purpose of examining resilience empirically, the region was delineated at the NUTS 3 level, encompassing two Hungarian counties and three Serbian districts. The analysis focuses on GDP and employment data (from Eurostat). Both sides of the border were affected by the pandemic and subsequent austerity measures. While the region as a whole demonstrates resilience in terms of GDP, as evidenced by a return to growth, employment patterns reveal more heterogeneous trajectories: some counties and districts exhibit resilience, whereas others show signs of relapse or persistent dysfunction.

Keywords: Hungarian-Serbian border region, regional economic resilience

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Introduction

The border regions of the European Union have long been the focus of special attention in both territorial analyses and EU cohesion policy. External Schengen borders, where an EU member state borders a non-EU state, constitute a distinct category, which includes the Hungarian–Serbian border. However, this border is unique in several respects.

Hungary has been a member of the EU since 2004 and shares borders with seven countries, five of which are EU member states and members of the Schengen Area. The remaining two neighboring countries, Ukraine and Serbia, are not EU members, so the borders shared with them are external Schengen frontiers. Serbia, for its part, shares borders with nine countries, four of which are EU member states, including Hungary. Serbia submitted its application for EU membership in 2009 and was granted candidate status in March 2012. Accession negotiations between the EU and Serbia began in January 2014 (Bonomi & Uvalic, 2019). It is expected that Serbia will become an EU member within the next few years, at which point an internal Schengen border could eventually be established between the two countries.

The history of the current Serbian–Hungarian border can be traced back to the peace negotiations that concluded World War I, when a new border section was established between the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Hungary (630.6 km) (Sallai, 1995). This border bisected the formerly geographically unified territories of Bácska (Bačka) and Bánát (Banat). The name Bácska originated in the Middle Ages, during the period of Ottoman occupation, to denote the southern part of the area between the Danube and the Tisza. Following the expulsion of the Ottomans, two counties were established in this territory, which were united by law in 1802 (Csüllög, 2011). Banat, by contrast, is also a historical region, although in medieval Hungary it did not constitute a distinct territorial-administrative unit, but was instead divided among several counties (Kókai, 2006). Both regions were fragmented by the newly established national borders. Today, Bácska is shared between Hungary and Serbia, while Banat is divided among Hungary, Serbia, and Romania.

In the aftermath of World War II, and particularly in the second half of the 20th century, this border acquired geopolitical significance, as Yugoslavia—emerging from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—pursued a political trajectory distinct from that of the Soviet Union and its allies, including Hungary. With the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the creation of the new Republic of Serbia, this section of the frontier acquired its present status as the border between Serbia and Hungary. The former Yugoslav–Hungarian border thus became three separate borders, dividing Hungary from the independent states of Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia.

The border regions, along with the social and economic processes taking place there, are of particular importance to Hungary. This is partly due to the presence of a significant Hungarian minority of around 1.8 million people living in neighboring countries, a large proportion of whom reside in border areas. One of the distinctive features of the Hungarian–Serbian border region is that, as a result of the Treaty of Trianon, nearly 450,000 Hungarians lived on the Serbian side, in the region known as Vojvodina, during the first half of the 20th century (Palusek & Trombitás, 2017). (The Hungarian name Vajdaság derives from the Serbian word Vojvodina, which was first mentioned during the 1848–49 revolution. At that time, a Serbian uprising against Hungary, supported by the Habsburgs, sought to establish a new independent entity, the so-called Serbian Vojvodina.) At present (2022), approximately 180,000 Hungarians still live in Vojvodina, maintaining strong ties with Hungary. Relations between Hungary and Serbia have undergone significant improvement in recent decades. Most of the contentious issues of the past have been successfully resolved, and bilateral cooperation has intensified. Hungary also supports Serbia's bid for EU accession (Szigethy-Ambrus, 2023). In addition, the Hungarian government has launched special economic and other programs to provide support for Vojvodina (Juhász & Pleschinger, 2021).

The European Union operates the Interreg program, which aims to strengthen the internal cohesion of border regions. The Interreg VI-A IPA Hungary–Serbia Programme is an initiative implemented under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) within the EU's 2021–2027 financial framework, with the primary objective of facilitating and promoting the harmonious cross-border development of the region. The IPA Programme, which has been in operation since 2007, is currently in its third phase (IPA III) and covers nine NUTS 3-level units: two Hungarian counties and seven districts in Vojvodina (see below for territorial administrative units). Although projects implemented under Interreg and other EU programs did not generate significant economic or financial changes in the Serbian region, they nevertheless had an impact on the applicant organizations. The successful implementation of these projects demonstrated which communities were sustainable (Ricz, 2023). Moreover, the results achieved provided an example of the benefits of EU funding for community development (Nagy, 2020).

At the same time, economic relations between Hungary and Serbia are not particularly intensive, as both countries tend to be more closely integrated with the economies of larger and more developed European states. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH, stadat), in 2023 Serbia ranked 17th in terms of imports and 16th in terms of exports in Hungary's foreign trade. Nevertheless, social and economic relations across the border have long been significant, particularly in the fields of migration, higher education, culture, employment, and shopping tourism (e.g., Ritz & Gábrity, 2010).

As this is an external Schengen border, strict controls are in place. There are nine official road crossings and two rail crossings along the Hungarian–Serbian border. The former includes a motorway connection (the M5 in Hungary since 2006 and the A1 in Serbia since 2011), while the latter is currently undergoing modernization as part of the Budapest–Belgrade railway line. Both routes form part of Corridor X of the Trans-European Transport Network, which links Austria and Hungary with Greece and Turkey. This results in significant transit traffic, both in terms of freight transport and the movement of guest workers.

The Hungarian–Serbian external Schengen border is unique in that it is fortified with a fence. Migration routes from Africa and Asia to Europe cross the southern and eastern borders of the EU, and one of the three main migration corridors runs through the Balkans (Triandafyllidou, 2016), directly affecting the Hungarian–Serbian border. In 2015, the Hungarian government erected a barbed-wire fence along the 175-kilometer border with Serbia in an attempt to control irregular migration flows. Overall, this border region demonstrates internal connections and cohesion in many respects, reinforced by various programs, but at the same time it remains a heavily controlled external Schengen border. This duality burdens the region in multiple ways and constrains its more organic development.

The 21st century has introduced several new challenges for the European Union, one of the most serious being the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. The Eighth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion of the European Commission (EC, 2021) highlighted: "The restrictions put in place to contain the pandemic led to the deepest post-1945 recession…. The travel restrictions not only affected the tourism sector but also border areas where people could no longer cross a national border to go to work or to access services" (p. 1). In 2020, real GDP fell by 6.0% in the EU and the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis has varied widely across Member States and regions. This leads to the first research question: Did the economies of the Hungary–Serbia border regions experience a more pronounced decline in GDP and employment compared to the national rural averages of Hungary and Serbia?

The report further emphasized that, thanks to job-retention schemes, the effects on employment and unemployment were relatively limited. The Ninth Cohesion Report (EC, 2024) also notes: "The COVID-19 outbreak had a severe impact on the EU economy and society, but GDP rebounded strongly in 2021 after a massive downturn in 2020" (p. 20). This gives rise to the second research question: Did the economies of the Hungary–Serbia border regions recover from these disruptions in terms of GDP and employment at a pace comparable to the respective national rural averages?

The theoretical framework for addressing these questions is provided by the concept of resilience. The rise in popularity of this concept is often attributed to the work of ecologist Holling (1973), who examined the resilience and stability of ecological systems. Subsequently, the term appeared in other disciplines (e.g., psychology, engineering), where it was used to analyze how individuals, objects, and systems respond to disturbances. Over time, resilience also entered the field of economic geography and gained prominence among researchers in response to the heterogeneous reactions of regional economies to the 2008 recession (Sutton et al., 2023). Although the term has been defined in various ways, within this field it has crystallized as regional economic resilience. Sutton et al. (2023) summarize it as the ability of regional economies to resist, adapt, or transform in the face of shocks, and to recover afterward, thereby restoring or even improving pre-shock economic performance. Tóth (2012) further distinguished several types of regions depending on whether a region or its economy resists a shock (resistant), recovers from it (resilient), or only slowly recovers or even declines (gradual or continuous decline).

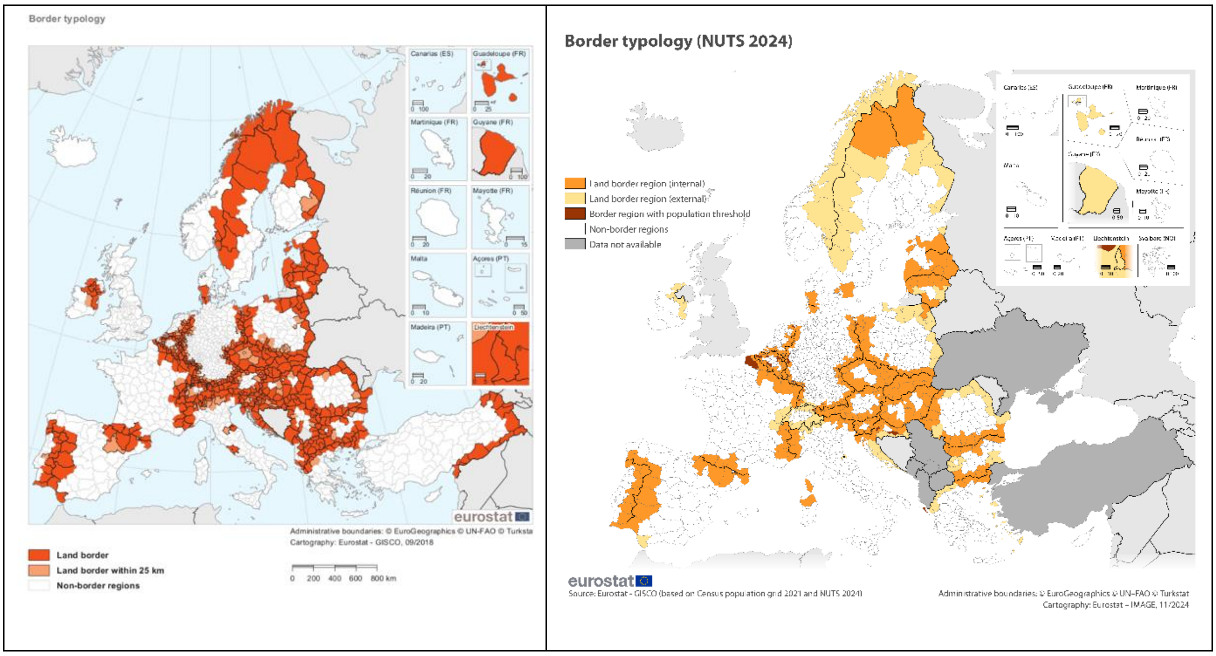
The COVID pandemic shows that cross-border interactions are fragile and border regions were vulnerable in terms of cross-border mobility as borders were closed and controls were reintroduced in several countries (Evrard, Nienaber, and Sommaribas 2020, Hippe et al. 2024). Inhabitants in border regions are often the first to be confronted with these shocks (Hippe et al. 2024). Furthermore, the external border regions of the EU are less resilient than the internal ones (Capello et al. 2017, Pascariu et al. 2020). With regard to European border regions, Hippe et al. (2024) highlight, based on their analysis of time series GDP data, these regions have a lower resistance than non-border regions, but they show a higher recoverability, and border regions must be seen as territorial objects with high potential and often a strength, but short-term vulnerability is highly relevant.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the aim of this study is to analyze the changes in the main economic characteristics of the Hungarian–Serbian border region during the pandemic. To this end, the border region must be precisely defined, appropriate statistical indicators selected, and the observed changes compared. This makes it possible to assess how the trajectories of the regions under study differed from those of other regions and to determine what type of resilience characterized them.

Materials and Methods

First, the territorial framework is defined. The border typology of the European Union is applied at the NUTS 3 level: it identifies border regions as those with a land border, or as those in which more than half of the population lives within 25 km of such a border (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The border regions (NUTS 3) in the European Union, in the case of NUTS 2014 and NUTS 2024 (source: Eurostat)



Looking at the regions of the Hungarian-Serbian border, the following can be seen. Hungary has eight NUTS 2 regions, and with the exception of Budapest, all of them share borders with neighboring countries. The Dél-Alföld region (area: 18,339 km²; population: 1,206,377 [2022]; no administrative center) borders Serbia. At the NUTS 3 level, Hungary is divided into twenty counties (nineteen counties and Budapest), fourteen of which (70%) are located directly along the national border. This is explained by the relatively small size of the country (93,030 km²) and the comparatively large territories of its counties. The Dél-Alföld region consists of three counties, two of which border Serbia: Bács-Kiskun County (area: 8,443 km²—the largest county in Hungary; population: 495,675; administrative center:

Kecskemét, with 108,000 inhabitants), and Csongrád-Csanád County (area: 4,262 km²; population: 392,621; administrative center: Szeged, with 159,000 inhabitants).

In Serbia there are five NUTS 2 regions, and with the exception of Beograd, all of them share borders with neighboring countries. The Vojvodina region (area: 21,614 km²; population: 1,740,230 [2022]; administrative center: Novi Sad, with 325,551 inhabitants) borders Hungary. One of the regions is Kosovo, a disputed territory on the Balkan Peninsula. The state, unilaterally proclaimed by the local Albanian majority, has only been partially recognized internationally; Serbia and the United Nations do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

Serbia (including Kosovo) is divided into twenty-nine administrative districts (NUTS 3 regions), twenty of which (69%) lie directly along the national border. This is largely a result of the elongated shape of the country. The Vojvodina region consists of seven districts, three of which border Hungary: West Bačka District (Zapadnobački okrug; Zapadnobačka oblast [Eurostat]) — area: 2,420 km²; population: 154,491; administrative center: Sombor, with 42,000 inhabitants; North Bačka District (Severnobački okrug; Severnobačka oblast [Eurostat]) — area: 1,784 km²; population: 160,163; administrative center: Subotica, with 94,000 inhabitants; North Banat District (Severnobanatski okrug; Severnobanatska oblast [Eurostat]) — area: 2,329 km²; population: 117,896; administrative center: Kikinda, with 32,000 inhabitants. All seven districts of Vojvodina participate in the Interreg VI-A IPA Hungary–Serbia Programme (Figure 2). It should be noted, however, that defining the border region at the NUTS 3 level produces some distortions, as the two Hungarian counties have significantly larger areas and populations than their Serbian counterparts. In fact, Bács-Kiskun County alone has a larger area and population than the three Serbian districts combined.

Figure 2. The border regions (NUTS 3) of Interreg VI-A IPA Hungary-Serbia programme (source: Széchenyi Programme Office)

Secondly, the selection of statistical indicators was required. The Eurostat database provides standardized data for territorial analyses within the European Union. At the regional level, data are available for NUTS 1, 2, and 3 regions; however, not all phenomena are covered at every level, and in some cases partial data gaps exist. A distinctive feature of the Eurostat database is that it also includes data for European countries and regions that are not EU members. In this context, candidate countries such as Serbia are expected to provide detailed and EU-compatible data as early as possible, even prior to accession. All relevant data can be accessed and downloaded from the Eurostat website. Given the economic focus of this study, the analysis is based on two indicators: GDP (gross domestic product at current market prices, million euros) and employment (number of employed persons aged 15 to 89, expressed in thousands). These are the two indicators that most frequently appear in economic analyses of countries and regions (see, for example, the European Union's cohesion reports).

Results

With regard to GDP, if we examine the 2014–2023 data series (2014–2022 in the case of Serbia) and take 2019 – the year preceding the COVID-19 crisis – as the base year (100%), the following patterns emerge. In Hungary and in the two counties under study, GDP values declined in 2020 but rose again in 2021, exceeding the 2019 level. Notably, the decline in the two counties in 2020 was smaller than the national average and even smaller than the rural average. Regarding the rebound in 2021, Csongrád-Csanád surpassed both the national and rural averages, whereas Bács-Kiskun lagged behind, a trend that persisted through 2022 and 2023.
The situation in Serbia was somewhat different. In 2020, two of the three districts – Severnobačka and Severnobanatska – experienced a slight decline, but neither the national nor the rural averages decreased compared to 2019 (both stood at 102%), and Zapadnobačka even recorded growth (103%). By 2021, all regions under study had exceeded the 2019 baseline, with national and rural GDP growth particularly strong, as was the case in Zapadnobačka. Thereafter, however, the growth dynamics of the latter region slowed somewhat.

Figure 3. Change in GDP of the two counties on the Hungarian-Serbian border (Bács-Kiskun, Csongrád-Csanád) (2019=100%) (Source of data: Eurostat)

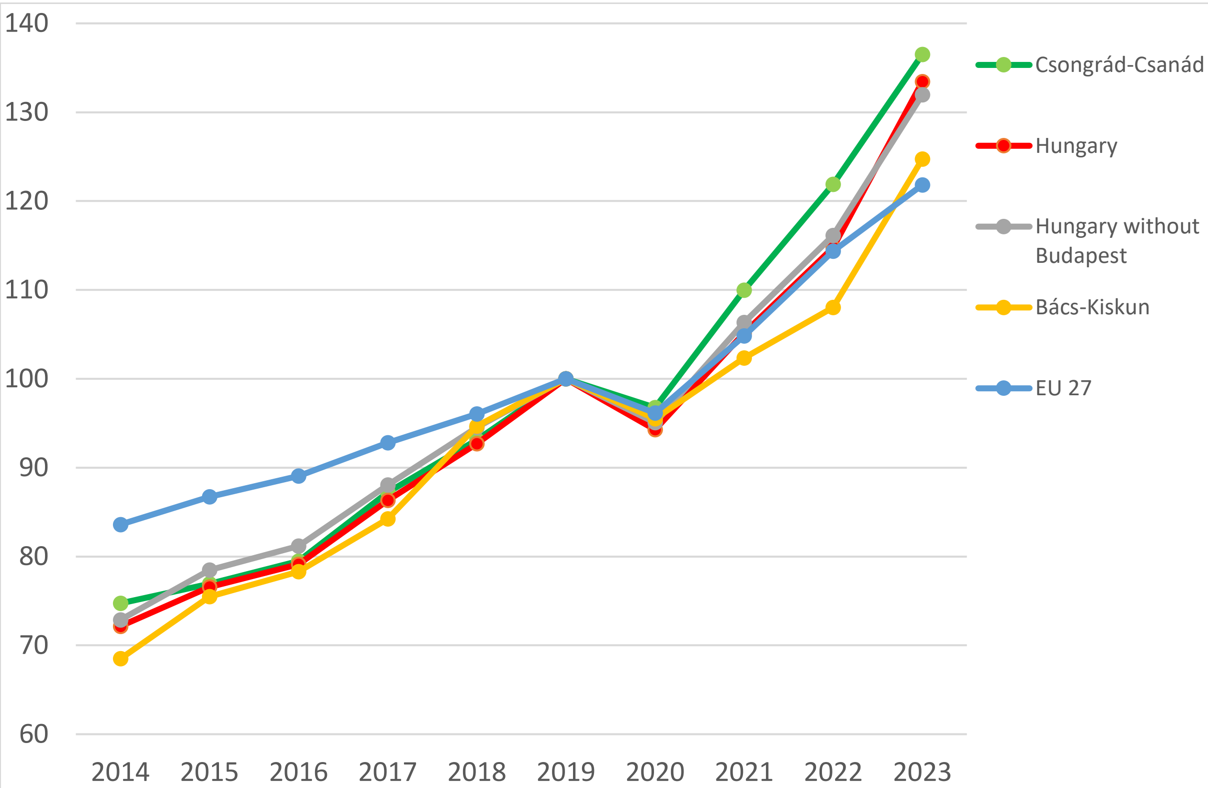
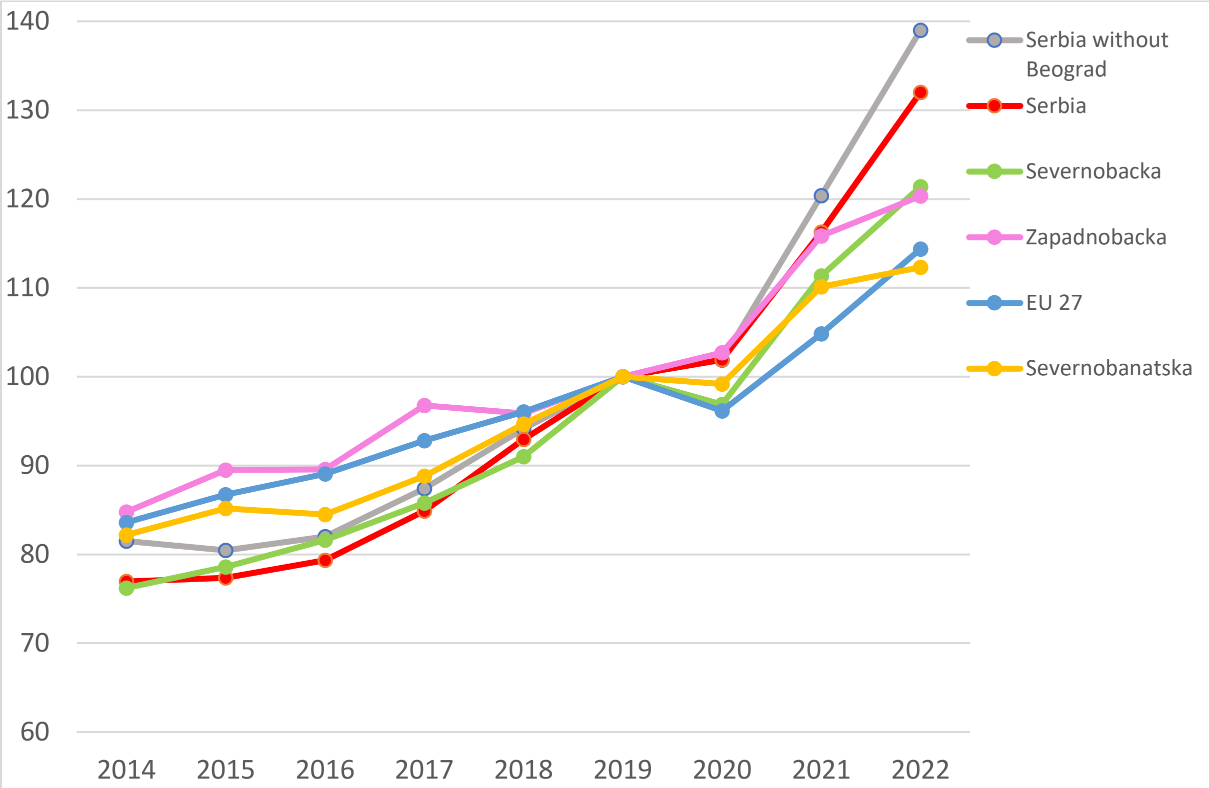


Figure 4. Change in GDP of the three Serbian districts on the Hungarian-Serbian border (Severnobacka, Zapadnobacka, Severnobanatska) (2019=100%) (source of data: Eurostat)



In terms of gross domestic product at current market prices, resilience can be observed in both Hungary and Serbia, consistent with broader EU trends. This is also true at the regional level: with the exception of Bács-Kiskun County (102%), the GDP of all four other regions increased to at least 110% of the 2019 level. Considering the rural averages, prior to the pandemic the two Hungarian counties were less dynamic than rural areas as a whole. However, from 2021 onward, Csongrád-Csanád outperformed the Hungarian rural GDP growth rate, while Bács-Kiskun continued to lag behind. By contrast, the Serbian districts performed better than rural GDP growth prior to the pandemic. Yet, in 2021 and 2022, GDP growth in Vojvodina's border districts slowed compared to the rural average in Serbia.
In terms of employment, if we examine the 2014–2023 data series (2014–2022 in the case of Serbia) and take 2019 – the year prior to the COVID-19 crisis – as the base year (100%), the following trends emerge. In Hungary and in the two counties analyzed, employment declined in 2020. Thereafter, employment in Hungary and in Csongrád-Csanád increased in 2021, even surpassing the 2019 level, while Bács-Kiskun continued to decline until 2022. In 2020, the decrease in Csongrád-Csanád was greater than the national average, whereas the decline in Bács-Kiskun was smaller. However, Csongrád-Csanád subsequently recovered more rapidly, while both Bács-Kiskun and the national average lagged behind. The situation in Serbia was markedly different. In Severnobačka and Severnobanatska, significant fluctuations were observed prior to 2019 (with only a slight increase in Zapadnobačka). In 2020, however, employment declined across the country as well as in all three districts. Although an increase followed in 2021, another downturn occurred in 2022.

Figure 5. Change in employment of the two counties on the Hungarian-Serbian border (Bács-Kiskun, Csongrád-Csanád) (2019=100%) (Source of data: Eurostat)

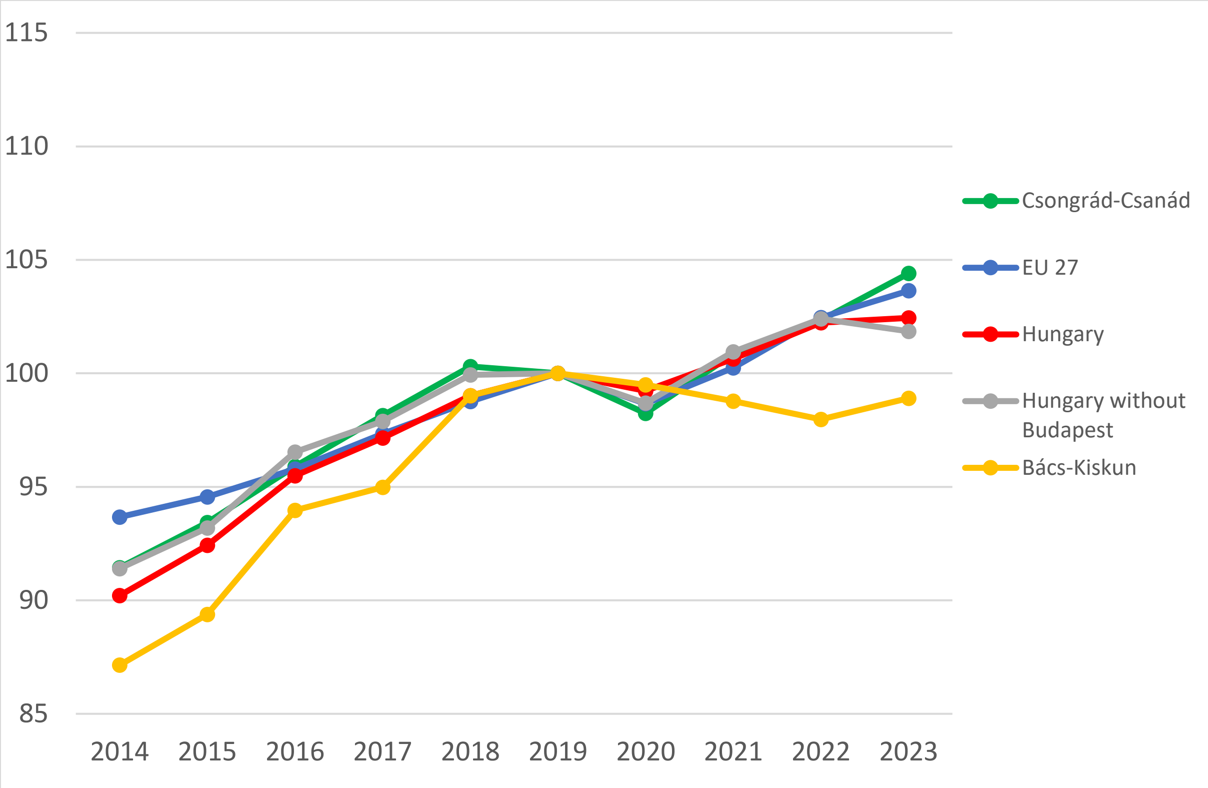
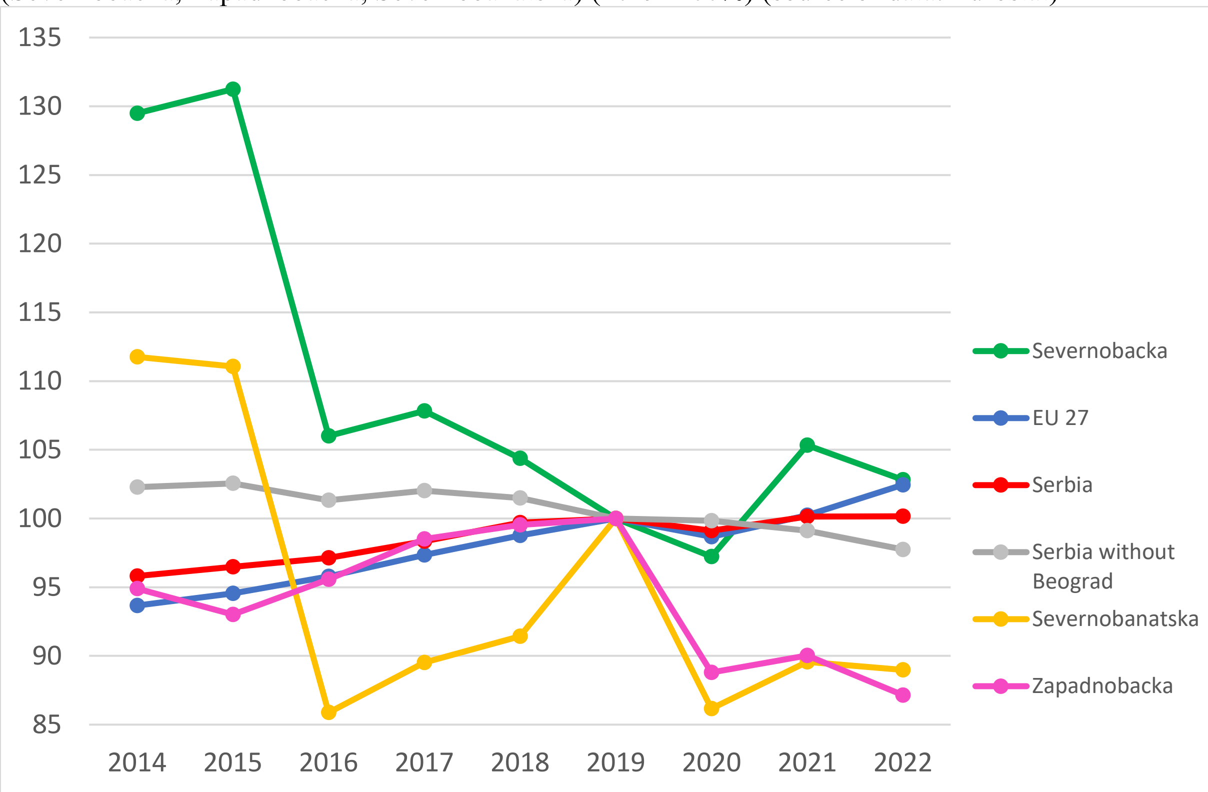


Figure 6. Change in employment of the three Serbian districts on the Hungarian-Serbian border (Severnobacka, Zapadnobacka, Severnobanatska) (2019=100%) (source of data: Eurostat)



In terms of employment, resilience can only be identified in Csongrád-Csanád County, whereas Bács-Kiskun County exhibits chronic dysfunction and the three Serbian districts show signs of relapse. Csongrád-Csanád County followed a trajectory similar to that of rural Hungary, while Bács-Kiskun consistently lagged behind. In Serbia, Severnobačka outperformed the rural average, while

Zapadnobačka and, after 2016, Severnobanatska performed below it. (Notably, while the share of rural employment in Hungary remained stable at two-thirds throughout the period under review, in Serbia it declined from three-quarters in 2014 to two-thirds in 2022.)

Before the pandemic, the Hungarian-Serbian border was heavily controlled and restricted due to its status as an external Schengen border and the issue of illegal migration. Nevertheless, cross-border traffic remained high, driven both by transit flows and by internal labor mobility within the border region. After the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, many border crossings were closed, and various restrictions were introduced. The closure significantly affected cross-border commuters: following the declaration of the state of emergency, thousands of people from Vojvodina were unable to reach their jobs in Hungary, while Hungarian companies near the border faced considerable labor shortages. The subsequent relaxation of the rules, including the introduction of a 30-kilometer and later a 50-kilometer commuter lane, quickly alleviated the situation. Commuters and agricultural landowners were allowed to cross the border for a maximum of 24 hours by presenting appropriate documentation (e.g., employer's certificate or medical papers), in line with a Hungarian government decree. Others, however, were required to undergo quarantine if they lacked a valid negative test. By contrast, Serbia has not been a significant destination for Hungarian workers: according to the Central Statistical Office, fewer than 300 people commuted there for work in 2011 (less than 1% of Hungarians employed abroad). Nonetheless, the restrictions affected this small group as well.

The economic outlook for Bács-Kiskun County, which has significant manufacturing capacity in the automotive and related industries as well as in the food industry, is strongly influenced by global economic trends. At the global level, the decline in demand for manufactured products, the weakening of the German economy, and the postponement of certain state investments on the domestic front are adversely affecting the county's major economic actors (KSH 2024). By contrast, the economic output of Csongrád-Csanád County grew slightly, but still exceeded both the national and rural averages. Despite the pandemic and a decline in industrial performance, primarily in the domestic market, the labor market in Csongrád-Csanád County remained stable (CsCsKI 2024).

Vojvodina is a relatively developed economic region in Serbia, with GDP per capita at 96.5% of the national average (2022) and the highest proportion of well-educated working-age people living in Belgrade and Vojvodina (Uvalic, Bartlett 2021). It accounts for one-quarter of the country's GDP and 22.6% of employment. In recent years, droughts affecting agriculture, the decline of the agricultural sector, and the growing importance of the IT sector, a continuous improvement in financial performance have played a decisive role in shaping economic developments. The three districts of Vojvodina examined here accounted for 19.3% of the region's GDP (2022), while employing 22.6% of its workforce. Novi Sad, the administrative center of Vojvodina, has also become the most attractive destination for a significant share of the regional labor force (Petrovic 2024) and rural areas are becoming depopulated even in the more developed regions of Vojvodina, due to a lack of local development and employment opportunities (Uvalic, Bartlett 2021): between 2014 and 2022, the number of people employed in the city's district increased by nearly 50,000, while employment decreased in the three districts under study, particularly in Severnobanatska and Severnobačka.

In summary, the answer to the research questions is that both sides of the border were affected by the pandemic and subsequent austerity measures, but while the region as a whole demonstrates resilience in terms of GDP, as evidenced by a return to growth, employment patterns reveal more heterogeneous trajectories: some counties and districts exhibit resilience, whereas others show signs of relapse or persistent dysfunction.

Conclusion

For various reasons, some of the European Union's border regions remain far from peaceful, easily accessible areas in the 21st century, as they continue to face both old and new challenges – including migration, pandemics, and war – arising from the presence of national borders. One such example is the border area between Hungary and Serbia, where the external Schengen border between an EU member state and a candidate country creates a number of economic and social barriers. This border is further reinforced by a barbed-wire fence erected by Hungary in response to illegal migration. During the pandemic, closures and restrictions were also imposed, which temporarily weakened relations between the two sides.

Our analysis of the regions identified here (NUTS 3 units) with meaningful and comparable data not only highlights the partly shared and partly divergent characteristics of the regions in the two countries but also underscores the limitations of analyses based on this level of typology. The typology accepted by the EU proves questionable in the case of small countries such as Hungary and Serbia. The data for individual NUTS 3 units – particularly on the Hungarian side – are less representative of the characteristics of border regions. These features are more evident at the micro-regional level (formerly LAU 1, now involving a certain degree of territorial aggregation of LAU units, e.g., within 30 kilometers of the national border). However, for this scale, only limited comparable data are available (e.g., GDP data are lacking).
In fact, regional geography also plays a decisive role in this study. Although the regions and settlements of Europe can be categorized in many ways (e.g., as border regions), the diversity stemming from historical, social, and economic factors cannot be overlooked. For this reason, it is advisable that the EU's cohesion policy, including the INTERREG program, be implemented in a highly decentralized manner, with the main objectives of the EU adapted – at least to some extent – to the specific local conditions of each country and region.

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