

THESIS
(Summary)

Zsolt Menyhárt:

**Examining the potential of transnational cooperation from the perspective of macro-
regional strategies**

(PhD) thesis

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I. The subject and the aim of the research

From the end of the 1980s, there was a strong determination in the European Community of the need for economic and social cohesion in regions with different levels of development. This has raised a number of politically, economically and administratively sensitive issues that are still the subject of renewed debate, including the size of the common budget, the eligibility of individual countries and regions, not to mention regulatory and institutional arrangements to ensure uniform implementation in the form of the creation of structures.

Economic and social cohesion – which complemented by the concept of territorial cohesion at the end of the first decade of the new millennium – has from the outset included the transnational, ie state and administrative dimension of development policy and the close system of relations based on it. Early, self-organizing forms of this appeared in Western Europe as early as the late 1970s, and from the 1990s onwards became even more complete within the framework of EU regional (cohesion) policy, increasingly involving the border regions of Central and Eastern European countries during the pre-accession process. The progress of the process is indicated by the fact that, since the start of the 2007-2013 programming period, cross-border co-operation has emerged as a separate objective ("European Territorial Co-operation"), and new, larger institutional and legal forms have been introduced, focusing not only on cross-border co-operation but to encourage and facilitate cooperation in general. Over the last three decades, this model can be interpreted in a complex, closely interlinked system of governance, public administration and development policy based on vertical and horizontal principles. This is also shown by the fact that Euroregions, European Territorial Groupings (EGTCs) and other types of cross-border associations have been set up by municipalities or mid-level units in neighbouring states at the same administrative level.

The institutionalized emergence of macro-regions in the EU is by no means an unprecedented process. It was triggered by a bottom-up, but in fact initiated and coordinated, demand by the EU's key institutions (in particular the European Commission and the European Parliament) to be flexible and flexible with soft strategic regulation based on cross-border cooperation programs launched in the 1990s. The aim was to create a rapidly adapting, multi-level institutional framework that cannot be considered as rigid entities in geographical, international legal or administrative terms. From the macro-regional strategies, the EU and national actors primarily hoped that they would act as a catalyst for the initiatives of local and regional

communities, through which the general, principled objectives could become directly perceptible to European citizens in the form of concrete projects and developments.

Based on all this, we consider the macro-region as a functional policy area (“soft policy space”) organized within a flexible framework, crossing state and administrative borders, which marks a possible intermediate path in territorial and functional policy-making.

According to the starting point of the dissertation, the macro-region is a specific form of the transnational governance model, which is part of the EU administrative systems. It is made possible by the fact that the EU operates a 'bottom-up', multi-level institutional structure under its control, which provides a broad, integrative framework for the diversity of cohesion principles and policies.

II. Thematic concept

My choice of topic focuses on examining the potential of transnational cooperation, which I examine from the perspective of macro-regional strategies. The novelty of the topic is that my study simultaneously aims to map the form of coordination and institutional structures in the transnational environment that can effectively perform their development, public service and, in special cases, public authority tasks. This governance model is workable and can be effective if it is based on more than legal requirements and has a functional, flexible and goal-oriented approach with institutional constraints. I intend to present the theses of this alternative model of cooperation and governance through the macro-regional strategies of the European Union with an analytical approach based on theoretical and empirical studies.

There is a rich international and domestic literature on the overall phenomenon of the macro-region. In the intervening period (2009-2014), the initial large-scale, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approaches, including historical antecedents, were gradually supplemented by practical research to accomplish strategies.

Over the last half decade, a further significant increase in studies has included the focus on specific projects and new, long-term perspectives for the functioning of EU macro-regions (geopolitics, neighbourhood policy). The shift in emphasis has been accompanied by the introduction of new conceptual frameworks and, in particular, the emphasis on empirical surveys, as global international organizations (OECD, UN, EU) have increasingly focused on a practical approach. However, there are still a number of areas that have received relatively

less attention, as evidenced by Hungarian literature, such as the macro-regional-minded, yet area-specific and high added value mindset.

My choice of topic was also motivated by the fact that a complex approach is essential for the research of the potential and perspective in macro-regions, which in my opinion is the defining, widely applicable basic category of today's social science research. The novelty of the transdisciplinary approach in the aspect of the topic lies in the fact that it remains suitable for the development of holistic, innovative and flexible cooperation within a territory-specific, geographically and administratively delimited framework.

Regarding the results of macro-regional cooperation, I also used a compact approach in addition to direct outputs, I examined efficiency, effectiveness and other (political-social) mechanisms together. Overall, my goal was to present the relationship between transnational cooperation and macro-regional strategies in a novel approach.

II. 1. Research hypotheses and the structure of the dissertation

One of the most important theoretical bases for macro-regional cooperation is the multi-level governance (MLG). Its starting point is that macro-regional strategies associate state and non-state actors at different levels of decision-making to address the functional challenges of a given region across state and administrative borders. Based on the frequently cited, emblematic studies by Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe, MLG was originally a form of governance based on vertical coordination ("Type I") of power entities at hierarchically organized levels of government, EU institutions, national governments, regional and local authorities. However it is also suitable for describing the horizontal coordination function of functional areas, such as macro-regions ("Type II").

In the case of macro-regions, the crucial question is where the language of the balance sheet goes and whether the "pure" or even "hybrid" model can cause discrepancies in practice. In the course of the dissertation I will examine the possible areas and controversial issues of the application and adaptation of the model.

Based on the above the first research hypothesis (H1) is that the implementation of macro-regional strategies using new tools and governance methods contributes to the achievement of cohesion policy objectives in a more focused and place-based way. By incorporating some theories and concepts of governance, mainly from a territorial perspective, I paid particular

attention to mapping the added value of the macro-region in terms of broadening the objectives and further perspectives of cohesion policy.

According to my second research hypothesis (H2), the institutional potential of programs implemented within the framework of macro-regional strategies is suitable for strengthening the effectiveness of the implementation of cohesion objectives. The institutional and legal frameworks themselves create necessary but not sufficient conditions, they are embedded in the economic, social and historical contexts of the macro-region. A hypothesis can be created by expressing the internal dynamics of institutions and specific cultural-socialization factors, putting neo-institutionalist approaches into practice.

Macro-regions tend to cover a relatively large area, with the participation of governmental, regional and local actors with significant attitudes, goals and differences of interest. There are also political and priority contradictions between the main EU institutions, and the areas of intervention, which are initiated and represented by each institution. These kind of burdens can also intensify the conflicts in the context of macro-regions.

The analysis of these debates and dilemmas also supports my first two hypotheses, but at the same time provides an answer to my third hypothesis (H3), according to which inter-institutional conflicts have had a significant impact on the directions and priorities pursued by each macro-region over the past decade. What advantages and disadvantages have helped or hindered the achievement of macro-regional objectives, what could be done differently, what could be developed in the future?

The empirical data I systematically collected, processed, analysed and evaluated during my research, also help to answer the hypotheses. The results are represented by graphs and charts to make it as clear and easy to interpret as possible.

The dissertation is divided into two major parts, on the one hand a theoretical and on the other hand an empirical part. The thesis has ten chapters. In the first five chapters, I attempt to clarify the theoretical concepts, models, instruments, and background information that are unavoidable to understand the hypotheses. From VI to X. chapters I attempted to process the macro-regions of the European Union from a practical point of view, deals with the macro-regional concept, and discuss the legal, organizational and governance aspects of the strategies. A recommendation has been included, which focuses on macro-regional Europe, and contains proposals and perspectives for the period after 2020. In the XI. chapter (Conclusion), I have tried to summarize and draw the most important conclusions.

II. 2. The method of the research

The dissertation was based on the joint application of the descriptive, explanatory and analytical approach, as well as the empirical (fact-based) methodology, involving the social sciences, including public administration, political science (governance, public policy, European studies). This was intended not only make a presentation of the models, but an interpretation too, and to place them in an international context. Comparing the good practices with the help of methodological tools, and also drew attention to the possibility of benchlearning.

In order to develop the theoretical framework, I processed the international and domestic literature related to the topic, as well as the policy documents of the EU institutions (white and green papers), the directives, regulations, as well as the discussion materials of the EU and its agencies. In the case of the Hungarian aspects, the relevant Hungarian legislation was reviewed. Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the EU budget period 2021-2027 will determine the next seven years of Cohesion policy. I researched the European Commission's expertise, in particular the Modern Budget for a Union that protects, secures and empowers its citizens.

The second half of the dissertation reflects pragmatically on the concepts and models presented in the theoretical part. The empirical research based on questionnaire surveys elaborates the incoming responses.¹ However, the surveys differ from two crucial points. On the one hand, the questions in the first empirical research provided a much more limited answer for the subjects of the questionnaire, while in the second nearly all of the questions had the opportunity to express their own opinions and suggestions (in specific boxes). The other difference stems from the different cultural and social status of the target audience. The aim of perceptual research was to explore the “feeling” of Hungarians with digital literacy. It can play a key role in influencing their commitment to the Danubian ideal, insofar as the latter satisfies their needs and aspirations. It was conducted with the involvement of the professional organizations of the Danube Region Strategy, and focused on estimate the specific professional suggestions.

In the context of the empirical research methodology, I would like to state that my goal was to conduct an informative, orientational pre-research, which could serve as a prelude to future independent research with a significantly larger sample immersion.

¹ Perceptual Research can be considered as primary research, where data were generated in the framework of our own questionnaire survey. Secondary research undertook a detailed and systematic scientific evaluation of the data collected by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary.

So the primary research is a so-called pre- or pilot research, a representative, larger sample survey would have required significant resources and human capacity. In the framework of the doctoral dissertation, I had the opportunity to take my own initiative and my own research steps, but in the future I would like to see all this happen more extensively. Evaluated as pilot research, we can gain valuable knowledge, it is worth paying special attention to the distribution of the applied scales according to the scale level around the values obtained here.

The reader may wonder why a questionnaire with an in-depth interview was not included in the primary research? The answer to this question is that the consultation with experts dealing with the Danube region, from which important information and intellectual inspiration came, was presented in chapter VIII. Regarding Danube Region Strategy, I had a long professional discussion with the national coordinator representing the government side, and the secondary research is suitable to shed light on the position of the other side, namely the stakeholders.

Regarding the method of the questionnaire, it measured the positive and negative attitudes of the stakeholders, and provided an opportunity to express individual thoughts and suggestions. I processed the responses of the stakeholders involved in the opinion poll anonymously, taking into account that the relevance of the results in such research does not depend on the respondent's person, tasks, or competences. An in-depth interview with the National Coordinator also contributed to the proper and professional interpretation of the responses.

III. Brief summary of the scientific findings

My doctoral thesis examined the potential of transnational cooperation from the aspect of macro-regional strategic cooperation. Categorizing and analysing macro-regions is not an easy task, as may have emerged from the considerations presented above. Within international relations, the specific legal and institutional framework of the European Union is characterized by a simultaneous political, administrative, territorial and functional attitude. Both in terms of governance and in terms of the interests and motivations. Moreover, being a multi-player model, these interests are the least likely to point in one direction, it is not always clear who determines the directions. Although the European Commission has taken the dominant position after a while, and we must see that there are clearly identifiable differences in priorities and interests between the Community institutions on the EU stage. However, from the national to the middle levels of government, differences of interest can be observed throughout.

For this reason, I tried to represent the scientifically complex and complex scientific approach, meaning the “mentality” that accompanied the research from the practical presentation of the models listed in the theoretical part to the practical adaptability of the empirical research results.

Based on the results of the research, is it inevitable to answer the question of whether it is necessary to provide a new EU funding, new EU legislation, new EU structures for the new period of MFF. With the help of empirics I could point out that the macro-regional strategy can be well operated in the framework of the so-called 3 NO’s and it is well adapted to the EU mechanisms. The effective exchange of information, best practices, know-how and experience between macro-regions and their regional and local authorities must be implemented as fully as possible, and thus will no longer depend on financial, legal or institutional possibilities.

With the emergence of functional macro-regions, we can talk about a different delimitation from the territorial units known in the regional policy of the European Union (NUTS2 and NUTS3). It can also be seen as a fact that macro-regional strategies have become an integral part of the EU's policy framework. They provide excellent opportunities and contribute in a unique and innovative way to cooperation within the Union and with neighbouring countries. Their basic characteristic is that they are able to meet the expectations of the 21st century in an adaptive way, and they can take into account the different interests raised by multi-stakeholder mechanisms to realise manifold interests.

The geopolitical significance of macro-regions can influence the system of relations within the European Union. There are two levels: the interactions of the Member States and the development-oriented partnership of candidate member states. On the other hand, outside the EU the macro-regions can be important tools for the EU's emergence as an independent foreign policy player. They are willing to help and to create regional stability at the Union's external borders and accelerate integration in the Western Balkan. Moreover, they can be a suitable tool for formulating and representing more coherent foreign policy and enlargement goals.

Macro-regional frameworks are a bridge between policy efforts at Member State and EU level. The discussions about the new programming period and have so far not provided an exhaustive answer to the role that macro-regions can play in the implementation of the transnational form of governance in the future. As an EU institution, the European Commission aims to make more efficient, targeted and responsible use of existing EU funds by macro-regions. At the same time, the coordination of sectoral policies and the use of Community budgetary resources can be better linked to the creation of macro-regions. The concept of territorial cohesion can further

strengthened, as well as the exploration of the specific regional resources and territorial capitals. It will entail the development of special governance structures tailored to functional regions, ie various forms of territorial governance. In the new financial proposal for 2021-2027, the Commission and the Council have the opportunity for the reform of the Community budget. Therefore the macro-regions could be a separate title for support, and the process of creating macro-regions could also be accelerated.

Anyway, in my opinion the development of territorial-based constructions are unstoppable. At the same time, it is important to assess the challenges and difficulties, because the proposals based on the evaluation of the examined macro-regions can be used in the future for the strategies under preparation and consideration. (e.g. in the case of the Carpathian Region Strategy or macro-regional visions for the Black Sea, the western and eastern Mediterranean and the Atlantic Arc Coastal Region).

III. 1. Utilizing of research outcomes in practice

According to my conclusions, the key element of the first hypothesis (H1) is the territorial cohesion. This was being presented not only in horizontal, but at the same time in integrated way, which creates the concentration and coordination of the territorial capitals of functionally interconnected, overlapping regions along certain priorities. The coordinated development of the EU as a whole and the promotion of fuller economic, social and territorial cohesion by strengthening territorial cooperation constitute a paradigm of European development policy. This has the possibility to offer a realistic alternative of traditional, redistributive and sector-centred catch-up policies.

Based on my research, I consider justified my second hypothesis (H2). The central element of H2 is the macro-region as a specific, transnational institutional potential. This context is framed by the horizontal thesis of multilevel governance related to the territorial governance model. However, the organization and functioning of macro-regions points out that in addition to the formal-legal approach of institutions, it is necessary to understand their “self-movement,” and historical embeddedness. The neo-institutionalist theories is a good theoretical background therefore I analysed the different types of that.

Finally, the third hypothesis (H3) is confirmed not only by the 2014-2020, but also by the present, the 2021-2027 MFF. The EU budget period between institutional conflicts are well

defined between the EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament), within each institution (e.g. relation between Directorates-General), and competition between different forms of financial assistance (for example system of purely cross-border and transnational or interregional cooperation). Institutional conflicts at EU level are inseparable from subnational advocacy efforts in Member States and even in some countries. I have concluded that macro-regions have been the winners of this multi-stakeholder and multi-level competition in the current budget period, but there are still many uncertainties in the post-2020 period about cohesion policy as a whole and the role of macro-regions.

It is important to emphasize that the institutionalization, competence, decision-making competence, financial autonomy and stability of macro-regions lag far behind other types of regional cooperation. Although the EU institutions have taken significant steps to overcome the difficulties in developing macro-regional cooperation, the institutional and legal framework needs to be clarified. The responsibilities of the national and sub-national levels have of great importance in the future. The further step will be taking into account territorial specifications, an active and direct dialogue between the sub- and supranational levels, and direct policy-making, and coordination of interests,

In terms of perspectives, I believe that the novelty and modernity of the cooperation platform, based on macro-regional strategic foundations, lies in the fact that it seeks to create such a functional, flexible, goal-oriented and heterogeneous, yet regulated and "EU-compliant" foundation that can integrate a wide range of interests. That does not lose sight of the original goal of promoting territorial cohesion.

If we consider the EU as a global player, regional and cross-border cooperation at European borders could be a realistic alternative for cooperation in the future. This requires an adaptive and flexible building of human resource capacities in addition to the institutional ones. This process needs to be stimulated most effectively by an organic and bottom-up demand system.

Consequently, my position is that macro-regions are fundamentally effective and cooperative constructions and this has been demonstrated over the last ten years. Although they did not succeed in achieving a complete breakthrough, they introduced a new type of territorial cooperation under a specific model of transnational cooperation. If the political commitment of the decision makers last long and the necessary legal and support frameworks are in place, new, innovative forms of public policy-making and territorial institutional configurations will

become sustainable. To sum up macro-regions can offer a viable alternative for a flexible, functional approach to managing cross-border policy issues.

IV. Scientific publications (MTMT)

1.

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Boros, Anita ; Menyhárt, Zsolt ; Kiss, Rebeka ; Sáfrán, József: X. rész: Az eljárás hatékonyságnövelésének eszközei a hazai és nemzetközi gyakorlatban In: Boros, Anita; Patyi, András (szerk.) A hazai közigazgatási hatósági eljárási jog karakterisztikája Budapest, Magyarország: Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, (2019) pp. 435-450. 16 p.

3.

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8.

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18.

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V. Academic and professional background

The author was determined at a young age to promote the common good and to work in the public service. Therefore, he started his higher education at the Faculty of Law of the University of Debrecen and he graduated in public administration bachelor's and master's degree. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the Doctoral School of Public Administration at the National University of Public Service, under the supervision of Dr. Tamás Kaiser.

During his university years, he considered it important to gain international experience as well, so he applied for an Erasmus scholarship and studied for a year public law in the city of Trier, Germany. During his internships, he also tried to get to know both the Hungarian and European administrative systems, first in Hungary at county and regional level, and then in Magdeburg, Vienna and Brussels for a few months to achieve professional development. The Ph.D candidate has worked at several ministries, at the Office of the National Assembly, and as a scientific rapporteur at the University. He is currently a member of the background institution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

His scientific interest also led him to the public administration. His research interests include European Union policy-making, territorial governance, the European administrative area, and last but not least, regional and cross-border cooperation, such as macro-regional cooperation. He has published several publications in Hungarian, English and German languages. During his doctoral studies, he participated in the work of several university research groups, in the doctoral program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as in individual research project. He is currently an expert in the Young Expert System.