


CO-EXISTING SPATIAL CONCEPTS AROUND THE CARPATHIAN (PANNONIAN) BASIN

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Abstract

The Carpathian Basin (or Pannonian Basin) exhibits undeniable unity in physical geographical terms, such as topography, hydrography, and biogeography. This natural cohesion is universally acknowledged, even by representatives of differing ethnic and national backgrounds, but it is also true that social, economic, and urban spatial processes also spectacularly cross national borders in the region. However, this spatial unity does not extend to historical, cultural, political, social, or economic dimensions, where ethnic and national perspectives take precedence. For Hungarians, the Carpathian Basin represents a more integrated historical and spatial concept, while other state-forming nations in the region do not centre their territorial identities around it. Multilateral cooperation initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe – such as the Carpathian Convention, Carpathian Euroregion, EUSDR, EUSCR, V4, 3SI – do not prioritize the Carpathian Basin as a cohesive unit. Instead, their focus is often shaped by broader regional interests and the foreign policy agendas of powerful actors, particularly Poland, rather than by tailored strategies for the Carpathian area itself. Despite this, a distinct regional identity is observable among Austrians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Serbs, and Slovenians living in and around the Carpathian Basin. This identity, although not consciously rooted in the collective memory of the historical heritage of the Kingdom of Hungary, arises from certain regional characteristics, including the unique historical and cultural development of these peoples' communities located in the Carpathian Basin, which differs from the others. These phenomena are common large-scale regional features independent of national and ethnic borders, but they rather reflect contemporary Central and Eastern European and general regional dynamics than a direct distinct connection to the Carpathian Basin.

Keywords: territorial identity, spatial conceptualization, Carpathian Basin, Pannonian Basin, Central and Eastern Europe

INTRODUCTION

The Carpathian Basin is a geographical term that among other spatial organizations represents the traditional ethnic Hungarian settlement area¹. According to the Hungarian collective consciousness this was the territory occupied by the conquering ancestors, and within which the Kingdom of Hungary existed for over a thousand years. According to the Hungarian perspective, the Carpathian Basin is thus a geographical unit – not only in terms of its special and distinct environmental structures (topography, hydrography), but also in the spatial

¹ Basically, the same area is also referred to as the Carpathian Region or Pannonian Basin/Region in many languages used in this region (Fejes, 2011).

organization of social and economic systems. Furthermore, it is also a space that contributes to Hungarian identity formation. This study aims to examine the other spatial concepts and identity-forming spaces related to the Carpathian Basin that can be identified among the peoples living alongside Hungarians in the region.

Our research question focuses on how certain countries located in the Carpathian Basin surrounding Hungary and their titular ethnic groups interpret their socio-economic spatial organizations, and whether there are differences between the spatial interpretations of the neighbouring peoples within and outside the Carpathian Basin. Furthermore, since the Carpathian Basin as a whole is influenced by the cooperation of the nation states of the European Union, the question also arises as to whether the Carpathian Basin, which spans national borders, can be interpreted in this supranational space.

This research draws on decades of Hungarian literature interpreting the Carpathian Basin, and occasionally even foreign authors have addressed this topic. This study aims to go beyond these precedents by attempting to synthesize the meanings conveyed by the Carpathian Basin, covering all the countries concerned, all the major ethnic communities, and even the European Union's spatial concepts. Based on this broad overview, it draws conclusions about the validity of the Carpathian Basin concept.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE TERM “CARPATHIAN BASIN” IN THE LITERATURE

Understanding the Carpathian Basin

The Carpathian Mountains, located in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), are part of the Eurasian mountain range, covering an area of 190,000 km², and forming a chain of mountains stretching 1,500 km, enclosing the 325,000 km² area of the Carpathian Basin (Dövényi, 2016). In addition to its mountainous structure, the Carpathian Basin also forms a hydrographic unit, as it encompasses the watershed of the middle section of the Danube River. The Carpathian Basin is a closed unit from a geomorphological and physical geographical point of view, distinct from the Bohemian-Moravian Basin, the Polish Plain, the Ukrainian Plain, Wallachia, and Moldova. In the geomorphological literature, the Carpathian Basin is regarded as a unique phenomenon, although its name may vary depending on the era, country, academic discipline, and language – for instance, it may appear as the Pannonian Basin, the Hungarian Basin, or the Central Danube Basin (Hajdú, 2015b).

This natural geographic area has provided the framework for various social and political processes, and has been the target of geopolitical ambitions (Hajdú, 2015a). As part of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, the territory of the Hungarian state extended across most of the Carpathian Basin, including the historical Kingdom of Hungary and its annexed regions. However, following the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War in 1920, the territory of the Hungarian state was reduced to the central and lowland areas of the basin, and the sources of 90% of its watercourses now lie outside the national borders (Benyhe, 2018). In addition to Hungary, the successor states of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy also became dominant powers within the Carpathian Basin (Hajdú, 2008), leading to the fragmentation of the traditional ethnic Hungarian settlement areas across the newly established states.

Between the two world wars, Hungarian geopolitical thinking was primarily focused on revisionist aims concerning the Carpathian Basin. While this led to temporary successes, the peace treaty concluding the Second World War restored the borders set by the Treaty of Trianon (also resulting in the loss of another three villages of the so-called Bratislava Bridgehead [*Pozsonyi Hídfeje* in Hungarian]). At the same time, this period (until the end of the Second World War) marked the peak of scholarly exploration of the significance of the Carpathian Basin (Boda, 2021). Hungarian scholars such as Ferenc Fodor (1928), Gusztáv Kalmár (1942), and Pál Teleki (1931) aimed to substantiate the necessity of the region’s political unity, emphasizing the dominant – though not exclusive – role of the Hungarian population. One of the main arguments of this perspective was the economic spatial structure of the Carpathian Basin, shaped by the division of labour between different regions of the area. Further changes in regional state power relations occurred with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in 1991, and the partition of Czechoslovakia in 1993.

As a result, the Carpathian Basin became even more politically fragmented, resulting in a highly mosaic geopolitical and geoeconomic pattern consisting of relatively small states (Tab. 1). Hungary and Slovakia can be considered countries whose entire territory lies within the Carpathian Basin, while other countries only partially belong to it: Austria, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Some areas with negligible size in Poland, the Czech Republic and Bosnia and Herzegovina can also be considered part of the Carpathian Basin. Thus, today, in this relatively small area, there are countries that are members or associate partners of various economic integration organisations (European Union and Eurasian Economic Union); countries that are committed to the NATO, the Atlantic military alliance and those that are not; countries with very different foreign policy orientations (for example, there are countries with excellent

relations and countries with strained relations with several world powers such as the USA, China and especially Russia).

Table 1 Main geopolitical and geoeconomic orientations in the Carpathian Basin

Membership in international organizations / Foreign policy orientations	Member Countries from the Carpathian Basin
NATO	
NATO member	Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia
strong relations to NATO	Ukraine (<i>Comprehensive Assistance Package, NATO – Ukraine Council, weapons supply</i>), Bosnia and Herzegovina (<i>military presence</i>)
cool relations to NATO	Serbia (<i>historically determined: NATO bombing during Kosovo crisis</i>)
Militarily neutral	Austria
European Union (EU)	
EU member	Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia
strong relations to EU	Bosnia and Herzegovina (<i>candidate member</i>), Serbia (<i>candidate member</i>), Ukraine (<i>candidate member</i>)
cool relations to EU	–
Eurasian Union (EAEU) relations	Serbia (<i>free trade agreement with the EAEU</i>)
Organization of Turkic States relations	Hungary (<i>observer</i>)
Relations better than CEE average to world powers such as:	
China (economic, political)	Hungary, Serbia
USA (military)	Croatia, Poland, Romania, Ukraine
Russia (economic, political)	Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), Hungary, Serbia
Relations worse than CEE average to world powers such as:	
China (economic, political)	–
USA (military)	Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska)
Russia (economic, political)	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Czech Republic (in a variable position), Romania, Ukraine

Source: author's own editing

Carpathian basin as a space of identity

The concept and significance of the Carpathian Basin as a Hungarian settlement area are self-evident for Hungarians, as is its geopolitical importance. Although the Carpathian Basin is clearly recognizable and well-defined as a geographical unit, it does not carry the same meaning and importance for the other peoples of the region.

Certain minority ethnic groups and communities living in the Carpathian Basin alongside the Hungarians can be mentioned as exceptions. These are primarily communities that have no kin-state of their own, or whose kin-state lies far from the Carpathian Basin, and who have lived alongside Hungarians for centuries, becoming integrated into Hungarian society. Examples include the Hungarian Armenians and Hungarian-speaking Roma communities, which once lived within the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary but now reside outside Hungary's borders, and may possess full or partial Carpathian Basin-based identity. It is important to note that their identity in this respect may significantly differ from members of their own ethnic group living in the same country (e.g. Hungarian Armenians in Transylvania [Romania] vs. Armenians in other parts of Romania, or Hungarian Roma vs. non-Hungarian Roma in Slovakia or especially in Transylvania [Romania]). The Hungarian Jewish community is in a similar position, although it is officially recognized as an ethnic minority only outside the borders of Hungary. Historically, parts of the ethnic Rusyn communities without a kin-state may have had similar considerations but this has probably changed significantly by now (see more details about the Rusyns and the Ukrainians later).

Among today's various ethnic minorities in Hungary, a Hungarian national identity and a weaker connection to their nation of origin or kin-state are also observable (Bindorffer, 2007). This may indicate that the Carpathian Basin also serves as a space and factor of identity formation for them. This phenomenon can be attributed to the survival of the so-called **Hungarus** consciousness, which prevailed in the former Kingdom of Hungary: despite linguistic and cultural differences, these communities considered themselves part of the Hungarian political nation. Most of the national minorities living in today's Hungary had little or no contact with the historic national movements and nation-building ideologies of their kin-states, which is why many of them have a Hungarian identity (notable examples include the German, Slovak, Rusyn, Romanian, and Croatian communities in Hungary). A similar Carpathian Basin-based perspective may also exist among Armenians and the Roma in Hungary as mentioned earlier.

As we will see in the following chapters, ethnic or ethnographic groups of the neighbouring peoples living outside Hungary but within the Carpathian Basin often possess distinct regional or communal identity patterns, differing from those of their ethnic kin. However, it remains questionable whether these identities primarily reflect the character of the Carpathian Basin, or rather the historical ties of the various ethnic communities to their former common state, the Kingdom of Hungary, or whether their main driving force is simply their attachment to the

given smaller regions inside the Carpathian Basin, or whether other factors play a key role in their formation.

A shared historical past can be a significant factor in identity formation for the members of a community or the residents of a region. The Kingdom of Hungary's thousand-year existence provides a common historical background for the population living in the Carpathian Basin. This, however, does not necessarily lead to the emergence of a unified collective identity today. Even Hungarian historiography acknowledges that some states surrounding the Carpathian Basin have historical roots reaching back at least to the time of the Hungarian conquest or the foundation of the Kingdom of Hungary – despite the fact that their statehood may not have been continuous (e.g. Croatia and Serbia). At the same time, the official historiographies of all surrounding states of Hungary trace their national statehood back to similarly long or even longer historical periods. For the purposes of our analysis, it is particularly relevant that in several of these countries (Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania), dominant historical narratives claim that their state-forming nations—and even the states they shaped—were already present in parts of the Carpathian Basin at the time of the Hungarian conquest.

Carpathian Basin as a space beyond the Hungarian understanding

The concept of the Carpathian Basin does not follow the usual customs of landscape demarcation and naming, as it only covers one side of a mountain range and the flatlands below. According to Fejes (2011), this alone suggests that the demarcation of this region presupposes an additional interpretation that, based on known historical facts, is only present among Hungarians: according to popular belief, the Carpathian Basin coincides with the territory of the thousand-year-old Hungarian state (which needs to be clarified in light of historical facts). This view is not obvious to other peoples and their countries.

Among the works that go beyond Hungarian approaches, Balogh's 2021 work is worth mentioning first, as it provides an excellent overview of the development of the Carpathian Basin as a geographical and geopolitical concept in the first half of the 20th century. Balogh (2021) found that geographical deterministic trends and ideas of spatial social and economic development determined by environmental structures played a major role in the development of the concept. This approach was shared by several influential 19th-century European geographers (especially in German-speaking countries), and during this period, historical Hungary was often cited in international literature as an example of organic state development within natural borders (between the Carpathian mountain ranges). The importance of the social and economic spatial organizing force arising from the natural unity of the Carpathian Basin

was a prevailing view among Hungarian geographers, and indeed remains so to this day, having only been sidelined during the socialist period. Balogh (2021) examined the work of geographical research groups in the countries that shared the Carpathian Basin (Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia) after World War I, when Hungary lost its territory in the Carpathian Basin. He showed that these authors did not consider the Carpathian Basin to be a factor in the spatial organization of their own countries, and in this they could rely on Western European (primarily French) geographical schools that were moving away from the geographical determinism of the time. Geographical works produced in countries neighbouring Hungary have built their spatial concepts around the historical and geographical contexts of their own states' formation (Scott & Hajdú, 2022).

Scott and Hajdú (2022) explore the role of the Carpathian Basin in the European Union's spatial interpretation in connection to the so-called Europeanization of spatial planning (Salamin, 2024). In the course of the 21st century in Europe, primarily in the European Union, a specific kind of territorial governance may emerge in larger spaces that transcend administrative and political boundaries (Salamin, 2021). Following this approach, the Carpathian Basin could also become a space for European regional cooperation. A so-called soft space, such as those currently prioritized by European territorial governance, which are defined not by their administrative boundaries but by the territoriality of functions (Salamin, 2023). The most widespread soft spaces are often defined at the European level (Salamin, 2024), yet the Carpathian Basin is not part of these. However, this logic offers opportunities for the creation of soft spaces at all levels. In this regard, prospects are opening up for the Carpathian Basin, as there are obvious functions that unite this space, or at least transcend the national borders of individual countries in the region: for example, environmental, water management, and landscape ecological structures (Fodor and Gálosi-Kovács, 2019), or socio-economic mobility (e.g., Megyesi & Péti, 2022; Hardi et al., 2009).

Several Hungarian government initiatives are attempting to transform the Carpathian Basin into a European soft space: this idea has appeared in Hungary's development planning documents (Péti, 2014; Péti & Mozga, 2023), development strategies have been drawn up for this area, an economic development institutional system has been established, and Hungarian government-supported economic development programs have been implemented (primarily to support Hungarian communities abroad). These Hungarian state initiatives mainly but not exclusively target ethnic Hungarians and do not really have a multilateral intergovernmental cooperation dimension. Analysing these Hungarian initiatives is not covered by this study, but it is worth mentioning that another political term has been introduced to describe and refer to

the Hungarian settlement area. This term, Carpathian homeland (Kárpát-haza in Hungarian), distinguishes between the Carpathian Basin as a geographical unit and the Hungarian communities living in the Carpathian Basin (Szász, 2016), as today's indigenous Hungarian settlement areas cover a significantly smaller area than the entire Carpathian Basin. The Carpathian Homeland Concept developed by the National Strategy Research Institute considers the Carpathian Basin to be a valid area even in terms of EU funds utilization (Horkay et al., 2015), an approach that was also reflected in the use of Hungarian Member State funds from the EU's cohesion policy, with certain human resource development initiatives gaining a Carpathian Basin perspective (Scott & Hajdú, 2024). With the support of the Hungarian government, cross-border organizations operating under the specific European Union legal system, known as European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), have also spread along Hungary's borders in the Carpathian Basin (Ocskay, 2016). Furthermore, within the framework of the European Union's European territorial cooperation programs (cross-border and transnational programs), Hungarian communities living in different countries can implement joint initiatives at the Carpathian Basin level. However, according to some studies, bottom-up European Union-level cooperation between Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin has been less organized than it could be, and is sometimes hampered by administrative or theoretical obstacles (Péti & Hoffmann, 2016).

However, according to Scott and Hajdú (2022), due to differing interpretations of history, the Carpathian Basin region is burdened and therefore unable to fulfill its multilateral cooperation function: apart from actors with Hungarian ties, there are no real partners for this approach, as they may perceive it as reflecting Hungarian imperial ambitions, which is sometimes reinforced by statements made by Hungarian decision-makers. Moreover, the Hungarian names given to the large regions of the Carpathian Basin, which are divided into individual countries, are either incomprehensible or offensive to the non-Hungarian actors involved. The Carpathian Basin can thus only be interpreted in terms of Hungarian-Hungarian relations, as a neighbourhood viewed solely from the perspective of Hungary, where one of the most important directions of cross-border relationship building can be found between the Hungarian kin-state and the Hungarian minority communities in the surrounding countries. In addition, the Carpathian Basin is also linked to a Hungarian-inspired political interpretation that emerged after the change of regime, according to which the Carpathian Basin is diverse, and this diversity is also provided by Hungarian minority communities outside Hungary, and thus state structures based on the territorial or cultural autonomy of minorities could also be

established here. However, the latter idea was not supported by the countries neighbouring Hungary that had implemented a unified nation-state system.

In the following, we will review the national and ethnic-based spatial concepts of the countries and peoples of the Carpathian Basin, which generally differ from the Hungarian Carpathian Basin-centric interpretations. Before doing so, however, we assess the spatial concepts affecting the Carpathian Basin generated by international cooperation in the narrower international environment of the Carpathian Basin, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

DATA AND METHODS

The methodology of this study is based on the processing of secondary sources and analyzes certain historical and contemporary interpretations of space affecting the Carpathian Basin within the framework of a literature review. This study attempts to synthesize the literature on the subject, drawing on a broader geographical and thematic scope than previous works, and thus to produce new results, which are presented in tabular and map form where appropriate.

When selecting the literature, it was important to ensure that it covers the identity formation of all countries neighbouring Hungary in the Carpathian Basin. The study also strives to reference both Hungarian and non-Hungarian authors. Due to the examination of European Union spatial concepts, the study also had to take into account literature dealing with spatial planning and international development policy initiatives based on a territorial logic.

RESULTS: THE CARPATHIAN BASIN IN MULTILATERAL INITIATIVES OF CENTRAL- AND EASTERN EUROPE

Before we look at the spatial concepts of individual countries and peoples, it is worth reviewing the extent to which this multi-country space is alive in international cooperation. There are numerous transnational cooperation initiatives whose geographical scope covers all or part of the Carpathian Basin (Tab. 2), but there is no multilateral cooperation focusing specifically on this area.

Some international cooperation initiatives that are related geographically also to the Carpathian Basin even include the term “Carpathian” in their names, but apart from the aforementioned Hungarian state initiatives, none of the cooperation initiatives include the term “Carpathian Basin” in their names. According to Scott and Hajdú (2022), the term

“Carpathians” used in certain European international cooperation initiatives does not refer to the Carpathian Basin, but rather to a smaller area that excludes the Hungarian Great Plain.

Table 2 Central- and Eastern European multilateral international initiatives and their member states from the Carpathian Basin

CEE initiated international cooperation	Member Countries from the Carpathian Basin	Member Countries outside the Carpathian Basin	Non-Members from the Carpathian Basin
	<i>Countries of the Carpathian Basin: Austria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia</i>		
Carpathian Convention	Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine	Czech Republic, Poland	Austria, Croatia, Slovenia
Carpathian Euroregion	<i>only some regions from:</i> Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine	<i>only some regions from:</i> Poland	Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia
European Union Strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCR) (<i>only a proposal</i>)	Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine	Czech Republic, Austria, Poland	Croatia, Slovenia
European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)	Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine (<i>partly</i>)	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany (<i>partly</i>), Moldova, Montenegro	–
Visegrad group (V4)	Hungary, Slovakia	Czech Republic, Poland	Austria, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia
The Three Seas Initiative (3SI)	Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine (<i>partner-participant</i>)	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Greece, Moldova (<i>partner-participant</i>), Albania (<i>partner-participant</i>), Montenegro (<i>partner-participant</i>)	–

Source: author's own editing.

The first example of cooperation involving the term “Carpathians” is the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention), which has a UN cooperation background that started in 2003. According to Mitrofanenko et al. (2020), the Carpathian Convention promotes dialogue between multiple stakeholders and the joint development of strategies, policies, and projects in a number of thematic and cross-cutting areas; and as such, the Convention can be seen as a mechanism for mutual learning and negotiation in the Carpathians with regard to sustainable development and, consequently, the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda. Its main objective was to promote cross-border cooperation and develop a multidisciplinary eco-regional approach to facilitate the protection, conservation, and sustainable development of this mountainous region (Pantic, 2022). The geographical scope of the Carpathian Convention covers the Carpathian Basin more comprehensively than other international cooperation initiatives. This is not surprising, considering that the main focus of this initiative is related to environmental structures, dealing with the unique landscapes and natural heritage of the Carpathian mountain region. These natural geographical features are the characteristics that most consensually constitute a unique geographical space along the Carpathians, unlike social, economic, historical, cultural, and political features.

Another international initiative using the word “Carpathians” in its name, the Carpathian Euroregion, was established more than 30 years ago as the second Euroregion in Central and Eastern Europe (Pantic et al., 2022). Once located far from the European Union (despite the fact that the Euroregion is one of the EU’s instruments), it now lies on its eastern border. It covers only the northeastern part of the Carpathian Basin, but its territory extends further to the northeast. Its membership consists of some administrative regions of five countries. It provides a framework for looser institutional, consultative, and planning cooperation between administrative and other actors, covering topics such as social, economic, and environmental structures. Among their priorities there are some specific ones: supporting Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration; improving the accessibility and development of the public transport system in the region; development in the field of environmental protection and nature conservation, tourism, health, social and cultural environment, preparation for the reception of European Union support (Zochowska, 2013; Khusainov et al., 2023).

The most recent ambitious but as yet unrealized strongly Carpathian-focused initiative is linked to Polish governments. Since the mid-2010, Poland has made attempts to promote an EU policy on the Carpathian region, known as the European Union Strategy for the Carpathian Region (EUSCR). This initiative would follow the tradition of the so-called EU macro-regional

strategies. These strategies were introduced as a new model of EU regional policy designed to foster the integration of regions by reducing national border barriers, promoting cooperation based on complementary strengths, and creating new opportunities for cross-border areas (Maslov, 2019). These ambitions are realised in the frame of macro-regional strategies without creating new rules, institutions, and financing sources, this new macro-regional dimension of EU Cohesion Policy is considered therefore as a new added value (Turşie, 2015), and it necessarily reflects a spatial conceptualization. To date, four macro-regions have been created – the Baltic Sea Region (2009), the Danube Region (2010), the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014) and the Alpine Region (2015) –, making the initiative focusing on the Carpathians the fifth. This initiative would cover the entire Carpathian Basin, and the geographical boundaries of the macro-region coincide with those of the Carpathian Basin. This is due to the macro-regional strategic cooperation's geographical focus on the central part of Central and Eastern Europe, which encompasses the Carpathian Basin. Hence, it can be seen as a genuine Central and Eastern European initiative coming from Poland (Stańczuk-Olejnuk & Szacawa, 2024), the largest regional player. Moreover, it represents a type of Europeanization distinct from other CEE cooperation initiatives, such as the Visegrad Cooperation and the Three Seas Initiative. Besides these CEE-focused considerations, the initiative also mentions the characteristic development needs and opportunities related to the mountainous areas of the Carpathians (Stańczuk-Olejnuk & Szacawa, 2024). According to critical voices, the geographical scope of initiatives targeting the Carpathian region largely overlaps with the area of another existing macro-regional strategy, the European Union's strategy for the Danube Region (Stańczuk-Olejnuk & Szacawa, 2024). However, whereas the Danube Region stretching from west to east includes not only the Central and Eastern European states but also some Western European core areas, and divides Central and Eastern Europe into two parts (e.g., by excluding Poland), the Carpathian region could constitute a purely Central and Eastern European formation, covering exclusively the new eastern Member States and the accession countries, while bringing together all of the major CEE countries. This EUSCR approach does not refer predominantly to an understanding of the Carpathian Region (and definitely not the Carpathian Basin), but rather expresses Central and Eastern European and Polish interests in the political arena of the European Union. Such a CEE experiment is particularly promising given that European spatial development, strategy, and spatial conceptualization capabilities have generally been dominated by influential actors from Western Europe (Salamín, 2024; Péti et al., 2024). It may still take years for the EUSCR to be adopted, as the initiative has not yet received unanimous support from the governments of the respective countries of the Carpathian region, and the level

of support varies (Stańczuk-Olejniki & Szacawa, 2024) as a result of the coexistence of a plethora of parallel and conflicting spatial concepts concerning the Carpathian Basin (as discussed in the following chapters). The still peripheral position of Central and Eastern Europe prompts these countries to orient themselves toward the core areas of Europe rather than each other. Nevertheless, this Polish initiative could provide a significant impetus to embedding the Hungarian Carpathian Basin concept in an international framework. The aforementioned Danube region – which already has a macro-regional strategy and transnational program in the EU – encompasses the entire Carpathian Basin and other countries, as it covers the entire Danube river basin. This could potentially be an area of cooperation tailored to Hungary, as it may refer to one of the pre-war Hungarian interpretations of the Carpathian Basin, the concept of the Middle Danube Basin (Hajdú, 2004). In addition, the EU institution managing the EU-funded Danube Programme is based in Budapest. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the programme activities linked to the various Hungarian actors in the programme area (both within and outside Hungary) do not clearly express a Carpathian Basin or Hungarian mission.

Other international initiatives not directly related to the Carpathians or the Carpathian region can also strengthen Central and Eastern European cooperation, and therefore their geographical scope extends to the Carpathian Basin. The Visegrad Group or V4 (including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) is a multilateral international cooperation with a significant history established within this macro-region. The members of the V4 have coordinated their intentions and measures in the field of Euro-Atlantic integration (Nagy, 1998). The historically changing borders of its member states were consolidated after World War II, yet the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the regions ignited persistent regional disputes (Usiak, 2020). However, as the V4 area only partially covers the Carpathian Basin, the different spatial concepts of the various states or peoples of the Carpathian Basin cannot be studied properly within the framework of the V4 where only the Hungarian-Slovak context is represented. The V4+2 spatial planning cooperation, created as a thematic extension of the V4, also involves Romania and Bulgaria in the V4 circle and covers the Carpathian Basin more extensively. In 2014, this cooperation even published a Common Spatial Development Strategy, signed by the ministers of all of the countries concerned (V4+2, 2014). Although the initial idea was to promote north-south infrastructure connections in this part of Europe (emphasizing their importance alongside the dominant east-west connections), the strategy identified common socio-economic characteristics that are highly relevant in the context of the Carpathian Basin (heritage linked to colourful cultural patterns, sensitive and interrelated natural features).

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is a relatively new international cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, established on the initiative of Poland. The initiative is based on a cooperation model typical to Central Europe, which provides a certain degree of stability and repetition but it has no permanent structure or administrative background (Orzelska-Stączek, 2024). Its main objectives are the development of energy, transport, and digital infrastructure within the geographical scope of the initiative, and security, which has become increasingly important since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Lewkowicz, 2024; Dumitrescu, 2024). The broad geographical scope of the Three Seas Initiative encompasses the entire Carpathian Basin. Although this initiative does not interpret the concept of the Carpathian Basin either, the differing foreign policy orientations of its member states and the initiative's strong security focus may trigger interesting debates that also reflect different spatial concepts related to the Carpathian Basin.

RESULTS: SPATIAL CONCEPTS AROUND HUNGARY

The Slovak “counter” spatial concept

At present, alongside Hungary, the entire territory of Slovakia also lies within the Carpathian Basin. The Hungarian term “Felvidék” refers to a historical Hungarian region covering the same area as Slovakia itself (Fig. 1). Small Slovak communities are also present in every other country of the Carpathian Basin. Nevertheless, the Carpathian Basin is not a prominent category in defining Slovak spatial identity. In fact, due to its similarity to the geographical extent of the Kingdom of Hungary, the use of the concept of the Carpathian Basin may carry a pejorative connotation among the Slovak public, interpreted as a denial of Slovak statehood. Slovakia's separate geographical position is more closely tied to its 20th-century independence, having previously played a subordinate role in larger state formations – first as part of the Kingdom of Hungary, then of Czechoslovakia (Ištók & Plavčanová, 2015).

According to Slovak historiography and national narratives, the first independent political entity of the ancient Slovak settlement area was the Great Moravian Empire (Kollai, 2005). (There is no consensus among Hungarian or other historians regarding this theory of Slovak origin.) This empire, whose downfall was partly due to the arrival of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin, was not confined within the boundaries of the Carpathian Basin – it extended westward into its western parts and beyond.

The second largest Hungarian minority in the Carpathian Basin lives in Slovakia, numbering 0,5 million people. In southern Slovakia today, where several areas have an ethnic Hungarian majority, there is also a significant Roma community. However, a large portion of this Roma population identifies with Hungarian identity.

Figure 1 Historical-political territorial units and other geographical features that shape national identity in the Carpathian Basin, including the regions inhabited by ethnic Hungarians outside of Hungary.



Legend: *grey bands*: border of the Carpathian Basin on mountain ranges; *bright red lines*: state borders; *pale red lines*: historical border of the Hungarian Kingdom; *captions with black letters*: Hungarian names of regions/landscapes; *captions with red letters*: the equivalent of the Hungarian name in another language and its mirror translation into Hungarian if relevant; *captions with green letters*: names of countries in Hungarian.
Source: author's own editing.

The Romanian “counter” spatial concept

Nearly half of Romania's territory and a quarter of its population are located within the Carpathian Basin. Nevertheless, the Carpathian Basin is not considered a fundamental structural element in the Romanian spatial perspective. In fact, the classic models of Romanian settlement geography approach this concept in the opposite way (Conea, 1941; Mehedinți, 1943; Mihăilescu, 1936; Valsan, 1937, cited in Tóth, 2009). These models place the mountainous regions (namely the Eastern and Southern Carpathians) at the centre of Romanian spatial structure. The mountain ranges are not viewed as natural boundaries, but rather as unifying elements that connect the surrounding plains – including sometimes Hungary's entire Transtisia

(Tiszántúl) region, the region beyond the Tisia river [Tisza river in Hungarian, Tisa river in Romanian], it basically coincides with the Romanian Crisana region, the region along the Cris river [Körös river in Hungarian] – due to their permeability. This broader concept of Greater Romania bordered by three rivers (Tisia from the west, Danube from the south, and Dniester from the east) as an ancient Romanian settlement area already appeared in geography textbooks in the second half of the 19th century (Vlădescu, 1868). (It is interesting to note that the use of such textbooks was restricted by the Hungarian educational authorities as early as the 1870s, as these books defined an almost two millennia old ancient Romanian settlement area with a certain statehood within the territory of the much later founded Hungarian State [Tóth, 2009]. There has been no consensus among Hungarian or other historians regarding this Romanian origin theory.)

The Romanian regions located in the Carpathian Basin are collectively referred to as Transylvania (Erdély in Hungarian, Ardeal or Transilvania in Romanian) (Fig. 1). Transylvania is still a widely used term in Romania today, though primarily in a geographical sense, without administrative content. For centuries, Transylvania developed in ways that significantly differed from the rest of Romania: it was more ethnically diverse and more socially and economically advanced. Due to this shared historical background, the historical region of Transylvania (the Transylvanian Region) includes also Partium and the Banat, which form the eastern edge of the Pannonian Plain (the Great Hungarian Plain in Hungarian). All of these areas were once part of the Kingdom of Hungary, covering its territories that now belong to Romania. The aforementioned Partium and Banat used to be even more integral parts of this Kingdom, as the rest of Transylvania (the core, the historical Transylvania) enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy within Hungary during certain historical periods. Transylvania in the narrower sense refers only to historical Transylvania, the Transylvanian Basin. Transylvania, this internationally well-known term means “beyond the forest” and conveys an approach similar to viewing this region from the centre of historical Hungary, with Transylvania lying beyond the forests of the mountains bordering the Transylvania Basin to the west.

Nevertheless, regional identities with a Carpathian Basin-based character – such as Transylvanian or Partium identity – have not become major political factors in 20th-century Romania. Demographic processes have played a major role in this. The economic development of the 20th century triggered large-scale internal migration within Romania, with many people moving to Transylvania. At the same time, the proportion of ethnic groups who regarded Transylvania as their homeland significantly decreased. The once significant Transylvanian Saxon ethnic minority has almost completely disappeared. In Romanian political culture,

regionalism may be accused of undermining national territorial unity, and among other reasons this can result in that a Transylvanist movement – advocating for the distinct status and protection of Transylvanian interests – is today mostly limited to the Hungarian community of Transylvania (K. Lengyel, 2017).

The largest Hungarian minority in the Carpathian Basin lives in Transylvania, numbering over 1 million people. The Hungarian ethnic minority still constitutes a local/regional majority among the Romanian majority on Romania's western border, in Partium, and in the eastern part of Transylvania, in Székelyföld, and scattered elsewhere in other parts of Transylvania. There is also a significant Roma community in Transylvania with a largely Hungarian identity.

The Croatian neighbouring spatial concept

A significant portion of Croatia also lies within the Carpathian Basin – in fact, its central regions and capital city are located there. However, the Carpathian Basin does not play a defining role in Croatian spatial perspectives. This is due to the dual structure of the original Croatian settlement area: in addition to the regions within the Carpathian Basin, it also includes coastal areas along the shores of the Adriatic Sea whose historical development and culture were long separated from the continental Croatian territories inside the Carpathian Basin. The once independent Croatia became part of the “Lands of the Holy Crown” (the crown, which originates from Saint Stephen, the first king of Hungary) from the 11th century onward. This status meant a relationship with the Hungarian head of state at the time, but at the same time it also meant a high degree of autonomy for Croatia, separate from Hungarian territories, which was last regulated by the Croatian-Hungarian Compromise of 1868 (Andrási, 2020). The Croatian-Hungarian border has been in place for centuries. So this border region truly separates the two central areas of the two countries, and only a slow development of the cross border processes can be observed even after Croatia followed Hungary in joining the EU (in 2013) and later the Schengen area (in 2023) (Rácz, 2017; Horeczki & Szilágyi, 2025).

In Croatian historical memory, the evaluation of Hungarian statehood is not necessarily negative. However, the most recent shared episode of statehood – the Croatian–Hungarian Compromise – is strongly criticized in Croatian historiography and education, partly because it prevented the unification of Croatian territories (first of all the coastal and the continental ones). This unification had been a goal of the Croatian national movements that emerged in the 19th century, but after the Compromise, the coastal territories outside the Carpathian Basin remained separate from the reformed Croatian political entity (Bende, 2013).

The southern border of the Carpathian Basin is uncertain, including in relation to Croatia. Geographically, the Carpathian Basin extends to the Dinaric Mountains, including the lowland Croatian regions south of the Drava River, such as Slavonia (Szlavónia in Hungarian) and Syrmia (Srijem in Croatian, Szerémség in Hungarian) (Fig. 1). However, the main northern boundary of Croatian settlement has almost always coincided with the Drava River (Dráva river in Hungarian) due to Croatia's considerable autonomy, effectively making it a southern political boundary for Hungarians living within the Carpathian Basin – just as it is today. In this sense, it can even be interpreted as a “thousand-year-old” border.

At the same time, it should be noted that the northeastern corner of present-day Croatian Slavonia, which lies north of the Drava River (Drávaszög region in Hungarian, Baranja region in Croatian), was part of Hungary proper until the end of World War I and did not come under Croatian autonomous rule (Fig. 1). This small region is home to the majority of the indigenous Hungarian communities living in Croatia. (The number of the Hungarians living in Croatia is one of the smallest in the Carpathian Basin between 10 and 20 thousand.) This small region has a distinctive regional identity, but this is not primarily characteristic of the titular ethnic group (Croatian), but rather of the Serbs, who live here in significant numbers for historical reasons (due to the UN peacekeeping program, which lasted until the end of the 1990s, the Serbs living here were not exposed to the same extent of mass emigration and refugee crisis as other Serbs in Croatia in the mid-1990s). This area is also home to two other ethnic groups, the Bunjevci and the Sokci. For considerations regarding their identity and space-shaping characteristics, see the chapter on Serbian concepts.

Nevertheless, on both the historical Croatian territories and on those that once belonged directly to Hungary but now form part of Croatia, there are still indigenous Hungarian settlements (where Hungarians live not only with Croats but also with other nationalities – today primarily with Serbs).

The Austrian extension of the Carpathian Basin spatial concept

Certain regions of Austria, Slovenia, Serbia, and Ukraine also form part of the Carpathian Basin. However, only a smaller portion of these countries once belonged to the core territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. For this reason, the concept of the Carpathian Basin understandably does not hold central significance for them and is connected only to regional identities in specific parts of the area.

After World War I, the western borderlands of the Kingdom of Hungary (Őrvidék in Hungarian, Burgenland in German) were annexed by Austria (Fig. 1). At the time of annexation,

these areas were predominantly inhabited by Germans who represented the easternmost extension of the German-speaking regions of neighbouring Austrian provinces. It is likely that a significant portion of the German-speaking population had settled here as early as or even prior to the Hungarian conquest. The annexed territories were organized into a separate province in Austria named Burgenland. This region is one of Austria's smallest and economically less developed provinces, located on the country's periphery.

A strong regional identity exists in this area, although it has been significantly shaped by the development of Austrian statehood and provincial identity after World War I (Palkó, 2009). This region never formed a political or administrative unit within the Kingdom of Hungary. The identity of Burgenland does not rely on the legacy of the Carpathian Basin or the Kingdom of Hungary. Its state symbols (flags, coat of arms) intentionally avoid references to the Hungarian Kingdom (Palkó, 2009). This process of regional identity-building was interrupted when the province briefly became part of the German Reich after Austria was incorporated by Nazi Germany in 1938. During this period, the territory was divided among neighbouring Austrian provinces.

Today, small Hungarian and slightly larger Croatian ethnic communities live in the region among the titular ethnic group. (Hungarians in Austria constitute the smallest indigenous Hungarian minority community in the Carpathian Basin with only several thousand members.) In their respective kin-states they are recognized as distinct linguistic and ethnographic groups. There are also small Roma communities here, some of which have also a Hungarian identity.

The Slovenian extension of the Carpathian Basin spatial concept

The north-western part of Slovenia, known as the Mura region, covers approximately 1,000 square kilometres and was once part of the political Carpathian Basin – that is, the Kingdom of Hungary. Prekmurje, the Slovenian name for the region, refers to the areas beyond the Mura River and suggests a perspective as if we were viewing the region from the south-western regions outside the Carpathian Basin (from Slovenia proper) (Fig. 1). Meanwhile, the Hungarian name, Muravidék, which refers to the area along the Mura River, does not carry such a meaning. (From a physical geographical perspective, however, the boundary of the Carpathian Basin does not end at the Mura River, but extends as far as the foreland of the Alps.) Interestingly, there is academic consensus that the Slavic population living in this area was already present well before the Hungarian conquest, possibly as early as the 6th century – making them perhaps one of the oldest autochthonous nations among the currently existing ones of the Carpathian Basin.

As a former part of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Mura region differs historically and culturally from other Slovenian regions (Göncz, 2020). This may explain its linguistic distinctiveness, as the inhabitants speak a special Slovenian dialect known as the “Vend” language (Lukács, 1996). The regional and linguistic identity of the Slovenian population in this area has persisted to the present day (Gasparics, 2014; Stankovicsné Szendi, 2020), although it is not closely tied to the concept of the Carpathian Basin (or to the memory of the Kingdom of Hungary), and a process of Slovenian homogenization is underway. Hungarians in Slovenia constitute one of the smallest indigenous Hungarian minority community in the Carpathian Basin with only around ten thousand members. In addition to Slovenian and Hungarian communities, the region is also home to a sizable Roma population.

The Serbian extension of the Carpathian Basin spatial concept

The current territory of Serbia diverges both from the political concept of the Carpathian Basin as related to the Kingdom of Hungary and from the physical geographical interpretation of the region. The former southern border of the Kingdom of Hungary – which until the end of World War I followed the lines of the Sava and Danube Rivers – now runs through Serbia. From a physical geographical perspective, however, the Carpathian Basin – whether referred to simply as the Carpathian Basin or, following Pál Teleki, as the Central Danube Basin (Teleki, 1931; Prinz & Teleki, 1937) – still extends southward, reaching the Morava watershed. This led the noted Hungarian geographer Jenő Cholnoky (1914), already before World War I, to propose a southern expansion of the sphere of interest of the Kingdom of Hungary in order to fully utilize the economic development potential offered by natural borders. In the decades that followed, historical developments unfolded in direct opposition to this idea, resulting in the near-complete dissolution of the political unity of the Carpathian Basin.

Serbia’s Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Vajdaság in Hungarian), which lies entirely within the territory of the former political Carpathian Basin (Fig. 1) – that is, within the Kingdom of Hungary – understandably has different historical roots, developmental paths, and identity than other parts of the country, which only gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century after centuries of a foreign rule that represented a cultural and administrative environment very different from the rest of Europe. The Serbian territories south of Vojvodina – and thus also south of the Carpathian Basin and Kingdom of Hungary at that time – were the core area of the medieval Serbian state before the Ottoman occupation in the 14th and 15th centuries, with Nis as their capital (Rácz, 2023). It is therefore no coincidence that this northern province of Serbia has traditionally enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy

since it was incorporated into the later Serbian state (after World War I), although this status has been suspended at times in recent decades. The ethnic composition of the region also reflects this unique status. Besides its Serbian majority, Vojvodina is an important area inhabited by Hungarians (the number of Hungarians in Vojvodina is slightly less than 200,000, their settlements are concentrated in the northern part of the province), but it is ethnically more diverse due to resettlements following the Turkish occupation in the 18th century (that happened much earlier than in other parts of Serbia). Many of the indigenous ethnic communities of the Carpathian Basin are represented here: Serbs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Romanians, Rusyns, and Roma communities live here in populations of tens of thousands. (In recent years, also tens of thousands of Russian and fewer Ukrainian emigrants have settled here as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war.) Nowadays, however – partly due to the decreasing diversity of the region resulting from internal Serbian migration and the resettlement of Serbian refugees from the Yugoslav Wars – the Vojvodinian identity, which still indirectly reflects the idea of the Carpathian Basin, may gradually fade away within the Serbian majority society.

It is worth mentioning that there are two other indigenous ethnic groups in Vojvodina whose homeland are almost exclusively related to the Carpathian Basin: Bunjevci and Sokci (Bunyevác and Sokác in Hungarian). They live primarily in Vojvodina with smaller communities in Croatia, and in Hungary (along its southern border). They live in the regions of Backa (Bácska in Hungarian) that is divided between Vojvodina and Hungary, in Baranya (Barana in Croatian) that is divided between Croatia and Hungary, and in Slavonia. They are officially recognized as distinct ethnic minorities in Vojvodina and Serbia with own representations, whereas in Croatia and Hungary they are classified as Croatian ethnographic groups. Their recognition in Serbia is viewed in the Croatian perspective as a political effort to divide Croats. In Hungary, there have also been proposals among the Bunjevci to be recognized as a separate ethnic minority distinct from Croats, but this was not supported by the rest of Hungarian Croatian community without a Bunjevci background and finally nor by the Hungarian authorities (Obádovics, 2018). This issue continues to be a subject of debate among the affected communities.

The Ukrainian extension of the Carpathian Basin spatial concept

The northeastern part of the Carpathian Basin is today Ukraine's Transcarpathian region. Zakarpatszka, the Ukrainian name for the region (Fig. 1), similar to its international name (Transcarpathia), refers to the areas beyond the Carpathian mountain range and suggests a perspective that views the region from areas east of the Carpathian Basin. Meanwhile, the

Hungarian name, Kárpátalja, which means “foothills of the Carpathians”, approaches the region from within the Carpathian Basin. It is worth mentioning that several Russian and Ukrainian historians assume that during the first decades or centuries of the Hungarian Kingdom, this part of the Carpathian Basin, together with its Slavic population, the later Rusyns, belonged to the Principality of Halych (Font, 2020). This principality is considered one of the earliest Russian or Ukrainian state formations, whose core territory was located outside the Carpathian Basin, to the northeast of it. However, there is no consensus on these theses among Hungarian or even other historians.

The Rusyns once lived in the northeastern part of the Carpathian Basin, in what is today Ukraine’s Transcarpathian region and beyond. Since the time of the Rákóczi War of Independence in the early 18th century (when Hungarian troops fought with the Austrian Habsburg empire), Rusyns have been regarded as an ethnic group loyal to the Hungarian nation, while still preserving their own traditions. During the national awakenings of the 19th century, the Rusyns also came under the influence of Pan-Slavic ideas. However, compared to the neighbouring Slovak national formation, they were at a disadvantage, as their region was less developed and linguistically less unified. The modernization of the Rusyn language was attempted by three competing linguistic models (Russian, Ukrainian, and a movement for an independent Rusyn language) (Csernicskó & Fedinec, 2019). The settlement area of the traditionally Hungary-loyal Rusyn population – though not exclusively – lies predominantly within the Carpathian Basin, and a significant portion of the Carpathian mountain range marks its border. Thus, it can be said that the idea of the Carpathian Basin, as well as the memory of the Kingdom of Hungary, may still be present in their collective memory.

When the region was briefly reattached to Hungary in 1938 (until the end of World War II), a declaration was made to guarantee the autonomy of the Rusyns. Although extensive preparations were made, the plan was ultimately not implemented, primarily due to military and security considerations (Fedinec, 2009). This initiative was motivated not only by the memory of Rusyn loyalty to the Kingdom of Hungary but also by Hungary’s geopolitical ambitions (Vasas, 2000). In addition, Hungarian Prime Minister Pál Teleki’s geo-economic considerations regarding geographical factors also played a role (Ablonczy, 2004). It is worth noting that Transcarpathia was the only territory returned to Hungary shortly before and during World War II where the Hungarian population was significantly in the minority. Therefore, this region could have served as a model for Hungary’s new concept of nationhood and nationalities policy, and autonomy could have played a key role in this (Fedinec, 2009).

The Rusyns' attachment and loyalty to the Carpathian Basin is a complex issue. In the early 20th century, Rusyn and Ukrainian national ideas emerged, which viewed the Rusyns as part of the Ukrainian nation, and interpreted the territory inhabited by them as an extension of Ukrainian settlements beyond the Carpathians. These ideas also took political form in the region (Csernicskó & Fedinec, 2019). Unsurprisingly, Rusyns are not officially recognized as a national minority in Ukraine, nor is the Rusyn language recognized as an official minority language (unlike in Hungary and Slovakia). In addition to the Hungarian minority, smaller Slovak and Swabian communities also live in the area, and since World War II, a Russian-speaking community has also formed due to migration from the former Soviet Union.

The Transcarpathian region has developed significantly differently from the rest of Ukraine and is often seen from the capital's (Kiev) perspective as a remote periphery. This geographical and political distance contributes to a strong regional identity among the population, which is significant not only among Hungarians but also among other ethnic communities. However, this identity is increasingly losing its linguistic and ethnic dimensions. The indigenous Rusyn population (which likely still forms the majority in the region) and the Russian-speaking population settled after World War II have gradually assimilated since Ukraine's independence, especially since the 2010s when Ukrainian nation-building efforts intensified. (These efforts have manifested in the regulation and restriction of minority language use, including in public education [Fejes & Miklós, 2019].)

The Russian–Ukrainian war that broke out in 2022 may lead to a significant demographic shift in the population of Transcarpathia. It has caused a massive influx of refugees and internal migration, with Transcarpathia being one of the main destinations, while locals also fled abroad in large numbers. As a result, the strong regional identity that once characterized this area is likely to weaken further.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In certain aspects of spatial organization, the Carpathian Basin undeniably constitutes a unity, and even opinion leaders of differing ethnic affiliations do not claim otherwise. This unity can be experienced in terms of topography, hydrography, and biogeography. However, in historical, cultural, political, social, and economic dimensions, this unquestionable unity no longer holds, and ethnic considerations become significant. From this angle, the Carpathian Basin primarily forms a unity only for Hungarians. The native territorial spatial concepts of other state-forming nations living in the region are not centred around the unity of the Carpathian Basin.

It is unclear in which direction the significance of the Carpathian Basin spatial concept is changing. Hungarian Carpathian Basin concepts are rooted in geographical science schools that follow geographical determinism (Balogh, 2021). This deterministic approach is less valid today, and except for certain Hungarian and German schools, it has lost much of its significance since the 1920s, as greater emphasis has been placed on other factors of social and economic spatial organization. This could also mean that the significance of the Carpathian Basin is declining. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that it is precisely in the territorial interpretation of environmental structures (which is the basis of geographical determinism) that the Carpathian Basin forms a geographical unit that transcends the Hungarian interpretation. Today, the importance of these environmental structures is growing (Fodor & Gálosi-Kovács, 2019). The challenges posed by climate change are intensifying the environmental challenges and intervention needs of the Carpathian Basin across national borders (see water management, flood protection, agriculture and forestry, environmental pollution, and the spread of invasive species). The cohesion of the Carpathian Basin is further enhanced by the spread of cross-border functional urban areas (Hardi et al., 2009) and labour market cooperation (Megyesi & Péti, 2022), for which the unifying European Union offers an excellent platform. However, this growing mutual dependence and cohesion within the Carpathian Basin and certain border regions of the Carpathian Basin does not mean that the Carpathian Basin as a whole is becoming increasingly recognized beyond Hungarian circles.

Multilateral cooperation initiations originating from CEE (e.g. Carpathian Convention, Carpathian Euroregion, European Union Strategy for the Carpathian Region, European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, Visegrad group, The Three Seas Initiative) do not interpret the Carpathian Basin but, they deal with issues and areas that are related to the Carpathians and the Carpathian Region, among others. The term “Carpathians” which is used by some of these initiatives, often does not cover the lowland areas of the Carpathian Basin, only its mountainous parts. However, even their possible focus on the Carpathians mostly reflects the foreign policy intentions originating from Central and Eastern Europe and somewhat the ambitions of the strongest regional partner, Poland. Their priorities are not solely on strategic developments tailored to the specific needs and opportunities of the Carpathians or the Carpathian Region, and understandably, the development of the Carpathian Basin as a whole region is not evident in them.

At the same time, within the settlement areas of neighbouring peoples that extend into and beyond the Carpathian Basin (Austrians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Serbs, Slovenians), a distinctive regional identity can be identified – one that is tied to Carpathian Basin spaces.

Although this identity is based on the different historical developments of regions outside the Carpathian Basin (which did not belong to the Kingdom of Hungary), it was probably not shaped by a conscious awareness of historical heritage, but rather by general regional characteristics that are not closely or directly related to the Carpathian Basin or the heritage of the Kingdom of Hungary, or if they are, they are not definitely expressed.

Our findings can be summarized as follows: regarding the territory of the Carpathian Basin, we can identify numerous parallel and sometimes conflicting spatial concepts belonging to ethnic communities or states, which model the historical development and current situation of the spatial organization of socio-economic and environmental structures. However, apart from the approaches belonging to the Hungarian people and the Hungarian state, none of these captures the Carpathian Basin as a unified spatial organizational unit. At the same time, it can be assumed that the common characteristics of the Carpathian Basin (e.g., changing environmental conditions and processes due to climate change, such as cross-border pollution and water management challenges, or the increasing value of natural resources) have gained significance, and interrelationships within the region have also emerged (see, for example, labour markets or functional urban areas crossing borders).

All this suggests that it is worthwhile for the peoples living in the Carpathian Basin to learn as much as possible about each other, so that they can plan and implement developments that are either common or show synergy, or at least do not undermine each other's positive effects. This could also advance the recognition and articulation of the broader region's – Central and Eastern Europe's – own common interests at the European level.

In order to recognize these common interests, manage environmental or urban interdependencies, and thereby develop a common territorial concept for the region, all communities must participate in the process. However, studies show that approaches based on the Carpathian Basin have not taken root among actors outside the Hungarian community, which may indicate that this historically determined conceptual framework does not really correspond to the ideas of the peoples living alongside the Hungarians (Scott & Hajdú, 2024; Balogh, 2021). Rejecting the Carpathian Basin, on the other hand, may pose a threat to the recognition and appreciation of Hungarian values, especially in the case of ethnic Hungarian minority communities, while in today's European geopolitical context, the protection of indigenous ethnic minorities has become a particularly sensitive issue. Developing cultural, scientific, and political approaches that lead to a genuine common understanding of the region will therefore be an important and difficult task for our region in the future.

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