



A cross-border cultural tourism destination: the possibility of levelling up through cooperation

For local, regional and national policymakers

Author: CERS team

Introduction

In Europe, there are many examples of cross-border regions and by fostering greater cohesion between states, the European Union aims to transform dividing borders into connecting ones, encouraging regions to increase the frequency and intensity of cross-border interactions in order to address the existing ethnic and cultural fragmentation. As strengthening the cohesion of cross-border destinations, and intensifying cooperation in cross-border tourism development is considered to be an essential condition for creating a common European identity, in our research we take the cross-border region of Komárom/Komarno as study region and look at success and limiting factors for strengthening cohesion between cross-border destinations in the area and at the same time look examples aiming to strengthen cohesion between cross-border cultural tourism destinations in the case study region and other cross-border regions of Europe. By looking at good examples, and analysing their applicability and upscaling it is possible to explain which factors could strengthen cooperation in cross-border cultural tourism destinations.

The **cross-border twin city of Komárom/Komarno**, which is located on both banks of the Danube river between Slovakia and Hungary, is one example that is currently being examined in the SPOT project.

The region has a rich archeological and historical heritage because it has been inhabited from the oldest ages and was a crucial part of the Limes that protected the Roman Empire from barbarian invaders.

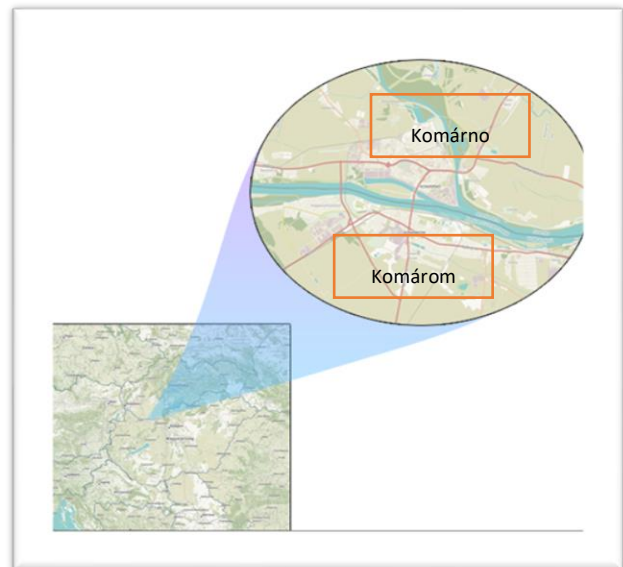
From the medieval ages, as an important river crossing and a fortified place, the town (located that time exclusively on the northern side of the Danube) has gradually become one of the most significant urban centres of the Hungarian Kingdom.

Today, Komárom's main attraction is the Fortification System that surrounds the city.

It also became a developed Danube port city, with Danube trade and shipbuilding. Thanks to shipping, many trading Danubian nations and ethnic groups settled in the city.

The peace treaty after the First World War dissolved the Hungarian Kingdom. The Danube became a state border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the northern part of the town by its new name Komárno was annexed to Czechoslovakia (after its dissolution (1993), today Slovakia), while the southern part remained part of Hungary.

The cross-border twin city attracts a high number of visitors. Based on estimates by Komárom TDM, tourists spend on average 90,000 tourist nights there. They are officially **two separate destinations, but the two sides offer a number of parallel and complementary tourism elements** and there is considerable movement between them besides the traditional motivations related to tourism eg. citizens visiting the other side's facilities (cinema, theatre, spa, museum, etc). This is officially considered "**international**" tourism, **but it takes place in the same local space**. For each of these groups a distinction can be made between Hungarian and Slovak nationalities. The number of classic international tourists is still low.



1. Evidence and Analysis

Based on our research conducted in the fall of 2022, we can conclude that tourists seek out the twin-city attractions for a variety of reasons. There is also a subset of visitors who come to Komárom primarily to see the historical and archaeological sites. According to our research, they are mostly Hungarians from Hungary and residents of Slovakia who are interested in their ancestors' history. It is also obvious that the most popular historical sites are on the Hungarian side. **Komárom's cultural offering** is primarily comprised of historical structures, with **the Fortification System** serving as its focal point. The Old and New Fortresses resisted the largest armies of the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg troops in 1849, during the Hungarian independence war. The most visited and renovated parts are found in Komárom. Meanwhile, **in Komárno, a more active form of cultural tourism** is popular, with festivals and theater at its core. In Komárno, the Fortification System is largely unrenovated and because of that most of its parts in Slovakia cannot be visited.

Citizens of Komarno have a different perspective on culture than citizens of Komárom; events associated with "high culture" are not as popular among citizens as mainstream festivals. Although Komárom and Komarno have well-established local and regional tourism institutions, the majority of their **operations are independent. The major attractions are developed independently and managed by the state**. There has been a noticeable upturn in culture in Komárom due to significant public investment, but there have been

no significant cultural investments in Komarno. Komarno's cultural life is based primarily on civic associations and a few prominent local figures, with no significant support from the central government. Jókai and Lehár's memories have enormous potential, but they are largely untapped. Development in Komárno is not dependent on local will, but rather on a central will that does not favor the region. As a result, the **majority of developments rely on EU funding**, such as Interreg. Nitra District has a Tourism Destination Management Organization that brings together local Tourism Destination Management Organizations (which was newly formed in 2021). While there are hopes that the **District Tourism Destination Management Organization will provide opportunities to pool resources**, it is seen as a highly politicized organization. In its planning, the Hungarian Tourism Agency considers **Komárom to be a part of Budapest and its surroundings, as well as a part of the Danube Bend**. The Agency sees the city as a **transit zone**, with highways and railways connecting it to Bratislava, Vienna, and Budapest. As a result, **tourists typically spend 1-2 tourist nights** in Komárom. A major issue is that even if they wanted to spend more time in the city pair, there is **no tourism infrastructure and no adequate or sufficient accommodation. As a result tourists spend their money in other cities and because of that there is no significant local economic benefit from tourism**. As a result, Komárom prioritizes the **development of tourism infrastructure**. Komárno has a classic pedestrian street, which Komárom, the Hungarian part, does not have. Komárno has a well-developed cycle network, which Komárom lacks, so the cycle paths in Komárom are being built out.

Key issues according to the findings of the tourist survey are the **absence of Hungarian labels and titles on the Slovakian side of the case study area, a lack of information, and the deterioration of historic structures**. We should note that this is a common complaint among tourists who visit the areas annexed from Hungary. This criticism is also strange in the case of Komarno, because almost all relevant information is written in Hungarian almost everywhere (too). While tourist-host interactions are viewed positively, the issue of the missing Hungarian-language inscription demonstrates that they are still susceptible to misinterpretation and stereotyping. Local residents do not perceive any disadvantages related to tourism, mainly the industrial park and the resulting traffic problems are the source of dissatisfaction amongst locals in Komárom, Hungary.

Tourists frequently suggested **expanding opportunities**, such as adding more tourist programs, sporting events, and festivals. Tourists interviewed in Komárom considered a lack of information and the quality of information to be the most serious issues, but this was a common theme in both samples. According to the findings, the **main barriers to the development of cultural tourism in the area are a lack of tourism marketing skills and experts, as well as a lack of investment in tourism marketing**. Another problem identified is that at planning level municipal and district **statistics are difficult to obtain**, only county data is available.

Stakeholders emphasize that technically and for tourism the **focus should be on common things and on making the cities into one tourism destination**. They wrote a common strategy 15 years ago, which had the aim to coordinate a common urban planning, but it is outdated and is not really used. **The diversity and complementarity of the cultural offerings of Komárom and Komarno** support our hypothesis that the benefit of their collaboration would be that these **destinations would be more "visible" on an international scale when they were combined**. The completion of an integrated tourism and thus **creating a new tourism**

To examine cross-border cultural tourism in the area we conducted research within the framework of the EU-funded SPOT project, which aims to develop a new approach to understanding and addressing cultural tourism. Due to the specificity of the Komárom-Komárno case study area we carried out surveys separately with the help of stakeholders to reach the residents of Komárom and Komárno and the tourists visiting the area. The target population of the residential survey was all persons aged 15 years and older living in Komárom or in Komárno. The target population for the tourists' survey was defined as international and domestic visitors who entered the case study area, regardless of their gender and age.

The total number of residents surveyed is 103, of which 49,51% live in Komárom. Out of the 99 tourist surveys delivered, 92 were born in the case study countries.

product offer by combining cross-border tourism destinations is therefore worthwhile in order to grow and sustain their competitiveness on international scale.

On a daily basis, actors on both sides of the border collaborate, and there are shared goals, such as building electric bus transportation between Komárom and Komárno. A major goal is to **connect the transportation systems** of the two cities. The integration of the Danube into tourism is a priority for both parties. The railway separates Komárom from the city, and the industrial park separates Komárno from the city, but **incorporating boat trips into tourism programs** may provide a good opportunity for integration.

An **EGTC association** (Pons-Danubii) has been set up on a **cross-border basis**, which among its many tasks in the tourism sector, has projects on both sides (e.g. the CULTPLAY project, the joint bicycle network and the operation of the cross-border bicycle rental service Komárom Bike) focusing on strengthening cohesion between destinations on both sides of the river. The association has projects with the goal of increasing the attractiveness of a border region by developing new tourism areas through products and brands based on the shared history.

One of the most successful projects **building on shared history on both sides of the border is the CULTPLAY project**. CULTPLAY stakeholders create **thematic parks that represent the partners' significant cultural heritages, primarily serving as playgrounds** while providing educational information, historical value, and knowledge. The educational materials are available in three languages - Hungarian, Slovak, and English - via a QR code-enabled mobile application. CULTPLAY's main goal is to engage local residents and tourists in new ways of utilizing existing cultural heritage, not only by visiting and passively observing heritage sites, but also by actively participating in and using theme parks. CULTPLAY parks are being built in nine cities (SK: Érsekújvár,



Source: <https://egtcmonitor.cesci-net.eu/hu/projektek/cultplay/>

Komarno, Gyalla, Guta, Vágsellye, HU: Komárom, Tata, Oroszlány, Kisdér) to showcase cultural heritage on both sides of the Danube. CULTPLAY parks are constructed in each municipality, **with each park focusing on a significant built heritage site (castle, fortress, watermill, mine) of another municipality from the other side of the border in the partnership**. While the cultural heritage of the Slovakian side is built on the Hungarian side, the cultural heritage of the Hungarian side is built on the Slovakian side. Partnership and widespread support for the initiative among local governments are critical success factors. Another factor that contributes to its success is that it **involves new ways of utilizing existing cultural heritage as well as the use of new technology, particularly digital technology, to attract visitors**. Much effort has gone into making these thematic parks important cultural attractions for all generations, as well as promoting new ways of **access to culture for a variety of target groups of tourists and citizens**, but promoting it on an international level would require further cross-border marketing in a form of a campaign.

Another example of **utilizing existing cultural heritage and finding new ways of use for existing cultural heritage sites** is the restoration of **Star Fortress** and the new exhibition it is hosting. The exhibition of life-like plaster replicas shows some of the finest examples of medieval and Renaissance sculpture. The replicas, often made after the original works of art, can be studied up close and at eye level for the first time. The exhibition gives an overview of the history of sculpture from Antiquity to the Renaissance, showing the origins



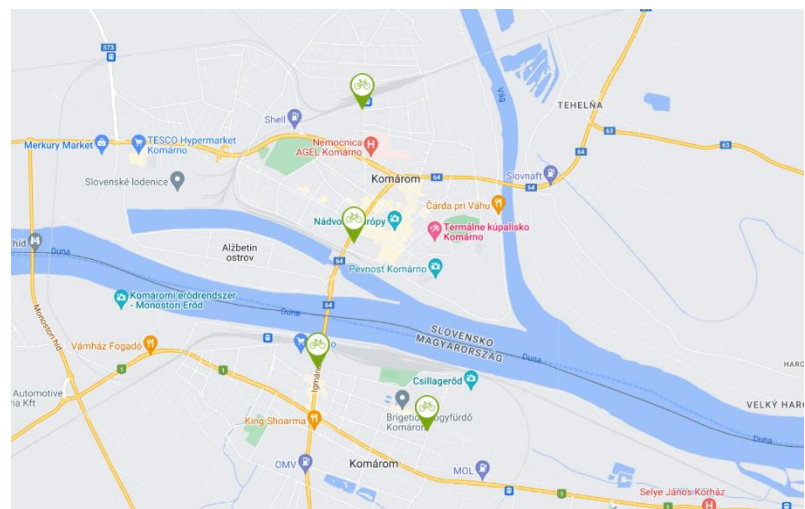
and succession of styles and the use of iconographic and representational types and patterns. The exhibition also highlights the ancient connections between medieval and Renaissance monuments, for example by putting the Laocoon group of sculptures and Michelangelo's sculptures in



Source: KRTK, Melinda Smahó

dialogue with art history. **Marketing the uniqueness of Star Fortress and connecting it to other tourism destinations** in Komárom and Komárno as well is an important task for local actors in the area.

As connecting the two cities is an important factor for cohesion between destinations the **KOMBiBike** project's goal is to significantly **improve the interconnectivity of the Komárno-Komárom cross-border region by launching an innovative public transportation system**. It implements a cross-border community bicycle rental system in 9 municipalities (HU-4, SK-5) with 13 stops and the main goal is to **integrate the bicycle rental system into the local public transportation**. The cross-border EGTC association is responsible for the development of



Source: kombibike.eu

infrastructure for cross-border cycling and bike rental: the new car park in Tata's Builders' Park is an excellent place to change modes of transportation and a good starting point for cycling tours. The same is true for the car park that will be built in Naszvad, adjacent to the spa complex that is currently under construction and along the route of a future cycle path connecting Révkomárom and Érsekújvár. Another important is increasing target group awareness of the green transport modes.

1. A good example from Europe is the Lake Constance Tourism Ltd. (<https://www.bodensee.eu/de>, <https://bw.tourismusnetzwerk.info/inhalte/service/ansprechpartner/regionen/internationale-bodensee-tourismus-gmbh/>). It is a cross-border tourism organization with shareholders from Germany, Switzerland, France and Liechtenstein in the Lake Constance area. As it is an organization set-up for a long-term cooperation, it covers the fields and functions needed for successful cross-border integration. Through pooling information and managing a platform via which tourist organizations of the destinations/regions and the companies in the tourism sector around Lake Constance cooperate and share information makes cooperation between shareholders efficient. Through the organization regional actors work on projects and issues together and it helps in presenting, representing and communicating Lake Constance as a unified area. Projects managed by the organization are:
 - Bodensee Erlebniskarte: it is a Holiday Pass of Lake Constance, an all inclusive card that offers free access to more than 160 attractions in four countries.

- Lake Constance Gardens: a cross-border network of historical gardens or castles, monasteries with gardens around Lake Constance.
 - Wine Region Lake Constance: it is a new cross-border network of wine regions around the lake to establish a cross-border wine region.
 - Joint trade fair presentations of Lake Constance
 - A Common Sales Guide for Lake Constance
 - A common tourism website for the Lake Constance area
2. Euregio Meuse-Rhine (<https://youregion-emr.eu/prepare/euregio-meuse-rhine/>) is one of the frontrunners in Europe with regard to cultural cooperation. Under the name Space Collecting People cities in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine are linked by transboundary contemporary art. Since its inception in 2002, it has acquired 107 contemporary pieces from the area. Interactive sculptures are placed in public areas and when a visitor puts money into a SPACE machine, the sculpture comes to life and they are awarded a poetry ticket or a cultural prize. By giving contestants the option to select a cultural gift from Liège or Maastricht or from a neighboring city, the idea behind the "cultural award" is to promote cultural interchange and the exploration of other people's traditions. The Euregio Meuse-Rhine border triangle is home to 13 locations that participate in the Open Art Sunday network. The partners from the three surrounding nations work in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, jewelry, recycling art, illustration, and design.

2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

It is essential for integration that the two regions, which currently function separately, **draw up a strategic tourism concept together with a long term orientation and a higher level of institutionalization** eg. under the coordination of the existing EGTC association or a cross-border association set up for this purpose. The attractions in both cities have the potential to put the common destination on the tourism map of Europe. The coordinated development and tourist use of the Fortress System, the Roman heritage theme, the memory of one of the monarchy's most important and popular composers, the involvement of cities under the umbrella of cultural routes such as the Cyril and Methodius Route, and the further enhancement of the Danube's and shipping's tourism importance could all play a role. Together, these could propel the twin cities' tourism to a truly international level, giving them a symbolic reputation, a 'brand,' that would transcend the ethnic divides of the twentieth century.

As data collection is difficult an important task is to **pool information** concerning the cross-border area and its destinations. **Operating a platform** via which tourist organisations, destinations and businesses share information can contribute to effective planning. To keep the integrity, the uniqueness of the local cultures and ensure sustainable local development, **citizens should have the opportunity to channel their ideas and opinions** related to the tourism development of the area as well through consultation and/or joining the platform of developers.

Under the umbrella of the strategy, local actors with national support could launch a number of projects aimed at strengthening cohesion. **Launching cultural routes** similar to the Cyril and Methodius Route, which include cultural heritage sites in both cities through visits to historic sites, as well as providing the necessary infrastructure through **further developing city interconnectivity**, will aid tourist movement in and across the region, contributing to sustainable growth. **Creating common cross-border products and carrying out common marketing campaigns, coordinating tours** throughout the area visiting heritage sites in both cities would further enhance the visibility of the area on an international level eg. the memories of Jókai and Lehár have huge potential: creating common products, common larger scale events with government support related Jókai and Lehár. **The integration of the Danube** into tourism is an important objective on both sides and could further strengthen interconnectivity.

The strategy should also be aimed at facilitating the **development of tourism infrastructure ensuring modern accommodation and catering services** in order for tourists to stay longer than one day within the region. The aim is to provide high quality, safe and affordable tourist services, as well as providing a welcoming environment for visitors. In addition, actors in both cities have to **plan and coordinate their efforts** to ensure that the developments complement each other via communicating the cross-border platform mentioned before.

Addressing issues raised by tourists is important as well, especially the **misinterpretation and stereotyping** found during the tourist surveys conducted. **Educational programs and/or educational trails focusing on shared values** could generate discussion and help to address stereotypes. A joint image and communication, and having marketing materials — such as posters, advertisements and **signs of streets, destinations and tourism infrastructure – available in multiple languages** can solve issues related to missing information.



Project Identity

Project name	Social and innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation (SPOT)
Coordinator	Prof. Milada Šťastná, Ph.D. Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic milada.stastna@mendelu.cz
Consortium	Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest, Romania Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development, Dresden, Germany CERS Institute for Regional Studies, Győr, Hungary Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, Netherlands Tallinn University, Estonia Karl Franzens University of Graz, Austria University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom University of the Aegean, Mitiline, Greece University of Barcelona, Spain University of Verona, Italy University of Wrocław, Poland Univerzity of Ljubljana, Slovenia Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia
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Website and social networks	www.SPOTprojectH2020.eu fb: @SPOTprojectH2020 twitter: @H2020Spo
For more information	Contact – Dissemination team: spotprojecth2020@gmail.com

