

Radicalism and moderation at the edges of the nation Attitudes to fences and re-bordering in Hungary

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Abstract: The radicalization of national conservatism in Hungary, under the leadership of prime minister Viktor Orban, is well documented. Less known, at least internationally, is what has happened at the sub-national level. This paper focuses on borderlands as one particular local domain, where national, regional and local interests and ideologies intersect and interact with global geo-political developments. In 2015, in the midst and aftermath of the so-called “refugee crisis”, Hungary erected a fence – sometimes referred to as a wall – along the entire length of its border to Serbia. It also reinforced physical infrastructure and/or instated other measures of protection at the borders to Croatia and Romania, both of which are fellow members of the European Union. In 2020, like many other European countries, the government emphasized border closings as one of the most prominent measures against Covid-19.

These processes of *re-bordering* and *re-boundarization* took place within borderland spaces rich in histories of territorial disputes and population movements. However, under the impact of democratic transition, European integration and de-escalation of the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s and 2000s, these borderlands have been characterized by institutionalization of cross-border cooperation and ambitious attempts at joint policy formation at the local level. European Union policymakers expected, as did many scholars in the field of borderland studies, that the development towards more permeable borders and more cooperation would continue. It was also assumed that institutions of cooperation would be main proponents in this endeavor. The paper questions this assumption by asking how cross-border cooperation institutions and other local actors in the borderlands have reacted to policies of re-bordering since 2015. The paper can thus establish whether there are differences in attitudes towards radical nationalism between the country’s core and (border-close) ‘peripheries’.

1. Introduction

The radicalization of national conservatism in Hungary, under the leadership of prime minister Viktor Orbán, is well documented to the extent that it has become a poster child for the term ‘democratic backsliding’ (Sitter and Bakke 2019; Greskovits 2015; Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Batory and Svensson 2015), which refers to increasing deficits in the institutional structure of democracy. Scholars have also noted the peculiar development of the party Fidesz, which radicalized after coming into power in 2010¹ and on many policy positions overtook the place of the party Jobbik as the far-most right-wing party. The two parties have competed when it comes to issues like resisting immigration and playing on national sentiments (see for instance Enyedi 2016).

Harsh border policies have been an important part of this radicalization, manifested by the erection of a fence in 2015 and an early border closure during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2015 refugees entered Hungary mainly from Serbia in the pursuit of access to their preferred “Western” destination through Austria. The Hungarian government responded with increasingly hostile rhetoric and policy measures, seeking to prevent both entry and further movement towards Austria without registration. Images of refugees “stranded” at the Budapest Keleti railway station became worldwide news and broadly criticized, while the Hungarian government claimed their obligations to fulfil European agreements to protect external borders. The erection of a border fence was a part of these policy measures, initially reported in international media as a “wall”, generating connotations to both the Iron Wall and discussions in the United States about the ‘wall’ to Mexico (Svensson, Cartwright and Balogh 2017). The situation in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic was in many ways different. This time the new border measures were not erected to keep unwanted populations from “far away” out, but strict entry rules by both Hungary and its surrounding neighbours made cross-border crossing initially more or less impossible.

The strict border policy has become the subject of international attention, albeit more in the form of media coverage than scholarly research. While the fence has become a political symbol as much as a functioning policy and interpreted as such by international scholars (Cantat and Rajaram 2018; Cantat 2020), international scholarship has largely neglected the actual politics

¹ Fidesz also governed Hungary in the period 1998-2002, but it was upon the return after eight years in opposition and with a 2/3 parliamentary majority that it could start significantly changing the country. Fidesz has subsequently won elections in 2014 and 2018.

at play at sub-national level around these issues. This paper focuses on borderlands as one particular local domain, where national, regional and local interests and ideologies intersect and interact with global geo-political developments.

The paper starts with a contextualization of the national political landscape, as interpreted by key internationally recognized scholars. This is followed by a brief overview of available scholarship on parallel sub-national development. The paper proceeds to situate this in relation to the study of borderlands, arguing that this strand of scholarship has largely missed to document challenges to ‘de-bordering’ narratives (Blatter 2001) and also that it often neglects formal power in the form of party politics. The research question that is posed is an empirical one: do institutional actors and citizens in the regions close to the borders embrace the radicalization of national conservatism and its focus on ‘re-bordering’.² An empirical chapter covers this from two perspectives: voting behavior and attitudes among cross-border cooperation organizations. The conclusion sums up the findings and suggests an agenda for further research.

2. National-level politics of radicalization and challenges to democracy

The political history of Hungary – a landlocked country of ten million inhabitants in continental Europe – contains political expressions of most standard ideologies. However, the combined influence of (a) elevation under Habsburgian rule (the Austrian-Hungarian double-monarchy), (b) the loss of 2/3 of its territory after WWI through the Trianon peace agreement, (c) the experience of both allegiance with Germany and occupation by the same country during WWII, and (d) the submission to communism and Soviet dominion until 1990, was that of ensuring that nationalism would to some extent influence all political movements. After 1990, many external observers wondered in what form the rightwing spectrum would work with nationalism and with what consequences. In the 1990s the first government under József Antal (1990-1994) was conservative but used nationalist rhetoric, even though most saw the Smallholder party under István Csurka as the true “radical right”. Rather soon after the implosion of the Smallholder party, it was followed by the creation and growth of the party “Jobbik” (meaning

² The usability of these concepts can be seen by the recent uptake by European studies scholars, which have previously had little intersection with border studies (Schimmelfennig 2021; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021).

both right and better) which took over as the radical right party of Hungary. In the meantime, Fidesz, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, abandoned its liberal roots from the late 1980s and went in a steady direction towards more conservative values, seen already during its time in power 1998-2002, but becoming clearer after again winning elections in 2010. Many, however, continued to see the party as conservative-right and Jobbik as radical-right, even though Jobbik gradually moderated its policy positions whereas those of Fidesz became more radical. This became clear during the so called “refugee crisis” of 2015, when Fidesz was among the first to take some strong rhetorical and real measures against refugees.

As with many of the newer member states of the European Union³, Hungary had had very little experience of receiving asylum requests and dealing with refugees up to that point. In 2013, for example, there were less than 1,000 people who asked for refugee status in Hungary, and even then, the majority of people processed in the asylum system absconded before any decision was made. In terms of administrative arrangements, there were very few dedicated facilities to house asylum seekers. For example, there was only one facility in the country that could be an official reception center for minors, despite the steady rise in number of unaccompanied minors coming to Europe. In early 2015, Hungary saw the first large scale wave of migrants, mainly travelling from nearby Kosovo and partly explained by an ongoing visa liberalization process with the European Union. Almost all applicants were rejected and returned home, but from this point Hungarian media began to monitor the issue on a more or less regular basis.

With the first arrivals of significant numbers of refugees and migrants from the Middle East (in particular Syria) and South-Central Asia (mostly Afghanistan and Pakistan) in the spring, things started to change dramatically. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, the FIDESZ government launched a so-called ‘national consultation on immigration and terrorism’. As its name suggested, the “consultation” excluded the issue of refugees or indeed, emigration, a phenomenon that has characterized Hungary for a long time. The first measure was a survey to every households containing very loaded and biased questions, for example, ‘Do you agree with the Hungarian government that instead of supporting migrants, it is rather Hungarian families and Hungarian future children that need support?’ Available responses were ‘Fully agree’, ‘partly agree’, or ‘not agree’, meaning that two out of three possible answers were predetermined as support for government position. Over 1 million questionnaires were returned,

³ This and the following two paragraphs were previously used in the CEU Center for Policy Studies working paper series, see Svensson, Cartwright and Balogh 2017.

with 90% expressing criticism of immigrants. A nationwide poster campaign showed the government's emerging policy on migration and refugees.

While a small number of posters were defaced, according to many opinion polls, the majority of Hungarians – to whom immigration was most likely a non-issue until very recently – subscribed to the government's line. The message towards potential immigrants and refugees was very simple: 'Don't come here!' In reality, the vast majority of migrants did not want to stay in the country, but simply to travel through Hungary in order to get to Germany and Scandinavia.

The literature contains multiple accounts and explanations for the development of Fidesz (Greskovits 2015) and the country in a direction of which much of the surrounding world has been critical. Fidesz has been described as “the earliest example of a radicalising centre-right party that in less than a decade transformed a liberal democratic into a competitive authoritarian regime within the European Union (EU)” (Greskovits 2020: 247), as a party that used participatory governance techniques as a populist tool for its own purposes (Batory and Svensson 2019) and how it captured state institutions (Dimitrova 2018; Bankuti, Halmai and Scheppele 2012; Halmai 2011). A comparison of Fidesz and Jobbik showed the type of paternalist populism that characterizes both (Enyedi 2016), and the term *democratic backsliding* has been used as an overall concept to denote this (Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Sitter and Bakke 2019).

3. Sub-national radicalization and challenges to democracy

It is often pointed out that the development in Hungary is part of a global backsliding trend, where the quality of democracy has decreased in many countries and some countries have been labelled hybrid regimes rather than full democracies. The assessments of Freedom House (2021) and the Quality of Democracy monitoring project at the University of Gothenburg are among the more well-known. There are obvious challenges to maintaining or building local democratic governance structures in backsliding democracies, hybrid regimes or (near) authoritarian regimes. The sub-national dimension of these has not received the same amount of attention though. For instance, the journal *Local Government Studies* published nothing with relation to this in the years 2019-2021. This mirrors the general tendencies for nation-bias and national methodologies in political science.

What has been done is recent and largely been on regional variation, where initial studies show that differences within countries may be larger than between countries (e.g., Charron and Lapuente, 2013; Charron, Lapuente, & Rothstein, 2018). Two recent articles in *Governance* have sought to advance this agenda by going more local. Erlingsson and Wallmann Lundåsen argues that more research is needed on municipal variation in quality of argument and brings forward a study on institutional quality and trust based on data from Sweden (2021). Interestingly, for the purpose of this paper, the other paper pursues an inquiry into Hungarian local democracy under the Orban regime. The University of California/Berkely-based researchers Laura Jakli and Matthew Stenberg combined a document analysis of the organizational and operational rules that govern Hungarian city councils with interviews with local elites. They found that many changes have been made at the local level that reduce the opportunities for opposition parties to partake equally in the public sphere. They also analyze electoral data to demonstrate that “left left-leaning national parties consider so few seats contestable that they invest in running candidates at significantly lower rates than they did in the mid-2000s” and that Fidesz has increased the percentage of mayoral races it contests from 57% in 2002 to over 80% in 2010 and 2014. Even more strikingly, their rate of winning these races has increased from 32.7% in 2002 to 69.5% in 2014 (Jakli and Stenberg 2021: 318). They argue that understanding the subnational level is crucial to understanding how illiberal and/or hybrid regimes such as Hungary has kept oppositional activity and a functioning viable opposition option at bay. In their view, incremental subnational feedback loops of illiberalism prop up the regimes. “Illiberal leaders place numerous, systematic subnational constraints on local democratic bodies and institutions to protect against the emergence of local political resilience.” (Jakli and Stenberg 2021: 316)

Given the scarcity of scholarship on the sub-national level, it is not surprising that democratic backsliding of the governance in borderlands is hitherto an un-examined topic. While the international borderlands studies community has grown in size over the past half-century, it has not reached mainstream social science, especially not in the political science discipline. That is a pity, since borderlands constitute interesting sites of differential governance dynamics and with heavy normative connotations, in Europe especially linked to the European integration project. Before returning to Hungary, the next section provides an overview of this literature and situates the paper’s research question in relation to this literature.

4. Borders, borderlands and cross-border cooperation

Since local sub-national cross-border cooperation stopped being framed or regulated as 'illicit' diplomacy, or para-diplomacy, conducted by "subversive" subnational actors (Aldecoa & Keating 1999), it has been seen as positive for regional development and European integration. Policymakers assumed that increased flows between countries in crossborder areas would improve relations and lead to higher trust among citizens. Residents of border regions have also sometimes been seen as special, in that they often are located at a nation's peripheries but at the same time have access to resources within another country. They have sometimes therefore implicitly been expected to be more open-minded and/or be boundary-spanners who transcend national patterns of movement and thinking. Notably, as recently shown by Decoville and Durand (2019) this is not always the case. Using Eurobarometer survey data on trust, they demonstrated that cross-border regions with much exchange do not necessarily show a higher level of mutual social trust, and that there is not always reciprocity with regard to mutual trust. While there is research on the everyday practices of borderlanders and how they capitalize on the borders in various ways, the political behavior of borderlanders has not been examined and we do not know if there are specific patterns in political attitudes. This article seeks to make a small contribute to that by examining the political behavior of residents in Hungarian borderlands.

Institutionalized cross-border cooperation between local governments and regions in European borderlands, sometimes including civil or economic actors, often referred to as 'Euroregions' (Svensson 2013), can be seen as networks of actors (mainly local or regional governments), and as policy actors in their own right, existing within a broader network of other organizational players relevant to policy-decisions taken in the cross-border landscape. This is a view of Euroregions fitting in with the multi-level governance view of Europe (Marks 1993:392, 402-40; Hooghe and Marks 2001) as well as on the emphasis on the role of policy networks in policymaking (Börzel, 1998:254; Christopoulos, 2006:786; Lynn, 2012). For the study of Euroregions, the distinction between two types of multiple-level arrangements, type 1 and Type 2 (Hooghe and Marks, 2003), is especially relevant. The former "describes system-wide governing arrangements in which the dispersion of authority is restricted to a limited number of clearly defined, non-overlapping jurisdictions at a limited number of territorial levels, each of which has responsibility for a 'bundle' of functions. By contrast, Type II describes governing arrangements in which the jurisdiction of authority is task-specific, where jurisdictions operate

at numerous territorial levels and may be overlapping” (Bache, 2012:630). The complex governance in borderlands is mostly referred to as Type 2 (e.g., Medeiros, 2020:151).

The managers, mayors and regional politicians that usually lead and carry out the activities of Euroregions have worked within a context that emphasized borders as something that creates obstacles for the development of their cross-border regions. There have been strong norms around working towards opening up borders by making their physical manifestations disappear as well as tearing down the “mental” borders of citizens in borderlands by various “people-to-people” and “bridge-building” activities. At the same time, in practice, the European integration project have at least since the 1980s, been characterized by the pursuit of parallel processes of *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* (Varwick & Lang, 2007; Dimitrova, 2008; Celata, et al 2017), signalling softening and hardening borders, respectively. While obstacles for mobility across internal borders have been removed, external borders have been fortified, leading to the expression of ‘Fortress Europe’. In paradoxical, perhaps even schizophrenic, ways the European Union has utilized the same programs, e.g., the European Neighbourhood Policy, to pay for both stronger physical manifestations of external borders, i.e. border control infrastructure, and more social and human contacts across those same fortified borders (Demidov & Svensson, 2013). is new (or re-appearing) in more recent years is how this tension has intensified also at internal borders, as was visible during and after the 2015 refugee situation, which led to an unprecedented re-introduction of controls at internal Schengen borders (see section 4).

This is likely to have met many actors of local cross-border cooperation unprepared. Often, they are technocrats or local pragmatic politicians who are used to a bureaucracy steeped in norms related to de-bordering. How the local actors, active at areas which symbolize European integration, acted and act upon this tension is important for the way it illustrates both the potential and pitfalls of local cross-border governance mechanisms. Linked with this are issues of legitimacy of the both the local and overall democratic systems. As argued by Ulrich (2020:171), even the comprehensive Type 2 approach to multi-level governments often neglect the *normative-ontological* perspective of governance that emphasize the participation of civil society and citizens in the whole area of the borderlands (Ulrich, 2020:171). On the other hand, to achieve results Euroregions must act within significant amounts of hierarchical jurisdiction within the multi-level governance frameworks, more akin to Type 1, since they have only very limited decision-making powers of their own. Their scope of action is therefore limited.

To understand both the behaviour and attitudes of cross-border organizations and their representatives, their options can be linked to the concepts of re-bordering, de-bordering and – as suggested by Durrand and Perin, *a-bordering*. The latter captures the continuity of borders, especially in people’s representation, a permanence in time of the border, which makes local actors ambivalent to whether cross-border integration is visioned as happening with or without the border (Durand and Perin, 2019:327). Thus, cross-border organizations and their representatives may:

- (1) support the re-bordering measures imposed by national governments;
- (2) advocate for de-bordering by resisting those measures through vocal opposition and various forms of policy action;
- (3) take an a-bordering perspective, whereby they accept the border as a constant imposed from “above”, and view what the national government decides with relation to the border as something that cannot be changed and act accordingly.

With respect to Hungarian border, this article asks a question that may seem simple one of descriptive inference (King, Kohaene and Verba, 1994): which one of these alternatives were chosen? If European and Nordic adherence to the values of open borders as a principle was a driving force and the actors are free to speak out without risking repercussions, the analysis of documents and interviews should demonstrate that they resist through voicing dissent. However, if other values are at the fore, or they are situated in non-permissive or hard hierarchical governance systems, they might accept or align with the national policy. Which action route to take may partly depend on the type of border (external/internal to Schengen or the EU) or the type of policy driving the situation leading to the border restrictions or closures.

5. Hungarian borderlanders as advocates of openness or radicalization? Does closeness to borders contribute to radicalization and/or support for borders?

Hungary’s current borders stems from the peace treaties after WWI, but the names and constructions of its neighbours have changed multiple times and significantly since then. After the Balkan wars in the 1990s again changed the maps of the region, the country in the early 21st century borders seven countries, out of which four are members of the European Union and

Schengen (Slovakia, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia, one is an EU member but not Schengen member (Romania), one is a candidate country (Serbia) and one a European neighbourhood partner (Ukraine).

Sub-national actors have been very active in creating various cross-border cooperation structures across these borders, with Hungarian-speakers and non-Hungarian speakers “on the other side”. European instruments that have been created to promote and facilitate cross-border cooperation has been popular, even though the norms surrounding them have been reinterpreted in the local context (Svensson 2018). In 2020, Hungarian local governments and regions took part in 24 out of the 72 European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation that have to date been founded, which was the highest number among member states, followed by France (Svensson and Ocskay 2015; Durand and Decoville 2020: 110).

Many of those operated on the long border with Slovakia, but there are organizations at all seven borders, including several on the contentious southern borders towards Romania, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. Hungary’s entire southern border represents a complex recent past including issues of ethnic minorities and the disruption caused by the Balkan wars in the 1990s. Today Hungary’s cross-border organizations in the south include actors from one non-EU country (Serbia) and three EU countries, but only one of these EU countries is a Schengen country (Slovenia). These borders, especially towards Serbia, was in center during the so called “refugee crisis” in 2015, when it became the penultimate gateway before reaching western European Union countries. In 2020, on the other hand, border measures were less uni-directional, designed to keep the domestic population in and other people out. For those involved in cross-border cooperation this came as a shock, since daily passing was impossible. A complicating factor is that some have relatives and family on the other side, since there is are sizable Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries.

The cross-border cooperation organizations are often territorially overlapping, since some focus on the local and others on the regional level, and one municipality may also be a member of more than one organization. The DKMT Euroregion was founded in the 1990s as were the seeds for other cooperation organizations, even if they formalized only later, such as the BTC EGTC at the Hungarian-Serbian-Romanian border, the Mura EGTC at the Hungarian-Croat Border and the Muraba EGTC covering Hungarian, Croat and Slovene territory (Svensson and Ocskay, 2015; Svensson, 2015).

The following two sections asks the question whether borderlands indeed tend to embrace openness and de-bordering policies, or if they may indeed be hotbeds for radical right attitudes to border as protection or as something that should be open mainly for those of similar ethnic affinity. We do this by first looking at voting data from the most recent elections, and then to qualitative case studies of organizations working on cross-border cooperation.

5.1. Attitudes at the border as measured by voting patterns

Hungary has a mixed voting system for a one-chamber parliament, where about half of the seats are awarded through a first-past-the-post majority system and about half through proportional party list systems. The share allocated through first-past-the post system was increased before the 2014 election, which is to the advantage of the largest party. The last parliamentary elections in Hungary were held in 2018, and the last local government elections were held in 2019. In the 2018 elections Fidesz won 133 out of the 199 seats in parliament (67%). Jobbik became the second largest party with 26 seats (13%).⁴ In the 2019 election, Fidesz won most off the races, but lost Budapest and many of Budapest’s districts. Since Fidesz won most places, regardless of whether close to a border or not, any potential effect of being border-close would be small. We first look at the major towns, and the result there, divided into border close (max 30 km) and not-border close towns.

Table 1a. Voting in border towns with county status, mayor elections 2019

Name of town	Location	Party of the winning mayor
Bekescsaba	South-east Hungary, close to Romanian border	Opposition coalition
Gyor	North-west Hungary, close to Slovak and Austrian border,	Fidesz-KDNP
Nagykanizsa	Southern Hungary, close to Croatian border	Fidesz-KDNP
Salgotarjan	Northern Hungary, close to Slovak border	Opposition coalition
Sopron	Western Hungary, close to Austrian border	Fidesz-KDNP
Szombathely	Western Hungary, close to Austrian border	Opposition coalition
Szeged	Southern Hungary, close to Serbian border	Opposition coalition
Esztergom*	Northern Hungary, close to Slovak border	Fidesz-KDNP
Komarom*	Northern Hungary, close to Slovak border	Fidesz-KDNP

*Does not have county seat status but included due to size and location directly at border crossing.

Table 1b. Voting in towns with county status not located at the border, mayor elections 2019

Name of town	Party of the winning mayor
Debrecen*	Fidesz-KDNP
Dunaujvaros	Opposition association
Eger	Opposition association

⁴ All numbers in this section are taken from the website of the National Election Office (www.valasztas.hu), retrieved March-April 2021.

Erd	Opposition coalition
Hodmezovaroshely	Opposition association
Kaposvar	Fidesz-KDNP
Keckkemet	Fidesz-KDNP
Miskolc*	Opposition coalition
Nyiregyhaza	Fidesz-KDNP
Pecs	Opposition association
Szekesfehervar	Fidesz
Szekszard	Fidesz-KDNP
Szolnok	Fidesz-KDNP
Tatabanya*	Opposition coalition
Vezprem	Fidesz-KDNP
Zalaegerszeg	Fidesz-KDNP

*Relatively close to border crossing, 30-50 km

In the border-close towns Fidesz won 5 out of 9 mayor elections, and in the non-border close towns 9 out of 16, i.e., more or less equal shares. Definitely there does not seem to be a border effect as measured by these numbers. However, due to the sheer complexity of local politics and the size of these towns, there are probably so many parameters that matter, that it would be more useful to what is going on directly at the border. We therefore look at the voting districts and separate those that are located at a border from those that are further from the border within the same region.

Table 2a. Voting districts located at border: winner of the mandate and second place (shares of votes)

Voting district	Winner of single mandate	Vote share %	Second place	Vote share %
Somogyi 2	Fidesz	52	Jobbik	38
Bacskiskun 5	Fidesz	56	Jobbik	33
Csongrad 1	MSP par beszed	44	Fidesz	36
Csongrad 2	Fidesz	45	MSP par beszed	35
Csongrad 4	Fidesz	52	Jobbik	37
Bekes 3	Fidesz	50	Jobbik	23
Bekes 4	Fidesz	43	Jobbik	39
hajdú-Bihar 3	Fidesz	58	Jobbik	25
Hajdú-Bihar 4	Fidesz	55	Jobbik	30
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 4	Fidesz	60	Jobbik	27
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 5	Fidesz	59	Jobbik	33
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 6	Fidesz	57	Jobbik	20
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 3	Fidesz	48	Jobbik	37
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 4	Fidesz	45	Jobbik	30
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 5	Fidesz	49	Jobbik	29

Zala 1	Fidesz	53	Jobbik	22
Zala 3	Fidesz	49	Jobbik	35

Table 2b Voting districts with one district separation from the border: winner of the mandate and second place (shares of votes)

Voting district	Winner of single mandate	Vote share %	Second place	Vote share %
Somogyi 1	Fidesz	43	Jobbik	31
Somogyi 3	Fidesz	52	Jobbik	37
Somogy 4	Fidesz	51	Parbeszed MSZP	25
Bacs-Kiskun 1	Fidesz	54	Jobbik	24
Bacs-Kiskun 2	Fidesz	53	Jobbik	20
Bacs-Kiskun 3	Fidesz	53	Jobbik	30
Bacs-Kiskun 4	Fidesz	60	Jobbik	21
Csongrad 3	Fidesz	50	Jobbik	38
Bekes 1	Fidesz	45	Jobbik	33
Bekes 2	Fidesz	52	Jobbik	29
Hajdu-Bihar 1	Fidesz	47	MSZP par beszed	28
Hajdu-Bihar 2	Fidesz	49	Jobbik	25
Hajdu-Bihar 5	Fidesz	52	Jobbik	30
Hajdu-Bihar 6	Fidesz	50	Jobbik	28
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 1	Fidesz	40	MSZP parbeszed	32
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 2	Fidesz	48	Jobbik	35
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg 3	Fidesz	62	Jobbik	27
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 1	Fidesz	39	Jobbik	29
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 2	Fidesz	38	MSZP parbeszed	29
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 6	Fidesz	49	Jobbik	32
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén 7	Fidesz	55	Jobbik	32
Zala 2	Fidesz	56	Jobbik	28

Again, no immediate patterns emerge, even though in Hajdu-Bihar one could possibly say that the support for both right-wing parties is stronger at the border, and notably, only one second place went to a non-right party in the elections. However, the way voting districts are drawn, they sometimes include territory quite far from the border so in an effort to look what happens directly at the border, the following table looks at voting results at small settlements located at the border at a place where there is *a border crossing*. This follows the logic that although a lot of settlements are located at borders, many of them are located next to a river or field without crossing opportunity. This is manageable since several of the borders have relatively few

crossing points. There are for instance only 4 crossings at the Hungarian-Ukrainian border, and 3 each to Serbia and Croatia, respectively. The number of crossings to the other countries are higher, but still limited, for instance 12 to Romania, and 18 to Slovakia.

Table 3. Voting in 2018 parliamentary elections, votes on single mandates

Name of settlement and number of voting the place (e.g. school, library)	Bordering	Winner of single mandate	Vote share %	Second place	Vote share %
Letenye 1	Croatia	Fidesz	50	Jobbik	33
Letenye 2	Croatia	Fidesz	49	Jobbik	38
Letenye 3	Croatia	Jobbik	43	Fidesz	42
Letenye 4	Croatia	Fidesz	56	Jobbik	38
Letenye 5	Croatia	Fidesz	68	Jobbik	25
Tótszerdahely 1.	Croatia	Fidesz	59	Jobbik	29
Tótszerdahely 2	Croatia	Fidesz	54	Jobbik	31
Barcs 1	Croatia	Jobbik	52	Fidesz	37
Barcs 2	Croatia	Jobbik	50	Fidesz	37
Barcs 3	Croatia	Jobbik	51	Fidesz	34
Barcs 4	Croatia	Fidesz	60	Jobbik	31
Barcs 5	Croatia	Fidesz	54	Jobbik	35
Barcs 6	Croatia	Jobbik	49	FIDESZ	37
Barcs 7	Croatia	Jobbik	47	Fidesz	45
Barcs 8	Croatia	Jobbik	47	Fidesz	40
Barcs 9	Croatia	Jobbik	57	Fidesz	34
Udvar 1	Croatia	Fidesz	78	Jobbik	9
Asotthalom 1	Serbia	Fidesz	47	Jobbik	34
Asotthalom 2	Serbia	Fidesz	48	Jobbik	29
Asotthalom 3	Serbia	Fidesz	51	Jobbik	28
Asotthalom 4	Serbia	Fidesz	60	Jobbik	31
Asotthalom 5	Serbia	Fidesz	62	Jobbik	22
Tompa 1	Serbia	Fidesz	63	Jobbik	27
Tompa 2	Serbia	Fidesz	57	Jobbik	34
Tompa 3	Serbia	Fidesz	54	Jobbik	34
Tompa 4	Serbia	Fidesz	58	Jobbik	31
Tompa 5	Serbia	Fidesz	68	Jobbik	22
Röszke 1	Serbia	Fidesz	57	MSZP/Parbeszed	20
Röszke 2	Serbia	Fidesz	58	MSZP/Parbeszed	20
Röszke 3	Serbia	Fidesz	62	MSZP/Parbeszed	21
Hercegszántó 1	Serbia	Fidesz	65	Jobbik	15
Hercegszántó 2	Serbia	Fidesz	62	Jobbik	20
Letkes	Slovakia	Fidesz	59	Jobbik	29
Barabás	Ukraine	Fidesz	66	Jobbik	23

Beregsurány	Ukraine	Fidesz	80	Jobbik	12
Tiszabecs	Ukraine	Fidesz	67	Jobbik	24
Záhony 1	Ukraine	Jobbik	48	Fidesz	32
Záhony 2	Ukraine	Jobbik	41	Fidesz	40
Záhony 3	Ukraine	Jobbik	41	Fidesz	35
Záhony 4	Ukraine	Jobbik	42	Fidesz	34

The results in the table are all the single mandate votes, but a sample of results were cross-validated against party list, showing that voters who voted for Fidesz or Jobbik tended to cast to vote for the same party in both the single mandate and the party list.

The tables display very strong performances of either Fidesz or Jobbik, performances that go beyond their national results. Of course, this may be due to other factors than border closeness, and a regression analysis of a larger sample, including similar demographic settlements (thereby controlling for other factors). That said, the results are clear enough to demonstrate that there is definitely not a “benign” effect of being border close, in that border residents would be more prone to vote for parties having an open rhetoric. Instead, closeness to the border might sharpen preexisting tendencies to vote for a right-radical party.

5.2. Attitudes at the border as indicated by cross-border cooperation organizations

The author of the present paper has followed cross-border cooperation organizations since 2008 (e.g., Medve-Balint and Svensson 2012; Medve-Balint and Svensson 2013; Demidov and Svensson 2013, Svensson 2013; Svensson 2015; Ocskay and Svensson 2015; Svensson 2018). The research has demonstrated that cross-border cooperation is driven both by instrumental motivations clustering around expectations of access to European Union funds and by normative incentives, especially linked to the value placed on inter-ethnic cooperation. However, during most of this period, the attachment to a belief that Hungary moves towards removed, reduced or more porous borders was not questioned, neither by the researcher nor by the research objects. In 2020, the author again carried qualitative interviews with eight representatives of cross-border cooperation representatives, mainly at the southern borders and many of whom had been interviewed before. The purpose of the interviews was to assess the reactions to the rebordering tendencies after 2015, as well as take a snapshot of reactions to the ongoing Covid19 pandemic.

The interviews revealed little in terms of explicit support for fences, walls, controls, restrictions or other policy measures associated with hardening borders. Nonetheless, when analysing the

material, some such sentiments were coded. For instance, when asked about the consequences of the fence, one administrator of a cross-border cooperation organization described the fence as something generally positive.

People definitely think that [the fence] is a good thing, and I also believe that we got used that it is there. In the last couple of months, you could once again see that the migrants are trying to cross here at this section of the border, so this [the fence] was without doubt a necessary thing. It provides protection and safety for us here in the direct vicinity of the border. (Administrator, cross-border cooperation organization, 2020.03.05)

According to the administrator at another border, the fence has been irrelevant from a cross-border cooperation point of view; at the same time the interviewee indirectly indicated support for policies that seek to curb irregular migration through references to the way refugees in 2015 and afterwards took routes that included walking on agricultural lands.

The migration situation [and the fence] did not mean anything at all for us, because you can cross the border normally at any time. [Did the organization have any opinion about the fence when it was built?] Well, what opinion do you mean it should have had? Speaking of which, my own opinion is that for instance when I go abroad, I always go through the border crossing point and not on the corn fields, so I don't get the problem, people are free to cross the border, but at the border crossing points. When people and trucks go to, for instance Austria, they don't use to do that across the fields. (Manager, cross-border cooperation, 2020.03.09)

Such support was also expressed by a local politician, active in both a cross-border cooperation and municipal political work.

When it comes to migration, the European Union is deaf. It was quite interesting when 5,000 migrants crossed [name of town] every day and we sent a letter [in the name of the town] to the European Commission that something has to be done [...] that this we will not be able to bear this much longer. You could not have a normal life. We did not get any answer.” (Municipal politician and representative of a cross-border cooperation organization, 2020.03.05)

Notably, none of the interviewees from cross-border cooperation indicated that they saw any irony or paradox in being, so to speak, for and against borders at the same time. The only interview where such a perspective came up was with an expert and consultant in cross-border cooperation

It is a double faceted situation. The municipalities who are the members of the (cross-border cooperation organizations) that are very massively affected by the mass migration. They were in the middle of flow of people, which caused a lot of tensions. You know. There is a mayor at a local government

who has to protect the ownership of the population living in the municipality. It is in his competence, and he has to do something, and at the same time these mayors are representatives in the cross-border structure, where borders should be opened up. (Cross-border cooperation expert, 2020.03.02)

While these instances of support could be found in the analysis of the transcripts of interviews at the south Hungarian border, it should be noted it was a marginal phenomenon, and the dominant response mode of cross-border organizations to re-bordering at the German-Austrian and the southern Hungarian borders was that of *acceptance*. Restrictions were conveyed as something that is imposed from above and had to be dealt with more or less as given. According to an expert with more than 20 years' experience of cross-border cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, Euroregions see this is national-level competence.

It is an absurd situation. But I think they managed to solve it quite well. They do not deal with national level issues. (Cross-border cooperation expert and consultant, Hungary, 2020.03.03)

Therefore, the Euroregions accepted the measures as important ones to protect against unwanted mobility, i.e., irregular migration, and a virus spreading, i.e., Covid-19. At the same time, they were keen to maintain or enhance mobility of their own citizens within the confinements of harder borders, such as through opening more border crossing points with longer opening hours or to allow for exceptions based on local conditions (e.g., commuters, farming). Several interviewees expressed that “this is a national issue”, indicating that local actors did not think that they had a mandate to speak out against harder borders as such.

Interviewer: Did the [cross-border organization] have any opinion on the fence?

No, the fence was never a topic for discussion. Absolutely not officially, but in anyhow it did not even come up. (Manager, cross-border cooperation, 2020.03.09)

What they could do was to try to achieve exemptions for certain groups or activities. For instance, they could contact the department at the foreign ministry which usually deal with crossborder organizations to signal the local problems and expect that department to take their issues further. Another issue concerned farmers who worked land on both side of the borders, which also needed an exemption. Cross-border cooperation also highlighted solidarity and humanitarian efforts across the border, such as the distribution of Hungarian medical supply to the Romania side.

6. Conclusion

The motivation to write the present paper was based on two gaps in current scholarship. First, the burgeoning literature that attempts to explain democratic backsliding in the world in general, and in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, has largely stayed at the national level. Secondly, there is a rich literature on various governance processes being played out at a *sub-national and cross-national* level in European borderlands, and although this literature has been concerned with how to assess the nature of these processes in relation to representative democracy, it has not engaged with mainstream literature on democratic institutions (e.g., political parties) and has not taken up current challenges to democracy.

This paper represented an attempt to help fill these gaps with a case study of Hungary, which offers rich empirics in the intersection of democratic backsliding, right-wing movements and borderlands. It reviewed what existing literature has found with relation to these phenomena, and then brought forward two sets of empirical data to probe into whether residents and actors at Hungary's borders tend to be in favor or against the right-wing narratives around the need to protect and construct borders. Using election data from 2018 and 2019, the paper showed that the difference between "border voters" and other voters appear small, but that there is definitely no tendency for borderlanders to be vote against harsh border rhetoric. Instead, voting patterns in settlements and towns that have border crossings seem to indicate that the ruling party Fidesz and the right-wing party Jobbik are even stronger than elsewhere in these places. However, larger statistical analysis probing for various control factors would be needed to further test this. The paper also analyzed a small sample of interviews carried out with representatives of cross-border organizations in 2021, which showed that these actors tended to either support the re-bordering measures imposed by national governments or to take an a-bordering perspective, whereby they accept the border as a constant imposed from "above", and view what the national government decides with relation to the border as something that cannot be changed and act accordingly. To conclude, the paper in general goes against expectations that increased exposure to another country within a borderland region would lead to support for opening borders or less nationalism.

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