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“Now We Don’t Belong Together Again”: Attitudes to Borders and Europe in Hungarian-language News Portals in Slovakia during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *This article analyzes media representations of “EUrope” (a portmanteau of Europe and the EU) in relation to border-related narratives in Slovakia’s two largest Hungarian-language news portals during the COVID-19 pandemic. It demonstrates that the most common theme in regional media regarding EUrope concerns EU-aided cross-border cooperation. Media narratives focused on borderland cooperation and collaboration, showing how local cross-border entities were lobbying higher administrative levels to ease border restrictions. The findings also confirm that borderland minorities were the key drivers of such collaboration (cf. Klatt 2020). Some Eurosceptic attitudes appeared in the media, which can be explained by the comparatively disadvantaged position of southern Slovakia within the EU and at the national level (cf. Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2024). At the same time, local frustration extended to Hungary, which was seen as having temporarily let down its ethnic kin by closing its borders. After the pandemic, some new-old Slovak-Hungarian quarrels re-emerged, but overall, open borders have partly helped resolve them.*

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Introduction

Media in the borderland regions of Europe have received surprisingly little scholarly attention. This article and the special section on internal European Union (EU) borderlands are our contribution to the field. Our focus is on the period of COVID-19-related border restrictions, which were a shock to the Schengen system. Analyses of the effects of the restrictions have hitherto focused on cross-border commuters (Wassenberg 2020; Novotný & Böhm 2022) or borderland residents more

generally (Opitowska 2021). However, media narratives produced by members of the affected communities in the borderlands have gained little attention.

Furthermore, while some studies have shed light on the links between minorities and the media (Caspi & Elias 2011; Bleich et al. 2015), these studies rarely focus on communities concentrated in borderlands. However, these regions often host autochthonous minorities

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that, in some cases, constitute local majorities and often serve as key drivers of cross-border connection (Klatt 2020; Malloy 2010; Balogh & Pete 2018; Benczi 2023). Nation-building policies can, however, clash with transborder community-building measures (Brunet-Jailly 2022, 4–5). Borders also create and maintain differences and identities that do not quickly, or even necessarily, vanish once the borders are open (Paasi 2005; McCall 2013). The border can therefore be characterized as Janus-faced, in that it can be a source of desire and fear at the same time (Houtum 2010).

Slovakia’s ethnic Hungarian minority is of particular interest not only as the EU’s second-largest autochthonous minority with a kinstate, but also because it is overwhelmingly concentrated along the Hungarian border. Accordingly, many members of the community have developed close ties with their kinstate, especially since Slovakia and Hungary joined the Schengen Area in 2007. The 2020 border closures constituted the single largest disruption to the ties to date. While the media remain a key platform connecting individuals and society, this was especially true in 2020, when in-person contact—especially across state borders—was restricted. The purpose here is to analyze media narratives that emerged in Hungarian-language Slovak news portals on the border between Slovakia and Hungary, as well as on “EUrope” (Europe and the EU), during the COVID-19-related border restrictions.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief introduction to the Slovak–Hungarian borderland. The next section describes Slovakia’s Hungarian-language mediascape and discusses the methodology used to select articles for this study. The following section discusses cross-border cooperation, Slovak–Hungarian relations, and Hungarian–Hungarian relations. The article concludes with a short statement and analysis of the border narratives as presented in the regional media.

The Borderland and Slovak–Hungarian Relations in a Nutshell

Despite the small size of both Slovakia and Hungary, their 679-kilometre border is one of the longest in the EU (and the longest in both countries) and has dozens of crossing points. The border itself is the result of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which was re-ratified in 1947 with only small modifications to the original treaty. According to the latest census in Slovakia, 422,065 individuals declared Hungarian as their primary ethnic identity, which is 7.8 percent of Slovakia’s population (SOSR 2021a). The number of Slovaks with Hungarian as a mother tongue was slightly higher—462,165 people—which translates to an 8.5 percent share (SOSR 2021b). While the absolute size and the proportional share of this group have gradually decreased in recent

decades, Hungarians continue to make up Slovakia’s largest ethnic minority. Prior to 2021, the community’s political representation was fragmented, but its major actors have since joined forces in a united party called Hungarian Alliance. While the Hungarian Alliance only had a 4.4 percent vote share in Slovakia’s 2023 general elections, the party is well represented locally and regionally.

Since Slovakia’s independence in 1993, the country’s Hungarian minority has been the most important binding (and sometimes dividing) element of Slovak–Hungarian ties. Slovak–Hungarian relations have experienced ups and downs, but they have improved overall in recent years. The improvements are largely due to the post-1998 democratization of Slovakia, as well as to efforts toward bilingualism at the municipal level.

In 2010, Hungary amended its citizenship law to allow a simplified naturalization process, primarily for ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries. Slovakia responded by immediately banning dual citizenship for its citizens. It was reported that a few Slovak Hungarians still held Hungarian passports, which at first led to considerable tensions between the two nations. The situation was later downplayed by then-Slovak President Čaputová (Pósa Homoly 2019). In 2004, both countries joined the EU, and in 2007, cross-border mobility within the Schengen Area intensified. Numerous crossing points and bridges were (re)built along the Danube and Ipeľ/Ipoly,¹ which together form the western half of the border. As the next section shows, however, increased integration has only partially affected the media landscape, and even that is not a linear process.

Slovakia’s Hungarian-language Mediascape and the Selection of Articles

Despite a potential readership of just under half a million people, a large variety of Hungarian-language media organizations operate in Slovakia (Renczes 2022). This might be surprising, given that Slovak Hungarians have been following Hungarian media from Hungary for decades. Nevertheless, recent surveys find that they are increasingly turning to domestic media, though it remains largely Hungarian-language (Beke 2023). At the same time, the reason Hungarian-language Slovak media have become more popular might be that some media organizations are openly and directly supported by Hungary’s government (Renczes 2022). The media supported by the Hungarian government tends to be more nationalist and conservative, while media with other sources of funding tend to be more diverse. Still, this analysis agrees with that of Renczes (2022), who concluded that Hungarian-language Slovak media are not as strongly influenced by their financial and political ties as the media in Hungary, where the media landscape is particularly polarized (Tóth et al. 2023).

Only a minority of news portals publicize data on their traffic and readership. A better indicator of their reach is the number of followers they have on Facebook, which remains the most popular social media outlet in the region. When the analysis was performed in April 2024, the outlet with the most followers was *Új Szó* with 94,000. *Új Szó* is the only media portal with a daily print edition, making it by far the most influential regional media outlet. That same month, the second most-followed portal was *Felvidék.ma*, with 73,000 followers. *Felvidék.ma* has a different political outlook than *Új Szó*.

Új Szó was established in 1948 and is the oldest Hungarian-language media institution still operating in Slovakia. *Új Szó* issues a daily newspaper with a print of 20,000 copies per day. The online edition, *ujso.com*, has 10-million-page downloads per month. Accordingly, the outlet claims on its website that it is Slovakia’s most-visited Hungarian-language portal. The claim seems justified, at least given its large number of Facebook followers. Additionally, *Új Szó* claims to be the second-most-read daily paper in Trnava and Nitra, two of Slovakia’s eight regions (*kraje*) in southwestern Slovakia. *Új Szó* does not explicitly identify with a political party or ideology, but it tends to be critical of the incumbent governments of both Slovakia and Hungary. Overall, the media organization gives the impression of being a mainstream outlet that represents a wide range of views. Its opinion pieces tend to reflect social-liberal values, but this is often counter-balanced by news articles that are often right of centre. *Felvidék.ma* is an example of Hungary-supported media among which it has by far the widest readership. It has been online since it began operating in 2006, and it leans politically toward national conservatism but not the far right.

The media analysis was undertaken as part of the B-SHAPES project² that also analyzed regional media across several European borderlands. The temporal focus was restricted to the months before, during, and after COVID-19 border restrictions. We looked for articles that contained the terms “border”, “border closure”, “Europe”, “European Union”, “Brussels”, and “Eurosceptic”. For the Slovakian case study, the online archives of *Új Szó* and *Felvidék.ma* were searched for the period from July 2019 to February 2022; 105 articles were identified and read, of which 59 from *Új Szó* and 46 from *Felvidék.ma*. A slight majority of the EU-related articles reported on issues that were either unrelated or only indirectly related to the Slovak-Hungarian borderland. In the end, there were only 41 that were included in this paper (see the list of articles in Works Cited).

Before the analysis of the media articles, some general observations are worth noting. First, some articles include the author’s name, while others do not. Most are regular news articles, but some are op-eds or

commentaries. A few appear under the label “party media” and contain communications from Slovakian and Hungarian politicians or parties. A few articles represent readers’ opinions. The latter three groups of articles are typically published with names. Most of the op-eds, party media, and readers’ letters to the editor have identifiable authors. The majority of the articles have been written by men and about men, but many also by and on women. Most of the authors are in-house journalists, but some are external to the media organization and include politicians, public figures, policy analysts, and academics. Most authors have names that appear Hungarian, while others have names that appear Slovak. Some authors have what appear to be mixed names (Slovak and Hungarian). Most of the authors are from Slovakia, but a few guest authors are from Hungary.

Media Coverage of Cross-Border Developments

This section focuses on how developments in the borderland were covered more generally, including when references to the European dimension were present.

In the months before the COVID-19 pandemic, media articles from the region gave the impression of a borderland that was “normalizing”. This means that cross-border ties were growing, EU Interreg programs were being implemented, and transborder investments (such as firm acquisitions) were taking place without any external support (*Új Szó* 2020d). Additionally, borderland residents were travelling near and far and regularly crossing the border for shopping and other purposes. Several articles in *Új Szó* (e.g., Száz 2020) helped the borderlanders track diverging prices and currency fluctuations on both sides of the border. Of course, there were also some negative media stories. A few of the articles (e.g., *Új Szó* 2019a) noted the arrival of African swine fever in Slovakia. It was assumed that the disease had reached Slovakia through wild boars from Hungary, where swine fever was already circulating. Hence, many residents were banned from the area between Košice and the border, a measure justified by the desire not to interfere with wild boars’ mobility patterns (Németi 2020c). Finally, there were also articles on attempts to cross the border illegally, such as when sixteen young Afghans tried to cross at Štúrovo (*Új Szó* 2020a).

Despite the negative portrayals of the border, there were even more (and often longer) articles detailing the implementation of numerous, often EU-supported, cross-border cooperation projects. One of the more positive articles (Buchlovics 2019) discussed a €3 million Interreg grant recently acquired by the Ister-Granum EGTC (European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation). The funding was to support several interrelated

projects to boost the region’s economy, more specifically through its agriculture and viticulture sectors. The region is already a well-functioning cross-border shopping community that primarily focuses on local products (cf. Svensson et al. 2019, 50–54) and is to be further developed through a new exchange point in Štúrovo. A wine laboratory was going to be set up in Mužla. A producer’s yard and a house for rural cuisine were going to be established in Svodín. Finally, the honey and fruit processing plant was to be expanded in Ipešský Sokolec. Another article (Németi 2020a) covered a recently approved €2.7 million grant aimed at boosting the borderland’s tourism industry. Given the name Castle to Castle, the cross-border project aimed to renovate four castles and forts in Regéc, Streda nad Bodrogom, Veľký Kamenec, and Veľká Ida. The article clarifies that the “settlements are all peripheral border locations, suffering from emigration and a lack of local jobs”. By establishing a common cross-border tourist route, visitors were allowed to travel the region and take multi-day tours.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, most border checkpoints were completely sealed off, and cross-border contact was minimized. One article (Németi 2020b) from the early days of the pandemic reported that “the minor crossing points had been closed, whereas the major ones were under continuous monitoring”. The journalist claimed that “the majority of people are happy with the measures”, while only citing the opinions of two people. One of them admitted to not being happy about the extra distances he now had to drive but added that “I have acquaintances in Italy and do not want to get into a similar situation as them”. The other one said that “nothing good can be expected for the economy, and the virus can only be tamed through drastic measures”.

Of course, most people were unhappy with the border closures. During the first wave of the pandemic, some Slovak NGOs were already actively contesting the constitutionality of the closures (NZS 2020). An opinion piece (Ákos 2020b) that also illustrates this period quotes the poetry of 20th-century Slovakia-Hungarian writer Sándor Márai and asks a seemingly simple question: “Is Freedom such a big thing?”³ According to the journalist,

it is now, during the coronavirus, that we really understand what a big thing freedom is... We can neither travel around with budget airlines nor jump over to Budapest to visit a theatre, the cinema, or just a mall... Although globalism has its disadvantages (such as the decline of national values), the liberated, free atmosphere has created a milieu which fundamentally defines our elbow-room and lifestyle... Moreover, a stable cornerstone of this is the European Union, together with the Euro as common currency, the Schengen Area, the customs union, and EU citizenship... The overtly bureaucratic nature of Brussels is indeed often frustrating ... yet it

would be terrible to even think about throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Especially on the centenary of Trianon, we need to be particularly cautious not to step back on the disappearance of physical borders and national unification.

During the second wave of the pandemic, several articles appeared focusing on various cross-border meetings aimed at kickstarting the post-pandemic recovery as soon as possible. One article (Szalai 2020c) detailed the meeting of the Rába-Duna-Vág European Group of Territorial Cooperation (RDV EGTC). At the time, the president of the Association stressed that “we are looking for those elements that connect us on the two sides of the Danube rather than those that divide us”. He added that “the coronavirus has also shown how conspicuously interconnected the two sides of the Danube border are economically and socially”. The article also mentioned that the RDV EGTC’s presidency was then rotating between Slovakia and Hungary. The Small Project Fund was one innovation that established grants worth between €20,000 to €50,000 for cross-border projects proposed by NGOs, local associations, municipalities, and party enterprises. According to the president, the grant “was invented in the Slovak-Hungarian border region, but other countries are already considering its introduction as well”.

A similar article (Buchlovics 2021a) reported on an online event co-organized by Štúrovo and Budapest to develop cooperation among spas in the wider borderland region. It was said that “COVID-19 could have some positive effects”. The director of Budapest’s spa corporation expected “the number and importance of post-COVID treatments to grow”, with some spas rebranding themselves as “health centers”. Several spas organized popular cultural events, while other spas were developing “multifunctional spaces” in areas adjacent to their facilities, including walkways, open-air belvederes, and so on. Some Hungarian spas aimed at attracting tourists from Czechia and Slovakia, as Czechs had already been present in large numbers prior to the pandemic. The spas of Győr and Dunajská Streda (cities on opposite sides of the border) had “established an action group for meeting regularly and exchanging experiences”. The zoo in Győr held events at the Dunajská Streda spa, and the two joined for a study trip to Český Krumlov and Linz. According to a participant: “Rather than envying each other’s guests, let us assist them in visiting as many sites as possible. We are therefore developing and popularizing joint tour paths, maintaining a website, and so on”.

Four more articles on cross-border cooperation are worth mentioning briefly. The first of the four articles (Somogyi 2021) covers the meeting between the Csallóköz Area Tourism Association and the Győr-based Arrabona EGTC. It was thought that tourism needed development, as it had undoubtedly suffered the most during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of

the development was “not necessarily to attract as many visitors as possible” but to increase the average number of days that (then 2.6) 1.5 million tourists were spending in the region. Over the preceding year, the Csallóköz Area Tourism Association and the Arrabona EGTC engaged in cross-border cooperation, developing a common website and promotional videos to inform visitors about shared bike programs and water routes, the region’s spas, and more.

The second article (*Új Szó* 2021) concerns Europe’s largest cross-border bike rental system, KOMBIbike. The bike rental system connects four Hungarian and five Slovak municipalities via 130 rental bikes, both traditional and e-bikes, across 13 rental points. One can easily cross from one side of the border to the other, spend some time there to charge the bike, and then return. The project cost €981,000, of which €834,000 were EU funds.

The third article (Buchlovics 2021b) reported on a recent high-level bilateral meeting that focused on two projects: the start of construction of a bridge linking Ipolydamásd and Chľaba and an agreement to resume the hydrofoil service between Bratislava and Budapest. The Hungarian foreign minister said that “the excellent Hungarian-Slovak ties are also manifest in cross-border developments” and that “borders not only link the two countries but also make them stronger”. Moreover, “both countries are making efforts to halt the unnatural conditions along the border by which friends, relatives, acquaintances and neighbours are torn apart”. The Hungarian government was also urging the construction of five additional bridges along the border, noting that “bridges also generate significant economic effects, and Slovakia is already Hungary’s third most important trading partner”. Slightly less enthusiastically, the Slovak minister for transport noted that the bridge was important for local mobility and added that the Slovak government intended to speed up development along the Danube and Ipel’ rivers within the framework of Interreg. The article ends by mentioning that the bridge is supported by EU funds, which another article (Pásztor 2020c) on another Ipel’ bridge construction also mentions.

Media Coverage of Slovak–Hungarian Relations

The articles in this section focus on Slovak–Hungarian relations within Slovakia, between Slovakia and Hungary, and within Europe more generally.

In a July 2019 opinion piece (Szombathy 2019), the Janus-faced nature of football was portrayed. Football can mean “war” in some situations, and it can mean peace in others. According to the article, the “ultra-fans of Cracovia caused a huge scandal in Bratislava,” where “together with Ajax hooligans, they had been hunting

fighters of Slovan and Wisła” (a rival team in Kraków) and had been arrested. The next evening, the same fans “descended onto the stadium of Dunajská Streda [a Hungarian-majority town in Slovakia] as peace doves in the spirit of eternal Polish-Hungarian friendship”. The performances at the game included displaying the national flags and symbols of the opposing team. The journalist reporting from the scene described himself as a frequent visitor to the Dunajská Streda stadium in Hungary. He also said that he was “strongly sympathizing with the minority-identity-cherishing club”. He was “hoping for an enduring, Central European cohesion by the leaders of the Visegrád countries, irrespective of different worldviews”. This was because “European politics by their nature consist in complex oppositions of various interests in which great powers necessarily prevail, against which having a smart strategy for our region would be desirable”. Accordingly, the focus of the first visit of “the new, liberal Slovak President in Budapest was on cooperation rather than on ideological differences”. The journalist was optimistic given that, over the past three decades, Slovakia and Hungary had been moving in the same direction “irrespective of the ideologies of the given governments”. He still had a dream that someday in Dunajská Streda, Slovak fans would fly the Hungarian flag while the Hungarians would welcome the opposing camp in Slovak “so that neither side takes its wounds too seriously”.

In the same month, another opinion piece (Hegedűs 2019) reported on Slovak politicians who drew parallels between Crimea, Ukraine, and Csallóköz, a Hungarian-dominated region in southwest Slovakia. The piece noted that Kotleba’s far-right group did not make the comparison, but that a representative of Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS), a political party that had previously referred to itself as liberal, did. The comparison between the two places was not justified as “the Csallóköz is not an autonomous republic, Hungary is not Russia, and Slovakia and Hungary are EU members”. Additionally, “there is not much air left for revisionist policies in a borderless Europe, and serious politicians are not really talking about any such thing, as this would be against everything the EU stands for”. Still, several Slovak politicians were concerned about the atmosphere at Dunajská Streda’s football stadium, with one proposing a ban on the Hungarian anthem. According to the journalist, “surely one can detect national feelings at such matches, but this is far from the annexation of Crimea”. Instead, “populist politicians are picking up such topics and mobilizing them to collect cheap votes instead of engaging in real work”.

Alleging that Hungarians in Slovakia have separatist intentions is not limited to politicians. One brief media article (*Új Szó* 2019b) commented on the planned coalition of the two main ethnic Hungarian parties at the time. A Slovak journalist described the political party Most–Híd (also known as Bridge) as liberal. At the same time, the Party of the Hungarian Community (MKP)

was referred to as having a “strong ethnic focus”. The journalist went on to state that “MKP urges Hungarian separatism rather than Slovak–Hungarian cooperation”. To support her claim, the writer argued that:

MKP keeps embracing topics related to ethnic struggles of the worst kind, which the country just recently got rid of. These include modifying the country’s administrative-territorial division and establishing minority self-government. Further, MKP stands for the abolishment of the Beneš decrees, while it sees European politics through the lens of Viktor Orbán. Instead of deepening European integration, it is dreaming of strengthening collaboration among the V4 countries, where Orbán-type autocratic and Eurosceptic politics prevail. Accordingly, Most–Híd may lose its liberal-minded Hungarian voters who dislike the open alliance between the MKP and Fidesz. However, such voters are not few, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of Slovakia Hungarians voted for the liberal candidate, Zuzana Čaputová, in the presidential elections.

Toward the end of COVID-19’s first wave, another article (Vataščin 2020) reported that eleven mostly ethnic Hungarian mayors of south Slovakian cities had sent a joint letter to the Slovak premier “asking the government to reconsider the restrictions on crossing the border between Hungary and Slovakia as soon as possible”. The signatories provided several reasons for doing so. One reason was that there used to be “a very lively and active traffic” moving across the border. Furthermore, the closure was “affecting the economy and also dividing families”. They also did not understand why

Hungary is being left out even as Slovakia is already preparing to open its borders to Czechia and Austria, even though the number of cases does not justify this... If a mini-Schengen is implemented, we firmly request that Hungary be included in this process. Since relations between Slovakia and Hungary are good, we do not see any barrier to this.

In July 2020, an opinion piece (Szilvássy 2020) commented on the recent visit of Slovakia’s premier to Budapest, where he pleaded that “his government would create conditions for Slovakia’s Hungarians under which they can feel at home in their country. This also required the economic catch-up of the southern regions”. However, the journalist wondered to what extent this plea could be taken seriously, since “when it comes to thriftiness, we typically come to think of southern Slovakia”.⁴ The author was concerned about the recent steps taken by two ministers who had been cancelling and delaying decisions on transport infrastructure investments in southern Slovakia, despite EU support for some of them.

Relatedly, in December 2020, MKP floor leader Iván Farkas wrote an article (*Új Szó* 2020e) where he

portrayed his party’s struggle in the Nitra Region to attain seats in the Regional Partnership Council. The Council was becoming the key decision-making body in regional development: “During the previous two EU budget periods, when Slovakia’s northern and central regions were allocated far more development funds than the southern and eastern ones, decisions over the funds had been made on the national level”. These decisions were now being devolved to the regions, just as the budget cycle was beginning. “Urged by Brussels”, these councils were now supposed to widen and diversify their membership by “adding members of regional and local self-governments, entrepreneurs, NGOs, academics, as well as representatives of the state administration”. Farkas reported that his faction had managed to put some ethnic Hungarians on the Council, including three MKP county representatives. They also suggested including representatives of the J. Selye University (a Hungarian-language state institution) in Komárno: “if the two universities of Nitra can participate, then why not that one?” Similarly, the faction proposed adding the (presumably ethnic Hungarian) representative of the Calvinist Church: “if the Nitra Episcopate of the Catholic Church can participate, then why not also the former?” In addition, they suggested including several professional associations, such as three European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). The measures were undertaken to increase the representation of Nitra Region’s southern districts (*okresy*), so that “the South shall also develop, rather than just the North”, and because “rural areas shall also develop, rather than just the district seats”.

Several contentious issues between Slovaks and Hungarians have been covered in the regional borderland media. One issue concerns Slovakia’s citizenship law. Several articles addressing the law appeared in the first months of 2021 (Pósa Homoly 2021). One article (Czímer 2021) notes that, as of 2010, the Slovak citizenship law prohibits dual citizenship. The law was a reaction to Hungary’s own law allowing for dual citizenship, but which had disadvantaged some groups, such as Slovaks emigrating westward. Thus, in February 2021, the Slovak government “approved a modification of the law that exempts citizens who have lived outside Slovakia for at least five years and are taking up citizenship there from losing their Slovak passports. Those living in Slovakia and adopting the citizenship of another country would still be stripped of their Slovak passports”. According to a lawyer interviewed, “the law would not even allow dual citizenship for people daily commuting to Hungary for their job, real estate, or school”. He added that “this is discriminatory and therefore will not resolve the question of dual citizenship; moreover, the law would be unconstitutional even following its amendment, since based on the constitution no one can be deprived of citizenship against their own will”. The article ends by stating that “since the law has entered into force, several attempts had been made to alleviate it, but none has been successful so far; the

Constitutional court had also been examining the law but could not decide whether it was unconstitutional”.

Another article (Új Szó 2020b) takes a more conciliatory view of the citizenship laws. The article falls into the category of “party media” and was authored by the head of a small ethnic Hungarian party, the Hungarian Forum, which had not yet joined the much larger Hungarian Alliance. Despite the party’s small size, it was still given a voice in *Új Szó*, as its message resonated with at least some members of the moderate-liberal faction of the Hungarian Alliance. The article provides more exact figures on deprivations of citizenship and also notes the relatively low number of Hungarian-related cases. According to the article, “over the past decade, 3,622 persons were stripped of their Slovak citizenship against their will; in 134 cases, it was because they had applied for Hungarian citizenship. We certainly agree that this happened as the result of a bad law, but this should not be a pretext for radicalizing society”. According to the politician who wrote the article, ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia were now faced with more pressing challenges such as “securing livelihood, improving healthcare provision, halting the decline of our region, or stopping the daily violation of human rights”. Despite the current amendment to the law, at least “one tiny step has been taken toward the right direction: the Preamble of the Constitution shall now include that we Hungarians, together with the representatives of other nationalities, feature as nation-constituting”, which “could change the mindset whereby Hungarians or anyone else should be treated as a security threat in this country”. The piece concludes with the statement that “we are at home here and want to remain here, as well as wanting to secure the future and prosperity of our children”.

The final article (Bugár 2022) concerning Slovak-Hungarian relations focused on the Beneš Decrees, a series of laws issued between 1940 and 1945 that confiscated the property of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia. The article is an interview with Loránt Vincze, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) delegated by the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania. Vincze was interviewed on the Beneš Decrees in part because there were no ethnic Hungarian MEPs from Slovakia, and partly because of his recent engagement with the topic following recent cases of land confiscations. Hence, the interviewee had submitted a question to European Commissioner Didier Reynders, who answered that “based on the available information, it seems that the Beneš Decrees do not have any cross-border effect that belongs to the EU’s legal scope”. However, as Vincze argues:

The main issue is not that this historical document remains in Slovakia’s corpus juris, but that it is still enforced... We have recently been facing an increasing number of cases of land confiscation with references to the Beneš Decrees... Hence, the EU cannot claim

that this issue only belongs to the competence of the Member State, as it is a clear case of ethnicity-based discrimination. In this regard, Slovakia’s position on the Beneš Decrees contradicts the rule of law, and the European Commission’s argument is therefore false as well.

The writer of the article then raises the question of whether the EU is only pretending to be uninterested in the Beneš Decrees, because doing so could otherwise open Pandora’s box. Vincze replied that “there is some fear concerning ethnic-minority issues. If the EU markedly took the position that the 50 million autochthonous minority members are collectively entitled to EU law protection, such as rights to use and receive education in their native languages, that would have severe consequences for some Member States”. The journalist then states that there were eight ongoing court cases on the issue, including one concerning an Austrian citizen of German ancestry, raising the question of whether other Member States had the political will to address the issue. Vincze reckoned that “there is a majority for the cause in the European Parliament, but the whole issue falls apart when it comes to the Commission because the Member States have a much more direct impact on the Commissioners”. He saw further problems, such as low societal pressure on decision-makers to address the problem, not all affected persons having come forward, and the lack of any ethnic Hungarian MEP from Slovakia. Still, Vincze found that “this discrimination should not be tolerated in Slovakia and Commissioner for Justice Věra Jourová should be shocked and deem it unacceptable that a group of EU citizens are being stigmatized and their rightful property confiscated”.

Media Coverage of Hungarian-Hungarian Cross-Border Ties

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted both interethnic and intra-ethnic relations. Following the first lockdown, a long article (Szalai 2020a) reported on the situation in the divided city of Komárno, which straddles the Slovak-Hungarian border. The article states that the slogan “the two Komárnos are one city” had become illusory, considering that the cities were now divided by a concrete fence. The mayor of Komárno, Slovakia (a man with a Hungarian name) confirmed that it was “Hungary that had fully closed the crossing point”, and he hoped that the problem would be resolved shortly, given that Hungary’s foreign minister originated from Komárom (Hungary) and thus fully understood the issue. The mayor added that his counterpart in Komárom was also working on the border closure because “now, Slovak citizens working on the other side have to travel an extra 100 kilometres”. At the same time, Komárno’s mayor reckoned that “the population had understood the need to follow the restrictions in order to protect its own health”. He also criticized Slovakia’s Government Commissioner for Minorities (also a man with a

Hungarian name) for rebuking the population rather than making the documents available in Hungarian and other minority languages. By contrast, the local police in Komárno “had informed the population bilingually—through notice boards, etc.—on all playgrounds and sports areas”.

An April 2020 opinion article (Sidó 2020) contemplated the effects of the pandemic on the economy and on politics. With respect to the economy, the author noted that the agricultural sector in Western Europe was struggling because seasonal workers from Eastern Europe were no longer coming, leading to an increased emphasis on domestic agriculture. As for politics, the author compiled a list of populist leaders worldwide who initially sought to capitalize on COVID-19 by downplaying its impact but largely failed. Referring to Viktor Orbán, the journalist also described how “our region’s most established power technician has expanded the powers of his government to the limit, criticizing Brussels rather than the virus. However, we should not forget that the drastic measures now introduced might stay with us”. He then quotes Yuval Harari: “It is the ugly habit of temporary solutions to survive the given emergency, mainly since new emergencies always pop up on the horizon”. Accordingly, the journalist called for vigilance to ensure that, following the pandemic, citizen power and global solidarity prevail over totalitarian police states and nationalist isolation.

Offering a different perspective, a shorter article (Farkas 2020), written a month into the first lockdowns by a MKP (Party of the Hungarian Community) board member, argued that the pandemic could pose new opportunities for southern Slovakia. The piece lamented the agricultural sector’s low share of the country’s GDP (2.5 percent), noting that an increase would benefit southern Slovakia in particular. Accordingly, to protect domestic (often ethnic Hungarian) agricultural entrepreneurs, the politician explicitly advocated for more tightly controlled intra-Schengen borders in the future.

On September 1, 2020, when Hungary suddenly reintroduced border closures, several articles covered the mess and frustration created in places like Šahy (Pásztor 2020) and Komárno (Szalai 2020b). In Komárno, people faced delays of up to two hours at the border as Hungarian police forces initially enforced strict document checks but later abandoned them due to the resulting chaos. Nevertheless, difficulties and uncertainties related to crossing the Slovak–Hungarian border remained omnipresent. Accordingly, the second wave also included efforts by borderland elites to combat border closures. An article titled “Now We Don’t Belong Together Again” (Sándor 2020) reported that the board of Ipoly Valley EGTC had urged “the MPs of Nógrád County [northern Hungary] to remedy the situation immediately”. Moreover, media outlets published a joint letter (Új Szó 2020c; Felvidék.ma

2020) by the leaders of what were then still different ethnic Hungarian parties in Slovakia, addressed to the Hungarian government, specifically the foreign minister:

We Hungarians know that we can really only count on each other. The now-enforced government decree on border closures is adversely impacting Slovak Hungarians in several ways. Slovakia had been performing well in taming the pandemic. In the Hungarian-inhabited regions, the number of cases is well below the average. We therefore believe that ending the border closures would not contribute to the spread of the virus... Although the current regulation provides some mobility, over the past few days we have encountered dozens of cases that have hampered the everyday lives of cross-border workers and students to such an extent that they need fast solutions... We are asking for consideration of the following proposals. The five open crossing points are not enough; in some cases, commuting workers need to travel an extra 120 kilometres ... We suggest the widening of the 30-kilometre free-mobility zone... In the spring, people were allowed to cross for up to 24 hours without any distance-related restrictions - it would help if this were reinstated. Due to the start of the school year, it is worth considering introducing a special student status, as thousands of students from Slovakia are attending university or upper-secondary school in Hungary.

Indeed, the late-announced reintroduction of border closures on September 1 was unfortunate as it coincided with the start of the school year in Hungary. Hence, criticism of the Hungarian government’s handling of the situation came not just from borderland elites but from higher levels, too. A state secretary in Slovakia’s education ministry (a woman with a Hungarian name) had approached Hungarian authorities to inform them that cross-border students from Šahy now had to travel an extra 70 kilometres to reach their schools (Finta 2020). The challenges faced by the students were odd given that tourists from the Visegrád countries had recently been exempted from travel bans to Hungary. It was also reported that the European Commissioners for Internal Affairs and Justice were pressuring the Hungarian government to abandon its selective border closures. Another article (Pásztor 2020a) also noted the paradox that Czech tourists were allowed to enter Hungary, while people from southern Slovakia were not. The same article also reported that Hungary was unable to comply with border reopenings, such as those at Balassagyarmat. Finally, it observed that the extension of border restrictions for yet another month was announced just a day before the closure (MTI 2020).

Although the situation later became more stable, the messiness of September 2020 triggered resentment against Hungary (the kinstate) among some ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia, as evidenced by an angry commentary article (Ákos 2020b):

Hungary has closed its borders... Those borders that the now-decade-old government, as well as the more nationally committed Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin, perceive as an alien element... How many times have I heard that borders only exist in the head! Thanks to the Schengen Area, crossing the border has become so natural that we routinely do it without noticing. Just when the mobile operator or the currency changes. EU regulations [abolishing roaming fees] have greatly contributed to national unification, though the latter is, unfortunately, still pending. Having the Euro as a common currency [in both Hungary and Slovakia] would further integrate the two sides and improve the lives of millions. Surely everyone understands and tries to accept anti-COVID measures, but now that the border is closed, we are confusedly asking: Should Hungary be protected from us? Moreover, despite all the efforts, do borders still exist?

Following the absurdities of COVID-19, life gradually returned to places like the small border-town of Radzovce (Hegedüs 2021). According to the mayor of the town, “the nearby closed border checkpoint has not caused a major rift in the lives of commuters as they had acquired certificates, yet it clearly affected the residents’ sense of comfort. Many residents had been frequenting the nearby market in Salgótarján and spas in Hungary on weekends... It felt as if they had put up a wall between us”. The mayor also talked about local attitudes toward vaccination, which were “mixed”. He found, however, that “through television and other media, the community were following the campaigns in Hungary”, which the mayor deemed as much more effective than the ones in Slovakia.⁵ He added that “even though the border is very close, the majority of the locals were planning to be vaccinated in Slovakia, mainly as the vaccine certificates are not standardized. It is therefore unclear whether those issued in Hungary would be accepted in Slovakia”.

Relatedly, in June 2021, Hungary announced that, starting in July, residents of neighbouring regions—regardless of their citizenship—could be vaccinated in Hungary (TASR 2021). They could enter Hungary at designated checkpoints and receive vaccinations at designated vaccine stations. The regions in Slovakia included in Hungary’s vaccination campaign accounted for half of Slovakia’s population, although residents in the southernmost part of the country presumably took advantage of the opportunity (if at all).

Concluding Analysis

This article has examined media narratives related to the border and EUrope during the COVID-19 period on Slovakia’s two most influential Hungarian-language news portals. In the preceding sections, the media content was divided into three major themes: cross-border

developments more generally, Slovak-Hungarian relations, and Hungarian-Hungarian ties. These issues are, of course, interrelated, and the intention is to understand them within the European context.

First, EUrope is a portmanteau combining “Europe” and “European Union” (EU), as they are sometimes used as synonyms. EUrope is a key reference point in the media narratives analyzed in this paper. This is not surprising, given that by the time of the pandemic, Slovakia and Hungary had already spent 15 years as members of the European Union and 12 years in the Schengen Area. The two countries had already fostered extensive cross-border contacts, mobility, and exchange. One observation made as a result of the study is that EUrope features here more prominently than in the Danish-Swedish borderland (Svensson & Miraka, this issue) but less so than in the Franco-German borderland (Bruyas & Wassenberg, this issue). Those regions have of course been part of EUrope longer than the Slovak-Hungarian borderland region, but this does not seem relevant. The number of years spent in EUrope does not correlate with how much or how little it appears in regional media narratives.

Along Slovakia’s southern border with Hungary, the most covered topic was EU-aided cross-border cooperation (CBC). The coverage usually discusses Interreg-based cross-border projects. The tangible results of these projects can be seen in the (re)construction of bridges and other cross-border infrastructure, which advance tourism and regional development more generally. Nevertheless, the intangible results of CBC projects and entities are also important, since advancing cross-border links is naturally contingent on human contacts and coordination. Over the past two decades, the EU has co-financed about 85 percent of these projects. One can only wonder how many of them would have been realized without the support. What we can say is that EUrope has already made a big difference in the region, not just materially but also mentally, orienting the regional mindset toward cooperation. This attitude was maintained even during the difficult period of border restrictions, as we have seen. Importantly, representatives of CBC entities had also been advocating for the easing of border-crossing restrictions in the Hungarian-Slovak borderland, as elsewhere (Novotný & Böhm 2022).

Beyond institutionalized cross-border cooperation projects, numerous voices in media reports underscored the advantages the region had of being part of EUrope. The main advantage is the privilege of open internal borders, although the abolition of roaming fees and a common currency are part of the same integration process. It should be added that, in the Hungarian context, European integration is, for some, as much about ethno-national (re)unification as it is about the freedom of movement within the EU as a whole. There

are some parallels here with other EU borderlands, such as the border between Ireland and the UK (McCall 2013), but our case stands out from the other borders studied in this special section. This confirms the earlier insight that ethno-linguistic minorities are often the key drivers of cross-border contact (Klatt 2020). That said, cross-border integration of ethno-national communities is neither linear nor uncontested.

Regardless of the intention propelling European integration, the media narratives also give voice to Eurosceptical attitudes. Euroscepticism appears across the entire continent, with Rodríguez-Pose and his colleagues (2024) linking such attitudes to structurally weaker regions. As such, it should be recognized that southern Slovakia is a peripheral area by both EU and domestic standards. It is a largely rural and agricultural region that adheres to traditional customs, which may explain some of the opposition to mainstream EU norms and values that was also encountered in the media. EU institutions were seen as reluctant to address the rights of autochthonous ethnic minorities (Bugár 2022). However, the structural weaknesses of southern Slovakia may explain the suggestion by an influential ethnic Hungarian politician, who instead argued for keeping the borders closed (Farkas 2020). The background for this argument is that the region’s businesses were struggling to compete with Western European exporters who received higher subsidies (Susla 2019). Accordingly, the politician’s idea is clearly a protectionist effort aimed at lifting southern Slovakian agro-enterprises, which may be run by or employ ethnic Hungarians, but the paradox of an ethnic minority representative advocating for stronger internal EU borders—which would divide his community from its kinstate—cannot remain unnoticed. The situation confirms Paasi’s (2005) point that borders both create and maintain difference and (at least partly) different identities. It is also a testimony to the Janus-faced nature of the border, which can be desired and feared at the same time (Houtum 2010).

To further underpin the latter points, let us recall that, back in 2015, some right-leaning voices of the Hungarian minority lamented that while members of the Slovak majority showed solidarity with the refugees, many would not support strengthening the institutions of their autochthonous minority fellow citizens (Engl et al. 2024, 47). However, as we have seen, in 2020, Slovak–Hungarian frustration was rather directed toward the kinstate and its government, which, despite its long-declared ethnonational commitment, had temporarily let down its transborder ethnic kin by closing its borders against them as well. In this borderland, just as across the Schengen Area at large, the damage done to cross-border ties may have been short-term, but the COVID period and its contested border closures highlight the necessity of smart(er) border policies, particularly in moments of crisis.

Finally, the post-COVID period saw a partial reappearance of contentious themes that had received less attention while COVID-19 was the main focus. One of the issues concerned the Beneš Decrees, a World War II policy that is still enforced and has recently been invoked to justify land confiscation (cf. Tarnok 2022). It is a controversial issue that directly affects only a small number of people, which might be why it does not appear to be a pressing issue at the inter-state level. Another contentious topic concerns the citizenship laws of both Slovakia and Hungary. Slovakia has banned dual citizenship since 2010. In 2021, they amended the law to exempt Slovaks living abroad, but not ethnic Hungarians, to whom Hungary had offered the opportunity to reclaim citizenship. On the one hand, the situation shows that Hungarian citizenship is still feared in Slovakia, reflecting a lack of trust between the two nations.

On the other hand, the Hungarian government has over the past 15 years discussed the idea of reuniting the Hungarian nation without changing borders (Verseghi-Nagy 2022). In other words, national reunification would occur across state borders rather than necessitate territorial revision. Understandably, such discourses would prompt neighbouring countries to adopt precautionary measures, particularly in light of the current geopolitical turmoil in the region. Tensions persist between nation-building and transborder community-building projects (cf. Brunet-Jailly 2022, 4–5). However, both countries are members of the European Union and NATO, which provide security but also require adherence to the rule of law and policy coordination. With respect to bilateral and interethnic relations, considerable progress has been made, but a long process of trust-building lies ahead, which open borders may help support.

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Endnotes

- 1 Throughout the article, place names in Slovakia are given in Slovak while place names in Hungary are given in Hungarian. English is used for the Danube River, as it is widely established. The Ipel’/Ipoly is primarily a border river, with its source in central Slovakia.
- 2 <https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsenheder/samf/b-shapes>
- 3 Capitalizing “Freedom” (which is not standard in Hungarian either) was a deliberate choice of the author.
- 4 Ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia have long lamented that the southern regions receive less investment than other parts of the country (cf. Smith 2000; Balogh and Pete 2018).
- 5 In the first half of 2021, Hungary had an oversupply of vaccines and the authorities worked actively to change the attitudes of the unvaccinated. Relatedly, residents of neighbouring regions became eligible at this time for vaccinations in Hungary or at the border.