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**The Challenges of Inter-municipal Cooperation
from the perspective of local governance,
as illustrated by the Győr urban area**

THESIS BOOKLET

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I. Background to the research and justification of the topic

One of the defining processes of contemporary spatial development is the formation of urban agglomerations and the strengthening of functional links between settlements. The urban area can increasingly less be defined solely on the basis of administrative boundaries: labour market, transport, economic, educational, healthcare and cultural links create spatial systems that regularly extend beyond the boundaries of individual settlements. Urban areas are therefore not simply collections of neighbouring settlements, but functional spaces interconnected through everyday mobility, the use of services, economic links and social interactions. The theoretical starting point for this research is the realisation that the spatial logic of these functional spaces is increasingly at odds with that of the traditional system of local government institutions, which is bound by administrative boundaries.

This issue is particularly significant from the perspective of local governance. The classical model of local self-government is based on local autonomy, the management of local public affairs and democratic participation, whilst the contemporary approach to governance highlights that a significant proportion of public policy issues require cooperation between multiple actors, multiple levels of government and multiple local authorities. Based on the works of Rhodes (1996), Pierre and Peters (2000), Stoker (1998), and Hooghe and Marks (2003), governance is becoming increasingly networked, multi-level and partnership-based. Local government can thus be understood not merely as a public authority operating within its own administrative area, but also as an actor required to coordinate with other local authorities, state institutions, and economic and civil society actors.

The issue of metropolitan governance is further reinforced by the literature on ‘soft spaces’. Allmendinger and Haughton (2009), Haughton et al. (2010), Purkarthofer (2021), and Salamin and Péti (2019, 2023) point out that a significant proportion of territorial processes take place in functional spaces with flexible boundaries that do not align with formal administrative divisions. These areas do not replace formal institutions, but they create levels of cooperation without which transport, regional development, environmental issues or even the management of the labour market cannot be effectively addressed. From a research perspective, this implies that the study of metropolitan cooperation cannot be limited to legally institutionalised

associations: formal and informal relationships, personal networks of trust and ad hoc, project-based cooperation must also be taken into account.

The specific characteristics of the Hungarian local government system make an examination of this issue particularly warranted. The decentralised model that followed the transition to democracy was built on extensive local autonomy, whilst the fragmented settlement structure, significant disparities in capacity and the limitations of cooperation mechanisms gave rise to operational tensions at an early stage. In parallel with the reforms following 2010, more responsibilities and resources were transferred to the central level, whilst the scope for local government action was restricted in several areas. Based on the works of Pálné Kovács (2008a, 2020, 2021, 2022), centralisation, limited financial autonomy and the weakness of the intermediate level directly influence the ability of local actors to cooperate and take strategic action. The issue of metropolitan governance in Hungary is therefore simultaneously a territorial, institutional, financial and political problem.

Győr and its wider region are particularly well-suited to the examination of this topic. Győr is one of Hungary's most dynamic rural economic and industrial centres, whose development is closely linked to its specialisation in the automotive industry, foreign direct investment, the relationship between the university and the economy, and its favourable transport geography. Numerous studies by Rechnitzer (1997, 2004, 2014), Lados and Rechnitzer (1997), and the Győr Regional Research Workshop have explored in detail the economic, spatial and institutional transformation of the city and its region. The processes of suburbanisation in the Győr conurbation were examined by Hardi (2002), whilst the development of urban network and commuting links was the subject of several subsequent studies. The existing literature therefore provides a significant empirical and theoretical basis; however, a coordinated examination of local governance and the perceptions of local government actors remains warranted.

Győr's situation is also unique because its network of urban area connections does not stop at the national border. The Hungarian–Slovak border, the proximity of Rajka and the Csallóköz region, and the labour market and mobility links with Bratislava necessitate the inclusion of the cross-border dimension. Border-area connections have been examined from various perspectives by Rechnitzer (1997), Hardi (2001), Hardi and Lampl (2008), Hardi and Nárai (2001), and Hardi et al. (2021). Building on this body of work, this thesis analyses the new

demands that cross-border functional links place on local governance, as well as the cooperation mechanisms that have emerged or failed to materialise.

Within the broader spatial context of Central Europe, the proximity of Vienna and Bratislava is also significant. However, the thesis does not undertake a comprehensive empirical study of the Vienna metropolitan area. Vienna and Bratislava primarily represent an external gravitational and spatial context against which the situation of Győr and its surroundings can be interpreted. This distinction is important because the author's own empirical data collection focuses primarily on Győr, the surrounding Hungarian settlements, Rajka and selected local authorities in the Csallóköz region. The academic contribution of this research is therefore not a reassessment of Vienna's position within the metropolitan area, but rather an exploration of how the local authorities of a dynamically developing, cross-border Hungarian regional centre perceive and address the challenges arising from the transformation of the functional area.

The central element of the research problem is therefore the disharmony between the functional urban area and the institutional-administrative area. The areas of residence, work, public services and daily mobility are increasingly less aligned with the territorial jurisdiction of the local authority. This becomes particularly evident in policy areas such as public transport, primary care, education, public utilities, regional development and environmental protection. If these problems are on an urban area scale, but decision-making and funding powers remain at local or central government level, a lack of coordination may arise.

Accordingly, the main aim of this thesis is to explore the challenges posed by the transformation of the Győr urban area for local authorities; the extent to which the city of Győr is capable of fulfilling a coordinating role as a regional centre; and the obstacles hindering the development of a form of territorial governance capable of managing urban area processes. The study approaches these questions not merely from an institutional perspective, but through the experiences of local leaders and professional stakeholders, formal and informal cooperation mechanisms, and the context of socio-economic spatial processes.

The novelty of the research thus lies in the interconnection of three elements. Firstly, it links theoretical approaches to local self-government and local governance with the issue of the functional urban area. Secondly, it interprets the Győr urban area not solely as an economic or commuting system, but also as a sphere of local government action. Thirdly, it examines the

cross-border dimension not as a separate issue of external relations, but as part of the day-to-day challenges of local governance. This creates an opportunity to draw more general conclusions, based on the case of Győr, regarding the limitations and possibilities of urban area governance in Hungary.

II. Methods used

The research is based on an interpretative social science paradigm and employs a fundamentally qualitative approach. The chosen methodological framework is justified by the nature of the research questions: the study does not simply seek to measure how frequently a given phenomenon occurs, but also how local actors interpret urban area transformation, what problems they perceive, what opportunities for action they see, and what institutional, political or financial constraints they experience. The qualitative approach makes it possible to explore the interpretations of those involved, the local context and the informal mechanisms operating alongside formal rules.

The dissertation follows abductive research logic. Abduction does not merely involve the mechanical testing of pre-formulated hypotheses, but rather an iterative dialogue between the theoretical framework and empirical findings. Throughout the research, therefore, field experiences and new perspectives emerging from the interviews continuously influenced the theoretical interpretation and the refinement of the research questions. In line with the approach of Timmermans and Tavory (2012), both deductive and inductive elements were present: alongside concepts drawn from the literature on local governance, metropolitan coordination and border regions, new patterns emerging from the empirical data were also incorporated into the analysis.

The study area was delineated by taking both functional and research considerations into account. The research focuses on Győr as the region's economic, labour market and service centre. The Hungarian sample included settlements in varying circumstances: those more closely linked to transport and economic networks, more peripheral or rural villages, and local authorities with differing levels of financial flexibility. The aim of the selection was not to create a representative statistical sample, but to ensure the comparability of different local authority situations, capacities for action and experiences within urban regions.

Rajka was given particular significance in the research. The settlement is one of the most striking examples in Hungary of cross-border residential mobility along the Bratislava–Győr axis; for this reason, the thesis treats it as a 'regional laboratory'. The inclusion of Rajka made it possible to examine directly how administrative affiliation, the everyday mobility of the population, the use of services and the geography of social relations diverge from one another.

The selection of the sample in Slovakia followed a different logic. In the case of Csallókőz, due to the initially low willingness to respond, expert sampling was supplemented by the snowball method. The settlements included were therefore selected not on the basis of geographical completeness, but on the basis of their functional links to Győr, the availability of well-informed informants, and the recommendations of interviewees. The inclusion of interviews from across the border was justified by the fact that Győr's urban area network extends beyond the state border in several areas; consequently, the functioning of the region could not have been adequately understood by interviewing only Hungarian stakeholders.

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews. Between 2020 and 2026, the research team conducted interviews with 38 different individuals, with some participants interviewed on multiple occasions. The interviewees included local and national political decision-makers, mayors, deputy mayors, members of local councils, senior local government officials, town clerks, chief architects, chief inspectors from Slovakia, experts, as well as civil society and local community representatives in certain settlements. In 2026, a focus group interview was also conducted in Pannonhalma to gain a deeper understanding of the functioning of a sub-centre.

The selection of interviewees was justified by the fact that the research questions simultaneously addressed local authority decision-making, the functioning of local public administration, regional cooperation and the local interpretation of socio-economic processes. Political leaders have direct experience of strategic decisions, advocacy and inter-municipal relations; professional managers are familiar with the details of public services, development projects and institutional operations; whilst experts and civil society actors complement local government narratives with external or community perspectives. This diversity of participants enabled the examination of the same phenomena from multiple perspectives.

The research supplemented the interviews with document analysis and statistical data. The document analysis covered local and regional development strategies, local authority documents, spatial planning materials and relevant policy documents. The quantitative data did not form part of a standalone quantitative study, but served to contextualise the qualitative findings. Data on population, commuting, employment, land use and transport were given particular prominence. The analysis of changes in commuting patterns between 2011 and 2022

provided particularly important background information for interpreting the dynamics of urban area connections.

The research was supplemented by direct field observations. During the field visits, the focus of the study was on the settlement structure, the spatial manifestations of suburbanisation, transport links, and directly observable phenomena relating to cross-border mobility. The field observations were not treated as independent evidence, but served as a contextual source to aid the interpretation of the interviews.

The analysis of the interviews took place in several stages. The first stage involved re-reading the entire interview material, followed by the coding of sections relevant to the research questions. The coding process was conducted using both deductive and inductive methods: on the one hand, based on predefined theoretical categories – such as urban transformation, mobility, cooperation and institutional barriers – and, on the other hand, based on new themes that recurred in the interviews. The categories of analysis included mobility, the labour market, transport links, formal and informal local government cooperation, trust, and institutional, political and funding constraints.

In the analysis, the research did not regard the mere frequency of responses as decisive, but rather the content of the narratives, their interrelationships and recurring patterns. A separate analytical group was formed comprising political decision-makers, local authority technical managers, external experts and civil society actors. The separate examination of perspectives from the central city, smaller settlements and across the border also made it possible to identify the issues on which there is consensus, and where divergent interests or institutional conflicts arise.

Triangulation across data sources served to enhance reliability. Individual statements were cross-checked against the narratives of multiple interviewees, various settlement types and differing institutional positions; where possible, these were supplemented with statistical data, documents and field experience. However, the methodological limitations are clear: the sample is targeted and not representative; it does not cover all settlements in the region; and the qualitative findings rely to a significant extent on the participants' interpretations. Consequently, the aim of the research is not statistical generalisation, but rather to formulate analytical

conclusions and gain a deeper understanding of the operational mechanisms of urban area governance.

III. The academic findings of the thesis

Based on the findings of the research, eight interrelated theses can be formulated. Drawing on the study of the Győr urban area, these go beyond the specific case study and may contribute to an understanding of the relationship between cross-border metropolisation, functional integration and local governance. The theses are based on the empirical material of the dissertation, primarily the qualitative interviews, their thematic analysis, and the supporting documents and statistical data.

Thesis 1 – Functional integration, metropolisation and institutional integration are not parallel processes.

The case of Győr demonstrates that labour market, economic and demographic links can extend significantly beyond administrative and national borders without a corresponding regional governance system being established to manage them. Metropolisation can therefore proceed even without institutional integration; in such cases, however, local authorities are typically forced to adapt retrospectively and reactively.

The academic significance of this thesis lies in its interpretation of the differing paces of functional integration and governance integration as a scale problem in local governance. Everyday land use and socio-economic relationships can organise themselves more rapidly at the urban region scale than local authorities and other public administration institutions are able to adapt to.

Thesis 2 – Cross-border metropolisation does not necessarily lead to the emergence of a balanced polycentric spatial structure.

The example of the Győr urban area illustrates that links to larger metropolitan centres can be selective, both spatially and functionally. A medium-sized regional centre can become part of a wider network of metropolitan connections without, in the process, becoming an independent metropolitan centre itself. In the case of Győr, therefore, metropolisation can be understood primarily as a differentiated connection to the wider area formed by Vienna and Bratislava.

From the perspective of the development of a regional centre in such a situation, dual integration becomes necessary: it must simultaneously strengthen its links with its own

functional urban area and, as a network hub, connect to the wider international metropolitan network formed by Vienna and Bratislava. If either of these two directions remains persistently weak, the benefits of proximity to the larger metropolitan centres may be realised unevenly, both regionally and socially.

Thesis 3 – In border regions, the functional and institutional role of the state border may vary.

An analysis of the Győr urban area shows that increased border permeability and the strengthening of cross-border links amongst the population, in the labour market and in the economy do not automatically imply a decline in the role and significance of the state border as an administrative dividing line. Whilst the border's role as a dividing line may diminish significantly in terms of everyday use of space and economic relations, it may continue to function as a strong dividing line in institutional terms due to differences in administrative, funding, public service and regional development systems.

Functional integration along the border can therefore be understood as an asymmetrical process, in which the integration of the social and economic spheres may proceed more rapidly than the convergence of the governance and institutional spheres. A more open national border does not, therefore, in itself create a common governance space.

Thesis 4 – The divergence between the functional and institutional spheres is one of the fundamental problems of metropolitan governance.

Whilst commuting, economic links, residential mobility and certain public service needs are increasingly less constrained by municipal and national borders, the structures governing decision-making, funding and service delivery remain fundamentally tied to these boundaries. This contradiction is particularly pronounced in Hungary's fundamentally centralised public administration system, where the limited financial and institutional autonomy of local actors further restricts the scope for horizontal cooperation.

The dissertation thus interprets the discrepancy between the functional space and the formal governance space not merely as administrative fragmentation, but as a problem of scale between territorial processes and decision-making competences. This makes coordination extending beyond municipal boundaries particularly necessary in the case of transport, regional development and certain public services.

Thesis 5 – In the absence of a formal institutional framework for urban regions, informal social capital partly becomes a resource for governance, but is unable to replace institutional coordination.

Personal trust, the mayors' networks and informal cooperation can facilitate the development of joint projects, the securing of funding and even the establishment of cross-border links. In the absence of formal institutional cooperation, 'soft' cooperation tools, informal networks and partnerships between civil society, business, higher education and other regional stakeholders therefore take on greater importance.

However, these relationships are often dependent on specific individuals and projects; as such, they cannot, on their own, serve as a lasting substitute for the institutional and funding frameworks of long-term, cross-sectoral metropolitan coordination. Informal social capital is thus a genuine resource for local governance, but its sustainability also depends on the potential for institutionalisation.

Thesis 6 – The limitations of metropolitan cooperation cannot be attributed solely to the willingness of local actors to cooperate, but stem to a significant extent from structural and regulatory conditions.

According to the research, a significant proportion of local leaders recognise that some of the new problems arising from dynamically transforming urban areas and metropolisation can only be addressed by strengthening cooperation between local authorities. However, their practical experience shows that the intention to cooperate is not sufficient in itself: the current regulatory, funding and operational environment offers only limited scope for establishing sustainable, strategic inter-municipal cooperation.

Voluntary and project-based collaborations may be suitable for addressing certain shared problems and strengthening trust between stakeholders; however, the long-term management of structural problems affecting several local authorities – particularly in the areas of transport, regional development or certain public services – requires more stable coordination, funding and institutional frameworks. Strengthening urban area cooperation is therefore not merely a local issue, but a multi-level governance issue, which also requires adjustments to the national regulatory and funding framework.

Thesis 7 – The limitations on urban area cooperation stem not primarily from a lack of willingness to cooperate, but from structural, institutional and financial constraints.

One of the strongest generalisable findings of the research is that a significant proportion of local leaders recognise the need for regional cooperation, yet do not consider it realistic to establish lasting, strong metropolitan coordination within the current regulatory and funding environment. The problem cannot, therefore, be simply attributed to a lack of attitude or trust.

The empirical data highlights two main types of obstacle. One is structural and institutional: the centralised nature of the Hungarian public administration system, the lack of a stable legal framework to support metropolitan coordination, tensions within the system of responsibilities and resources, and disparities in local authority capacity. The other is political and cultural: party-political divisions, diverging local interests, dependence on personal relationships, and the limited institutionalisation of a metropolitan perspective.

These two types of obstacle reinforce one another. Without a stable legal, financial and organisational framework, cooperation is more likely to become dependent on individuals and specific projects; conversely, without lasting trust and a shared regional perspective, even formal institutions struggle to function effectively. The case of Győr therefore demonstrates that successful urban area governance requires both institutional reform and a culture of cooperation.

Thesis 8 – Győr’s functional central role is stronger than the local authority’s role as a coordinator within the urban region.

According to statistical and qualitative findings, Győr is the region’s key economic, employment and service centre. Its commuting catchment area is extensive, and the populations of the surrounding settlements are linked to the city in terms of a number of public services and economic functions. Its role as a functional centre is therefore clear.

By contrast, no similarly strong leading role has emerged for the central city in the area of local government coordination. According to the research, cooperation with neighbouring settlements is mostly ad hoc or sector-specific in nature, and is not organised within a unified urban area governance framework. This distinction is important: the ‘city as a functional centre’ and the ‘city council as a regional coordinator’ are not the same concept.

The contribution of this thesis lies precisely in distinguishing between these two roles. Győr organises its own catchment area through day-to-day economic and social processes, but it does not automatically follow from this that the local authority of the core city organises regional cooperation in a conscious and institutionalised manner. Functional integration and governance integration may therefore develop at different rates.

The common message of the eight theses is that urban area development and metropolisation do not automatically go hand in hand with institutional integration. In the Győr urban area, functional links, mobility and socio-economic integration have evolved more rapidly than the regional governance mechanisms capable of managing them.

The situation along the border further exacerbates this problem of scale. The functional role of the state border as a dividing line may diminish, whilst its institutional significance remains; at the same time, links with Vienna and Bratislava may be selective and geographically uneven. The case of Győr therefore also highlights that metropolisation is not synonymous with balanced polycentric development.

From the perspective of local governance, it follows from all this that addressing the discrepancy between the functional and institutional spheres requires both flexible, informal cooperation and more stable institutional and funding frameworks. The limitations of such cooperation cannot be explained solely by the attitudes of local actors: they stem, to a significant extent, from the structural characteristics of the multi-level system of governance.

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