

# BRIDGES OVER BORDERS: EXAMINING THE SUCCESS FACTORS AND SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF TOURISM-THEMED CROSS-BORDER PROJECTS IN HUNGARY

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Received 15 March 2026, accepted in revised form 28 April 2026



## Abstract

Tourism serves as the primary engine for cross-border integration within EU Cohesion Policy, representing the most dominant thematic objective in Interreg, IPA, and ENI frameworks. Analysis of the keep.eu dataset reveals that while 247 programmes have supported over 4,700 tourism projects, the sector is intrinsically linked to cultural heritage and education as “soft-power” tools for territorial cohesion. Hungary ranks in the top decile for project participation with 440 initiatives, yet a moderate partnership-to-project ratio indicates a strategic preference for bilateral cooperation over complex multilateral networks. Spatial distribution shows significant clustering along the Serbian, Romanian, and Croatian borders, whereas regional strategic priorities in other areas often emphasize cultural heritage, education and institutional cooperation over direct tourism development. The “Route of Medieval Churches” case study validates that successful integration depends on moving beyond fragmented restoration toward “sellable” tourism products through bilingualism and digital innovation. Effective cross-border cooperation requires a five-dimensional synergy where integrated marketing and strategic branding outweigh standalone infrastructural investments. For the 2021–2027 budgetary cycle, shifting focus from physical assets to cohesive destination identity is essential for long-term sustainability and regional competitiveness.

**Keywords:** cross-border cooperation, Interreg, tourism development, regional integration, integrated product, Route of Medieval Churches

## 1. Introduction

The primary goal of the EU Cohesion Policy is to mitigate regional disparities by supporting a diverse range of projects. In 1990, the EU initiated the Interreg programmes to identify ways to encourage development and strengthen border regions.

At present, the Interreg A programme has 42 thematic focuses, several of which are closely related to tourism – primarily through the promotion of social cohesion, cultural dialogue, cross-border tourism, and common heritage. Cross-border cooperation plays a specific role in this field, as these initiatives unite regional stakeholders and provide

forums, such as the European Cross-Border Platform (ECBP), to discuss and address shared challenges.

Cross-border cooperation fosters a sense of regional identity and shared purpose, strengthening social ties and promoting a more unified and cohesive territory. Nevertheless, cross-border cooperations are dependent on elements such as the extensive knowledge of local cultures and languages, awareness of differences in national holidays, and in some cases, even navigating different time zones. Cross-border tourism projects provide vital opportunities for mutual understanding, as they focus on the dissemination of this socio-cultural knowledge, thereby increasing the added value of the cooperation. As Bufon (1993) highlights, bilingualism and the national or ethnic intertwining of border populations facilitate more sophisticated and intense forms of social and cultural cooperation and integration. This human and cultural capital serves as the foundation for successful regional development.

Academic literature further underscores that cross-border tourism is a vital engine for the consolidation and integration of neighboring regions, fostering the exchange of cultural values and innovations (Makkonen et al. 2018). Research specifically highlighting

the Hungarian-Croatian, Hungarian-Slovenian and Hungarian-Slovakian border regions suggests that while the potential for joint development is significant, success often hinges on moving beyond fragmented initiatives toward uniform reception areas and truly integrated, sellable tourism products (Nemes – Happ 2024). Furthermore, while tourism in the Hungarian-Romanian border region is recognized as a highly supported economic activity at the national levels, there remains a critical need for more joint marketing activities and deliberate tourist packages to effectively promote these regions at the local and regional level (Czuczor et al. 2023). The importance of strategic branding is also evident in the Hajdú-Bihar/Bihar Euroregion, where studies emphasize that increasing marketing awareness and creating a cohesive cross-border destination identity are essential for regional competitiveness (Tatár et al. 2020). Drawing on the Hungarian-Romanian good practices, Toca and Chiriac (2024) propose a model for cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkans that integrates both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Their work further emphasizes the strategic role of tourism-related cross-border projects as a key objective within the Debrecen-Oradea Eurometropolis framework.

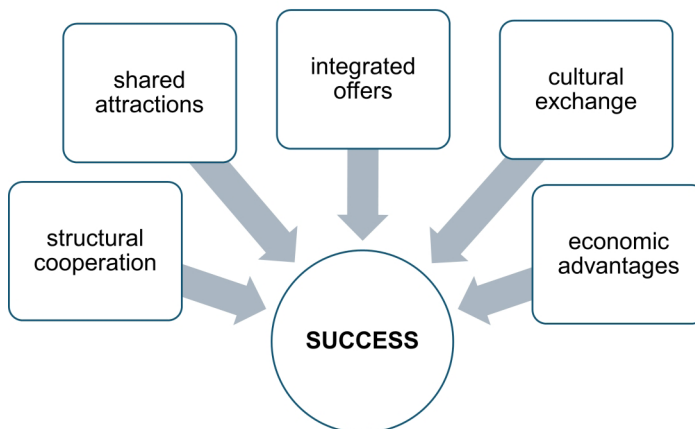


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of success factors in cross-border tourism projects  
(Source: edited by authors)

Ultimately, success depends on various factors (Fig. 1). First and foremost, robust cooperation between neighboring regions or countries is indispensable. Secondly, projects that offer common historical, cultural, or natural attractions are more likely to be successful. Furthermore, the effectiveness of a project is often measured by its ability to promote economic development and job creation. Those projects which develop integrated tourism products rather than standalone offers typically yield a greater impact and help transform borders from barriers into bridges. Overall, successful cross-border projects can significantly strengthen cultural communication and synergy between the participating partners.

As shown in Figure 1, project success is positioned at the intersection of five critical dimensions. Structural cooperation forms the organizational foundation, where institutional partnerships establish the framework for joint action. Shared attractions provide unique regional content leveraging common natural or historical heritage as a unique selling proposition. These elements are deeply embedded in the shared environmental background and landscape characteristics of the border region, which serve as the physical foundation for regional identity. The model suggests that the transition from individual efforts to integrated offers – supported by continuous cultural exchange – leads to tangible economic advantages, such as job creation and regional growth, which are often regarded as the ultimate output. These factors do not act in isolation; rather, they reinforce one another to create a resilient and competitive cross-border destination.

## **2. Materials and methods**

The study utilizes data from the *keep.eu* database, which serves as the primary repository for EU-funded cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation

projects. The research specifically focuses on the role of implemented Interreg A, IPA and ENI cross-border projects in tourism development within European border regions between 2000 and 2025.

To ensure a targeted analysis, the data were first filtered by thematic objectives, specifically selecting projects categorized under “Tourism”. The analysis evaluates this dataset through multiple dimensions: first, it identifies long-term trends by examining the fluctuations in the number of projects, project partners, and cross-border partnerships across four distinct EU budgetary periods (2000-2006, 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and the ongoing 2021-2027 cycle). This evaluation is conducted at both the macro-level (European Union) and the micro-level (specifically within Hungary) to allow for comparative insights.

Subsequently, for the Hungarian context, the data were spatially disaggregated to the NUTS 3 level to provide a more granular perspective on regional distribution. As a further methodological step, projects were categorized according to the seven specific border sections of Hungary (Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, and Ukraine). To identify geographical clusters and disparities, these spatial distributions are visualized through thematic maps. The raw dataset retrieved from *keep.eu* was processed and visualized through Microsoft Excel (version 2024), allowing for a comparative spatial and thematic analysis of the regional data.

Finally, the research employs a qualitative approach through a detailed case study. This section demonstrates the primary outcomes, best practices and practical socio-economic impacts of a specific tourism-related cross-border project located along the Hungarian-Romanian border region, illustrating how theoretical objectives are translated into regional development in practice.

### 3. Results

#### Tourism-themed cross-border projects in Europe

According to the dataset extracted from keep.eu in December 2025, a total of 265 programmes and 23,949 projects have been implemented under the Interreg A, IPA, and ENI frameworks, involving 57,452 partners across 88,814 distinct partnerships. A significant portion of this cooperation is dedicated to the tourism sector: 247 programmes have supported 4,715 tourism-related projects, engaging 13,352 partners and establishing 17,225 partnerships (Fig. 2).

As illustrated in Figure 3, a comparative analysis reveals that “Tourism” stands out as the most dominant thematic objective in terms of total project volume, partner participation, and partnership frequency. This dominance underscores the sector’s role as a primary driver of cross-border integration. Interestingly, the data show a strong thematic clustering: the sectors following “Tourism” – “Cultural heritage and arts” and “Education and training” – are both intrinsically linked to the socio-cultural foundations of regional cooperation. The high ranking of these three themes suggests that cross-border initiatives prioritize soft-power

tools and identity-building as catalysts for economic and territorial cohesion.

It should be noted, however, that while the data cover the period up to 2027, the figures for the ongoing 2021–2027 budgetary cycle remain incomplete, reflecting projects currently in the implementation or contracting phase, therefore the last data was retrieved at the end of 2025.

#### Tourism-themed cross-border projects in Hungary

In terms of participation, Hungary ranks within the top decile of eligible countries, boasting 440 tourism-themed cross-border projects and 695 established partnerships (Fig. 4). This positioning underscores Hungary’s proactive role in regional tourism development. However, a deeper analysis of partnership intensity reveals a different trend: when evaluating the average number of partnerships per project, Hungary’s performance is more moderate, with approximately half of the eligible countries demonstrating higher partnership-to-project ratios. This suggests that while Hungary excels in the volume of initiated projects, there is still potential for enhancing the depth and complexity of these collaborative networks.

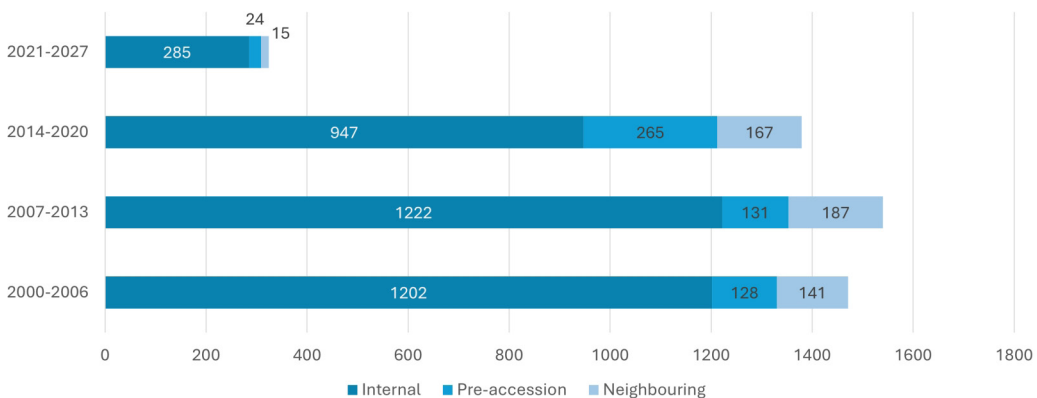


Fig. 2. Number of cross-border projects in Europe (2000-2027, data for the ongoing 2021-2027 budgetary period are incomplete) (Source: based on data from keep.eu)

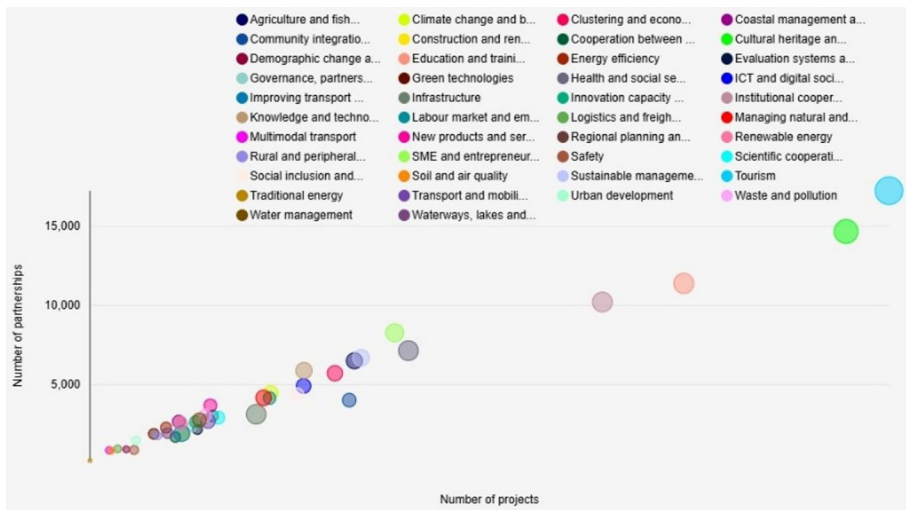


Fig. 3. Total number of projects, partnerships and relative budget sizes per theme (2000-2025) (Source: keep.eu)

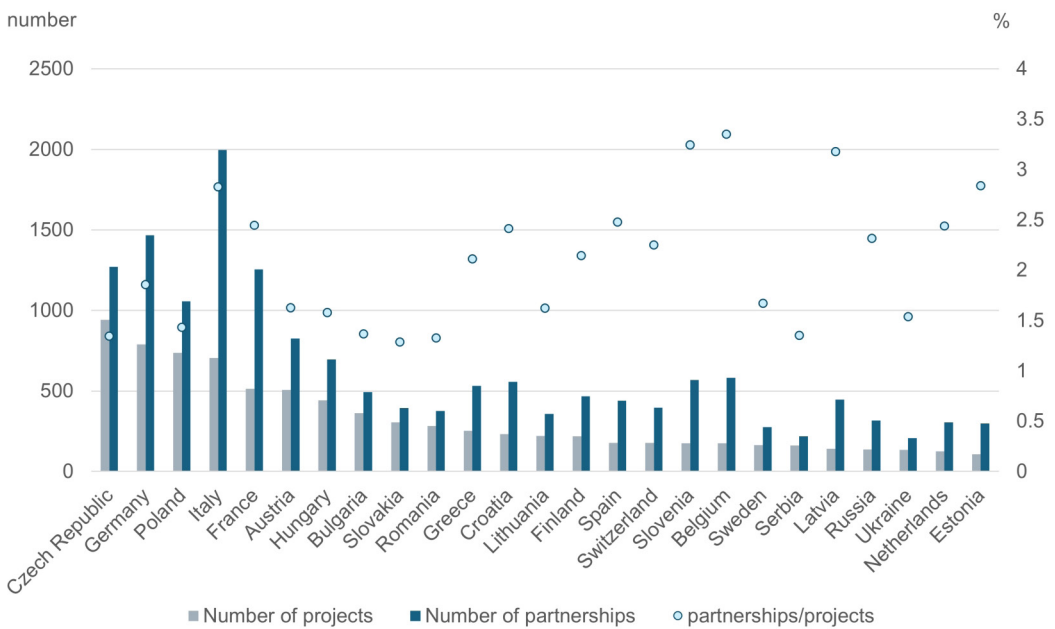


Fig. 4 Distribution of tourism-themed projects, partnerships and their respective ratios (2000-2025) (Source: author's elaboration based on keep.eu data)

The spatial distribution of tourism-themed cross-border projects across Hungarian NUTS 3 regions (Fig. 5) reveal a significant geographical concentration along specific border sections. Specifically, Csongrád-Csanád (67 projects) along the Hungarian-Serbian and Hungarian-Romanian border,

Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (55 projects) along the Hungarian-Romanian and Hungarian-Ukrainian border, and Baranya (51 projects) counties along the Hungarian-Croatian border emerge as the most active regions in terms of absolute project numbers.

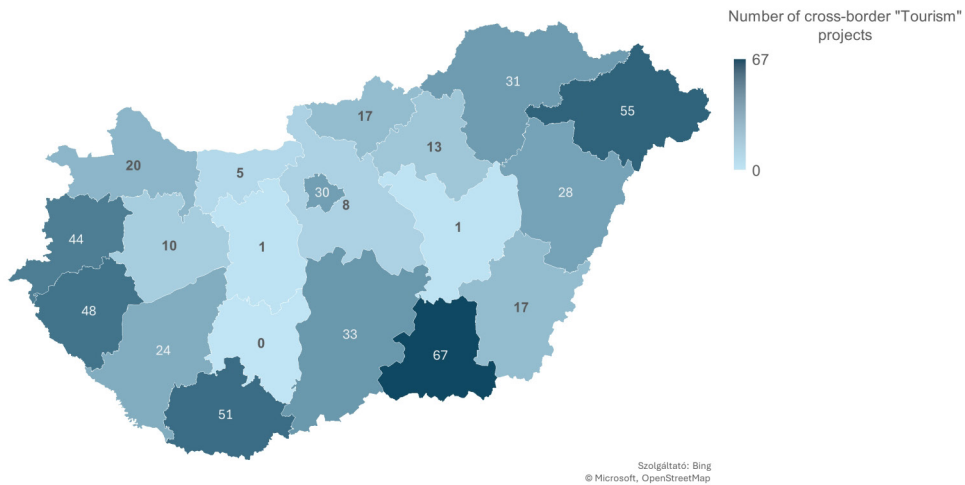


Fig. 5. Number of tourism-themed cross-border projects implemented in Hungary by NUTS 3 level regions (2000-2025) (Source: based on data from keep.eu)

This high volume of tourism-related initiatives reflects a robust institutional absorption capacity and a strategic focus on leveraging shared heritage in the Hungarian-Serbian, Hungarian-Romanian, and Hungarian-Croatian border contexts. Similarly, the western borders also show significant engagement, with Zala (48 projects) and Vas (44 projects) maintaining a strong presence.

In contrast, the central and interior counties (such as Fejér, Tolna and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg) show minimal participation (0–1 projects), which is consistent with the geographical nature of the Interreg, IPA, and ENI programmes that primarily target border-adjacent territories. The data further suggests that certain sections of the Hungarian-Romanian border region act as major hubs for tourism cooperation, where the synergy between established regional networks and thematic assets facilitates a high frequency of project implementation.

The spatial distribution of thematic priorities across Hungarian counties (Fig. 6) reveals significant regional variations, showing that tourism is not universally the primary focus in every border region. In the western segment of the Hungarian-

Slovakian border (Győr-Moson-Sopron and Komárom-Esztergom counties) and along the Hungarian-Romanian border, thematic diversity is particularly high. For instance, although Csongrád-Csanád county excels in the absolute number of tourism-themed cross-border projects, these constitute only 14% of the county's total cross-border projects, placing tourism third in the thematic hierarchy. Even more striking is the case of Hajdú-Bihar county, where tourism ranks only fourth among thematic priorities. It should be noted that in both counties, the first and second positions are occupied by "Cultural heritage and arts" and "Education and training" reflecting a broader focus on socio-cultural foundations of cooperation.

This ranking highlights that the success of tourism projects in these highly active regions is even more remarkable, as they must compete for resources and visibility within a diversified and mature project portfolio. The prominence of culture and education indicates a shift toward knowledge-based cooperation. In these cases tourism serves as a platform for disseminating socio-cultural values, suggesting that initiatives have moved from simple promotional campaigns toward more complex, value-added developmental projects. To remain competitive, they must

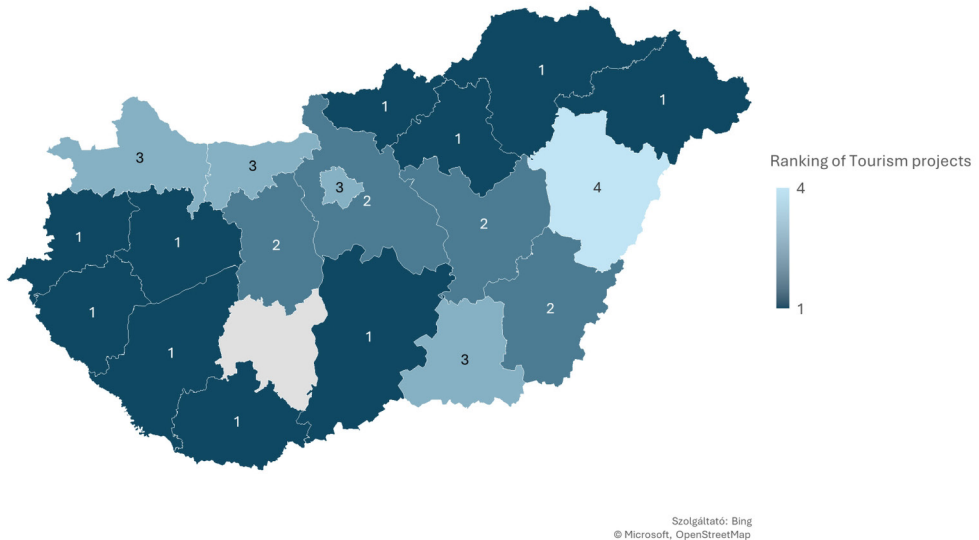


Fig. 6. Ranking of the “Tourism” theme within the thematic distribution of projects by counties (NUTS 3 level) (Source: based on data from keep.eu)

demonstrate higher strategic integration and synergy with existing socio-cultural goals. Consequently, the high project volume in these counties reflects not only quantitative success but also a high degree of institutional resilience and thematic maturity.

### Case study: The “Route of Medieval Churches” (Temple Route) project

#### *Project overview and strategic context*

To illustrate the practical application of the theoretical success factors identified in this study, the “Tourism attraction development of the Route of Medieval Churches” (Temple Route) project (HURO/0801/064) serves as a primary case study. This project was implemented between October 2012 and November 2014 and served as a strategic cross-border cooperation within the Hungary-Romania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 (HURO) (2.1.3. Development of tourism – small scale investments in tourism attractions and tourism infrastructure). The project area

focused on Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county in Hungary and Satu Mare county in Romania, targeting the preservation and promotion of a shared religious and architectural heritage that transcends national boundaries (Fig. 7).

#### *Objectives and integrated product development*

The project moved beyond fragmented local initiatives by creating a unified thematic route that links medieval religious sites across the border. This integrated tourism product leveraged shared historical assets to develop a cohesive destination identity. Key activities included the restoration of monumental medieval churches, the conduct of scientific research, the establishment of a cross-border tourism route with signage, the publication of multilingual promotional materials, and the organization of joint cultural events (Route of Medieval Churches). These efforts directly align with the findings of Nemes and Happ (2024), reinforcing the premise that successful regional development depends on the transition from isolated attractions toward uniform, sellable tourism packages.

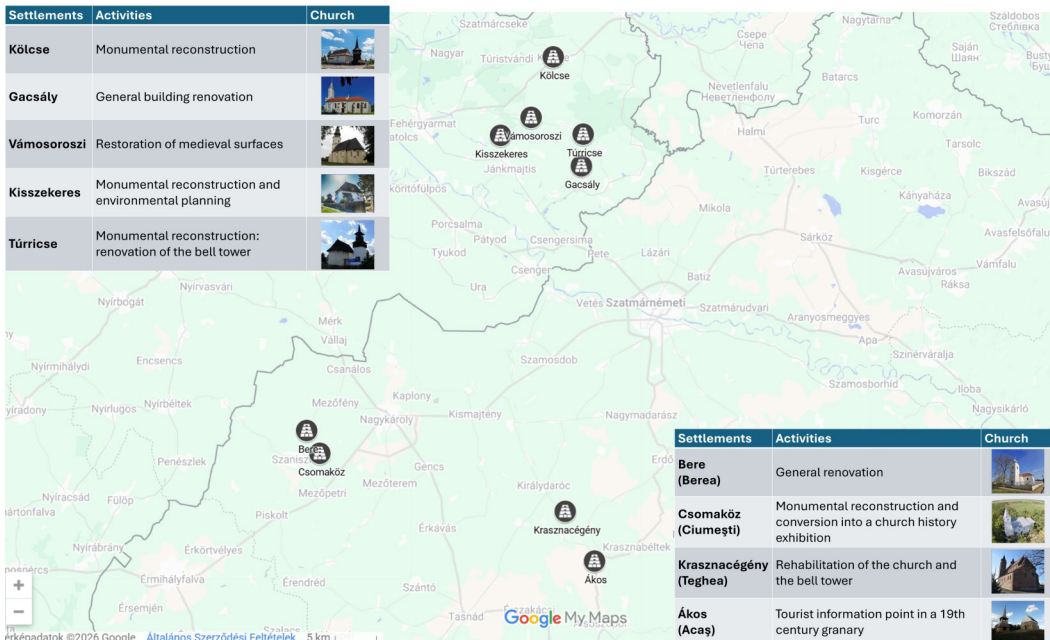


Fig. 7. Tourism development projects along the Route of Medieval Churches (Temple Route) (1 October 2012 – 30 November 2014) (Source: edited by authors)

### **Socio-cultural impact and regional identity**

Consistent with the theories of Bufon (1993), the project utilized bilingualism and historical intertwining of the local population to foster deep cultural dialogue. By highlighting the common roots of the Reformation and the medieval Christian heritage, the “Temple Route” effectively transformed the border from a barrier into a cultural bridge. This cooperation reinforced a sense of shared purpose among local stakeholders, municipalities, and church organizations, significantly increasing the socio-cultural added value of the regional partnership.

### **Marketing awareness and sustainability**

The project also addressed the challenges of marketing awareness identified by Tatár et al. (2020). Through joint promotional campaigns and the establishment of a

professional network for the management of the thematic route, the initiative successfully increased the international visibility of the Hungarian-Romanian border region. The sustainability of the “Temple Route” – which remains a recognized tourism brand today – demonstrates how top-down EU funding can catalyze bottom-up local initiatives to achieve long-term economic and cultural impact.

## **4. Discussion**

The empirical evidence from the keep.eu dataset validates the theoretical framework established in this study, confirming that tourism serves as a cornerstone of EU Cohesion Policy by bridging regional disparities through socio-cultural integration. The following sections interpret the results through the lens of the five critical dimensions of project success identified in the Introduction.

### **Tourism as a catalyst for social cohesion and identity**

The close alignment between tourism, cultural heritage, and education reinforces the theoretical premise that successful cross-border cooperation (CBC) relies on a socio-cultural foundation. The dominance of “Tourism” as the leading thematic objective across Europe (Section 3.1) underscores its role in fostering the “regional identity and shared purpose” described by Bufon (1993). Our findings suggest that tourism projects act as a catalyst for identity-building, transforming “hard” political borders into “soft” cultural bridges.

### **Evaluating the Hungarian partnership model**

A critical finding of this research is the discrepancy between Hungary’s high project volume and its moderate “partnership intensity” (Section 3.2). Ranking in the top decile for project count confirms a robust institutional absorption capacity and a proactive regional policy. The data suggests that Hungarian stakeholders are highly efficient at initiating projects but may still rely on fragmented, bilateral structures rather than the complex, multilateral networks required for “truly integrated, sellable tourism products” (Nemes – Happ 2024). Overall, the data reveals a tension between quantity and the “sophisticated forms of cooperation” mentioned in the Introduction. This “participation paradox” may stem from a strategic focus on administrative efficiency and lower-risk cooperation models. To reach the “Success” intersection shown in Figure 1, Hungarian regions must transition from project-based participation to more intensive, network-driven partnership models.

### **Spatial concentration and institutional maturity**

The geographical clustering of projects in counties like Csongrád-Csanád and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg reflects a high degree of institutional maturity and the successful

leveraging of shared historical assets. These “cooperation hubs” demonstrate that longevity in partnership (as seen in Hungarian-Romanian contexts) leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of successful project implementation. However, the data also reveals that in several active border counties, tourism is strategically superseded by other thematic priorities. In these regions, institutional cooperation, cultural heritage, and education and training take precedence, suggesting that stakeholders prioritize the strengthening of socio-cultural networks as a necessary precursor to large-scale tourism development. Conversely, the minimal participation of interior counties confirms that while Interreg remains spatially targeted, the spillover effects of these tourism corridors into the national hinterland remain limited.

### **From physical restoration to integrated product development**

The “Route of Medieval Churches” case study (Section 3.3) serves as a benchmark for overcoming the common pitfalls of CBC tourism. Many projects historically failed due to a lack of marketing awareness or an exclusive focus on physical infrastructure. The “Temple Route” overcomes these barriers by achieving an integrated offer through the development of bilingual systems and digital tools, thereby addressing the critical need for joint marketing identified by Czuczor et al. (2023). The project’s socio-cultural value derives from capitalizing on “national and ethnic intertwining” (Bufon 1993), utilizing the Reformation and medieval heritage to foster regional dialogue. By transitioning from fragmented restoration to integrated, bilingual, and digitalized product development, the project aligns with the contemporary requirement for “sellable” tourism packages (Nemes – Happ 2024). This project proves that for CBC tourism to be sustainable, it must move beyond the “funding phase” and establish a cohesive destination identity that resonates with both local residents and international visitors.

## Limitations and future trajectories

It must be acknowledged that the data for the 2021–2027 cycle remains incomplete. However, the trends observed up to 2025 suggest that the “strategic branding” and “marketing awareness” highlighted by Tatár et al. (2020) remain the most significant hurdles. Future cooperation should prioritize the sustainability of these integrated products after the funding period ends, ensuring that the “bridges” built by these projects remain resilient.

## 5. Conclusion

This study provided a comprehensive analysis of tourism-themed cross-border projects within the EU, with a specific focus on Hungary’s role and the “Route of Medieval Churches” as a strategic benchmark. The results confirm that tourism is the most utilized thematic objective in Interreg, IPA, and ENI frameworks, acting as a “soft-power” tool that translates abstract policy goals into tangible socio-cultural connections.

### *Summary of key findings*

The empirical analysis identifies a “participation paradox” in the Hungarian context: while Hungary ranks among the most active countries in project volume, the depth of its collaborative networks (partnership intensity) remains moderate. This suggests that while the institutional capacity for fund absorption is high, there is a need to shift from bilateral, project-based cooperation toward more complex, multilateral regional clusters. The research validates the proposed five-dimensional success model, highlighting that territorial cohesion is most effective where structural cooperation and shared heritage are translated into integrated tourism products. Furthermore, our findings support the view that cross-border cooperation and regional identity, rooted in a shared environmental

background, serve as the foundation for similar social and economic development pathways in these regions. This is particularly evident along the Hungarian-Romanian border where the spatial distribution of projects reveals that institutional maturity and historical intertwining are the main drivers of cooperation hubs. Crucially, the findings also show that tourism is not always the primary focus; in several active border regions, thematic priorities such as cultural heritage, education, and institutional networking take precedence. This suggests a strategic sequencing of cooperation, where the strengthening of socio-cultural and organizational foundations is viewed as a necessary precursor to sustainable tourism development.

### **Practical and policy implications**

The “Route of Medieval Churches” case study demonstrates that moving from fragmented restoration to integrated product development is the definitive factor for success. For the ongoing 2021–2027 budgetary cycle, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Policymakers and regional stakeholders should prioritize “soft” investments – such as digital tour guidance, bilingual information systems, and joint marketing – to ensure that physical restoration leads to a “sellable” and sustainable tourism product.
2. To overcome the hurdles identified in the literature, cross-border destinations must adopt professional marketing strategies that resonate with both local and international markets, ensuring resilience after the initial funding phase.
3. To move beyond the current bilateral limits of tourism-themed projects, future Interreg and IPA frameworks should incentivize broader partnership networks that involve a more diverse range of regional stakeholders.

## Final remarks and future research

In conclusion, tourism-themed projects have proven to be essential in successfully transforming borders from institutional barriers into cultural bridges. However, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives depends on their ability to generate economic value and maintain cultural dialogue after the initial funding phase. Future research should continue to monitor the 2021–2027 cycle to assess how digital transformation and shifting regional priorities further reshape the landscape of European cross-border tourism.

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