The Politics of Good Neighbourhood

State, civil society and the enhancement of cultural capital in East Central Europe

Béla Filep
The Politics of Good Neighbourhood

Analyzing neighbourly relations in multicultural societies, this book develops a concept of good neighbourhood and argues that cultural capital in various forms is the determining variable in building good-neighbourly relations. This work breaks new ground by offering a conceptual integration of different, mutually interdependent forms of capital: intercultural capital, cross-cultural social capital and multicultural capital. These forms of capital are linked to different educational and cultural policies of the state as well as to civil society involvement at different levels of implementation.

Grounded in extensive fieldwork, the book not only provides critical insights into neighbourly relations in culturally diverse border regions of East Central Europe, but the concept developed through a rich theoretical base can be usefully adapted and widely applied to other contexts.

Scholars and graduate-level students in geography, international relations, political science, social anthropology and sociology as well as policy practitioners with an interest in the negotiation of coexistence, minority issues and social and political cohesion in multicultural societies will find this an illuminating read.

Béla Filep is Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Bern in Switzerland and specializes in inter-ethnic relations, border studies and East Central Europe.
In recent years, borders have taken on an immense significance. Throughout the world they have shifted, been constructed and dismantled, and become physical barriers between socio-political ideologies. They may separate societies with very different cultures, histories, national identities or economic power, or divide people of the same ethnic or cultural identity.

As manifestations of some of the world’s key political, economic, societal and cultural issues, borders and border regions have received much academic attention over the past decade. This valuable series publishes high-quality research monographs and edited comparative volumes that deal with all aspects of border regions, both empirically and theoretically. It will appeal to scholars interested in border regions and geopolitical issues across the whole range of social sciences.

For a full list of titles in this series, please visit www.routledge.com/geography/series/ASHSER-1224.
The Politics of Good Neighbourhood
State, civil society and the enhancement of cultural capital in East Central Europe

Béla Filep
One is not born for living together.

_Living together is something to be learned._

(Quote from an informal conversation at a book store in Subotica/Szabadka)
This page intentionally left blank
Contents

List of Figures ix
Acknowledgements xi

PART I
Towards a Concept of Good Neighbourhood 1

1 Introduction 3
2 Neighbours, Neighbourhoods, Neighbourly Relations 11

PART II
Ethnicized Neighbourly Relations in East Central Europe 27

3 Komárno/Komárom in Slovakia: ‘One Town, Two Nations’ 29
4 Subotica/Szabadka: A Multi-Ethnic Oasis in Serbia 59

PART III
The Politics of Good Neighbourhood 83

5 Intercultural Capital: Facilitating Communication, Raising Cross-Cultural Interest, Increasing Mutual Respect 86
6 Cross-Cultural Social Capital: Fostering Intercultural Encounters, Cross-Cultural Experiences and Social Networks 116
Contents

7 Multicultural Capital: Expressing and Anchoring Mutual Respect, Recognition and Appreciation 138
Conclusions 185

Bibliography 190
Index 204
## Figures

I.1 “Together in Peace,” a demonstration on the Elisabeth Bridge between Komárno/Komárom (Slovakia) and Komárom (Hungary)  

1.1 Ethnic map of the Carpathian Basin with the two main research sites in Slovakia (Komárno/Komárom) and Serbia (Subotica/Szabadka)  

II.1 Symbols of the ethnicization of Komárno/Komárom’s public space  

3.1 The border station between Komárom (Hungary) and Komárno/Komárom (Slovakia) before and after their Schengen accession  

3.2 Manifestations of the Hungarian–Slovak border(s) during the visit of Hungarian President László Sólyom in 2009  

3.3 2010 election posters of parties related to the Hungarian minority in Slovakia  

3.4 Bilingual signs in Komárno/Komárom’s public space  

3.5 June 2015 issue of the *Komáromi Lapok/Komárňanské Listy* bilingual weekly newspaper  

4.1 Anti-Hungarian violence and intimidation in the 2000s in Vojvodina  

4.2 The statues of the writers Danilo Kiš and Géza Csáth, and the Serbian ‘tsar’ Jovan Nenad in Subotica/Szabadka  

4.3 Multilingual signs in Palić/Palics and Subotica/Szabadka  

III.1 Issue of *týždeň*, a Slovak weekly, published in May 2013 with a front cover in Slovak and a back cover in Hungarian  

III.2 The pyramid of good neighbourhood  

5.1 Map of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918) in a Slovak publication  

5.2 Photograph of a page from the Serbian version of the transcultural history book of the Province of Vojvodina  

6.1 The soccer club as a meeting place in Komárno/Komárom  

6.2 Ondrej and Orsi, a mixed Slovak–Hungarian couple in Komárno/Komárom
x Figures

7.1 The historical reconciliation process 140
7.2 Commemorative plaque in the city centre of Bratislava referring to the “merciless Magyarization” in the Kingdom of Hungary 144
7.3 Statue of János Esterházy in Košice/Kassa 165
7.4 Trianon monument at the Slovak–Hungarian border between Komárno/Komárom and Komárom, erected by the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) 169
7.5 Protests against the Slovak Language Law in Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely in Slovakia in 2009 172
7.6 “Pozsony? Nie, Bratislava”: election poster of Rudolf Pučík, member of the Slovak National Party (SNS) 175
7.7 Joint brochure of Szeged and Subotica/Szabadka on the Hungarian–Serbian border highlighting the common cultural heritage of the cities 182
8.1 The pyramid of good neighbourhood in its more dynamic form 186
Acknowledgements

This book could not have been published without the invaluable support of many people, to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude. First of all, I would like to thank Doris Wastl-Walter. She has supported and encouraged me throughout my academic career in more ways than I can count. In the framework of my research for this book, I have greatly benefited from her expertise in political geography, border studies and East Central Europe. Her most valuable feedback and our many discussions, both at the Department of Geography in Bern and during fieldwork, have significantly enriched this work.

Second, I would like to thank my senior and junior colleagues in two research projects that I have been part of during the past few years. My sincere thanks go to Károly Kocsis, Ulrike Hanna Meinhof and Werner Holly, with whom I worked in Searching for Neighbours: Dynamics of Physical and Mental Borders in the New Europe, an EU 6th FP project. They were all most supportive in the project and I learnt a great deal from each. Károly Kocsis’ profound knowledge of East Central Europe has been truly invaluable to me. From the TransMig: Integrating (Trans)national Migrants in Transition States project, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, I would like to thank Irén Gábrity Molnár, Monika Váradi, Zoltán Takács, Patrik Tátrai, Ágnes Erös, Saša Kicošev and Dušan Ristić. Irén Gábrity Molnár helped me in the initial phase of my fieldwork in Subotica/Szabadka. I am indebted to Monika Váradi, Zoltán Takács, Patrik Tátrai and Ágnes Erös for our many fruitful discussions on the issues at hand, during project meetings and joint fieldwork, which resulted in several joint publications.

Third, I would like to thank Grzegorz Ekiert, Wolfgang Danspeckgruber and István Deák. I thank Grzegorz Ekiert from Harvard University for hosting me at the Department of Government during my research semester as a visiting fellow in fall 2010; Wolfgang Danspeckgruber from Princeton University for welcoming me as a visiting researcher in his team at the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination in spring 2011; and István Deák for introducing me to the East Central European Center at Columbia University the same year. The research conducted at these institutions as well as their comments and our discussions during this time have all contributed to the outcome of
Acknowledgements

this book. I am also grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation for granting me the scholarship that enabled me to complete my research in these respective institutions.

My special thanks go to Jeannette Regan, who edited the English in this book. I have greatly appreciated her engaged and close reading of my manuscript as well as her willingness to grasp the smallest nuances when it came to expressing culturally and linguistically complex issues. I am also grateful to Janine Wegmüller for carefully reading and helping with the editing of the manuscript. My thanks also go to Katy Crossan at Ashgate and Faye Leerink at Routledge for their cooperation from the signing of the contract for this book to its publication.

I am particularly grateful to each and every person I had a chance to interview, and who took the time to answer my many questions during my fieldwork in the Hungarian–Slovak and Hungarian–Serbian border regions as well as in the European Parliament and the European Commission in Brussels. Without their willingness to share their views, ideas and visions on the neighbourly relations in East Central Europe, this book could not have been published. I would like to express special thanks to Péter Békési from the municipality of Komárno/Komárom and Margit Rédlí from the municipality of Komárom, as well as Stanka Parać from the Local Democracy Agency in Subotica/Szabadka, and Kinga Gál, Member of the European Parliament, for helping me to establish contact with many of my interviewees.

On a personal note, I am thankful beyond words to both of my parents, Ottó and Annamaria Filep, and my wife Ekaterina Filep for their encouragement and support throughout the years of my research and the process of writing this book. I thank my father especially for all our many and lively discussions and for his profound and illuminating insights over the years, which have added a personal dimension to my knowledge about and ‘feel’ for East Central Europe. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

Bern, August 2015
Part I

Towards a Concept of Good Neighbourhood

Figure I.1 “Together in Peace,” a demonstration on the Elisabeth Bridge between Komárno/Komárom (Slovakia) and Komárom (Hungary): Slovak and Hungarian politicians from Slovakia protest against the tensions between Slovaks and Hungarians, Slovakia and Hungary in November 2008. From left to right: Béla Szabó (then vice-mayor) and Tibor Bastrnák (then mayor) of Komárno/Komárom; Béla Bugár, president of the party Híd-Most (member of the Slovak Parliament, then SMK-MKP); Iveta Radičová, former prime minister of Slovakia (then opposition politician, SDKÚ-DS); and Imre Andruskó, then member of the Slovak Parliament (SMK-MKP).

Source: Bumm.sk.
1 Introduction

East Central Europe: A Region of ‘Bad-Neighbourly’ Relations?

East Central Europe has remained an area of political and social tensions in spite of the EU accession of 11 post-communist countries and intense transition processes since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 (see, for instance, Blanchard 1997; Fassmann 1997; Gabrisch and Hölscher 2006; Illés 2002; Mansfeldová et al. 2005; Risse et al. 2001; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2006; Turnock 1997). The ‘European Project,’ as attractive as it appeared to the new member states of the European Union (EU), has not (yet) succeeded in overcoming tensions between neighbouring states, majority and minority populations, and economic ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the transition period, to mention just a few examples. The persistence – some would argue re-emergence – of inter-ethnic antagonism in the ethno-culturally diverse countries of East Central Europe is especially critical. The reasons for these tensions are manifold: lack of inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, lack of knowledge about and understanding for each other, conflicting ethnic discourses in the public debate, exclusion of national and ethnic minorities from nation-building, nationalist and assimilationist policies, the ‘ethnic card’ as a convenient instrument to distract the public from other, for instance, socio-economic, problems, and also an EU (enlargement) that has neglected sensitive (non-violent) inter-ethnic issues.

The inter-ethnic tensions in East Central Europe are related to many contemporary issues. At the same time, they are historically deeply rooted and have not been easily released, first, because in post- or ‘post-post-conflict’ societies, an individual’s experience of conflict sustainably affects his or her consciousness, perception of and attitude towards the Other(s); second, it is the often conflicting interpretations of history that have sustained tensions, reproduced via institutions, public (nationalist) discourse and (inter-generational) social contact. Oplatka (2002) described this set of problems in connection with the controversy surrounding the Czechoslovak Beneš Decrees in the following way: “The soil of the old continent [Europe] is … historically saturated, political consciousness is historically shaped, and to a really incredible extent this is true for Central and South Eastern Europe.”
This ‘saturation’ is a result of the region’s troubled history with regard to external occupation (Ottoman, Habsburg and Soviet rule), internal tensions and ethnic conflicts.

In the relationship between the Hungarian cultural nation and the Slovak and Serbian cultural nations, the major event that has significantly determined these neighbourly relations in the twentieth and early twenty-first century is the Treaty of Trianon signed in 1920. It sealed the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a number of smaller states and turned Hungarians, the largest and dominant population group in the multinational Kingdom of Hungary, into minorities in Romania, Czechoslovakia (today on the territories of Slovakia and Ukraine), Yugoslavia (today in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia) and Austria. Nowadays, Hungarians still represent, both numerically and in terms of their political strength, the most significant minority in Romania, Slovakia and Serbia, in spite of having experienced assimilationist policies as well as deportation and expulsion in the course of the twentieth century. While the inter-ethnic relations within these countries and the relationship between Hungary and its neighbouring states have generally improved in the years that followed the fall of the Iron Curtain, the need to organize neighbourly relations across the ethno-cultural diversity at hand continues to exist.

Investigating Good-Neighbourly Discourses, Strategies and Practices

These problems are very present in the political, public (and scientific) debate in East Central Europe, but also in ‘Western’ discourses on the region. However, there are also ‘good’ examples, ‘best practices,’ and peaceful ‘normalities’ to be found, which have received less attention. Thus, in contrast to the frequently rather problem-oriented research on inter-ethnic relations in East Central Europe, this book pursues a solution-oriented approach, aimed at highlighting good-neighbourly discourses, strategies and practices.

Consequently, the main empirical research question guiding this investigation has been how good neighbourhood is understood and ‘practised’ by different stakeholders in a multicultural environment. What are their ideas and strategies for the building of good-neighbourly relations? To investigate these issues, I conducted more than 130 qualitative interviews between 2007 and 2011 with a variety of stakeholders in two ethno-culturally diverse border regions in East Central Europe as well as in the European Commission and Parliament. Since 2011, I have continued to substantiate this information with numerous visits to and conversations in the region. I have further enriched my analysis with the help of scientific and popular literature, documents and strategy papers of EU institutions, national, regional and local administrations, cultural associations, newspaper articles, radio and TV interviews, other visual materials and online sources.

The aim of this research has been to explore ‘best practices’ in response to the simple observation that the everyday life of people seems far removed
from an emerging violent conflict in contrast to the nationalist state policies and rhetoric of leading politicians. This raises once again the questions as to how people of different ethno-cultural affiliations surrounded by nationalist discourses peacefully coexist and how they organize their own multicultural neighbourhood. In my view, the analysis of people’s perceptions, ideas and (everyday) strategies is crucial for understanding inter-ethnic neighbourly relations and their dynamics, because these insights offer both an understanding of problems and access to solutions.

Solutions are the focus of this book. Therefore, the key analytical research questions have been the following: How can good neighbourhood or its politics be conceptualized for the East Central European context and beyond? What general factors define and contribute to the building of good-neighbourly relations? How can policy-makers then implement such a concept?

To investigate my research questions, research sites on the Hungarian–Slovak and the Hungarian–Serbian borders were selected: Komárno/Komárom in Slovakia, a divided town on the Hungarian–Slovak state border with its ‘other half’ in Hungary (Komárom), and Subotica/Szabadka in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Serbia, located on the Hungarian–Serbian state border close to its twin town Szeged, the third-largest city in Hungary. The border location of the research sites was crucial for two reasons. First, ethno-culturally they are among the most diverse areas in these countries because most Hungarians as a minority (with the exception of the Szekler population in Romania) have resided in the border regions of Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia and Croatia, often forming the majority population in a specific realm along the border with Hungary. Inter-ethnic contact in its various, political and everyday forms could thus be researched much more intensively than in other parts of Slovakia and Serbia where ethno-cultural diversity is less apparent. Second, the border location also allowed investigating the inter-ethnic question from a different perspective, looking at cross-border processes and how they might influence the inter-ethnic relations within Slovakia and Serbia.

In addition, the Hungarian population in both countries served as a central comparative element. Many challenges in the neighbourly relations between the majority and minority populations (most prominently the Hungarians) – including many claims of the minorities in Slovakia and Serbia – show similarities: educational matters, language-related issues, issues of collective rights and historical grievances, to name a few. At the same time, the two cases suggest differences: Slovakia and Serbia have experienced different paths to nation-building in the past 25 years and even their communist legacy differed. Slovakia’s independence in 1993 as a result of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in the (peaceful) Velvet Divorce was, on the one hand, regarded by Slovaks as a success in the establishment of a sovereign Slovak political nation; on the other, Slovaks largely ignored the need for specific policies that aimed at accommodating the minorities of the new state. In the case of Serbia, Serbian nationalism led several former Yugoslav Republics
Figure 1.1 Ethnic map of the Carpathian Basin with the two main research sites in Slovakia (Komárno/Komárom) and Serbia (Subotica/Szabadka).

Source: Kocsis, Tátrai and Balízs (2015).
into three major wars in the 1990s and the exclusion if not annihilation of minorities was state policy. However, although both countries had been hostile towards minorities in the 1990s, in comparison to Slovakia, Serbia faced much greater challenges in the early 2000s due to its violent recent past.

It is, therefore, a paradoxical finding of my research that it was not in Slovakia, but in the violently disintegrated, post-conflict Yugoslavia (more precisely in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Serbia), where (more visible) good-neighbourly strategies have since been applied or developed. It could be claimed that the Vojvodina region (as a part of Serbia) was peaceful throughout the years of war and that the former Yugoslav multicultural policies have positively and sustainably influenced the (approach to) coexistence of this multi-ethnic region's Serbian, Croatian, Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian population. However, this would still not fully explain the difference to peaceful Slovakia. Another possible explanation is that the wars eventually generated a necessity to actively 'repair' inter-ethnic relations and to engage in inter-ethnic rapprochement via different programmes and policies. In a historically multi-ethnic region such as Vojvodina, efforts of rapprochement of the kind that spread throughout the Western Balkans (involving external actors, 'Western' NGOs or governmental agencies) were more likely to find fertile ground. In Vojvodina, the historical, 'good-neighbourly' pre-war experience, but also the 'multicultural' self-conception of many Vojvodinians has undoubtedly played a positive role in this process.

Finally, the choice of these two research sites was also made on the basis of the criterion to investigate an internal (Hungary–Slovakia) and an external border of the European Union (Hungary–Serbia), because the international framework in which the respective countries are embedded might influence the positioning of the different parties: states, political parties, minority or civil society organizations. Undoubtedly, many neighbourly processes materialize within multi-ethnic states; however, it is in border regions where geopolitical changes such as the entries into the EU or the Schengen area have had immediate consequences on the trans-local (cross-border) level. Today, people can move freely between Hungary and Slovakia, while crossing the border between Hungary and Serbia is more restricted and was fraught with difficulty until the Schengen states abolished the visa-regime for Serbian citizens in 2009.

While the latter change in policy has pointed in a direction of rapprochement between the neighbours, the erection of a border fence by the Hungarian government in 2015 in response to the large-scale illegal border crossing of people from outside Europe at the Serbian–Hungarian border will also have its harmful effect at the trans-local level. Although the fence was not built to separate or restrict the movement of the Hungarian and Serbian neighbours, it will make their everyday life and exchange more complicated than it had become before the erection of the fence.
Conceptualizing a ‘Good Neighbourhood’

While “good neighbourhood,” “good neighbourly relations” and “good-neighbourly policy” represent terms that have been used frequently in politics and science, their consolidation into a theoretical concept has been lacking. Alan Henrikson (2000) was among the first academics to formulate a concept that used the “good neighbour” terminology. As an international relations scholar, he referred to bilateral relations between states, namely the United States and Mexico, whom he defined as neighbours. His “Facing across borders: the diplomacy of bon voisinage” is an attempt to conceptualize good neighbourliness according to three principles in inter-state diplomacy, in other words, on what basis states should maintain good-neighbourly relations with each other (see Chapter 2).

Differing from Henrikson’s concept of bon voisinage, my work develops a concept of good neighbourhood around ethno-national or ethno-cultural boundaries rather than state borders. While some of Henrikson’s principles for good-neighbourly diplomacy can be transferred to my context, the relations between people of different ethno-cultural affiliation or between cultural nations, the borders of which do often not coincide with state borders, involve aspects that make it significantly different from the neighbourly structure in Henrikson’s case. East Central Europe is a particularly telling example, since their relations have had a greater importance in the course of the region’s history than simply the struggle between neighbouring countries. That is, while the study focuses on the inter-ethnic relations in two multi-ethnic states (Slovakia and Serbia), it includes the role of Hungary as the motherland (or kin state) of the Hungarian population in its neighbouring countries.

At the core of my concept is cultural capital, a concept coined by the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1986), as the determining variable in the building of good-neighbourly relations. My “politics of good neighbourhood” is defined by its quality to enhance three distinct forms of capital: intercultural capital, cross-cultural social capital and multicultural capital. In this context, I draw on further authors such as Robert Putnam (2000) and his notion of bonding and bridging social capital and on Will Kymlicka (2007) and his considerations concerning multicultural societies. They, as well as Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox and Grancea’s (2006) framing of “everyday ethnicity” have strongly influenced my analysis and the conceptual elaboration.

Moreover, as my fieldwork has confirmed, the concept’s comprehensive nature is crucial. While some aspects in the concept such as reconciliation, minority rights and the enhancement of cross-cultural knowledge through education have been widely discussed and analysed, they have not yet been integrated into and considered within a more comprehensive concept. However, comprehensive thinking is especially relevant for political practice, where the implementation of different good-neighbourly policies sometimes
occurs in an uncoordinated manner. Therefore, my concept of good neighbourhood may also serve as a reference for policy-makers or representatives of civil society who aim at rapprochement between cultural nations or majority and minority populations. I have also abstracted the concept to an extent that should allow its application, at least in part, to regional contexts beyond East Central Europe.

Outline of the Book

This first, introductory chapter is followed by a conceptual chapter, which identifies the main sources of inspiration for the concept of good neighbourhood and then outlines its various aspects before defining the terminology used. However, it does not explain the concept itself. Chapters 3 and 4, forming the second part of the book, provide a detailed portrait of the two main research sites, Komárno/Komárom in Slovakia at the border with Hungary and Subotica/Szabadka in Serbia at the Hungarian–Serbian border. This second part of the book contextualizes the analysis in the third part. The focus lays on the role of ethnicity as a social category in different spheres of the neighbourly relations between the people of various ethno-cultural affiliations: politics, education, religion, cultural life, public space and media. Chapters 5 to 7, forming the third part of the book, analyse the different components of the concept: intercultural capital, cross-cultural social capital and multicultural capital. These three forms of capital as the main components in my concept of good neighbourhood have subcomponents that are discussed and analysed. In contrast to the second part of the book (Chapters 3 and 4), this part builds on culture as the category of analysis, since it is culture that constitutes the main element of the conceptual framework in which neighbourly relations in East Central Europe should be embedded. The final chapter synthesizes the results of Part III (Chapters 5 to 7) and concludes with an analysis of the dynamics of my concept of good neighbourhood.

A Note on Geographical Names and Translation

Given the multicultural setting and the political significance of language use in East Central Europe, I usually use more than one name of a town or village, for instance, Subotica/Szabadka. Subotica is the Serbian name of the town, while Szabadka is its Hungarian equivalent. If the name of the town appears in an interview quote, I use the version used by the interviewee. The interviews with Hungarian interviewees were conducted in Hungarian; conversations with Slovak and Serbian interviewees were sometimes held in Hungarian, sometimes in Slovak, Serbian or English, depending on the language proficiency of the interviewee and the agreement between interviewer and interviewee (see Filep 2009b). For interviews in Slovak and Serbian, I was accompanied by an interpreter. The English interview quotations appear
in their original version without language editing; all other, non-English quotations from interviews, speeches, literature and newspaper articles are my translations, from the original language to English.

Note

1 Cultural nation (or Kulturnation) refers to an (imagined) community (Anderson 1991) based on the belief of a shared national culture and language without necessarily requiring a territorially defined political entity such as the ‘nation-state.’ Therefore, it is a concept that may also, for instance, cross state boundaries, as in the case of the Hungarian and Serbian cultural nations.