

## Preface

This Discussion Paper of the Centre for Regional Studies is indeed timely. Our understandings of borders, border regions and crossborder cooperation have been affected by overlying geopolitical events, reflecting concerns of the times and the ways in which Europe and its internal and external borders have been perceived. 2004 marked an historical year in the process of European enlargement; ten Central and Eastern European states, as well as Malta and Cyprus, joined the European Union. Above and beyond that, a new round of enlargement is likely in 2007 as Romania and Bulgaria prepare for membership. Viewed from the co-operation perspective, particularly the regional and local cross-border kind, EU enlargement, the imposition of Schengen criteria for visas and cross-border mobility as well as new “partnerships” with Ukraine and other neighbouring countries provide a rapidly changing geopolitical context. As the EU takes on new members and its external boundaries gradually shift, socio-economic and political transformations are taking place at the borders that not only portend new regional development opportunities but also many potential problems and tensions. One of the central questions that emerges from these simultaneous processes is one of “re-bordering” in all of its multifaceted senses.

The “Wider Europe” initiative, unveiled last year by the EU Commission, expresses a will on the part of the EU to avoid future divisions due to socio-economic disparities, political divergences and conflicts of interest. This is to be achieved through comprehensive co-operation agendas that transcend political, economic and cultural dividing lines. The EU appears genuinely committed EU to an “alternative” geopolitics, based on partnership and non-exploitative interdependence. This, however, requires regional partnerships that can flexibly manage heterogeneous economic and socio-political realities. At the same time, however, economic particularism and selective border regimes could have profoundly negative effects on the eastern border regions of the new EU-25, particularly in the case of Hungary and other new member states. This could also exacerbate development gaps between the EU-25, the future EU-27 and non-EU states. Additionally, while free trade and open borders are upheld as necessary for economic partnership, securitisation and stricter regulation of the EU’s external boundaries threaten to limit the extent to which transnational civil society and socio-cultural co-operation can flourish.

Stifling border interaction that could be vital to economic and social development locally would confirm fears of a “Fortress Europe”. Hence, at the shifting borders of the EU it will be necessary to find mechanisms that mediate between external pressures and local concerns and transcend socio-economic, political and systemic asymmetries. This book examines capacities for “region-building” on Hungary’s eastern borders in anticipation of the next round of EU

enlargement and the inauguration of the EU's New Neighbourhood Policy. This includes, among others, co-operative structures, governance practices, conflict-minimising dialogue and strategies for joint economic development. For several years now, the Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has been carefully scrutinising potentials for border transcending co-operation practices and urban networks between Hungary, Romania and the Ukraine. It is only fitting that the pioneering work of Bela Baranyi and his co-authors receive greater international attention at this crucial period of Europe's geopolitical transformations.

Berlin, August 2005.

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