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# Border Living and Identities of the Hungarian–Serbian Borderlanders



## ABSTRACT

Diverse types of borders, like physical, social, personal or symbolic ones manifest themselves through a lot of different ways in political, social, cultural or economic discourses (BAUDER 2011). There is no singular perspective neither a theory to approach the borders, because they are determined by different local factors (PAASI 2005, 2011, NEWMAN 2006). However, there are some common phenomena which are present at all existing borders be it any type of them.

Borders created by institutions or the society, impacts the lives of local residents, who are constantly reproducing these borders by making interactions with different actors and the border itself. Thus, borders shape the identity of local residents regularly (HOUTUM 1999, NEWMAN 2006, YNDIGEGN 2006), thereby, the constant state borders have different meanings for different people (BALIBAR 2002). These narratives of the borders and their spatial extension have become more widespread, turning into more and more layered, and more and more identifiable in different areas and places of life, often separated from state borders (BALIBAR 2002, RUMFORD 2012). Bordering is an essential factor of defining self-identity, which is a Janus-faced phenomenon by constructing a community and at the same time by exclusion of the Others (HOUTUM–NAERSSEN 2002). Thus the exist of the borders inevitably build distance between the two side of it, enacting the stereotypes and then the behaviour of the borderlanders. However, the greatest effects of the border politics and the existence of borders have on those who are living close to them. Hence the research of them has great significance.

The most important questions of my paper are: What does it mean to live on one side of the border, and what on the other side? Along what kind of dimensions are the differences emphasized, and along which factors the similarities take shape. This paper shows the evolution and the narratives of the Hungarian–Serbian borderland and focuses on social and mental borders perceived by people living close to a state border, where different normative values meet.

The study area of the research is the Hungarian–Serbian border region. Two survey research in 2019 ( $N = 777$ ) was conducted in some settlements of this borderland. This revealed that the most vigorous mental border derives from the different mindset, however the economic and the cultural differences were mentioned also. These outcomes show different pictures if we examine two of the sides of the border separately. From the Hungarian side smaller number of the respondents mentioned any perceived differences between them and those living on the other side. On the other hand, respondents from Serbia felt that different mentality is the strongest factor of their mental border towards the other side.

## KEYWORDS

borderland, mental borders, identity

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## INTRODUCTION

The roles and the functions of state borders have changed throughout history, from time to time the dividing function coming to the fore, and other times the connecting role. Some periods and some boundaries characterized by physically invisible borders, while other boundaries are defined by walls and fences. The nature and role of state borders are constantly changing, even today. There are many economic, political, demographic, cultural and other factors that dynamically shape state boundaries.

The Serbian–Hungarian state border has also undergone many changes in recent decades. One of the most prominent historical point is the redefinition of the border defined by the Treaty of Trianon. Even today, this is often the subject of public debate on both sides of the border. Another important factor of the examined border region is that Hungarians live on both sides of it, creating a significant minority on the Serbian side. However, over the past decades, different socialization environments had taken place, and have made different life-worlds among the same nationalities on the opposing side of the boundary.

The starting point of the research and the main questions are linked to this key situation mentioned above. In this paper the following questions are going to be answered: What are the main differences and similarities related to the border situation of the two sides?; How the borderlanders are using the border itself?; What kind of attitude do they have towards their geographical location and whether they have a so called border consciousness or border identity? Following a brief theoretical review, the most important results of a 2019 Serbian–Hungarian cross-border survey would be presented.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

In spring of 2019, a questionnaire survey was conducted ( $N = 796$ ) in the study area. The survey sample consisted of 10 settlements and 2 control settlements, 7 in Hungary and 5 in Serbia (*Figure 1*). The reason for choosing this area is that both sides of the boundary are mostly lived by the same nationality, and it also has the most and the busiest border crossing points between Hungary and Serbia.

During the interpretation of the data, the units of analysis were made up of individuals, but because of the lack of a list of the population members (it is difficult and very expensive to get one from the statistical office), the sampling unit consisted of the dwellings. Systematic sampling was conducted with the help of an interviewer, every third residential building was selected, and only one person per building was eligible to fill in the questionnaire. The target number of questionnaires was the 5% of the residential buildings per settlement, however this was not achieved in all cases, some municipalities are somewhat overrepresented while others are underrepresented due to the differing response levels.

As part of the study, in the autumn of 2019, an online questionnaire survey ( $N = 200$ ) was conducted among the Hungarian residents of Subotica (a city in the northern part of Subotica appx. 16 km from the Hungarian border). It included a number of open questions about the factors according to how the local residents are evaluating their position relating to the border, and how was changing that in different historical eras. The survey also functioned as a pilot, as the opinions raised in Subotica and the questions asked will be used later in the sample area described above.

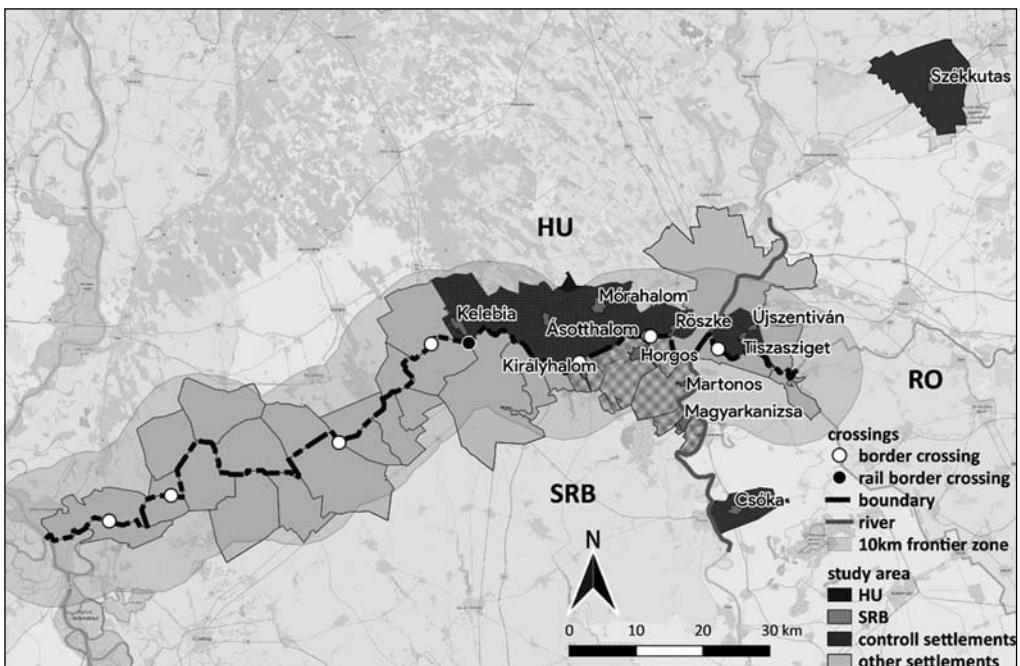


FIGURE 1 Study area in 2019 (KRISKA, O. 2019)

The data analysis was done primarily in the SPSS program, where I analysed different cross-tables, correlations. The main method analysis that is applied in this paper is the principal component analysis. All this made it possible for the different dimensions to be made up of several questions, thus better representing the attributions of that dimension and its different approaches.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Diverse types of borders, like physical, social, personal or symbolic ones manifest themselves through a lot of different ways in political, social, cultural or economic discourses (BAUDER 2011). There is no singular perspective neither a theory to approach the borders, because they are determined by different local factors (PAASI 2005, 2011, NEWMAN 2006). However, there are some common phenomena which are present at all existing borders be it any type of them.

Borders created by institutions or the society, impacts the lives of local residents, who are constantly reproducing these borders by making interactions with different actors and the border itself. Thus, borders shape the identity of local residents regularly (HOUTUM 1999, NEWMAN 2006, YNDIGEKN 2006), thereby, the constant state borders have different meanings for different people (BALIBAR 2002). These narratives of the borders and their spatial extension have become more widespread, turning into more and more layered, and more and more identifiable in different areas and places of life, often separated from state borders (BALIBAR 2002, RUMFORD 2012). Bordering is an essential factor of defining self-identity, which is a Janus-faced phenomenon by constructing a community and at the same time by exclusion of the Others (HOUTUM–NAERSSEN 2002). Thus the exist of the borders inevitably build distance between the two side of it, enacting the stereotypes and then the behaviour of the borderlanders. However, the greatest effects of the border politics and the existence of borders have on those who are living close to them.

People's basic need to belong to different groups and communities (HOGG et al. 2008) is most often requested with people whom they have some similarities. The use of "we-they", "here-there", "outside-inside" or other similar separations that create and form the identity is essential to the existence of these closed communities, be they related to spatial or social terms. In order to strengthening the identities, reproducing the existing system, and legitimizing different group practices, these distinctions are often emphasized – whether they are real or just perceived (HOUTUM – VAN NAERSSEN 2002). Beyond the dual definition, however, it is important to determine the distance related to "us and others" separation, the mental distance and mental boundaries between them (NEWMAN 2006, MEENA 2014), even objectively, but even more on the basis of subjective perceptions (YNDIGEKN 2006).

The formation of a border identity requires several components and is influenced by the (state)-border. Historical background, economic, cultural and political distance, the degree of cooperation and institutionalization all influence individuals' attitudes towards the boundary (PAYAN 2014).

Identity could be defined as a discourse that people speak about themselves in order to interpret and give meanings of their own life-worlds (BRAMBILLA 2007). At the same time, mental and state borders, especially when the two coincide, can transform all of this, since borders are meaning-breakers and meaning-makers concurrently. In each case, boundaries denote a different community, a different set of norms, and culture, thus during the crossing of a boundary the individual are forced to redefine themselves and their surroundings.

By “border consciousness”, I mean a factor that is essentially part of an individual’s identity, but weaker than that, and lies more “hidden”, in the lower degrees of self-definition. For the development of border consciousness, there may be a sense of difference in two directions, a sense of difference towards the inner parts of the country, which is essential for its formation. If the border population feels significantly different from the border population of the neighbouring country, then the border consciousness is created also, but we do not speak of a single, integrative approach on both sides, but of different views in the two border zones. Of course, the sense of identity and the common qualities, the similarity of life and the subjective feeling can also occur, and in that case a truly common, cross-border consciousness could be achieved.

### 3. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HUNGARIAN BORDER STUDIES

The renaissance of Hungarian frontier research began after the collapse of the socialist era, when the question of borders, cross-border cooperation and EU accession induced the birth of new research. In the previous era, under the auspices of socialism, political geography was neglected in the entire block thus the research of the borders was pushed into the background too (HARDI 2009).

One of the main features of Hungarian border research is that the focus is on the cross-border examination of various social phenomena and only recently launched the interest in topics where especially the boundary itself was emphasized in the research (KOVÁCS 2006). The interest of the studies on borders is mainly directed towards the defining the extent of the border zones and topics about peripherality, with numerous research on these subjects. An important starting point is the approach of Zoltán HAJDÚ (1988), who has applied the so called “line theory” and “zone theory” approach of the borders in Hungarian limology. He has already emphasized that borders both involve separation and cooperation, and that, overall, they can be seen as a zone of encounter, the possibilities of which are largely influenced by the formed image of (state) boundaries (HAJDÚ 1988).

According to the extent of the border zones, different methods have been used to define it. For example on the basis of the definition of urban catchment areas (KOVÁCS 1990), diverse transport geographic factors (PÁL 1996), or simply different zones were made relating to their distance from the border (HAJDÚ 1996, TINER 1994, HARDI 2008).

The issues about border closeness and socio-economic periphery related to that have also been accentual in the Hungarian border research, but the authors agree that border closeness may not necessarily involve the socio-economic peripherality. This largely depends on the boundary section and on the relationship with the neighbouring country furthermore, interventions of the government can also have a strong impact on the border life (BERÉNYI 1988, ERDŐSI 2002, TÓTH–CSATÁRI 2002, SZÓNOKYNÉ 2002, BAJMÓCY 2002). Of course, the existence of a border crossing pont is still scarce in order to increase the intensity of cross-border relations (KISS JÁNOS 1990), to build trust and to approximate social distances between the inhabitants of the two countries is needed to this.

In the international literature of border studies, a critical point of view on borders has become a crucial point of view for a few decades ago and today has been a decisive approach. However, in Hungary, only few studies are currently approaching mental boundaries and state boundaries as a social construct (TÍMÁR 2007, NAGY 2009, SIK–SURÁNYI 2015, PETE 2018).

## 4. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY – BORDER CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE HUNGARIAN–SERBIAN BORDERLAND

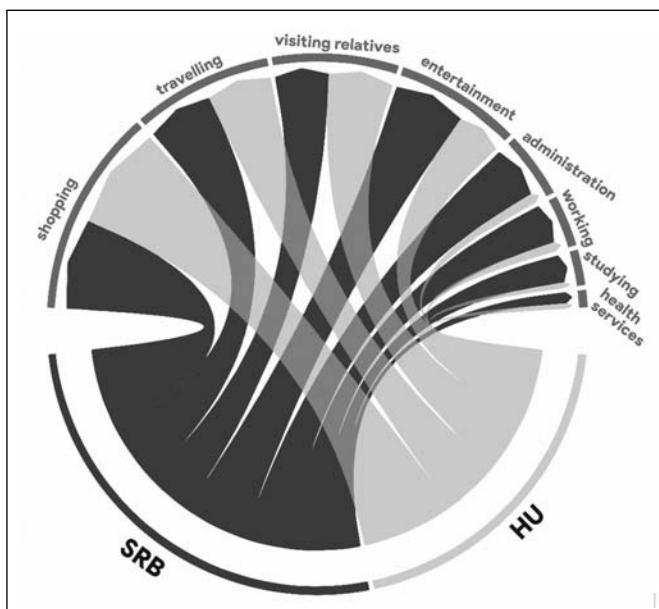
To present the results I grouped the questions around 4 main factors. These are the attitudes towards living close to the border; the patterns of using the border; the inward factors of the border consciousness; and the sense of difference towards the other side.

The principal component analysis of the *attitude towards living close to the border* ('PC Location') was made with two questions of the survey: 1) "For me it is advantageous to live close to the border." The statement was rated on a 1–5 Likert scale, while 2) "How much do You love living close to the border?" could be answered on a 1 to 4 scale. In the case of this principal component, a moderate correlation was found ( $t = -9.059$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), Serbian respondents found their location near the border much more advantageous than Hungarian respondents.

Respondents from Mórahalom, Kelebia and Röszke (HU) rated the location of the settlement the most negatively, from Hungary only respondents from Tiszasziget were answering that living close to the border has more advantage. The situation of the two control settlements is interesting, because in the case of Csóka (SRB), neither the positive nor the negative attitude is not clearly present, while the value of Székkutas (HU) is the most striking in negative direction. Perhaps not surprisingly, the 'PC Location' relates to the question of whether it would be better to live in the interior territories of the country. In this question the difference between the two countries is also present ( $V = 0.362$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), as 21% of Hungarians are agreeing with this, while only 5% agree with this on the other side of the boundary. Among those who consider the border location as a detriment, 54% of them would move away from their current settlement, if they could so, while only 24% of those who enjoy living close to the border would do so.

Turning now to border-using related questions, the first issue, which is very closely linked to the previous principal component, is the frequency of crossing the border. Namely, those who regard the border location as an advantage, crosses the border significantly more frequently from one side to the other ( $\gamma = 0.305$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). The difference between the two sides is even more remarkable ( $\gamma = 0.623$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ), as Serbian respondents typically travel to Hungary more frequently. However, it should be noted, that 73% of respondents from Hungary and 34% of Serbia, chose the 'less than once per month' option. Among the settlements on the Hungarian side, the residents of Tiszasziget are those who use the border slightly more frequently than from other settlements. Regarding to the principal component of the location, this explains why was Tiszasziget' a bit different from other Hungarian towns.

Regarding the purpose of the crossing (*Figure 2*), I asked the respondents to name their 3 most common motivations for crossing the state border. In both countries, shopping and travelling are the most often mentioned by respondents. Visiting relatives is also important from both sides, but the Serbian side dominates in terms of entertainment, administration, commuting to work, studies and visiting health services. In terms of settlement level, the case of Tiszasziget is outstanding, as 60% of all mentions are related to shopping, further explaining that the respondents of the settlement move to the other side slightly more often and that they feel the advantage of the border location. Overall, as we can see from the figure below, respondents from Serbia have notably more diverse goals when they cross the Hungarian–Serbian border.



**FIGURE 2** Purposes of crossing the border in 2019 (KRISKA, O. 2019)

To further analyse the aspects of using the border, the so called “*patterns of using the border* (‘PC Using’)” principal component has been made which summarizes the responses to the following statements (all of the questions are related to the HU–SRB border):

	Component
	1
13. The border control takes too much time.	,714
38. The border makes my life harder.	,672
39. It would be better, if I could cross the border freely.	,756

**TABLE 1** Patterns of using the border (‘PC Using’)

In the case of ‘PC Using’ we could assume that respondents from Serbia would be more sensitive regarding these 3 statements because of their frequency of border crossing. However, this alone does not justify their overall agreement with these statements compared to the Hungarian side. From Serbia, many more respondents feel that border control takes too much time, which is otherwise not correlated to the frequency of the crossing. At the same time, from Serbia more respondents said that the border makes their life harder (SRB: 36%, HU: 11%).

It seems somewhat contradictory that at the same time, the residents from the southern side of the border said to be an advantage living close to the border. The contradiction is only seeming,

as they have a higher level of awareness in the benefits of the border living, and the phrase “*makes my life harder*” specifically refers to the crossing of the boundary. If we look at the question “*How easy do you think it is to cross the border?*” We find that 48% of respondents in Hungary find it very easy to cross the border, compared to only 17% for respondents in Serbia, most of them chose the option of “*I can get through with little difficulties*” (65%).

All in all, from Serbia they are more likely to use the state border and because of the benefits it offers, they positively value their geographical location. On the other hand, crossing the border, is subjectively considered as a burden by the respondents of this site. Thus, there is a strong asymmetry between the two side regarding the experiencing and using of the border.

The previous statement is supported with that 37% of from Serbia have already had some unpleasant experiences at one of the border crossing points, while only 19% of the respondents from Hungary said so. Most often, 52% mentioned lengthy wait at the border, regardless of the respondent’s place of residence. Several people emphasized that they live only a few minutes from the border, but they still have to wait in the queue for hours, even who are commuting to work from Serbia to Hungary. A further significant group of opinions consist of explicitly negative comments on the behaviour and attitudes of border guards and customs officers (SRB: 41, HU: 23 mentioned this). Ethnic Hungarian respondents from Serbia often complained that Hungarian officers were scornful with them at the border and they called them “*Serbians*”. On the other hand, from the Hungarian side, although fewer people mentioned negative opinions about the border guards, in most cases they mentioned negative attitude of Serbian officers.

The next factor that may be present in the life of those living along the border is *inward border consciousness* (‘*PC Inward*’). In the questionnaire, several questions were asked about whether border residents perceive border living different from living in the inner parts of the country, and whether residents differ from those living farther from the border. So, it is a kind of inward attitude (towards inner spaces of the country) and a sense of difference that is essential for the creation of a border consciousness, a border identity. The inward border consciousness principal component is composed of the following questionnaire questions:

	Component
	1
26. It is different to live along the border compared to the rest of the country.	,654
27. People living along the border are different from the rest of Serbia/Hungary.	,748
44. The interests of those living along the border are less important than those of other areas.	,696
54. The right to free movement is restricted to those living along the border.	,598

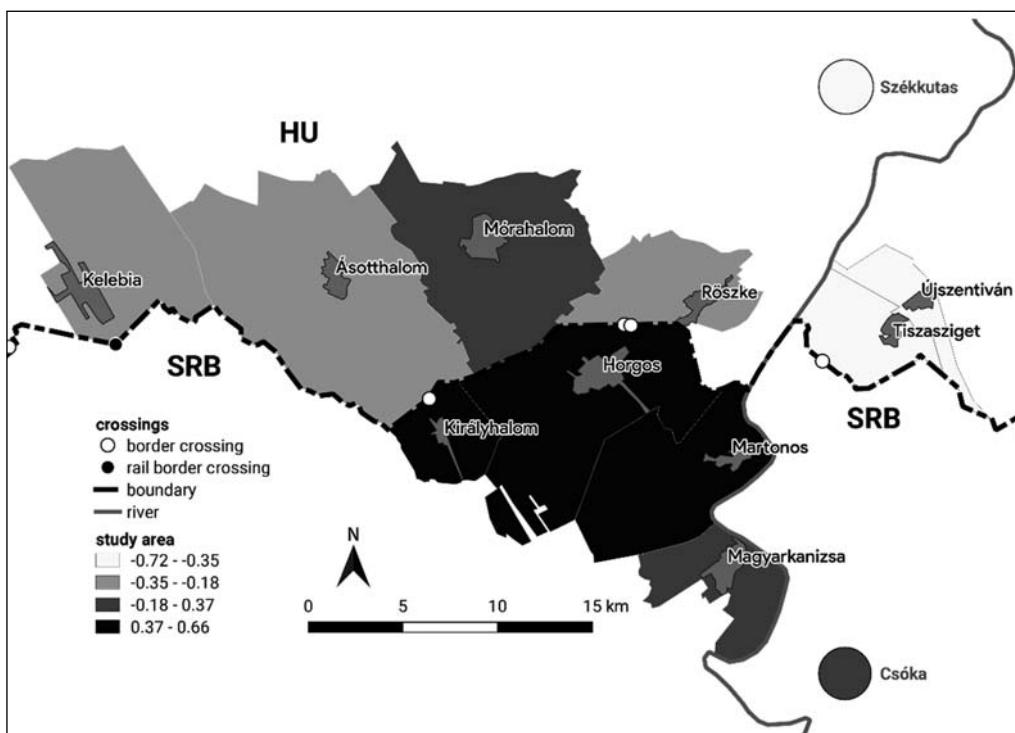
**TABLE 2** *Inward border consciousness* (‘*PC Inward*’)

Analysing them separately, there is no difference between the two sides of the boundary in the first statement, but the responses are significantly scattered on a 5-point Likert scale between agreement and rejection. The other three statements, however, already show differences between Hungary and Serbia, with respondents from Serbia generally agreeing more than from Hungary.

In the case of the second statement, this can be explained – among other things – by the fact that the majority of Hungarians in Vojvodina live near the border in the study area, while Serbians are in majority in the south and in the interior areas of the country. Attitudes towards minority political relations and related to the Serbian government and the majority Serbian territories may influence the third statement. In the case of the fourth statement, as previously described the difficulties of border crossing and hardships with it are more likely to occur on the Serbian side, at least in the subjective sense of the locals.

Looking at the components of ‘PC Inward’, it can be seen that in many cases other (indirectly border related) factors affect how people’s identity and border consciousness develops. However, as it was mentioned, all this difference is needed to form some kind of border awareness, and the data suggests that Serbian respondents’ border consciousness is stronger for these reasons (*Figure 3*).

Examining control settlements is particularly important for this principal component, since, as we move away from the boundary line, the development of border consciousness is less perceptible, according to the hypothesis. On the Serbian side, this seems to be somewhat outlined, as Csóka has the lowest value, followed by Magyarkanizsa, which is inversely proportional to the distance of the settlements from the boundary. In Hungary the values of the principal component are much lower, Tiszasziget and Újszentiván have the lowest values, only to be followed by Székkutas, the control settlement.



**FIGURE 3** Values of PC inward border consciousness (KRISKA, O. 2019)

Another important factor in the increase of border consciousness and identity is the *sense of difference from the other side* ('PC Difference') of the border, which can be examined from many aspects and also called as mental distance. From an economic point of view, the question asked in the questionnaire was that how the locals perceive the economic situation of their settlement comparing to the other side of the border and to their own country as well. When comparing with their own country, Serbia's residents felt to be in worse position, while Hungarians felt that their settlement is similar in economic terms to the rest of the country. The difference between the two sides is much more significant when they compared their settlement to the other side of the border. Respondents from the southern side clearly see their settlement in a worse economic situation, while from Hungary they find themselves in a better position ( $V = 0.796$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). 60% of respondents in Vojvodina agree with the statement that "*In general, those who live on the other side of the border are in a better position*", compared with only 11% on the other side.

Further investigating the differences, Hungarian and Serbian respondents did not agree with the statement that "*linguistic differences are a problem*" at all, with a relatively higher proportion of Hungarians than vice versa. This is probably because the answers given in Hungary focused on problems related to the Serbian language especially. There is no significant difference regarding the statement that "*norms and habits are too different*", there is a large majority of disagreeing on both sides.

60% of respondents from Serbia tend to agree with the statement that people have different mindset on the other side of the HU–SRB border, compared to the 43% of respondents agreeing with this from Hungary. By analysing the open question, it justifies the previous results. The most common response was the perceived differences are related to mentality, thinking, and behaviour from both sides. In addition, there were frequent responses concerning different language, culture, and economic differences. However, there was no significant difference between the two sides of the border.

	Component
	1
43. We are different from the residents of Hungary / Serbia.	,609
47. Hungarians have a different way of thinking on the other side of the border.	,537
17. The people on both sides of the border do not trust each other.	,780

**TABLE 3** *Sense of difference from the other side ('PC Difference')*

Based on the results of this principal component, it can be concluded that it is divisive on both sides of the border (*Figure 4*). Some inhabitants felt that there is some difference between people living on the other side, however some did not have such kind of feeling. All in all, there was no significant difference between the two sides in this factor.

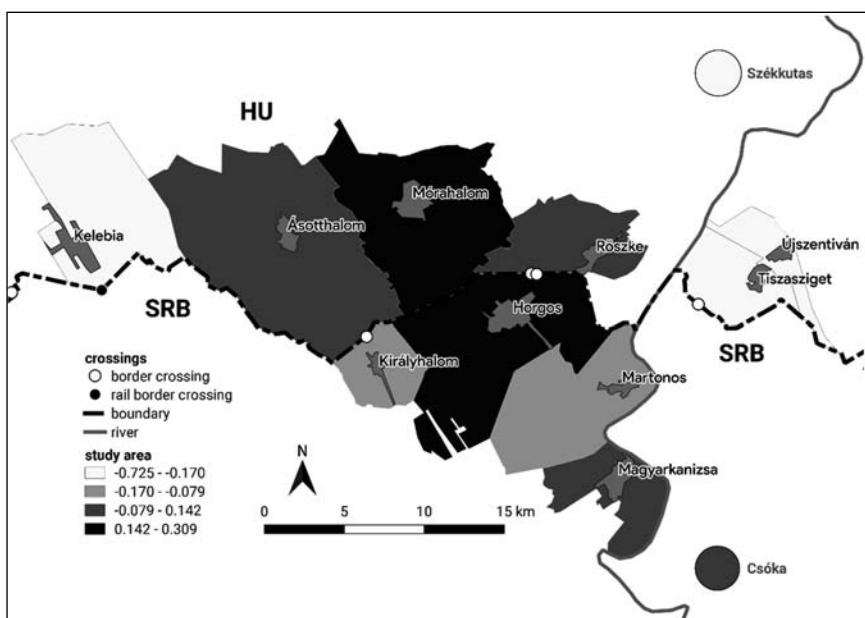


FIGURE 4 Sense of difference (outward) principal component values (KRISKA, O. 2019)

## 5. ATTITUDES ABOUT THE BORDER IN THE CITY OF SUBOTICA

The results provided in this chapter should be treated with reservations due to the small number of cases, while at the same time they provide an appropriate guide to understand the overall picture and to mark additional targets.

The questionnaire included a question about what historical era is the most advantageous in terms of border proximity. 45% of all mentions were for the 90s, followed by the “nowadays” category by 20%. Then the period before the 90s, and finally the mentions “always” and “never” closed the line by 9 and 6% of all mentions. Of course, the situation may seem somewhat contradictory, since the 90s were the period of Yugoslav Wars and the war in Kosovo, but this period was the most favourable among the locals, according to the border situation. The question of why these periods were mentioned has received different responses by different historical ages.

In terms of the 90s, the grey and black economy, the petrol business has been one of the essential elements, since all this has been a source of revenue for many families at this time, when the economic embargo struck Yugoslavia. *“Black trade flourished between two countries”*. As well as several people mentioned that the proximity of Hungary could make it easier to buy some essential products, which were in shortage in Serbia. *“Because we could go over and buy some food because the shops were empty here.”*

Regarding the 80s, respondents mostly mentioned that they were free to travel to Hungary or anywhere else while for Hungarians from Hungary that was an entirely different situation. Their discreet income was higher in Serbia, and they were eligible to spend it freely in Hungary. *"In the 80s everything was cheaper there, in the 90s it was about survival..."*

For today, 91% of the respondents from Subotica like to live close to the border. Most of them mentioned the potential economic or touristic opportunities between the two countries as a positive one, but all in conditional mode, referring to the idle opportunities. As a negative, it has been most mentioned that the border has led to the increased number of migrants in the city, whether they stay for a short or for a longer time. Others have highlighted the negative effects of transport. *"The city's transit traffic is too high, which contributes to an increase in air pollution."* Another important group was the comments on government, since several people mentioned that the Serbian government does not pay sufficient attention to this area, neglects it much less than the more southern areas. Someone named Subotica as a "disgraced" city. *"Serbia does not invest as much as it does in the interior parts of the country."*

The results of this chapter provide a qualitative view of how the local population of Subotica approach to the border, however this is not necessarily true to the whole of the study area presented above, although it is a good guide for further qualitative examination of the area.

## SUMMARY

Overall, the role of borders and border location in influencing identities depends on many factors. Hungarian respondents living on the Serbian side of the study area have more diverse border using practices than respondents from Hungary. Their sense of inward difference is stronger than that of the neighbouring country, however an important component of that is that they are nationally, linguistically and culturally different from the majority Serbian nation. At the same time, as we can see, in the case of the Serbian–Hungarian state border this is necessary for the formation of the border consciousness. The mental distance to the other side has similar characteristics on both sides, with slightly stronger differences perceived on the Serbian side. These differences are mainly limited to concepts like mindset, mentality and linguistic differences that may arise from the different social and socialization contexts mentioned in the introduction.

In the case of Subotica, we have seen that the perception of the border situation is very dependent on macroeconomic and other political factors related to the different historical era. The subjective opinion of the local population about the 90s was indicated as not in absolute terms as the most advantageous era for border-side. It provided a relatively safe place, and some economical possibilities as opposed to inner areas of the country.

According to the theoretical background, we can say that the polysemic attribution mentioned by BALIBAR (2002) is present in the Serbian–Hungarian border. The state border has different meanings for those living on the Serbian side and different meaning for those living in Hungary. Boundary perception and its usage are different for the two sides. At the same time, the sense of difference outward and inward are stronger on the Serbian side, which is essential part of border consciousness.

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