

PR CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING THE CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION DANUBE-CRIS-MURES-TISA (DKMT)

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Abstract: The cross-border cooperation is viewed in Europe as an important tool for unifying the once divided continent and for dismantling historic rivalries between states. In the border region of Romania, Hungary and Serbia the Euro-regional cooperation known as DKMT (Danube-Cris-Mures-Tisa) develops as a model for Romania. The elected officials at the regional level from the three states involved agree to develop projects and try to assess DKMT as part of the "big Europe". The paper looks into the PR practice of the administrative bodies of DKMT and analyzes some of the current problems in delivering Euro-regional information to the general public.

Key words: public relations, Euro-regional cooperation, (public) administration.

1. Introduction

Explaining the administrative decisions to the public is one of the main responsibilities of the PR departments of elected bodies. Introducing new concepts and making them interesting for the people, via media, is even more challenging. In the early '90s of the previous century, however, the public administration bodies in the frontier region of Romania, Hungary and Serbia set forth to introduce the cross-border cooperation, European processes and integration policies in their public agendas. The paper explores the evolution of this task in Timis county and what challenges remain significant for PR specialists in the context of new European processes. It is based on a combination of direct observation, media monitoring, interviews, analysis of relevant documents and studies concerning the particular case of the cross-border cooperation within the framework of Danube-Cris-Mures-Tisa protocol, signed by regional authorities in 1997.

2. The cross-border cooperation: a view from Timis county

The grass-root cross-border co-operation among sub-national administrative actors in Western Europe goes back as far as the early '50s, the unification process of the continent having a strong support in the region. Confidence-building measures, in the sense this term is currently used, are efficient only when they are based on open-mindedness, on the deep trust among co-operating partners, trust emerging from knowledge, experience, recurrent success in common action. As evidence, one may hint at the fact that over 70 euro-regions (involving 38 states) have been registered so far, and new euro-regions have been formed in areas formerly closed to such type of co-operation (Eger: 1999). An important fostering factor proved to be the Madrid *European Frame-Convention on the Cross-Border Cooperation of Territorial*

Communities or Authorities (1982, with an *Additional Protocol* of 1989 which enhanced also the possibilities for cross-border cooperation following the euro-regional pattern) and the constitution of the *European Association of Border Regions* (EABR). Thus, countries which hesitated to allow sub-state regions to cooperate across the border could better grasp the frame and limits of political, economic, administrative, cultural co-operation which could be left at the competence of sub-national authorities, while the regions themselves had a lobbyist and a promoter in the strength of EABR. Since building a new Europe depends largely on changing the function of borders from barriers into mere symbolic marks among states, the existence of euro-regions is favored as a smoothening factor. Also, it has to be kept in mind that the new Europe fosters not solely the state actors, but gives voice and place to communities and individuals. Thus, no political, economic or symbolic factors can be analyzed without taking into consideration a multi-level network of relationships, involving European, national, regional and local authorities. Those who believe that the sub-state authorities will increase in importance, as the unification process continues are encouraged by the fact that the Maastricht Treaty (1992) includes references to the value of regions (not cross-border, but still, regions) and by the ever growing use of the subsidiarity principle.

While looking up to the Western European models as success recipes, the Central and Eastern European countries were rather shy in approaching the regional policies. The new democracies, after a long experience of centralized administration, felt uneasy to let go of the prerogative for international direct co-operation and allow for sub-national authorities to decide on the matter. However, being willingly connected to European processes, having available financial instruments provided by West European donors for cross-border projects and understanding the value of the model, more and more Central and East European countries have stepped into partnerships of this kind (Scarpulla: 1999). Romania proves to be an interesting example, since in a time-span of 5 years (1992-1997) the attitude towards euro-regions changed in a spectacular way. While in 1992 the offer made by Hungarian regional authorities for creating euro-regions was rejected, the national government putting barriers to the process even in 1994 (Cernicova: 1999), the idea remained on the agenda of Romanian county leaders in the border region. Thus, in 1997 the euro-regions became desirable enough not only to allow for creating the DKMT co-operation, but also to include in the basic treaty signed with Ukraine a provision encouraging the creation of euro-regions at the Eastern frontier (involving Ukraine and Moldova Republic) (Cernicova: 2003). After 2000, acknowledging the value of euro-regions as means to attract additional funds for development, the Romanian Government included in the duties of ministries provisions regarding the monitoring and aiding such formations on the Romanian side.

Euro-regions (more often referred to as „cross-border cooperation“ or „cooperation of bordering regions“) should be considered, in a large sense, „stable cooperation initiatives between contiguous sub-national authorities across national

borders" (Ricq: 1996). Traditionally, the scopes of euro-regional actions include economic policy, but also spatial planning, transport or environment issues, largely depending on the general frame given by national authorities. Yet, it is obvious that local authorities would include in such actions all the elements which are under their competence by law, such as cultural activities, fostering of small and medium enterprises, educational projects, etc.

For Timis county, as a Romanian promoter of the concept that the Euroregion is part of the integration processes into the larger Europe, the task of introducing the benefits of cross-border cooperation to the general public proved to be easy. PR specialists found out quite soon that the frontier – between Romania and Serbia but also between Romania and Hungary – is perceived as a chance to reach Europe and its benefits, that the historical heritage is vivid and that the neighbouring countries are viewed as factors of development (Bodo, Cernicova, Somogyi: 1999). But journalists needed drama, conflict and competition in order to transform a process or an event into topics worthy of news coverage (Coman: 2007). Since the Romanian national government agreed that counties are also subjects of cross-border cooperation processes only in 1996, the Timis county PR specialists could feed the media with stories on the lost benefits of European cooperation under the form of euroregions, with examples of successful projects in countries where corresponding conventions have been signed and with lobby pieces in favor of the Danube-Cris-Mures-Tisa Euroregion (further, DKMT). As soon as the tension between the county and the national authorities disappeared, a new topic emerged: the fact that the Serbian partner (Voivodina province) fell under the effect of European blockade, following political decisions aimed at upturning Milosevici regime in Belgrade. But as soon as this conflict was over, the drama and conflict elements ceased to motivate an interest of journalists in the topic.

Surprisingly, since 2004/2005 the Euroregion DKMT has almost lost its attractiveness for the media. The local authorities refrained from commenting on conflicts while negotiating new projects or ideas on the trilateral agreements. The battle for competences between national and local authorities reduced its dimensions as a result of the administrative reform – at least in Romania. And also energies have shifted towards a direct representation of county interests on the European arena in Brussels. Timis county has sent its own lobbyist in Brussels, catching the European wave in early formation. PR efforts are, in the foirst decade of the 21st century, less salient at the county level, rendering the impression that DKMT is not on the public agenda any longer. So much so that DKMT is not even mentioned on the website of the Timis county authorities (while other international cooperation agreements are, see www.cjt.ro) and DKMT is no longer a topic included in the weekly press conferences organized by the president of the Timis county assembly.

3. Shifts of initiatives: DKMT is taken over by other actors

The idea to create a euro-region involving bordering regions from Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia was launched in 1994, when a first version of the protocol was signed. However, officially what is known now as the Euro-region DKMT came into being in 1997, with 4 Hungarian counties, 4 Romanian counties and the Autonomous Province Voivodina from Serbia. The protocol lists the main intentions of the co-operation: to create a climate of trust that would facilitate the social and economic development of the regions involved, as well as the entire area of co-operation.

The main target of DKMT was, and still is, to enhance the economic and social development of the area, by attracting international funds for regional projects, to access jointly resources which the national governments cannot provide for the area. The most important concept here is *economic development*, due to *international funds*, especially under the form of PHARE CBC, but also through the Pact for Stability or from other sources. The fact that the economic development comes first, at least in the intentions of the authorities, but also in the minds of the average (yet knowledgeable) citizens is certified by opinion polls carried in the area, on the territory of the three partners. 70-90% of the value rendered to DKMT comes from the potential possibility to act as a resource-opener (Bodo, Cernicova, Somogyi: 1999, also Branea: 2001). However, only two major projects with impact on economic development are actually funded through international funds: the Cenad-Kiszombor crossing point at the Romanian-Hungarian border, and a regional center for economic entrepreneurship, at Mako and Timisoara. Maybe here can also be included the funding for developing the *Strategic Plan for Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Co-Operation*, a document currently used to support further projects. One has to keep in mind the reference to *regional and local administrative authorities* only. Since the report the list of success stories has expanded, but due to other actors involved, and not to the will and effort of the governing body of the Euro-region, which is, according to the last (2003) version of the Protocol, the General Assembly (with the county/province presidents and some Hungarian mayors as members).

Emerging from the will of the regional policy-makers themselves, the most notable, but relatively recent achievement is the creation of the euro-regional Development Agency, under the name „Society for Public Utility” (negotiated for some years, but registered only in 2003), based on the provisions of the Hungarian law and based in Szeged. Thus, the decision-makers in the area considered that they stepped into a new cooperation phase, the genuine *cooperation stage*, after having gone through the information exchange and the concerted information stages (Ricq: 1996). This new stage is characterized by the existence of consultancy and permanent cooperation border institutions whose suggestions are taken up by the local or regional authorities on each side of the border. It is also useful to underline another significant fact: regional authorities have but little competence in economic areas. Therefore, what they still can do is to provide the frame for other actors to step in and manifest fully under the general and generous umbrella of the euro-region. Alongside with the

responsibility, the administrative authorities also gave away the task of PR activities in favor of DKMT. In order to ensure continuity in fostering the economic development, the administrative bodies invited permanently the representatives of the Chambers of Commerce to the proceedings of the Forum of Presidents (since November 2003, The General Assembly). In their turn, the chambers of commerce signed a co-operation protocol in 1998 and have the pride of organizing economic missions, exhibitions and other events under the label of DKMT. The most recent achievements are the "Euro-regional Partnership for Competitiveness" (2007) and the inauguration of the Regional Center for Sustainable Development of Historical Banat Region (2009). Whether DKMT will be successful in the long run still depends largely on the efficiency of the SPU to attract further funds. Otherwise, the initiative is left to other actors, while the administrations of the bordering regions will concentrate on different issues.

The bond among the partner regions is not so strong at this point and maintaining networks is a difficult task to handle. In addition to the scarcity of attracted European funds, the euro-region faces other challenges: while sharing a similar past, the regions belonging to three different countries move with variable speed towards integration in the European Union. Hungary and Romania are full members, while Serbia is still in a „stand-by“ position. This asymmetry may induce further complications in border and customs regulations. For the time being, the partners acknowledged the following factors hindering the economic cooperation:

- a) lack of direct exchange rates for the currencies used in the three countries;
- b) lack of duties and tax facilities for interregional exchanges among the cross-border partners;
- c) lack of cross-border industrial and commercial yearbooks;
- d) lack of common diagnoses and development concepts;
- e) finally, the political aspect is of importance, linked to clarifying the status of Serbia on the international arena, otherwise the co-operation risks remaining a bilateral arrangement between Romania and Hungary (Strategic plan: 2000).

PR consultants, on the other hand, have to deal with other issues:

- a) lack of active dynamics in the Euro-regional processes, thus making the media tired of waiting for significant results to cover;
- b) the necessity to diminish the drama or confrontation between co-operating partners in order to aid the negotiation processes, but with the effect of losing the interest of journalists in covering the events at the Euro-regional level;
- c) the shift of lobbying activities from obtaining the support of local actors to influencing supra-national authorities (Strasbourg and Brussels);
- d) the diffuse character of sources of authority in the euroregion, since the presidency of the governing body moves every year from county to county, doubled by the procedures which require consensus for every decision, which makes the process even more difficult to follow for the public, even for the special case of journalists as opinion leaders.

4. Conclusions

The history of DKMT has proved so far that the initial idea behind the protocol giving birth to the euro-regional cross-border cooperation, namely to attract international funds did not flourish as expected, due to a large number of factors, among which changes in the way European authorities address the problems of Central and Eastern European countries. However, the regional authorities found enough motivating elements to develop euro-regional structures and to exercise the direct co-operation across the border. The main functions of the board of DKMT (be it labeled „Forum of presidents“ or „General Assembly“) are:

- to make choices and set priorities;
- to convene and co-ordinate key actors;
- to involve people (and institutions) in shaping the policies and programs which can give substance to the euro-region;
- to foster the creation of networks;
- to keep the region connected to European processes and make good use of the action corridors opened by the Council of Europe, the European Union, the Stability Pact etc.

While PR consultants had, in the early stages of negotiating the protocol to form DKMT, tasks concerning educating the public with regard to European processes, regional interest and Euroregion as a framework, along the way they had to learn how to maintain the topic of DKMT on the public agenda, while actors other than the administrative bodies took over the driving role.

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