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The influence of Bulgarian horticulture on twinning in Hungary

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the historical and cultural significance of Bulgarian horticulture in Hungary and its influence on the development of twinning relationships between Bulgarian and Hungarian municipalities. The study employs a comprehensive analysis of historical literature and census data from 2001 to 2022 to characterise the Bulgarian minority in Hungary and track its historical changes. The research utilises databases from the National Association of Municipalities in Hungary (TÖOSZ) and the National Union of Local Governments in Bulgaria (NSORB) to identify and examine twinning relationships between municipalities. Interviews with cultural and community representatives supplement the analysis. The study investigates the motivations behind twinning, emphasising intraethnic cooperation and the desire to strengthen ties between ethnic minorities and their kin states. The research identifies specific partnerships that were established due to the historical presence of Bulgarian communities in Hungary. The findings suggest that while Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations are rare; they reflect a unique form of cultural heritage and promote collaboration in addressing local and global challenges. The paper contributes to understanding how historical ties and cultural practices influence contemporary international relations at the municipal level.

Keywords: *paradiplomacy, sister cities, twinning relations, Bulgarian minority, intraethnic cooperation*

1 Introduction[1]

Today, cities are a critical engine of the global economy, global information flows, and the global mobility of goods and people (Acuto, 2016). According to Enyedi (1997), the development of durable external relations is a hallmark of a flourishing city, one form of which is the twinning/town twinning partnership, based in part on geographical proximity, which typically spread after World War II (Kézai P. and Páthy, 2023). Cooperations can arise for a variety of reasons, such as trade, cultural relations, sporting events, and international educational exchanges (Krankovits, 2020; O'Toole, 2001; Riner and Becklenberg, 2001; Tham and Shim, 2025; Zelinsky, 1991). In all cases, the

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partners wish to cooperate toward a specific socioeconomic outcome, and this cooperation is provided with a legal framework in the form of a contract (Prasittisopin et al., 2024).

Studies of diplomacy that focus on twinning have mainly examined relations between metropolitan areas. Tidwell (2020) explored the emergence of US-China paradiplomatic relations, and Chatterji and Saha (2017) focused on US relations with India and China. In Asia, O'Toole (2001) first examined Japan's twinning relations with Australia, and Mori (2023) examined Japan's twinning network. Utomo and Widiana (2024) use Surabaya, Indonesia, and Kitakyushu, Japan, as examples to illustrate green twinning. Amiri and Grandi (2021) examined diplomatic relations between cities in Europe and North America, while Karvounis (2020) looked at the European dimension of the paradiplomatic network of Greek municipalities. Regarding the twinning networks of large cities in the Central and Eastern European region, Kézai P. and Páthy (2023) found that in the Central European region, partnerships are mainly concentrated in small towns, mainly between Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian cities. Laguerre (2019) examined the new digital dimension of international city twinning and pointed out that digital platforms allow city-twinning relationships to go beyond cultural exchange and become new tools for global governance, innovation, and social participation.

Our recent study belongs to a series of analyses that examine the relationships between a diaspora and the kin state (Campbell, 2015), or, on the other hand, between a given state and the kin state of those who have migrated there (van Ewijk & Baud, 2009), with a focus on Bulgarian gardeners settled in Hungary. The research underlying the present study examines the international diplomatic activities of municipalities in Hungary. As part of this, it (also) investigates the twinning relations of settlements with significant ethnic minorities, with a special emphasis on intraethnic cooperation, which may primarily manifest itself in relations with the kin state. The term 'settlements with significant ethnic minorities' is neither theoretically nor methodologically defined, and the category of settlements can be interpreted based on various legal conceptions and spatial development documents. The Law on National Minorities, adopted in 2011, links certain powers to the proportion of a given nationality within a settlement, reflecting international practice (twenty or ten per cent according to the latest census, see § 5 and § 6). The census results also form the basis for the right of ethnic communities to form local minority self-governments; today, twenty-five persons belonging to the nationality in question are required as a general rule, and twenty persons if certain conditions are met (§ 56). The category of 'areas with significant nationalities' also appears in development policy, at least at the conceptual level (OFTK, 2014). This study does not aim to clarify this issue but merely to highlight that such classifications exist – however, within different frameworks – indicating that this category is relevant.

Among the nationalities recognised in Hungary, the Bulgarian community is particularly small and dispersed. Although the community has been able to form local minority self-governments since its de jure recognition (1993) – only one in 1994, but already 33 in 2024 – the proportion in Hungarian settlements remains below the required threshold for additional rights under current legislation. Although they cannot be regarded as 'settlements with significant ethnic minorities', some municipalities inhabited by the community have historical characteristics involving the Bulgarian horticultural past that make examining their twinning relations worthwhile.

The literature on Bulgarians, Bulgarian gardeners, and Bulgarian horticulture in Hungary is also considerable and extensive. These subjects have been of interest because of their importance to the domestic food supply. Menyhárt (2021) analysed in the most comprehensive way the history of the Bulgarian community in Hungary. In addition to her research on linguistics, social and economic history, and ethnography, she devoted a special chapter to the work of Hungarian and Bulgarian researchers dealing with this theme. In addition to work in the field of linguistics (Menyhárt, 2017), as well as linguistic-biographical (Menyhárt, 2020) and historical (Miklós, 2009; Peykovska, 2013) studies of Bulgarians, there are also significant works in the Hungarian literature that provide a comprehensive description of Bulgarian folklore and culture (Boross, 1973; Csoma, 1987), as well as studies of agricultural statistics (Révész, 1915), as well as papers analysing the specific economic structure and work organisation of Bulgarian gardeners (Bódi and Savova, 2018). Several local historical and ethnographic works (Galambos, 2016; Király, 2001; Macher, 2020; Mlecsenkov, 2024; Mód, 2019; Rémiás, 2010; Varró, 2024; Vukov, 2024; Zsilák, 2014) have also been published concerning Bulgarian horticulture, and it is evident that there is still significant interest in exploring the Bulgarian gardening past, as studies and thematic special issues on the subject are still being published (Bulgarian Folklore, 2024). Although the history, significance, and impact of Bulgarians and Bulgarian horticulture in Hungary have been examined from many angles in the literature, no work has yet been published that examines the international relevance of this topic. In this study, we aim to examine relations between Bulgarian and Hungarian municipalities, focusing on settlements with local self-governments that were once home to Bulgarian horticulturalists and still have a significant Bulgarian ethnic population, to assess the relevance of Bulgaria's horticultural past to the development of twinning relations.

2 Methodology

This study investigates the extent to which the settlement of Bulgarians in Hungary and the horticultural traditions they established continue to influence the presence and identity of Bulgarian communities today. Furthermore, it examines how this historical and cultural heritage has been preserved within the settlements where Bulgarian horticulture once played a defining role, and how these continuities are reflected in contemporary Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations. To address these research objectives, a multi-method approach was used, integrating the analysis of secondary literature, statistical data, and databases, complemented by interviews.

2.1 Secondary data analysis

The characteristics of national minorities in Hungary were examined based on census data collected between 2001 and 2022. Particular attention was paid to the Bulgarian nationality, whose ethnic composition and historical transformation were analysed in detail. Historical national and local census records from 1910, together with relevant scholarly literature, helped identify and substantiate the historical presence of Bulgarian communities in specific localities.

The relationships between Hungarian and Bulgarian municipalities were identified through two national databases:

The NSORB database (National Union of Local Governments of the Republic of Bulgaria/Natsionalno Sdruzhenie Na Obshtinite V Republica Bulgariya) provides data on

Bulgarian municipalities, including their twin settlements, population characteristics, geographical location, the nature and type of cooperation agreements, and thematic areas of collaboration.

The TÖOSZ database (National Association of Local Authorities/Települési Önkormányzatok Országos Szövetsége) compiles information based on a 2018 survey of Hungarian local governments, supplemented by additional institutional and documentary sources. It records municipal, county, and capital-district twinning arrangements, indicating the year of agreement, formal status, and the thematic focus of cooperation.

From these databases, bilateral partnerships involving Bulgarian and Hungarian municipalities were extracted and analysed. These were subsequently compared with settlements identified in the literature and statistical data as possessing a Bulgarian ethnic or horticultural heritage.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews and content analysis for validation

The database findings were verified and enriched through semi-structured interviews conducted with the head of the Bulgarian Cultural, Documentation and Information Centre and members of the Association of Bulgarians in Hungary. To gain a deeper understanding of twinning relations, we conducted interviews with the current and former leaders of the relevant local minority self-governments and local governments. The interviews were carried out by telephone between 15 January and 27 June 2025, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

Additional verification was carried out through information available on the official websites of the respective settlements. The comprehensive research framework, together with the specific methodological approaches applied to each research question, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Research framework

	Research question	Applied methodology
RQ1.	To what extent do the Bulgarians who settled in Hungary and the Bulgarian horticulture they established still determine the presence of Bulgarian communities today?	Analysis of TÖOSZ and NSORB database Content analysis of interviews
RQ2.	How has this heritage been preserved in the settlements where Bulgarian horticulture was once located?	Content analysis of interviews Content analysis of settlement websites
RQ3.	How is this manifested in existing Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations?	Analysis of TÖOSZ and NSORB database Content analysis of interviews

Source. : Author's compilation.

3 Bulgarian gardeners in Hungary

Bulgarians, for historical reasons, live in and around Hungary's major cities. The Bulgarians were one of the earliest ethnic groups to join the Hungarian nation, probably before the so-called conquest. Three distinct phases of settlement in later centuries can be distinguished, each with its own motivation and geographical orientation. The first two waves of settlement (second half of the 14th century – 1526, last decade of the 17th

century – mid-18th century) were mainly motivated by flight from Turkish rule, while the third (from the last third of the 19th century) was determined by economic interests. In contrast to the earlier Roman Catholic Bulgarians, those who arrived in the third wave were Orthodox and moved to Hungary only for temporary, seasonal work (Miklós, 2009). In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Bulgarian nationality in Hungary was linked to horticulture (Menyhárt, 2021). The emergence of Bulgarian gardeners in Hungary can be traced back to two main factors, which mutually reinforced the migration processes. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire can be identified among the primary push factors, while among the pull factors, the development and urbanisation after the Austrian–Hungarian Compromise (1867) can be identified (Bódi and Savova, 2018).

The emergence and development of Bulgarian horticulture were naturalised by Ottoman rule, which, with the establishment of the free state in 1878, created unfavourable circumstances for gardening merchants due to the lack of demand and markets for products, the absence of a national citizenry, and the lack of local industry (İnalcık and Quataert, 1994). As a result of these changed frames, emigration from Bulgaria began (Grbić Jakopović, 2015), and by 1888, more than 9,555 gardeners (11% of the occupational group) had left the Tarnovo district, and by 1914, more than half a million more had followed (Csoma, 1987). It was, therefore, mainly from these urban, deprived, highly agricultural areas that gardeners left for the big cities of the neighbouring countries. They moved especially to areas where urban development was not accompanied by agriculture capable of supplying the urban population (Boross, 1973), and where they continued to do what they had learned at home on rented plots (Bódi and Savova, 2018).

The emigration from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century was one of Bulgaria's most important international economic migrations (Mód, 2024). Many Bulgarian gardeners arrived in Hungary, mainly from around the old capital, Veliko Tarnovo (Csoma, 2019; Peykovska, 1998, 2013), where intensive horticulture in Bulgaria was first developed to provide food for the Turkish army (Csoma, 1987). In contrast, Hungary was about 100-150 years behind in horticultural activity, which became a problem during the relatively late phase of urbanisation – the larger settlements, especially Budapest, were supplied by German horticulture, but this was no longer sufficient in the second half of the 19th century, opening the way for Bulgarian gardeners (Boross, 1973). Gardeners arriving in Hungary typically settled around Budapest and near railway transport centres, but later they also appeared in smaller but more significant towns (Peykovska, 1998, 2013). Geographical location was an important factor in the choice of location for horticulture, and for irrigated farming, predominantly vegetable production, they chose areas supplied with water and/or close to waterbodies, where they rented land (Miklós, 2009; Varga, 2021).

Initially, they stayed in Hungary seasonally, from February to November, and lived in Bulgaria for the rest of the year (Naydenov, 2022). The gardening groups were typically composed only of men (Csoma, 1987; Peykovska, 2013), and only later did they permanently move to Hungary – this time with their families. However, ties to Bulgaria and the dual lifestyle persisted, as evidenced by the fact that they typically farmed on rented land rather than on their own property, and most of their income from sales was used to support families left at home (Csoma, 1987; Révész, 1915). This period was the first so-called 'transitional phase' of the modern-day settlement of Bulgarians, followed by the second phase (1915–1945), when elements of

national life were institutionalised. Educational, ecclesiastical and social institutions were established (Association of Bulgarians in Hungary, 1914; Bulgarian Orthodox Church Community, 1916, later Bulgarian Church and School Community, 1917) at this time, and a horticultural journal (Bolgarski Godinár, 1928) was founded (Csoma, 1987; Menyhárt, 2023), which created the preconditions for genuine settlement and helped to end commuting. The third phase was the period of the emergence of a stable Bulgarian community in Hungary, and at the same time, of its internal transformation and integration into society, which was completed by the time of the regime change with the inclusion of the Bulgarians in the recognised nationalities (Bódi and Savova, 2018; Doncsev, 2013).

The influence of the Bulgarian gardeners was also noticeable in the emergence of so-called Bulgarian-style horticulture and in work organisation (Bódi and Savova, 2018). Between 1912 and 1913, the number of Hungarian-owned but Bulgarian-styled horticultural holdings increased from 697 to 1,592, while the number of Bulgarian horticultural holdings decreased from 872 to 649 during the same period. Besides the First Balkan War (Bulgarians temporarily stopped gardening because of their participation in the war), state incentives also encouraged the establishment of horticulture by Hungarian owners and labour, with land cultivated in the Bulgarian way. After World War II, as in other agricultural regions of the country, Bulgarian and Bulgarian-style horticulture were collectivised; the last to go was the Hungarian–Bulgarian Friendship Cooperative, which operated between 1956 and 1979. The result of collectivisation was also that some Bulgarian gardeners gave up vegetable growing and went into industry (Peykovska, 2013, Menyhárt, 2023). Based on employment data, agricultural activity is a thing of the past among the Bulgarian population in Hungary, but vegetable production still plays a central role in the life of certain regions or settlements due to the former Bulgarian horticulture (Betekintő, 2002; Velkey et al., 2021).

The spatial dispersion of Bulgarians in Hungary today still results from the Bulgarian horticultural past, with the 'centres' of the community still being the previously inhabited settlements. According to the results of the 1930 census, a total of 2,816 Bulgarians were living in the territory of then-Hungary, the largest numbers in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun county (884 persons) and Budapest (721 persons). There were also a significant number of Bulgarians in Miskolc (139), Pécs (65), and in the central regions of the country, in Fejér (89), Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok (87), and Komárom-Esztergom (85) counties. Among the settlements with Bulgarian communities, we find data (in literature, censuses, and other documents) confirming the presence of Bulgarians in Bánhida, Cegléd, Cibakháza, Dunaharaszti, Dunakeszi, Felsőzsolca, Fót, Lórév, Nógrádverőce, Nagyrábé, Piliscsév, Szegvár, Szentes, Szigetszentmiklós and Sződ, as well as Rákospalota, Soroksár and Zugló, which are now part of the districts of Budapest. The names of the public areas and outskirts of some settlements also recall the former Bulgarian horticulture and communities (e.g., Bolgárkertész utca [Bulgarian Gardeners street] in Zugló, Halásztelek, and Szentes). In Halásztelek, where there is still a significant Bulgarian community, there is a locality name sign in Bulgarian. In several places (Dunaharaszti, Felsőzsolca, Kispest, Óbuda, Soroksár, Szigetszentmiklós, and Zugló), the Bulgarian horticultural past has been preserved in public spaces as statues and fountains. One of the most well-known monuments is the Bulgarian Wheel monument in Halásztelek from 2007 (Menyhárt, 2020).

4 The Bulgarian nationality in Hungary

Censuses conducted in the early 20th century in Hungary did not provide data on nationality, national or ethnic identity, but on mother tongue. However, at the local level, communities with relatively small numbers, including Bulgarians, were included in the 'other' category, so no information is available on their numbers. Thus, the presence of Bulgarians in a settlement at that time could be inferred from the number of Orthodox believers.[2] In the State socialist period, data on nationalities were provided only for the Gypsy, Croat, German, Romanian, Serb, and Slovak communities, and from 1980 onwards also for the Slovenian communities. For other ethnic minorities, the number of groups can only be estimated based on mother tongue. Bulgarian nationality was only recognised after the regime change. The final provision of the 1993 Law on Minorities listed, in detail, the Bulgarian, Gypsy, Greek, Croatian, Polish, German, Armenian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, and Ukrainian communities recognised, in the terminology of the time, as national and ethnic minorities. The new legislation adopted in 2011 and its Annex I left the previous list on recognized minorities unchanged.

Table 2 Evolution of the number of recognised nationalities in Hungary between 2001 and 2022 (number of persons)

Nationalities	Census		
	2001	2011	2022
Gypsy (Roma)	205,720	315,583	209,909
German	120,344	185,696	142,551
Slovak	39,266	35,208	29,881
Romanian	14,781	35,641	27,554
Ukrainian	7,393	7,396	24,615
Croatian	25,730	26,774	21,824
Serbian	7,350	10,038	11,622
Polish	5,144	7,001	7,398
Russian	2,079	3,882	7,111
Greek	6,619	4,642	6,178
Bulgarian	2,316	6,272	6,109
Armenian	1,165	3,571	4,199
Slovenian	4,832	2,820	3,965

Source. : Based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) (2022)

As mentioned above, Bulgarians are one of the thirteen nationalities in Hungary and one of the smallest communities. In terms of the total number of the community[3], this almost doubled between 2001 and 2011 (from 2,316 to 6,272), while it has remained almost stable over the last decade (6,209 in 2022). In the Bulgarian community, symbolic ethnicity prevails (Tátrai, 2014; Tóth and Vékás, 2013), as, due to linguistic assimilation, the curves of nationality and language data are increasingly diverging. In this case, identity is linked to respect for national roots rather than to

[2] If the number of people of the Orthodox religion exceeded the number of (mainly) Serb or Romanian native speakers, and if there were also people of the 'other' category in the settlement, they were presumably Bulgarians.

[3] During the 2022 census, it was possible to indicate ethnic ties in three questions: nationality, mother tongue, and language used in the family and friendship community. The total number of people belonging to a nationality includes people of all three categories.

everyday practice, genuine cultural and linguistic attachment, and the use of minority institutions. The AN index, which shows the number of Bulgarian native speakers per 100 persons who declare Bulgarian national identity, is a good illustration of this phenomenon. It confirms the above statements, with values among Bulgarians decreasing from 95.7 (2001) and 81.5 (2011) to 67.3 (2022).

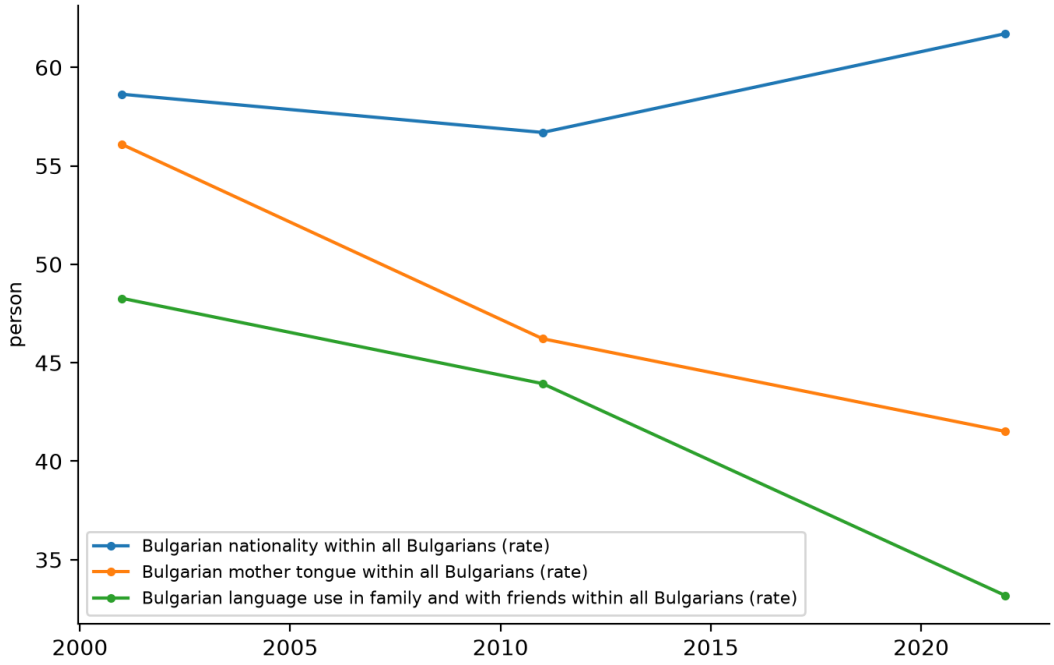


Figure 1 Characteristics of the Bulgarian minority in Hungary between 2001 and 2022 (persons, percentage)

Source: Author's compilation based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) (2022)

Most of the Bulgarian gardeners who did not settle permanently later moved back home, but those who stayed, together with those who later came to Hungary to study or work, and those who joined by marriage and now have a Bulgarian identity, form the backbone of the Bulgarian community today (Menyhárt, 2021). The Bulgarian population in Hungary can be described as culturally and linguistically heterogeneous, with an urban lifestyle that consciously strives to preserve its identity (Menyhárt, 2020, 2021). Several Bulgarian families lived and still live in the neighbourhoods of Csepel, Halásztelek, Dunaharaszti, Szigetszentmiklós, Lórév, Pécs, Miskolc, and Szolnok. According to the 2022 census (Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO), 2022), the most populous Bulgarian communities are found in Budapest (1902 people), Szeged (118 people), and Pécs (102 people), while the most significant proportion of Bulgarians live in the villages of Sármellék (2.7%) and Lórév (2.4%).

Minority self-governments also indicate the presence of the Bulgarian community. According to the current legislation, the establishment of a local minority self-government (based on the results of the last census) requires at least 25 persons with ethnic identity, or at least 20 persons with ethnic identity, in addition to a minority self-government or a national minority institution (e.g., a national minority school) in the settlement during the previous municipal term. The first minority

self-government was established in Halásztelek in 1994. In subsequent terms, municipalities were established in the big towns, in the capital districts – where the Bulgarian community is not otherwise sizeable in the population – and in the municipalities where former Bulgarian horticulture was located. Currently, as *Figure 3* shows, settlements where Bulgarian nationality can be detected (in 2022), and a local government is functioning (in 2024) at the same time, are relatively rare and are mostly located in the capital districts and regional centres (marked in black). Consequently, not all settlements with a Bulgarian presence (marked in dark grey) became eligible to establish a minority self-government in the 2024 local government cycle: for example, in Felsőzsolca, although a minority self-government has been operating since 2002, only 16 people declared themselves Bulgarian in 2022, which is below the legal minimum.

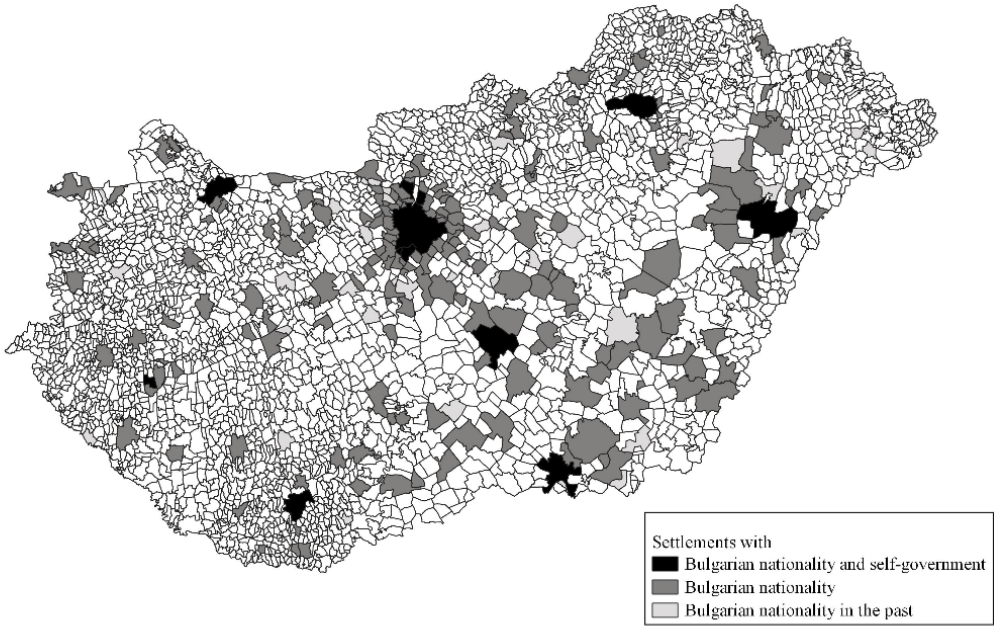


Figure 2 Municipal characteristics of the Bulgarian minority and Bulgarian minority self-governments in Hungary

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Source: Author's compilation based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) (2022) and Hungarian National Election Office (HNEO) (2024)

5 Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations with a focus on the horticultural past

In this chapter, we review the status and importance of Bulgarian–Hungarian relations within wider twinning relations based on the Bulgarian NSORB database and the domestic TÖOSZ database, and then, focusing on Bulgarian–Hungarian relations, we look for traces of the Bulgarian horticultural past. According to the Bulgarian NSORB database, Bulgarian municipalities have established 1,185 twinning relationships with municipalities in other countries. Europe plays a key role in the orientation of relations (Figure 4), with 85% of partnerships established with municipalities in countries on

the European continent (1016 twinning partnerships). Most of the contacts have been with Russia (123 twinning contacts), but neighbouring countries also play a prominent role in the twinning network, with 107 municipalities in Greece, 93 in Romania, 92 in Turkey, 81 in Serbia, and 67 in Northern Macedonia. Cooperation with municipalities in Western Europe is less frequent, with the highest number of partnerships in Italy (61), while the numbers for France (31) and Spain (30) are the same as for Hungary.

With 30 contacts in the database, Hungary is Bulgaria's eleventh most important partner on the continent and the sixth most important partner in the European Union. Among the Hungarian partner cities are several districts of the capital and settlements around Budapest. The dominant role in the relations is played by cities with country rights; however, there are also a high number of smaller rural municipalities among the partners (e.g., Ajak, Csopak, Hajdúsámson, Hollókő, Kazincbarcika, Kunszentmiklós, Paks, Siklós, Szentes, Tiszafüred).

According to the TÖOSZ database compiled in 2018, Hungarian municipalities have concluded 3,705 official twinning agreements, of which 3,041 (82%) involve cooperation within the Central and Eastern European region. Romania, Slovakia, Germany, Poland, and Austria are the five most important partner countries. Bulgaria ranks 17th in terms of the number of twinning agreements concluded. According to the database, 22 Bulgarian municipalities have signed 28 twinning agreements with 25 different Hungarian municipalities (Figure 5).

Twinning relations with Bulgarian municipalities are among the rarest in Hungary, as Bulgaria is not a neighbouring state and the historical links between the two countries are not particularly significant. However, like other nationalities, municipalities or minority self-governments with a relatively large (or once large) Bulgarian community actively foster relations with municipalities of the motherland. As suggested by Curtis (2016), these collaborative efforts allow local governments to learn from and adapt solutions in their partner cities to address specific challenges in their communities, which often coincide with global issues such as climate change. An excellent example of knowledge adaptation is the case of Bulgarian gardeners who settled in Hungary, creating a new horticultural culture (introducing and spreading tomato, pepper, and cabbage cultivation), and later initiating the development of several twinning relations.

The establishment of twinning relations can, of course, be motivated by several factors, including the socio-political period and context in which the relationship is formed. Of course, we could not examine the story behind every twinning relationship, but based on our knowledge, we tried to form groups that encompass the range of possible motivations. Among Bulgarian–Hungarian relations, we can find general international cooperation (e.g., Aheloy and Ajak) and even partnerships directed from the central level during the State socialist period (e.g., Blagoevgrad and Székesfehérvár, Burgas and Miskolc). Although some of the listed cooperating municipalities have a history of Bulgarian horticulture or have Bulgarian communities living there today, this was not the motivation for establishing links, or at least we could not prove this (e.g., Ravda and Dunakeszi, Lyaskovets and Tiszafüred, Veliko Tarnovo and Sopron). In some of the Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations, the influence of former Bulgarian horticulture can be traced to the present day, as suggested by the characteristics of the emergence and later settlement of the Bulgarian population in Hungary (Figure 5). In the initial phase of Bulgarian gardeners' presence in Hungary,

commuting and caring for those left at home maintained links among the disparate nuclear family units and, indirectly, among settlements in different countries. This relationship with extended family, more distant relatives, and friends may also have persisted during the final resettlement to Hungary. We know that the most famous and best-farming Bulgarian gardeners who arrived in Hungary came from the area around Veliko Tarnovo – Draganovo, Polikraishte, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Lyaskovets, Dragichevo, and Merdanya (Csoma, 1987) – and that strong Bulgarian identity and strong ties with the motherland were especially maintained among those who came from this region (Bódi and Savova, 2018).

This bond also determines the twinning relationships of settlements that were once home to Bulgarian horticulture, because – although such small settlements rarely still have Bulgarian connections – they do not establish partnerships with 'random' Bulgarian municipalities; they specifically initiate twinning relationships with municipalities that were once the settlements from which Bulgarian horticulturalists came to Hungary.

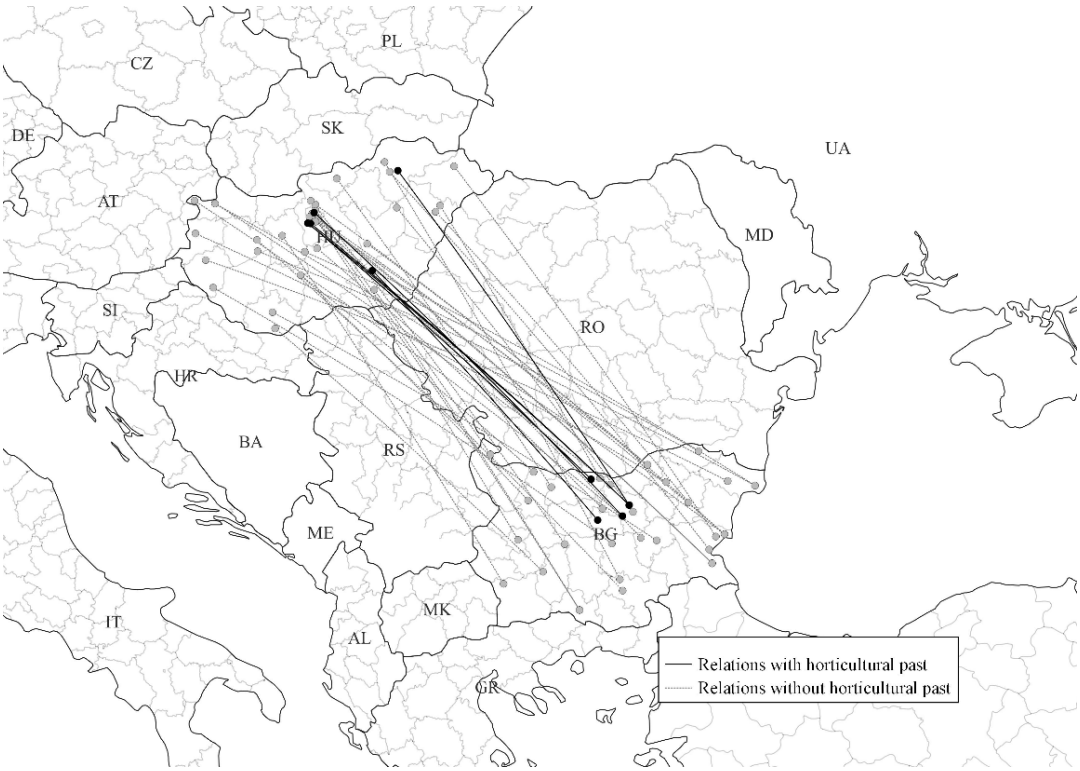


Figure 3 Twinning relations between Hungarian and Bulgarian municipalities based on the Bulgarian horticultural past

Source: Author's compilation based on TÖOSZ and NSORB databases

The twinning relations between municipalities where Bulgarian gardeners originated and later settled can be seen in the relations between Halásztelek – Polikraishte, Halásztelek – Nikopol, Felsőzsolca – Draganovo, Szentes – Sevlievo, Szigetszentmiklós – Gorna Oryahovica, and Zugló – Veliko Tarnovo. In Halásztelek (located in the southwestern part of Pest county), the initial Bulgarian settlers established themselves in the area in the late 19th century. These families primarily specialised in vegetable cultivation and regularly transported the latter to markets in Budapest for commer-

cial distribution. Over subsequent decades, the Bulgarian gardener community developed formal organizational structures and engaged not only in agricultural production but also in a range of cultural activities (Mlecsenkov, 2024). The municipality of Halásztelek has entered twinning relations with two Bulgarian settlements. In 1997, it established a partnership with Polikraiste with the intention of 'continuing and enhancing the long-standing friendship and traditions of kinship between the residents of the two villages', while with Nikopol (2002), the aim was to increase the number of mutual relations between the two settlements and to exchange opinions and experiences in many areas.[4] The relationship established with Polikraiste goes back even further. The need for this was formulated based on the still existing kinship relations of the Bulgarian gardeners living in Halásztelek, but the conclusion of the contract was a joint initiative of the two settlements. The basis for establishing the twinning relationship was therefore the establishment of a connection with the place of origin. The relationship with Nikopol was formed more recently and under external influence, as the then-Hungarian ambassador to Bulgaria raised the idea of cooperation between the two Danube settlements at an event in Polikraiste. In the last decades of the 19th century, Bulgarian gardeners gradually settled in the Miskolc area. In the period between the two world wars, the city was already surrounded by Bulgarian gardener communities, which appeared in several parts of the city (Rémiás, 2010). One of these surrounding settlements was Felsőzsolca, where the role of the current Bulgarian community is undeniable; the twinning relationship with Draganovo was established on 18 October 2008 on the initiative of the (formerly still functioning) national minority self-government 'because the parents and relatives of Bulgarian families living in Felsőzsolca come from that settlement, while at the same time there are still people living in Draganovo who once worked in our town as guest workers'.[5] Szigetszentmiklós identifies the Bulgarian gardeners as the origin of the twinning with Gorna Oryahovica since 'nearly 300 Bulgarian gardening families from the town and its surroundings have moved to Szigetszentmiklós and its surroundings', and the Bulgarian community is still an important player in the relations between the two municipalities. Their agreement was signed in 2004.[6] An interesting chapter in Zugló's (officially known as Budapest's 14th district) history involves Bulgarian gardeners, who played a significant role in shaping the district's horticultural landscape. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Bulgarian immigrants settled in Budapest, bringing with them specialized knowledge of gardening and floriculture (Vukov, 2024). The twinning relationship between Zugló and Veliko Tarnovo is the result of the initiative of the local Bulgarian community, the heirs to the Bulgarian gardeners.[7] Szentes also paid tribute to Bulgaria's horticultural traditions and their impact on the settlement's development by concluding an agreement with Sevlievo (2022). The twinning relation was initiated by the Bulgarian side, and the agreement formalized the cooperation between the two cities, which 'began several years ago thanks to Bulgarian gardeners'.[8]

The intensity and depth of twinning relations, as well as the formalisation of cooperation in the initial period, depend mainly on local governments. Szentes and Sevlievo are still in this phase of cooperation, so, beyond the annual official meet-

[4] https://www.halasztelek.hu/halasztelekrol/testvervarosok
[5] https://felsozsolca.hu/varosunk/testvertelepulesek/#draganovo
[6] https://szigetszentmiklos.hu/testvervarosok/gorna-oryahovica-bulgaria
[7] https://www.zuglo.hu/veliko-tarnovo/
[8] https://www.szentes.hu/mult/testvervarosok/

ings (which mainly involve visits by local government delegations), they have not yet been able to report on deeper local benefits. However, in Szigetszentmiklós and Halásztelek – where relations go back a relatively long time, and a Bulgarian minority self-government also operates – interviewees reported that the local governments played a role in initiating the processes, but now independent and direct connections exist between the various local groups and organizations. At the level of local governments, the relationship usually involves annual events, with these official visits providing a space and framework for the formation of other collaborations, which often include exchange programs of different local group, sports, children's camps, performances by artist groups, and creative camps, but there have also been examples of the submission of joint applications and participating in joint projects. The cultivation of the Bulgarian horticultural past, which forms the basis of twinning relations, also appears in the lives of the settlements and, occasionally, in municipal cooperation. Tributes to Bulgarian horticultural traditions include an annual tomato-growing competition organized by the Bulgarian minority self-government of Szigetszentmiklós, and the seed donation from Sevliovo to Szentes, but, of course, various symbols (monuments, public works) reminiscent of the past can also be mentioned here.

6 Discussion and conclusion

In recent years, subnational international engagement — commonly termed paradiplomacy — has emerged as a focal point of scholarly and policy interest on a global scale (Mori, 2023). Twinning has become a vital tool for city diplomacy, enabling municipalities to act as independent, proactive actors in international relations worldwide. These partnerships extend beyond symbolic links and cultural exchange to economic cooperation and become practical channels for sharing knowledge on urban challenges such as sustainability, resilience, and inclusive growth. Sister cities, rooted in a history of post-war reconciliation, have evolved into channels for advancing sustainable development goals by addressing global issues locally and fostering international cooperation (Acuto, 2016). These partnerships allow cities to share best practices in sustainable urban development, leading to more effective approaches to climate resilience and environmental management.

Twinning is most often geographically determined and is mainly established between municipalities in neighbouring countries. Even within each state, there is a tendency to orient towards the geographically closest state. These general rules can, of course, be overridden by close, friendly relations between two states, their history, the relationship between minorities living in the territory of each state and their mother country, etc. The historical ties between Bulgaria and Hungary are not particularly strong, although the State socialist period can be seen as a kind of shared history. Twinning relations were, of course, established within the State socialist bloc, but they were mostly formal and subject to the approval of the central authorities. It also follows that these relations were dependent on the relationship between the two states, so that if this broke down, the cooperation had to be suspended (Süli-Zakar and Czimre, 2007). Although most of these artificial and largely protocol-based twinning relationships ceased to exist after the regime change, there are still some collaborations that date back to this period. The disintegration of relationships and the regime change in twinning are well illustrated by the fact that the 94 regional centres in Central and Eastern Europe typically do not establish cooperation with one another, accounting

for only 10.8% of all relations (Kézai P. and Páthy, 2023).

After the change of regime, the opportunity arose for the established local governments to shape their international relations, including twinning relations, according to their own needs, characteristics, and interests. Minority self-governments at the national and local levels, established under the Minority Law in 1993, primarily perform cultural functions, but these organizations can also play a significant international, even diplomatic, role in connecting ethnic communities, and sometimes entire settlements, with the kin state or their specific localities. One form of this intraethnic connection is the official twinning established between (regional or) local governments. In most of the cases examined in the study, the initiating role of local minority self-governments can be demonstrated, and the Bulgarian twinning agreements concluded by the local government were clearly created under the influence of these actors. It is highly likely that the need for a connection with the kin state also underlies those twinning cooperations where the Bulgarian horticultural past is not decisive, but where a Bulgarian minority self-government or a Bulgarian community without an institutionalized form operates/operated in the settlement.

The size of the municipality is also a decisive factor in determining the number and direction of relations. Smaller municipalities tend to establish fewer contacts with geographically closer areas, while cities, especially large ones, tend to also seek cooperation with multiple states further afield. As far as Bulgaria and Hungary are concerned, there is a significant difference in the activities of the cities in the two countries. Hungarian municipalities are much more active than Bulgarians in this respect, even though Plovdiv almost leads the Central and Eastern European regional field with its 29 twin and partner city cooperations (only Lublin in Poland has more). Among Hungarian cities, Debrecen has the most contacts (19). The tendency of large cities to seek to establish links with many countries is also confirmed by the cooperation of the above-mentioned cities: Plovdiv and Debrecen have entered into cooperation with 21 and 17 cities, respectively (Kézai P. and Páthy, 2023).

The findings of this study underscore the persistent influence of historical migration and cultural heritage on contemporary local identities and inter-municipal relations. Although the demographic weight of the Bulgarian minority in Hungary has declined since the early twentieth century, its cultural and historical legacy continues to shape the symbolic landscape of several settlements. The persistence of Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations—though limited in number—demonstrates that cultural memory and ethnic heritage remain active drivers of municipal cooperation.

By integrating census data, historical documentation, and interviews, the research has revealed that former centres of Bulgarian horticultural activity have maintained a collective awareness of their ethnic past. This awareness has evolved from a tangible economic practice into an element of cultural identity, influencing present-day initiatives associated with cultural exchange and local diplomacy. Twinning partnerships, in this context, serve as institutionalised forms of cultural remembrance—mechanisms through which historical ties are reactivated and transformed into frameworks for international cooperation.

The analysis also shows that these partnerships are not purely symbolic. They provide local actors with practical means to engage in educational, cultural, and developmental projects that reaffirm shared heritage while aligning with broader European objectives of intercultural dialogue and regional integration. Thus, the study situates Bulgarian–Hungarian twinning relations within the wider paradigm of **heritage-**

based paradiplomacy, where historical and cultural linkages underpin the dynamics of local international engagement.

6.1 Theoretical implications

The research represents a significant theoretical contribution as it is the first study of Bulgarian-Hungarian twinning in this field. This study makes a noteworthy theoretical contribution to the emerging scholarship on paradiplomacy and intraethnic municipal cooperation by uncovering the link between diaspora and kin state, historical migration patterns, cultural heritage, and contemporary local-level international relations. By situating the phenomenon of Bulgarian–Hungarian town twinning within the broader theoretical framework of ethnic-based transnational networks, the research extends the understanding of how historical ethnic linkages may evolve into institutionalised cross-border partnerships.

The findings demonstrate that town twinning is not merely a symbolic form of diplomacy but can also be conceptualised as a manifestation of heritage-based paradiplomacy, in which collective memory and shared identity drive municipal cooperation. This perspective enriches existing theories of paradiplomacy, which have often prioritised economic, political, or geographical determinants of local international relations, by introducing cultural-historical continuity as a distinct explanatory dimension.

Furthermore, the study provides an empirical contribution to the theoretical debate on ethnic diaspora engagement and identity maintenance in host societies, showing that the persistence of twinning relations between Hungarian and Bulgarian municipalities reflects an ongoing process of transnational identity reconstruction. This approach may represent a useful model for analysing other small, dispersed ethnic communities whose cultural practices continue to influence local diplomacy long after the original migration wave has ended.

6.2 Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers, local authorities, and cultural institutions involved in heritage preservation and municipal diplomacy. The Bulgarian–Hungarian case demonstrates that shared cultural memory can be transformed into a platform for sustainable local development. Municipalities can leverage historical and ethnic linkages to foster cross-border collaborations in areas such as education, tourism, agriculture, and cultural programming.

For Hungarian and Bulgarian municipalities, revitalising or establishing new twinning relationships rooted in shared heritage can enhance community identity, promote intercultural understanding, and attract EU funding through initiatives such as Interreg Europe, Creative Europe, or Europe for Citizens. The findings also highlight the importance of involving minority self-governments and diaspora organisations in local diplomatic activities to ensure inclusivity and authenticity in heritage representation.

Finally, the results have broader implications for the development of local-level cultural diplomacy strategies in Central and Eastern Europe. They demonstrate that even small ethnic groups, through the preservation and activation of their historical legacies, can contribute meaningfully to transnational cooperation and cultural exchange.

6.3 Limitations

While the study provides significant insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies partly on secondary databases (the Hungarian TÖOSZ and the Bulgarian NSORB databases) that, while comprehensive, may not fully capture informal or unrecorded twinning relations. There might be international relations between municipalities that are not registered in these databases.

Second, the research focuses on a single ethnic group and country context, which limits the generalisability of the conclusions to other minority populations or regions. Additionally, the study did not explore in depth the **longitudinal evolution** of twinning relations or the socio-political factors influencing their continuity.

6.4 Future research directions

Building upon these findings, future research could pursue several directions. Studies using fieldwork, participant observation, or comparative network analysis could provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

Other studies could explore the similarities and differences between twinning relations in Central and Eastern European countries. Analysing data on twinning between countries could improve our understanding of paradiplomatic relations, how they develop, and how local governments can successfully network and connect. Such research would deepen theoretical understanding while helping create practical tools for designing inclusive and resilient models of local international cooperation.

6.5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the historical legacy of Bulgarian horticultural settlers in Hungary continues to influence both local identity and contemporary municipal diplomacy. By uncovering the enduring cultural and institutional linkages between Bulgarian and Hungarian settlements, it provides empirical evidence that heritage remains a vital dimension of local international engagement.

Theoretically, the study advances the notion of heritage-based paradiplomacy, positioning cultural memory and ethnic identity as dynamic forces shaping transnational cooperation. Practically, it underscores the potential of cultural heritage to serve as a foundation for sustainable local partnerships and community development.

Although limited in scope, the study opens new pathways for understanding how small ethnic communities contribute to the cultural and diplomatic landscape of Europe. Recognising and supporting these heritage-based interactions can not only preserve shared histories but also foster enduring networks of cooperation, dialogue, and mutual enrichment in an increasingly interconnected world.

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