

POLITICAL DECISIONS AND THE FRONTIER

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ABSTRACT

The frontier as a geographical concept was first mentioned in Hungarian geography during the 20th century. In its most general meaning, frontier refers to a special border, which appeared during the physical development of the USA as a country. However, modern research has revealed that this type of frontier has a Central and Eastern European version as well. This latter one is a typical feature of the Ottoman occupation in Hungarian history, which fundamentally influenced political and military decision-making in the Carpathian Basin in the 16-17th century. Water and rivers played important roles in the Hungarian and American frontiers. The present study attempts to prove and scientifically describe the history and nation-shaping role of the frontier by comparing and contrasting the American and European frontier types. The study also describes what roles water and rivers played in the decision-making processes. While the frontier is primarily a geographical category, the political events and spatial processes of the above-mentioned era prove that it was an important part of political decision-making.

1. Borders and political decision-making processes

Governing a state, as well as organizing and leading a society, have always been complex tasks. The modern circumstances of our era may suggest that solving a society's everyday problems depends solely on setting up and operating an efficient and expert political management organization. However, the lives of modern people are still being influenced by factors of their geographical landscape. Well-established political and economic decisions could not and cannot be made without considering the elements of a landscape; therefore these elements continue to play an important role in our lives. Recognizing geographical factors and describing them by scientific methods was a great achievement of 19th century political geography, which had just become an independent discipline. In other words, in the late 1800s, European people had to face up to the fact that their lives along with the political processes of society are not exclusively determined by themselves, but are also influenced by the surrounding environment. Political geography, mainly represented by Friedrich Ratzel, has focused on this somewhat

determining relationship, while it has devoted less attention to another impact, namely the landscape-shaping activities of humans (Ratzel 1887, 1903). According to political geography and later its offspring, geopolitics, the functioning of human societies is based on the principle that people have basic needs, such as air, water, food and protection, and meeting these requirements is essential for human life (Mendöl 1932 p. 23.). Humans as biological beings live in societies, which are fundamentally shaped by the geographical landscape where they exist, while humans themselves shape their geographical environment at the same time. This tight relationship influences politics, in which meeting such human requirements as water and protection plays an essential role.

The necessity of water and protection has been a constant factor in human history due to the relationship of these two. While the obtainment of water and – in case of floods and tsunamis – response to over-abundant water stimulates the formation and operation of a society's defensive mechanisms, water can also become an essential geographical means of defense against other societies. From this Ratzel's theory derives the concept of "state borders as rivers and seas". These are constant spatial phenomena in history. Consequently, water plays an important part in establishing the frontier as a border type. As water – among others – may be an element that constitutes a border, it is only natural that states' political and military decisions have always taken it into consideration. At this point it has to be made clear that some misconceptions about water as a geographical factor have been quite persistent. The most important of these misconceptions is the belief that watercourses provide secure borders. According to a basic work on modern military theory and military geography (Clausewitz 1961-1962 II. p. 217-241.), for defense purposes, there are a number of advantages to rivers, lakes and wetlands forming borders, as they greatly impede movement. On the other hand, at the same time they may significantly hamper the success of the defense. The scope of the present study does not allow for going into detail about this concept of military theory; however, two facts should be mentioned: from a military point of view, water can constitute a good border in special cases, while at the same time, due to its distinct features, in the untouched natural environment a body of water can indicate a border of entities within a boundary.

To understand the latter observation, geographical border types and their development have to be explained. Borders have become a central issue of modern geography and political geography with a huge body of academic research and literature, which includes detailed descriptions of the topic (Haushofer 1939; Schwind 1972; Ratzel 1903; Hardi – Hajdú – Mezei 2009; Maull 1956; Haggett 2006; Tóth 2011). While the literature on geographical approach to borders reflects different attitudes and opinions, the research generally represents the uniform position that state boundaries have special developmental processes and their own cultural history. The first summary of this topic was compiled by Ratzel in his synthesis of

political geography (1903), in which he dedicates a whole chapter to the topic of boundaries in geography.

State borders are actually a type of geographical boundary, since boundaries as geographical phenomena are typical not only of human societies but also of animate and inanimate features of the landscape. The phenomena of the animate world – the flora and fauna – as well as their spatial extent are generally not separated by sharp, linear borders, rather, they are divided by a transitional zone. In other words, border zones are dominant in the natural world but sharp, linear boundaries between certain geographical features also exist, for example, lake- and seashores. The same is true for boundaries between human populations. In this case, political geography distinguishes between boundary lines and boundary zones. The more natural, ancient form of borders is the boundary zone, while the borderlines of the modern era have been measured and delineated by exact surveying methods and are the results of modern culture. During the long centuries of human history, the boundary zone was the norm. Artificial structures resembling boundary lines, such as the Great Wall of China or the Limes of the Roman Empire were exceptions, which served the purposes of military defense rather than those of a physical border. However, in politics, the boundary zones have been just as important as boundary lines; therefore, governments have had to manage them. An example to illustrate this point is the medieval Hungarian system of “gyepű”. In this case, the exterior rim of the Carpathian Basin, in some cases a 100 kilometres wide, was intentionally left in its original condition. Thus, forces of nature and military activity together defended the borders, which extended to the transitional zone of the mountainous landscape. Ferenc Fodor’s research, published in the early 1900s, already mentioned that in certain places watercourses played an important role in the “gyepű” system (Fodor 1936). The topic is relevant for the present paper as it needs to be emphasized that statehood and borders – as geographical factors of linking and separating – fundamentally depend on geographical relations. One of these important relations is the one of water, boundary and the defense mechanism of a society, which may take shape in the frontier phenomenon and therefore is a constant element of political decision-making.

It is well-known how important state boundaries are for the leaders of a modern, well-organized state. For modern societies, the state boundary carries more meaning than just outlining the area they occupy. It is often the symbol of political independence and of the power of the state and society, as well as of its position in international politics. Due to these combined factors, the protection, possession, and eventual extension of boundaries are of primary concern in foreign policy decisions. Both the American and the Central and Eastern European version of the frontier supports the idea that this type of boundary, which is a buffer zone and also the spatial factor of territorial expansion, may actually have the ability to shape a society.

2. Frontier and water

A previous study has already discussed the topic of the frontier types of the United States and the Carpathian Basin and the differences between them (Nagy – Britschgi 2012). It was noted that the concept of frontier was introduced by A. N. J. den Hollander into Hungarian geography in his book and study about the Great Hungarian Plain (Den Hollander 1975, 1980). In this book, Den Hollander explains that the frontier phenomenon described by Frederick Jackson Turner (1920) could be applied to the situation in the Carpathian Basin during the Ottoman occupation. Turner believed that the settlement of the North-American continent by Europeans created a westward-moving border zone – the frontier -, which had a crucial impact on the evolution of American society. However, further geographical research has shown that the frontier has different forms and that there are a number of ways to approach the frontier beyond Turner's original concept (Karácsonyi 2008; Hardi – Hajdú – Mezei 2009). The simplistic approach that views the frontier as a transition zone between two cultures does not allow for understanding either the American or the Hungarian version as a geographical category. Both of these frontier types were boundaries that had their own social features, and whose geographical and social conditions constantly influenced political decision-making. Therefore, this complexity within the frontier became an independent political factor both in the United States and in the capitals of Ottoman-era Transylvania and the Habsburg Empire.

In these frontier types, water - as a geographical factor – played an important role in both cases, as it served as a border and was also a means of sustenance, although its importance varied from place to place. The most obvious difference in the role of water between the two types of frontier is the fact that in the Carpathian Basin flooding in certain areas was welcome and even encouraged and enabled for defense purposes during the Ottoman occupation, while in the United States watercourses provided a natural route for spatial expansion as well as a natural border for already occupied territories. Still, both cases illustrate how the role of water in the frontier emphasizes the tight relationship of military strategy and geography (Mundt 1934; Nagy 2001). The westward-moving settlement in North America created the frontier, which means that the settlement and the establishment of state institutions happened in consecutive zones and lasted for centuries. (The conquest of the Eastern coast of the North American continent happened in the early 1500s, and the settlement of the continent did not finish until the end of the 19th century. In Hungarian history, this same time period is marked by the beginning of the Ottoman era and the prime of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.) The chapter on North America in Otto Maull's political geography emphasizes that one of the most important aspects of spatial development in the United States is its zonal characteristic (Maull 1956. p. 554-583.). The first permanent European settlements were established on the East coast, where the Appalachian Mountains provided the natural western border of expansion. At the same time, the French pressed ahead along the Mississippi River, while in the

south, Florida, Mexico and the areas north of them were conquered by the Spanish. Nevertheless, the expansion westward was quite slow until the War of Independence (1775-1783), but accelerated afterwards. At this time, the western boundary of the new country was for a time the Mississippi River, as the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries was spent settling and populating the regions between the Appalachian Mountains and the river. In the early 1800s, the Americans crossed the Mississippi to conquer the rest of the continent by the end of the century (Maull 1956). In this process, certain rivers, such as the Mississippi, the Red River, the Rio Grande, and the Colorado became borders of the frontier at some point. Still, most state borders within the country, especially the ones west of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, are artificial borders; their absolutely straight lines that follow latitude and longitude indicate that the establishment of state boundaries was based on administrative considerations. East of the Mississippi, state borders are more likely to follow watercourses such as those of the Ohio, Savannah, Saint Lawrence, Hudson, Potomac rivers and the river valleys. These borderlines recall the first period of colonization, when establishing the boundaries of the first colonies and states was largely based on the natural features of the land.

However, colonization did not stop at natural boundaries, which was due to the social potential typical of American society. It is well-known that the population of the North American continent west of the Appalachians was not provided by the natural reproduction rates of the original English colonies. Rather, the primary source of population growth in North America was mass immigration of people originating from all over 19th century Europe, including the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This wave was partly motivated by the gold rush of the late 1800s. However, it must be mentioned that immigration was not exclusively oriented towards the United States; it also happened with other continents (Schmidt-Pretoria 1938; Wittman 1978; Schmidl 2000). In fact, the North American frontier advanced as a result of the momentum of settlement and immigration. The western boundary of the United States was a wide border zone where more and more settlers arrived and some of them eventually moved even farther westward. As these people and families crossed the official western border and managed to settle in the sparsely populated territories, there were always others who followed. This process resulted in the further westward movement of the vaguely defined frontier.

During the settlement of the North American continent rivers were the natural means of exploration and expansion. As it was mentioned above, the axis of French colonization was the Mississippi River. Due to the river network of the continent and the hydrology of the Great Lakes region, most of the continent was explored by expeditions traveling on rivers thus becoming the forerunners of the westward-moving frontier (Stegner 2008). The first white men arrived in the interior on rivers, and later these same watercourses became the temporary borders of the frontier. Therefore, it is apparent that the water bodies of the landscape had a great impact on the American frontier, and since its advancement was a social issue

as well, it must have played a crucial role in the decisions regulating the development of the country's territory.

At the same time, water had a different although no less important role in the frontier of the Carpathian Basin. We already know that this frontier had more impact on Hungarian history than Pál Beluszky originally gave it credit for: "... The applicability of the frontier concept to the development of the Great Hungarian Plain is limited. The American frontier, the Wild West is fundamentally different from the frontier in Hungary: the Wild West was the border zone of a capitalist society expanding with frantic dynamism, and quickly moving westward (thus in a given area, frontier conditions lasted just a few decades); in the Great Hungarian Plain the frontier was a condition that lasted for a century, and it provided a boundary for a feudal society until the middle of the 19th century ..." (Translation by Britschgi, R.) (Beluszky 2001 p. 61.). The Hungarian, Ottoman era frontier can be approached from a different point of view: after the Turkish invasion the conquest came to a stall, and the area of the Carpathian Basin became the frontier of the Turkish Empire bordering Royal Hungary, the Transylvanian Principality and, for a short period of time, Thököly's Principality in Northern Hungary (Nagy – Britschgi 2012). The Ottoman occupied territory as a spatial entity functioned in the same way as the American frontier; it kept pressing ahead while it had its own internal structure and life, but it also belonged to the distant power center of Istanbul as a periphery. This complexity made this region a factor to consider for military leaders of both the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, as it was the zone of military conflict between Habsburgs and Turks (Perjés 1975; Nagy 2007).

Nevertheless, the main feature of this frontier was the abundance of water bodies in the region since great expanses of the Carpathian Basin used to be covered by water most of the year. During the Ottoman occupation, Hungarian society halted work on river channelization, wetland draining and flood protection that had started centuries earlier. As a result, in the Great Hungarian Plain and some other areas of the country, the landscape reverted to what it was like before the waterworks started. At the same time – also due to the defense mechanism of the society –, a line of defense was raised with great speed, made up of forts and castles whose surroundings were intentionally transformed into bogs and swamps. Some of these would not be used again as agricultural areas until the 19th century (Ihrig 1973). Thus, the Carpathian Basin hosted a frontier of the Ottoman Empire which was rich in water, illustrating perfectly what modern geography says about the symbiosis of humans and their environment (Sárfalvi 1966; Györi-Nagy 2004).

The size of the country's water-covered area was only one of the concerns the political and military leaders had at the time. The other one was the fact that military operations usually moved along watercourses due to the river system of the theatre of war in the Carpathian Basin. In 20th century geopolitical literature this phenomenon was called "the river as the vehicle of historical movement" (Schmidt – Haack 1929 p. 15.). Turkish military campaigns in the Carpathian Basin con-

secutively followed the same route as they did in 1526 towards their goal, Vienna: the army left Constantinople, passed the Turkish city of Edirne near the borders with Greece and Bulgaria, then followed the Maritsa River and crossed the Balkan Mountains to reach the city of Nis in the valley of the Morava River, which led them straight to the Danube with direct access to Buda and then Vienna (Schmidt – Haack 1929; Perjés 1979).

Besides the obstacles posed by watercourses, the powers fighting in the region also had to take water into consideration as most armies at the time typically faced difficulties of reinforcements and supplies. The solution to these problems could unpredictably be either aided or hindered by the river system of the theatre. In any case, large armies were unwilling to move away from great watercourses, such as the Danube. In addition, the armies tended to avoid the sparsely populated Great Hungarian Plain as much as possible. The military leaders fighting in the Carpathian Basin followed the common practice applied in other European military theatres of not moving away from rivers that provided supplies and reinforcements, as they would have risked the physical existence of their armies (Perjés 1963; Markó 1935).

The Ottoman occupation had fundamentally rearranged the settlement network and spatial structure of the Great Hungarian Plain, and intensified the processes that had started earlier in the Middle-Ages (Csüllög 2000, 2004). The significant settlements of the modern Plain got a boost by having been built at the points of high geographical energy focused at passages between enormous wetlands created by the flooding of the Tisza River (Glaser 1939). The region of the Plain that lies east of the Tisza River used to be mostly covered by water, and served as a periphery of the Turkish frontier. It was a true transitional zone, and it also represents the ideal form of a natural border zone. The Ottoman Empire attempted to press ahead with this frontier along the Danube towards Vienna; however, this campaign was hindered by the difficulties typical of military operations at the time, and the fact that this frontier was lacking the social potential that the one in the United States possessed. Due to the latter factor, unlike the American frontier, the frontier of the Turkish Empire was not able to expand without military operations. The frontier in North America had inexhaustible human reserves and resources, which were lacking in the Turkish Empire as its human resources were fed only by the natural reproduction rates of the occupied territories. This fact, among others, allowed spatial expansion for the Empire only up to the inner rim of the Carpathian Basin. Moreover, the Empire was too large at that point with two military theaters, the Persian and the Hungarian, lying too far from each other, placing a great burden on the Turkish army to move between the two (Perjés 1967). In addition, the expansion of the Turkish frontier was slowed down by the fact that the Turks did not force people living in the occupied territories to adopt Turkish religion, culture and language, and Turkish people were not settled in the Danube valley, either. In Hungarian territory, the Turkish Empire was represented by administrators and soldiers.

3. Summary

Two kinds of frontiers existed in North America and the Carpathian Basin, but in both cases political leaders had to take water into consideration, although its role was different in the two regions. While water delineated the boundaries of the American frontier and indicated the direction of its expansion, in Hungary water-courses provided routs for military operations while at the same time hindering them. In North America, water was a factor of a frontier that expanded driven by the internal forces of society. However, in the Ottoman occupied territories, water hindered the mobility of the frontier; it obstructed military operations that drove the expansion of the frontier, even though it was useful for transportation purposes. Therefore, it is clear that it was unavoidable for the politicians of the time to deal with the implications, both positive and negative, posed by water.

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