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## MINORITIES, REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND INTEGRATION IN BORDERLANDS: A CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*The article examines a series of problems concerning the relationship between modernization processes and the situation of regional communities within borderlands, taking the Slovene minority in Italy as a case study. The article deals in particular with the dynamic aspects of ethno-regional development and the associated problem of ethnic identification in a situation of "ethnic continuum", focusing on the increasingly important role that regional communities and national minorities seem to have acquired in cross-border integration.*

**Key words:** Slovene, Italy, national minorities, political geography

## MINORANZE, TRASFORMAZIONE E INTEGRAZIONE REGIONALE NELLE AREE DI CONFINE: UNO STUDIO ANALITICO

### SINTESI

*L'articolo esamina il processo di modernizzazione sociale e la posizione delle comunità regionali nelle aree di confine prendendo spunto dal caso della minoranza etnica slovena in Italia. Particolare attenzione è dedicata ai dinamici aspetti dello sviluppo etnoregionale ed ai connessi problemi dell'identificazione etnica in un ambiente sociale di "continuum etnico", ma anche al maggiore ruolo delle comunità regionali, e soprattutto delle minoranze nazionali, nel mantenimento e rafforzamento dei processi di integrazione transfrontalieri.*

**Parole chiave:** sloveni, Italia, minoranze nazionali, geografia politica

## INTRODUCTION

The question of regional identity and the influence of regional factors on the development of cross-border relations increasingly appears to be one of the central problems of the process of European integration. Unlike the early post-war period, when the paradigm of modernization strongly emphasized integration or rather the standardization processes within states, entirely neglecting regional ethnic and cultural specificity, modern European societies have now had to face up to the durability of ethnic phenomena, and have begun to take greater notice of and deal with ethnic and regional issues. The "new" paradigm, stemming from both social urbanization and tertiarization, is connected, therefore, to a process of decentralization, expanding throughout the territory and forming a more regionally based social system within and between states. In such conditions, minority regional, ethnic and national groups also acquire greater opportunities for their own assertion and development.

Assuming that it is possible to apply the term regional communities to social groups with a local or regional dimension which have strong ties to the settlement area they have shaped into a specific cultural landscape (Bufon, 1990a; 1990b), then, while this term contains various dimensional levels of ethnic communities, it nevertheless reveals a common relationship towards space. Indeed, the strong attachment that minority regional groups have to their geographical and historical environment conveys a particular territorial behaviour, as a result of which the concepts of ethnicity and territoriality are becoming increasingly intertwined.

Territoriality not only determines local communities, but also binds them in their ongoing activities and their social transformation, which is expressed through the spatial and social mobility of group members. Territoriality can also be defined as the static component of a local community and social-spatial mobility as its dynamic component, while interactions between the two components influence the changing of both social structure and the form of relations with the social and spatial environment of a given regional group (Bufon, 1988; 1991). The results of these changes are ultimately reflected in the forms of regional, i.e. spatial and social development of the ethnically mixed border landscapes.

Clearly, this situation involves not only the economic contraposition between the centre and the periphery, but also the crisis of the modernist development model, thereby yielding more space and opportunities to a renewed social and ethnic pluralism which may reflect both the cultural characteristics and human expectations of the peripheral areas (Petrosino, 1986). In the opinion of a number of social scientists, modernization processes, including the centralization of productive and residential functions and locations, on the one

hand, and the standardization of culture and society into a single state model via administration and education, on the other, have destroyed the original socio-economic equilibrium and cultural regional diversity. As a result, not only has there been an uneven socio-economic development as regards central and peripheral areas, but there has also been an imposition of foreign cultural elements, which has been felt by peripheral regional communities as a threat to the preservation of their own ethnic, linguistic and other traditional features (Williams, 1984; Bufon, 1999).

At the same time, the central administration of increasingly complex socio-economic situations has with time become increasingly difficult and expensive for the state apparatus and, as a result, less necessary, too. Thus, the question has arisen of more viable direct forms of regional government, based on the assumption that regional development plans must be adapted to the particular historical, social and cultural features of the area concerned. At the same time, a number of border areas sharing similar characteristics and common interests have begun to unite to form border and cross-border regional associations. These spatial units, which previously represented only the periphery of centralized state organizations, are now becoming new "centres" of international unions (Rokkan, Urwin, 1983).

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN BORDER AND ETHNICALLY MIXED REGIONS

International integration on the continent of Europe has been the single most important factor contributing to the growth of interest in border and ethnically mixed regions. It has become evident that border regions, with all their specificity and "unity in diversity" experiences, can acquire a central role in the integration of neighbouring areas which are politically and administratively divided. Since they are connected to the mother state, but also have many features in common with the neighbouring areas, they represent a truly transitional zone, a region of flow and connection between two socio-economic systems.

This situation has been shown quite clearly by Johansson (1982), who justifiably concludes that borderlands introduce a new aspect into the standard theory of the centre-periphery relationship. As a result of its diffused ethnic mixing and historical memory, the borderland population is no longer attached solely to the centres of the state in which it resides; it also maintains stable relations with nearby centres across the border. In this case, the actual spatial and social borders related to the range of actions of the regional communities do not coincide with the state border, but extend beyond it, thereby uniting the entire region into a new, complex system. Border regions seem, therefore, to be a special case of peripheral territories, the main characteristic of

which is that their economic and social life is directly influenced by the existing border position and cross-border communications (Hansen, 1977).

An important contribution to the study of border regions has undoubtedly been made by Central European geographers (Bufon, 1997), who have carried out a number of detailed case studies.<sup>1</sup> The position of Slovenia within the cross-border regional community Alpe-Adria has been analysed in great detail by Klemenčič (1987), who stresses the new function of borderlands and border communities within the context of greater cross-border economic cooperation and an increasing flow of people, goods and information. Formerly underdeveloped frontier zones are, thus, turning into urbanized and integrated border regions, particularly in relation to certain basic cross-border functional activities, such as housing, work, supplies, leisure and education.

In addition to the generally acknowledged factors contributing to the increased permeability of borders, i.e. the comparability of social systems, the harmonization of the social and economic structures in border regions, a sufficiently high degree of spatial and social mobility of the borderland population, inclusion in international traffic and economic flows, the presence of a modern transportation network and other similar factors, it has also been possible, more recently, to add certain cultural factors, including a positive attitude towards one's neighbours and bilingualism on both sides of the border (Klemenčič, Bufon, 1994).

These cultural elements of connection and transformation of border regions have probably been more prominent in Slovenia than elsewhere in Central Europe, considering its specific location and the presence of sizable Slovene ethnic minorities in most of its border areas. Perhaps the most intensively studied region, here, has been the Italian-Slovene border region (formerly the Italian-Yugoslav border region), where both the degree of urbanization of the population and cross-border relations have reached higher levels than in all the other Slovene border areas.

#### THE ETHNIC AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF BORDERLANDS: THE CASE OF THE SLOVENE MINORITY IN ITALY

Several studies conducted on the present Italo-Slovene border region (to which the Slovene Research Institute in Trieste has made a considerable contribution since its foundation in 1974) have revealed that the intensiveness of cultural contacts across the border is a fundamental factor in the dense network of cross-border social and economic exchanges and even represents a

springboard for the development of higher forms of international cooperation. Local cross-border cultural contacts are maintained by the urbanized areas in particular on both sides of the border and bilingualism is widespread.

This is most clearly evident in the southern part of the border region between Italy and Slovenia, where the myriad cross-border contacts reflect the needs of the local population for the maintenance of the regional structure, which was destroyed by the new international border drawn after 1945, particularly in its gravitational, ethnic and economic aspects (Klemenčič, Bufon, 1991).

An analysis of daily cross-border transactions as recorded by newspapers (Sussi, 1973; Delli Zotti, 1982) revealed not only the quantitative growth of these transactions, but also the role of the national minorities in maintaining cross-border ties. Typically, local political contacts only appeared after local economic and cultural exchanges had significantly increased, and both these types of exchanges were primarily supported by the Slovene ethnic minority in Italy as a result of their bilingualism and their long-lasting ties to the mother nation (Bufon, 1993; 1994a).

In the determination of the ethnic regional development of the border area inhabited by Slovenes in Italy (Bufon, 1992), attention must be drawn to the fact that this process is still going on, especially as regards social urbanization within the ethnically mixed border area and the related growth of interest people have in their ethnic roots, and the regional role which the Slovene minority group tends to have in this border landscape. The first attempt to explain the dynamic aspects involved in the transformation of the ethnic and regional structures in the Italo-Slovene border area was provided by Klemenčič (1979) at the International Conference on Minorities in Trieste in 1974, when the effects of a rapid industrialization were predominant.

Simplifying the matter, it is possible to divide the process of ethno-regional development into three different phases (Bufon, 1994b). The first phase is characterized by the stability of the ethnic and social structures, and lasts from the rise of modern territorial states to the beginning of industrialization. No particular interactions between centres and periphery are apparent and so this phase can be defined as a period of static coexistence between an immobile, ethnically clearly distinct agrarian countryside and nearby self-sufficient, ethnically mixed urban centres with a pre-industrial economy.

The next phase is characterized by the rapid development of the industrialization process in the regional centres and growing trade between these centres and their hinterlands. The urban centres only have an indi-

<sup>1</sup> For a review of the work conducted, see, among others, contributions in the edited books (ESG, 1972-1975; Biucchi, Godard, 1981; Strassoldo, Delli Zotti, 1982; Maier, 1990; Gallusser, 1994).

rect or fairly uneven impact on the rural space, triggering a wave of emigration among the agrarian population, but having little effect on the ethnic structure of the countryside, despite the fact that the standardization of state institutions, such as schools and public administration, also penetrates from the centres into the rural areas. The emigration of nationally quite aware ethnic Slovenes from their native territory to the nearby industrial areas and centres of employment, on the other hand, objectively increased the spatial extent of the Slovene ethnic range of action.

The third and last phase is characterized above all by the strong growth in tertiary activities, a process which also spread centrifugally from the centres outwards. The difference is that ties between the urban centres and their hinterlands are now growing stronger and acquiring a reciprocal character. The effects of social innovations related to tertiarization and the increasing spatial and social mobility of the population are particularly evident in the phenomenon of daily migration. As a result, the difference in the degree of socio-economic development between urban centres and their now essentially peri-urban environments is rapidly diminishing and a common urban way of life predominates. There is a growing tendency for the urban population to settle in the countryside and so ethnically mixed areas are also forming within the formerly "pure" Slovene ethnic territory. Nevertheless, the local minority population still maintains or even strengthens its regional function, particularly in those cases in which the growth of its economic base takes place at the same time as the growth of its social and political role.

#### THE SLOVENES IN ITALY: IDENTIFICATION PROBLEMS OF A COMMUNITY IN TRANSFORMATION

A major problem concerning the study of the current situation of the Slovene minority group in Italy regards the very identification of this group. At first sight this problem may seem easy to resolve: a Slovene is someone who belongs to the Slovene ethnic community and can, therefore, be identified by his/her mother-tongue, ethnic origin and cultural horizons. The case of the Slovenes in the northern part of the province of Udine clearly indicates, however, how the original language of the members of a given minority group may regress to the point that it is only considered a local dialect. These Slovenes were unable to take part in the Slovene national movement after the political partition of 1866 had separated them from the core of the Slovene ethnic community and the local Slovene population was never

able to use its own language in public contacts or learn it at school. As a result, the use of the original minority tongue is becoming less and less frequent even within families and the Slovene language is, thereby, losing much of its value.

It is necessary, therefore, to consider, on the one hand, the ethnic Slovene population in the province of Udine, where the state assimilation policy has been particularly long-lasting and incisive, and, on the other hand, the Slovene minority in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste, where there are several Slovene schools, but where the public use of the minority Slovene language is quite limited. The Slovene minority organizations have tried to counter this situation of linguistic inequality by establishing a large number of exclusively Slovene associations within the Slovene ethnic territory. Yet, the urban centres still represent a great problem as they continue to function as an assimilative "melting pot", especially as regards the socially or economically more disadvantaged classes (Rebula Tuta, 1980; Cataruzza, 1989).

All these processes have developed within a "continuum" of ethnic change, ranging from acculturation to deassimilation (Sedmak, Sussi, 1984; Fonda, 1990), although it is only recently that cases of the latter have begun to occur with a certain frequency, particularly among the younger generation. This has led to a serious complication of the ethnic identification issue, with minority members having in many cases lost two essential identification attributes: mother-tongue and cultural horizons. At this point, only the third identification attribute, i.e. ethnic origin, remains, but only in the case of a complete isolation of the minority group itself – something which has never happened since the advent of industrialization.

It is evident, therefore, that the answer to the question "what ethnic group do you feel you belong to?" is turning out to be anything but unchangeable and univocal, especially bearing in mind the changing political and social climate, which can be more or less favourable towards the granting of the demands made by the minority group. Ethnic identification in ethnically mixed areas thus exceeds the "objective" social sphere and becomes part of the "subjective" one.

This is quite well illustrated by the results of a survey involving a representative sample of the population resident within the ethnically mixed border area of the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia carried out in 1985.<sup>2</sup> It can clearly be stated from this survey that the percentage of those people who declare themselves to be Slovene is everywhere much lower than the percentage of the "potential" Slovene population, particularly in

2 The investigation was carried out by a leading Italian social-investigation group (SWG) and analysed in greater detail by Bufon (1992).

the already discussed case of the Slovene population in the province of Udine where, as a result of the long-lasting assimilation policy, "linguistic membership" no longer coincides or does not as yet coincide with "ethnic membership". The situation is completely different in the province of Trieste, where the percentage of those who declare themselves to be Slovene is substantially higher than the percentage of those who actually speak Slovene at home. This means that, as a result of a stronger national identity, Slovene ethnic feelings are more persistent here even in a large number of cases of inter-marriages.

It does not seem, however, that linguistic practice alone can be considered a satisfactory way of determining the percentage of the "potential" Slovene population in the area studied. Indeed, while Slovene is spoken or understood by 14.7 per cent of the inhabitants of the borderland, it is only used at home by 9.7 per cent of the same population. Consequently, nearly one third of those who are able to speak or understand Slovene do not use this language at home, and the percentage of the "potential" Slovene population is even higher if the linguistic practice and knowledge of the interviewees' parents, i.e. their ethnic "origin", is selected as a criterion for identification. In this case 23.3 per cent of the population in the border area studied is descended from a completely Slovene family and a further 11 per cent from a family with just one Slovene parent. Exactly one third of the population considered, therefore, is descended from a Slovene or partially Slovene family. If one then considers the interviewees' partners' linguistic knowledge and practice (31.7 per cent of them speak or understand Slovene), it can be argued that the "potential" Slovene population can still be estimated at nearly a third of the sample. The survival of this "potentiality" among the next generation is indicated by the fact that 21.5 per cent of the interviewees' children understand or speak Slovene.

In an attempt to translate the above percentages into whole numbers, the Slovene presence today in the borderland studied can be set between two rather different limits (see Table 1). The numerical minimum is represented by those who declare themselves to be Slovene, while the numerical maximum is represented by the criterion of the partner's linguistic affiliation. The former refers to the Slovene "core group" and the latter to the Slovene "potential area". As always, the actual "everyday" Slovene presence within the border area considered is to be found somewhere in the middle, i.e. in the percentage of families in which both the senior and junior generations are able to speak or understand Slovene. The data regarding the ethnic "persistence" over

three generations lead to an estimation of the "everyday" Slovene presence in the area at 22.5 per cent of the total population.

It will not come as a surprise for students of minority phenomena to learn that only 43 per cent of the Slovenes in Italy, on the basis of the above-mentioned criterion of ethnic persistence, are currently willing to identify themselves as such. It is essential to stress the "momentariness" of ethnic self-identification as ethnic changes within a context of inter-ethnic continuum are continuous at a micro level, although they do not seem able to significantly alter the ethnic structure of the area studied over a longer period. Assimilation processes are not, therefore, an irreversible, "one-way" process, but are accompanied by de-assimilation events of greater or lesser importance. Ethnically mixed areas are consequently changing from a two-dimensional social space into a "fractal" one in which several forms of ethnic interaction are possible and may coexist. Ethnic identification cannot, therefore, follow a merely "yes or no" statistical logic and is unlikely to be revealed by a census alone. From an ethnic point of view, one of the most important results of present-day social urbanization is the erasing of the once clearly drawn linear ethnic border and the creation of an ethnic "continuum" in which a more conscious ethnic integration, preserving ethnic pluralism and the strengthening of bilingual practice, is taking shape (Bufon, 1992).

#### CONCLUSION: A "NEW" ROLE FOR NATIONAL MINORITIES WITHIN BORDERLANDS?

It is possible to conclude by stating that the transition and inclusion of the Slovene ethnic community in Italy into an ethnic "continuum" is also connected with its active integration into a wider social environment, as somehow guaranteed by the process of urbanization in post-industrial societies which by definition already represents an alternative to the centripetally arranged and spatially restricted industrial society. In this framework formerly neglected "border" communities and national minorities can perform their "natural" role as cultural and economic integrators of neighbouring countries and thereby become an important factor in regional development.<sup>3</sup>

This very close and "natural" relationship between minority groups and their own historical and cultural environment makes it possible to conclude that spatial affiliation or territoriality imposes itself as one of the most significant elements in identification processes in relation to local or regional communities, including autochthonous ethnic or national minorities.<sup>4</sup> It can also

3 See, for instance, the articles by Bufon, Klemenčič and Štrukelj in Štrukelj (1994a).

4 Different aspects of territoriality have already been discussed by Soja (1971) and more recently by Gottmann (1982) and Knight (1982).

be stated that territoriality determines not only the spatial "roots" of a local community, but also conditions its activity and socio-economic development, creating a specific social and spatial mobility among the members of a given community.

The creation of a new situation in which local communities tend to strengthen their regional role is undoubtedly influenced by certain contingent needs concerning the internal transformations of the structure of ethnic communities, but it is also related to the changed relationship between minorities and the dominant group. At present, rather than a conflict between two socially and culturally different formations, this relationship involves a contraposition of interests between the minority or regional group and the dominant state institutional framework (Jogan, 1991). This new regional and inter-regional role that local communities tend to perform is generally ignored or even rejected by the still powerful political and institutional centres.

Cross-border cooperation between Italy and former Yugoslavia started quite early, even earlier than that between the socially more developed countries of northern Europe, above all as a result of the fact that national minorities, which are present on both sides of the border, stimulated and took part in this cooperation (Valussi, Klemenčič, 1978). Although relations between Italy and Yugoslavia, or rather Italy and Slovenia, have eased in the first years of Slovenian independence, notwithstanding a general growth in local cross-border relations within the border region, the fact that these very local relations are still more intensive than those be-

tween Italy and the other countries beyond the Alps is both interesting and significant (Bufon, Minghi, 2000), particularly in the light of recent political transformations.<sup>5</sup> Here, too, the presence of national minorities along the border seems to be determinant. It can, thus, be argued that border minorities still have large resources in the field of cross-border cooperation, especially where they are able to develop their "natural" intermediation role (Bufon, 2000; 2002). The evolution of these minorities from passive into active regional communities, which is supported primarily by the improvement in their cultural and educational level, makes it possible to be a bit more optimistic about their present and future situation.

**Table 1: The Slovene population in Italy according to different identification levels (SWG, 1985).**

**Tabela 1: Slovensko prebivalstvo v Italiji na osnovi različnih identifikacijskih nivelov (SWG, 1985).**

Identification level	Percentage	Number
Self-declaration	9.4	40,400
Speak Slovene at home	9.7	41,700
Understand Slovene	14.7	63,200
Parents understand Slovene	23.3	100,200
Partner understands Slovene	31.7	136,300
Children understand Slovene	21.5	92,500
Children in Slovene schools	13.5	58,100
Mostly Slovene acquaintances	25.0	107,500

5 Further aspects of this problem can be found in the proceedings of several meetings, e.g. the Gorizia conference (1972) on Problems and Perspectives of Border Regions (Trieste, Lint, 1973) and the conference in Val d'Aosta (1988) on L'effet frontiere dans les Alpes (Aosta, 1992).

## MANJŠINE, REGIONALNA TRANSFORMACIJA IN INTEGRACIJA V OBMEJNIH OBMOČJIH: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA

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### POVZETEK

Članek obravnava na primeru Slovencev v Italiji eno najbolj žgočih in aktualnih tem v Evropi danes: vprašanje vpliva regionalnih dejavnikov, čezmejnega povezovanja in družbene integracije na identiteto lokalnih skupnosti. Uvodoma poudarja, kako so sodobni razvojni procesi lokalnim skupnostim po eni strani omogočili, da izboljšajo svoj družbeni položaj, po drugi pa so jih postavili v vse tesnejšo komunikacijo z drugimi družbenimi skupinami, kar lahko sproža tudi negativne učinke samoizolacije in odklanjanja vseh "tujerodnih" elementov. Te kompleksne in mnogokrat nasprotujoče si težnje in situacije so morda še najbolj razvidne v obmejnih in etnično mešanih območjih, v katerih se pravzaprav uspeh nove evropske paradigme "združenosti v različnosti" najbolj konkretno preverja. V nadaljevanju je proces integracije in transformacije nekega evropskega kontaktnega prostora podrobneje analiziran na primeru slovensko-italijanskega obmejnega območja ter slovenske manjšine v Italiji. Avtor opredeljuje faze etno-regionalnega razvoja obravnavanega etnično mešanega območja, ki jih opredeljuje rastoča soodvisnost in oblikovanje posebnega interetničnega kontinuuma, ter iz tega izhajajoče probleme (avto)identifikacije slovenske manjšine v Italiji. Po razpoložljivih podatkih se za slovensko narodnost opredeljuje 9,4% prebivalcev v etnično mešanem obmejnem pasu, in približno isti delež prebivalcev (9,7%) uporablja slovenski jezik doma. Po tem kriteriju bi lahko izračunali, da je Slovencev v Italiji le okrog 40 tisoč, dejansko pa znaša delež tistih, ki razumejo slovensko 14,7%, prenos jezikovnega znanja od starih staršev na otroke pa zajema celo 21,5% prebivalstva. To pomeni, da znaša obseg jezikovno aktivnega prebivalstva, ki pa se ne identificira nujno s slovensko narodnostjo, med 65 in 95 tisoč prebivalcev, kar predstavlja notranji in zunanji krog tistih, ki se na slovensko narodnostno skupnost povezujejo na bolj posreden način, in bi jih lahko, bolj kot nacionalno manjšino, po kriteriju avtoidentitete raje opredelili kot jezikovno manjšino. Sodobna funkcija manjšinskih skupnosti se torej po eni strani kaže v družbeno-kulturnem povezovanju dveh etničnih oziroma jezikovnih enot, po drugi pa v družbeno-ekonomskem povezovanju dveh državnih prostorov. Tudi v tem pogledu so opravljene analize pokazale, da je čezmejna povezanost toliko večja v tistih obmejnih območjih, v katerih so prisotne in dejavne etnične manjšine. Tu pa se odpirajo seveda še problemi ustreznih državnih in mednarodnih politik, ki bi morale lokalnim skupnostim in manjšinam dovoliti, da polno opravljajo svojo "naravno" funkcijo družbenih integratorjev v kontaktnih prostorih.

**Ključne besede:** Slovenci, Italija, narodne manjšine, politična geografija

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