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# Accepting the Border, Choosing the Border: The Štrigova and Razkrižje Micro-region in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## IZVLEČEK

### SPREJEMANJE MEJE, IZBIRANJE MEJE: ŠTRIGOVA IN RAZKRIŽJE V PRVI POLOVICI 20. STOLETJA

*Meja med Slovenijo in Hrvaško na področju Razkrižja in Štrigove je še vedno predmet raznih razprav. Do njene zadnje spremembe je prišlo leta 1946, njen današnji potek pa so oblikovali razni elementi. Članek zato analizira potek te meje v burnem obdobju prve polovice 20. stoletja.*

*Ključne besede: slovensko-hrvaška meja, Štrigova, Razkrižje, demarkacija, 20. stoletje*

## ABSTRACT

*The border between Slovenia and Croatia in the area of Razkrižje-Štrigova is still a subject of debate. Its last change occurred in 1946 and its present appearance was influenced by various elements. This article will analyze the phenomenon of the emergence of this border in the turbulent times of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*Key words: Slovenia-Croatia border, Štrigova, Razkrižje, demarcation, 20<sup>th</sup> century*

In 1946 a group of individuals, claiming to have the support of the majority of the residents in the former compact Municipality of Štrigova in the north-western part of Međimurje, visited various Yugoslav state institutions in Belgrade.

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Emphasizing transportation, economic, cultural, educational and national reasons, they appealed to the central authorities in order to ensure that their small region, consisting of several settlements, becomes a permanent part of the Federal People's Republic of Slovenia. They claimed that the state institutions were the only relevant factor with the authority to resolve this inter-republic Slovenian-Croatian border conflict and propose a final solution in the era in which the state promoted "brotherhood and unity" and avoided even the smallest possibility of a national conflict.<sup>1</sup> This case study will try to reconstruct what events led to a dispute over the Slovenian-Croatian border in this micro-region.

The article will attempt to emphasize that the nationalizing (Slovenian-Croatian) processes only occurred in that micro-region during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the Hungarian rule was overthrown, with the further development of local institutions and articulation of political and institutional nationalism on a local level. It will also highlight the importance of various local educational, economic and other social conditions which contributed to the articulation of attitudes of these communities about their (national) belonging and their expressions of reluctance or even resistance after they were placed on – what they considered to be – the "wrong side" of the border. In addition to theoretical literature, the article is based on published and unpublished archival sources and newspapers covering the history of this area in the mentioned period.<sup>2</sup>

Conceptually, this case study relies on Thomas Wilson's and Hastings Donnan's theory of identities along borders. According to Wilson and Donnan, the population living in areas closer to borders can perceive them as "both barriers and opportunities"<sup>3</sup>. This article aims to observe how the various aspects of border perceptions influenced the local population and affected the process of their self-determination in terms on their local, national, political, economic and other affiliations.

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## Reshaping the Borders, Shaping the Territory (1900–1945)

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The Municipality of Štrigova was formed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It comprised 45 individual villages and hamlets scattered across 9.351 square acres of mountain terrain. The settlements were quite disjointed and had a relatively few number of inhabitants. In 1910 Štrigova itself had only 433 inhabitants and Razkrižje, one of

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- 1 Duško Dimitrijević, *Državne granice nakon sukcesije SFR Jugoslavije* [State Borders after the succession of the SFR of Yugoslavia] (Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics, 2012), 399–404.
  - 2 Among other valuable titles, I would like to point out: Peter Pavel Klasinc, *Arhivski dokumenti o dogodkih v Štrigovi in okolici v prvih let po Drugi svetovni vojni* [Archival documents on events in Štrigova and its surroundings in the first years after the Second World War] (Ljubljana: Zavod 25. junij, 2008). Although this collection of documents is not without flaws (or agenda), they are still the best source to give us a good insight into the entire Slovene-Croatian border dispute.
  - 3 Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

the other larger settlements in the municipality, numbered only 229 inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> At the time, Štrigova Municipality was a part of Čakovec District, which was under the rule of the Hungarian-based Zala County. The Hungarian government and its policy of repression towards the Slavs, which was, for instance, evident in education, was in fact counterproductive; it slowly shaped the identity of the Slavic population in an undesired direction. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the resistance directed towards the efforts of the Hungarian authorities was mostly peaceful. However, after the collapse of Austria-Hungary at the end of 1918, an open revolt occurred. It was fueled by the difficult economic and political situation that came with the last year of the First World War. The Hungarian authorities' decision to send their army to this area was entirely counterproductive. The local Croatian and Slovenian politicians, tempted by the idea of the South Slavic unity, begun seeking help from this newly created South Slavic state.<sup>5</sup> In late December of 1918, Štrigova Municipality became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, following the quick action of the Croatian volunteer corps, who had entered Međimurje and consequently placed it entirely under the jurisdiction of the Zagreb provincial administration. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the right of ethnic self-determination was recognized and thus began the integration of Međimurje (and the neighboring Prekmurje) into the administrative and other systems of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia).<sup>6</sup>

Following a brief period of belonging to the Zagreb provincial administration (1918–1923), after *oblasts* were formed, Štrigova Municipality, together with the rest of Međimurje, became a part of the Maribor Oblast (1924–1929). Only six years later, the *oblasts* were abolished and *banovinas*, as the new, more centralized regional units in the era of the Sixth of January dictatorship, were formed. In 1929 the entire Međimurje fell under the Sava Banovina region, which had its seat in Zagreb. However, in 1931 Štrigova Municipality was separated from Čakovec District and the rest of Međimurje and placed under the authority of the Ljubljana-based Drava Banovina and its Ljutomer District.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to simultaneously build a unified state and nation, especially in the era of the Sixth of January Dictatorship (1929–1935), the Yugoslav government tried to create a new internal map of administrative units, from regional to municipal, in an effort to produce not only a functioning administration, but also a new set of allegiances towards themselves and the concept of integral Yugoslavism which they promoted. The state announced that their boundaries would be formed according to economic

4 A magyar szent korona országainak 1910. évi népszámlálása. Első rész (Budapest: Magyar statisztikai közlemények, 1912), 82, 83.

5 Vladimir Kalšan, "Međimurje 1918. i 1919. godine," in: 1918. u hrvatskoj povijesti [1918 in Croatian history], ed. Željko Holjevac (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 2012), 139–53. Vladimir Kapun, *Međimurje 1918* (Čakovec: Zrinski, 1982), 308–28.

6 Kalšan, *Međimurje 1918. i 1919.*, 148. Miroslav Kokolj, *Prekmurški Slovenci: Od narodne osvoboditve do nacistične okupacije 1919–1941* [Slovenes of Prekmurje: From National Liberation to Nazi Occupation 1919–1941] (Pomurska Založba: Murska Sobota, 1984), especially 35.

7 Ljubo Boban, *Croatian borders 1918–1993* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1993), 58–60.

and transportation principles, and that former ethnic divisions between South Slavic people will simply disappear.<sup>8</sup> For this purpose, many small settlements were placed under the administration of regional centers of power, under which they had never been before.

During the Second World War, the territory of predominantly Slovenian Drava Banovina was occupied and divided by the German, Italian and Hungarian forces. After a few months under the Third Reich, Međimurje, including the municipalities of Štrigova and Razkrižje, was from 1941 to mid-1945 reincorporated into the administrative system of the Hungarian Zala County.<sup>9</sup> In that form it welcomed the end of the War in spring of 1945 and the reunification with the Slovenian Ljutomer District in the now reconstructed Socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>10</sup>

All these changes were made without consulting the municipal or other local levels of government. It was clear to the inhabitants of this territory that the real reasons behind the border alterations lay in the changes which happened in the centers of power which surrounded them and claimed this territory. This shows the undemocratic character of the border changing processes in this area, which affected the behavior of the inhabitants and developed the idea of a border as something arbitrary, a line which, for some reason, does not include the area they would choose or approve of.

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## **Štrigova and Razkrižje Municipalities – the People and the Institutions**

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Frequent border changes produced a shift in self-awareness and border-awareness among the population, as well as a split in terms of identity within the once, at least nominally, homogeneous Štrigova Municipality. The last Hungarian censuses in 1900 and 1910 reveal that a vast majority of Croats populated this area.<sup>11</sup> According to the 1921 census (the only census which asked the Interwar Yugoslavs about their first language), Štrigova Municipality was home to a prevailing number of Croatian speaking population. Out of 6.076 inhabitants in total, 5.952 declared themselves as Croats, while only 96 (less than 1 %) as Slovenes.<sup>12</sup> The next census which shows how people declared themselves in terms of nationality gives us a completely different story. In 1948, the people living in the northern part of the former Municipality of Štrigova, better to say the new Municipality of

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8 Laslo Sekelj, "Diktatur und die jugoslawische politische Gemeinschaft – von König Alexander bis Tito," *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa 1919–1944* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2001), 519.

9 "Općini Štrigova in Razkrižje pod Madžarsko," *Slovenski dom*, June 25, 1941, 2.

10 Vladimir Kalšan, *Međimurska povijest [A history of Međimurje]* (Čakovec: V. Kalšan, 2006), 323, 324.

11 Comp. *A magyar szent korona országainak 1900. évi népszámlálása. Első rész* (Budapest: Magyar statisztikai közlemények, 1902), 162–65 and *A magyar szent korona országainak 1910*, 82, 83.

12 *Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31 Januara 1921 god. [Definitive Results of State Census of January 31, 1921]* (Sarajevo: Državna štamparija, 1932), 290, 291.

Razkrižje, which in the meantime became a part of the Slovenian territory, declared themselves predominantly as Slovenes, while the others, who were placed under the rule of the People's Republic of Croatia, declared themselves mostly as Croats.<sup>13</sup> Subsequent censuses tell the same story; between 1921 and 1948 a process of national differentiation occurred.

But we can leave the numbers aside and take a look at the multi-level dispute within the municipal community. It manifested on a local level in economic, cultural and political manner. It should be noted that Štrigova Municipality in that era consisted of a lot of mountain territory and that the central settlement itself had only several hundred residents. The inhabitants of the marginal parts of this municipality, broken into a number of villages and hamlets, due to the terrain configuration, experienced transportation isolation and some had problems when trying to reach Štrigova, the center of the municipality, or Čakovec, the seat of their district.

The dispute between the northern or Razkrižje part of the once unified Štrigova Municipality and its central or south part became more obvious during the 1930s. The inhabitants of Razkrižje and other "northern" settlements clearly resented the efforts of the local teachers and priest who came from Štrigova, and were sent by Zagreb's administrative and ecclesiastical authorities. They accused them of being unable to adjust to local circumstances (language, mentality), but also of "denationalization" of their children. In 1933 they petitioned the Drava Banovina authorities for a teacher who would teach their children in the Slovenian language. Soon, the primary school in Šafarsko near Razkrižje was actually granted this teacher.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a few years later, they petitioned even more vigorously for the formation of the new Razkrižje Municipality.<sup>15</sup>

This demand coincided with the efforts of the Drava Banovina authorities. In mid 1930s they started the process of redistribution of municipalities under their jurisdiction. Basically, this process was directed towards the merger of the existing municipalities, thus creating new, larger municipalities, with enough taxpayers to work for the good of the people. The number of municipalities in Drava Banovina decreased from 1069 to 407 in 1937.<sup>16</sup> Despite the proclaimed efforts to create a bigger and more functional local administration, the Drava Banovina authorities decided to dismember the large Štrigova Municipality. In 1937 one part became the new Štrigova Municipality, encompassing two thirds of the previous municipal

13 According to the 1948 census, In the People's Republic of Slovenia's district Ljutomer local people's committees [mjesni narodni odbor] Globoka (475 Slovenes and only 4 Croats), Razkrižje (1100 Slovenes, 19 Croats) and Veržej (720 Slovenes, 7 Croats), while in People's Republic of Croatia's Čakovec district local liberation committees Sveti Urban (61 Slovenes, 1199 Croats), Štrigova (89 Slovenes, 1823 Croats) and Železna Gora (19 Slovenes, 1140 Croats). – *Konačni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 15 marta 1948 godine: Knjiga IX [The final results of the March 15, 1948 census: Book IX]* (Beograd: Savezni statistički zavod, 1954), 351, 405.

14 "Razburjenost na Razkrižju in v Štrigovi," *Slovenski narod*, November 11, 1939, 2.

15 "Štrigova," *Jutro*, October 15, 1937, 7.

16 Gašper Šmid, *Uprava Dravske banovine 1929–1941 [Drava Banovina Administration 1929-1941]* (Ljubljana: Arhiv Republike Slovenije, 2003), 56, 57.

territory and population. The other, the northern third, seceded from Štrigova and it formed a new municipality - Razkrižje. During the distribution of settlements between Razkrižje and Štrigova, the principle of territorial integrity, according to which every settlement had to belong to one municipality, while a municipality may only be under the authority of one district, and a district under the jurisdiction of a single banovina, was not applied. Surprisingly, almost half of the individual settlements in this redistribution remained literally divided by house numbers between Štrigova and Razkrižje municipalities.<sup>17</sup>

The residents of Štrigova Municipality clearly disliked the actions of their neighbors in the new Razkrižje Municipality. They accused them of intentionally working on their separation from Croatian national territory with the authorities of Drava Banovina. They even cited some examples of arrests and fines sent to the people who declared themselves as Croats.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, on a practical level, they argued that some of the settlements which were placed under the latter municipality were in fact much closer to Štrigova.<sup>19</sup>

The dispute between the inhabitants of Štrigova and Razkrižje soon moved to the ecclesiastical level. After the separate municipality was formed, the malcontents from Razkrižje and surrounding villages started petitioning for their own parish, separate from Štrigova, and, of course, a Slovenian-speaking parson.<sup>20</sup> The priests from Štrigova, who were responsible for the entire parish, realized that the inhabitants of the newly formed Razkrižje Municipality provided resistance and emphasized that they do not feel they belong to the same (Croatian or "štokavian") culture and language as their neighbors. Furthermore, they decided to suppress these sentiments by insisting even more on the Croatian character of the Štrigova-Razkrižje micro-region.<sup>21</sup>

The Croatian-speaking priests from Štrigova clearly resented the petitioners who sought to establish a new "Slovenian" parish in Razkrižje and publicly refused to teach at the local school in Šafarsko after it replaced Croatian with Slovenian catechisms. The Drava Banovina administration responded in 1940 by ordering the

17 The Municipality of Razkrižje included the villages and hamlets Gibna, Razkrižje, Šafarsko and Vesčica, and parts of Jalšovec (house numbers 16-38), Grabrovnik (house numbers: 36a, 104, 105, 110, 112-151), Banfije (home numbers: 1-15, 26, 27, 30, 31, 34, 44-72, 82, 84-128, 131, 150-171) and Robadije (house numbers: 76-138, 148-179, 205-230). Other parts remained under the jurisdiction of Štrigova Municipality. – "Ukaz o spojitvah, razdružitvah in pregrupacijah občin in o spremembah imena in sedeža občin v območju Dravske banovine," *Službeni list Kraljevske banske uprave Dravske banovine*, October 16, 1937, 790.

18 Besides the supporters of the Croatian Peasant Party, the chaplain from Štrigova was also fined several times "for holding patriotic sermons, which was seen by the authorities as spreading of tribal hatred". – "Nasilno sloveniziranje Hrvata u Štrigovi," *Hrvatsko jedinstvo*, June 8, 1940, 2. Such procedures were, to say the least, inconvenient, because during that time (1939–1941) the Croatian Peasant Party was cooperating with the Slovenian People's Party on a national level.

19 "Štrigova," *Jutro*, October 15, 1937, 7.

20 Breda Pogorelec, "Razkrižje," *Jezik in slovstvo* 38, No. 3 (1993): 108–12.

21 In August of 1940, the pupils who attended the Catholic youth course came to Štrigova where they "sang many [Croatian] patriotic songs, to remind everyone that Štrigova belongs to Međimurje and not to Slovenia". Two months later, the choral society Zrinski from Čakovec arrived in Štrigova, where their outdoor performance turned into a great manifestation of Croatian nationhood. – "Razkrižje," *Hrvatsko jedinstvo*, August 24, 1940, 5. "Štrigova," *Hrvatsko jedinstvo*, October 5, 1940, 6.

local teachers to take over catechism teaching in Šafarsko, which was, according to the parishioners, against the law because in the area of their diocese only the bishop could appoint and dismiss religious teachers. The archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, tried to reconcile the Razkrižje parishioners and the Štrigova priests in 1940/1941 but with little success. The conflict between the Croatian speaking priests and the predominantly Slovenian-speaking parishioners continued for decades, even after a separate Razkrižje parish was formed in 1942.<sup>22</sup>

It seems that the process of national stratification advanced quite a lot in the Štrigova-Razkrižje micro-region due to the introduction of Slovenian school teachers, textbooks and municipal institutions in what was once, at least nominally, a homogeneous community. Perhaps the best indicator of that process were the results of the parliamentary elections. During the elections for the National Assembly in 1938, the last major elections prior to the Second World War, a vast majority of the population in the municipality of Razkrižje voted for the Yugoslav Radical Union (YRU), which at the time included the Slovenian People's Party, while in Štrigova most votes went for the United Opposition, i.e. the Croatian Peasant Party.<sup>23</sup> Although some malcontents from the Croatian side disputed these results, saying that "the local candidate of the YRU list was a farmer called I. Šajnović, who declares himself a Croat and is not a member of YRU", this information shows that during the late 1930s in the newly created Razkrižje Municipality most of the locals voted for candidates who supported Slovenian programs, while in Štrigova Municipality a vast majority of people in the same indirect way declared themselves as Croats.<sup>24</sup>

There were several announcements in 1939 and 1940 that during the reorganization of Yugoslav internal borders government will take into account the Štrigova-Razkrižje issue, which will be resolved by placing this micro-region under the jurisdiction of the newly formed Banovina of Croatia. The talks on this "replacement of the territory" between the leaders of the most prominent Slovenian and Croatian parties, Franc Kulovec and Vladko Maček, were intensified in late 1940.<sup>25</sup> However, due to the outbreak of the Second World War this plan never materialized.

22 Pogorelec, "Razkrižje," 110, 111. Razkrižje parish remained under the administration of the Zagreb archdiocese all the way until 1994. – "Župa Razkrižje Slovenska," *Varaždinske vijesti*, September 14, 1994, 9.

23 During the 1938 elections in the Razkrižje municipality Yugoslav Radical Union got 291 votes, opposition (altogether) – 83. In Štrigova Municipality YRU got 165, Croatian Peasant Party 334 votes. – "Volivni izidi v Sloveniji," *Slovenec*, December 13, 1938, 3.

24 "Nasilno sloveniziranje," 2.

25 Tomaž Ivešić, "Delovanje dr. Franca Kulovca na čelu SLS in ključni dogodki pred vojno," *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje* 49, No. 1 (2013): 93, 94.

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## The Border After the Second World War

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The aftermath of the Second World War saw the establishment of the new socialist Yugoslavia. It was supposed to be the state of all the “brethren Yugoslav nations” organized in six “fraternal republics”, which were conceptualized as a solution to the national question that the prior, monarchist Yugoslavia never managed to resolve.<sup>26</sup> The border between the newly formed People’s Republics’ of Slovenia and Croatia remained for the most part the same as the old banovinas border established in 1931. Štrigova and Razkrižje municipalities, along with their newly established local authorities, *local people’s committees*, provisionally became a part of Slovenia. The end of the War, especially April and May of 1945, was especially hard for the locals. Many homes and other buildings had to be rebuilt and there was a shortage of basic supplies, which in 1945/1946 forced some locals to fight the authorities and become outlaws.<sup>27</sup>

In the first few critical years after the War, food and other supplies came mostly from the authorities on the Slovenian side, i.e. Maribor and Ljutomer.<sup>28</sup> Only in late 1945 did the Croatian side show some interest in this territory. The central government in Belgrade was well aware of the fact that certain areas were controversial in a manner that it was necessary to resolve which of the Republics they belonged to. In September 1945, the Ministry for the Constitutional Assembly clearly listed the problem of Istria and Štrigova along the Slovenian-Croatian border, where “a strong conflict between individual [Communist Party] executives from Slovenia and Croatia broke out some time ago”.<sup>29</sup>

In September 1945, after the agreement between the ministries of the interior of Slovenia and Croatia, the area of the former Municipality of Štrigova was supposed to be transferred to the jurisdiction of SR Croatia. However, the implementation of the decision was postponed because the elections for the local people’s committees were in progress, as the new, lowest, forms of self-government, and the authorities were afraid that any change at this point could cause “a negative stimulation to the [Croatian and Slovenian] national question and boost chauvinism”.<sup>30</sup>

By the end of October of the same year, the Slovenian and Croatian ministries of the interior published the “Guidelines for the temporary enforcement of border relations in the former Štrigova Municipality”, which transferred the villages and hamlets Razkrižje, Šafarsko, Goibina, Robadije, Spornec, Presika, Leskovec, Sveti Urban and Leskovec under the authority of SR Slovenia’s Ljutomer District, while all other settlements in the former Štrigova municipality became a part of the SR

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26 Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918–2005* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 163–65. Boban, *Croatian borders*, 52. § 1-2 of the Constitution of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (1946), in: *Constitution of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia [Ustav Federativne Narodne Republike Jugoslavije]*, (s.n.: Belgrade, 1946), 5.

27 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 221–27, doc. 122.

28 *Ibid.*, 59, 60. doc. 21.

29 *Ibid.*, 28, doc. 6.

30 *Ibid.*, 26, doc. 5.



Croatia's Čakovec District. Furthermore, the "Guidelines" stated that the transfer of people and goods between the two republics should run completely freely and they even created mixed commissions with the aim of resolving issues connected to private property disputes.<sup>31</sup>

The provisional nature of this solution encouraged many inhabitants to raise the question of the final drawing of the border in this area. Some of them clearly stated in their letters and petitions that most of the settlements were more inclined to staying under Slovenia than becoming a part of Croatia. Curiously, some advocates of the Slovenian side declared themselves as Croats and even requested Croatian speaking teachers in their villages (eg. Grabrovnik). Other, pro-Croatian executives resented this idea, saying that the entire former Štrigova Municipality is a part of Međimurje, and Međimurje a constituent part of Croatia.<sup>32</sup>

It is curious to see some signs of national indifference. Some people, although they declared themselves as Croats, were more prone to becoming Slovenes, or were indifferent to active participation in the local Slovenia-Croatia dispute. A large number of them were from the villages even further from the border and more oriented to Croatia.

The Štrigova-Razkrižje micro-region was a territory very dependent on agriculture. That is why the lure of better prices and the vicinity of the Slovenian market (the villages of the micro-region gravitated towards the market in Ljutomer, which was only 3-10 km away, as opposed to the Čakovec market, 22-30 km away) played a significant role in the process of these people's self-determination.<sup>33</sup>

For some of the people living in this border area the concept of "national" dropped down on the list of interests in the economically and politically difficult times after the Second World War – to make way for a better life. For instance, in June 1946, the Croatian authorities attempted to speak to the residents of Štrigova and the surrounding area, in order to assess the situation. They concluded that Slovenian propaganda had an impact on ordinary inhabitants, mostly farmers and small winegrowers, because they used various socio-economic examples. For instance, they pointed out that their wine sells for 60 dinars in Slovenia and 35 dinars in Croatia, and that the Slovenian side could build infrastructure and bring electricity to their households much faster than the Croatian authorities.<sup>34</sup>

At the beginning of April 1946, a big meeting of the local people's committee in Razkrižje was adjourned. Most of the local residents attended and were very interested in the solution for the final demarcation of their area. At this meeting, the people from Razkrižje and its immediate surroundings, led by the president of the local people's committee Simon Kutnjak, protested against the alleged new agreement that was struck between the ministers of the interior of Slovenia and Croatia. According to that deal, which was perhaps only an oral agreement between the two ministers

31 Ibid., 31, 32, doc. 8.

32 Ibid., 34, doc. 9.

33 Ibid., 92, 141, doc. 43 and 73.

34 CSA, CCLSCC; Calls, box 5, The meeting between the people and the envoy of Varaždin County, June 19, 1946.

(Ivan Maček and Ivan Krajačić), the entire area in question was marked, again only provisionally, as a territory of SR of Croatia.<sup>35</sup> Without the involvement of the central (Yugoslav) state government, Croatian authorities decided to negotiate with their Slovenian counterparts about the “swift return” of these territories under the Croatian authority. The Croatian minister of the interior claimed that the population is almost entirely Croatian and that it represents a unification of Međimurje as a whole, the way it used to be during the Austro-Hungarian period. The Slovenian minister of the interior and the Ljutomer District authorities accepted these claims.<sup>36</sup> The verbal deal was struck, but the transition of authority was followed by something that neither side had previously been able to imagine: the discontent of the people they argued about.

The news about the agreement in 1946 only caused further polarization in the Štrigova-Razkrižje micro-region. Two distinct groups were formed; one advocating that the entire area, or most of it, should become a part of Slovenia. This group enjoyed strong support among the inhabitants, especially in Razkrižje itself. The Slovenian side, led by Simon Kutnjak and Ivan Horvatič, both from Razkrižje, were promising a better life, less taxes and a market (in Ljutomer) more open to the sale of the farmers’ products and wine than the one in the Croatian district centre (Čakovec).<sup>37</sup> They also fought against the officials, teachers and priests who were sent from Zagreb, claiming that they were conducting an unwanted linguistic and cultural unification of the population that is almost completely Slovenian.<sup>38</sup>

The other, pro-Croatian side, disagreed with these claims, but was somewhat weaker in its propaganda efforts. It emphasized historical connection of this area to Croatia and even used data from the former census to support this. The Croatian side, led by Josip Alt from Štrigova, pointed out that 98% of the population in the area felt Croatian.<sup>39</sup> But they too underlined the need to respect the will of the people in the new democratic Yugoslavia.

Both sides were supported, at least formally, by various local pro-communist leaders. Furthermore, both sides discredited advocates of the other with unsubstantiated claims of “cooperation with the enemy” during the Second World War, the accumulation of wealth in the first post-war year and other accusations which should have served as a red rag to the authorities of the new socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>40</sup>

Both sides cautiously accused one another of national chauvinism but also emphasized their desire for “fraternal coexistence”, not the national dispute with their “brethren”. Depending on the standpoint, Slovenian and Croatian police forces, teachers of both nationalities, priests and Ljutomer and Čakovec authorities were also blamed for further incitement of this hatred. Indeed, some procedures of the

35 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 94, doc. 43.

36 Dimitrijević, *Državne granice*, 407.

37 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 92, doc. 43.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 73, 91, doc. 30 and 43.

40 Ibid., 122–29, 158–62, doc. 62 and 79.

listed accused parties did not calm the situation. In fact, in 1946 they stirred up the conflict even more.<sup>41</sup>

In their requests, sent to the republican and state authorities, both sides sometimes referred to the Constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Its article 12 stated that the National Assembly of Yugoslavia, as its highest legislature, was responsible for the division of territories between the republics. However, the same article explained that any border changes involving the republics were not valid without the consent of each republic.<sup>42</sup> This shows that the writers of the Yugoslav constitution considered the possibility of border changes, and even incorporated some vague and ambiguous mechanisms to ensure that the will of the people is respected.

Although the highest state authorities at first had no intention of interfering, prompted by numerous complaints, at the beginning of August 1946, the National Assembly did react. First they sent letters to the governments of Slovenia and Croatia, asking for a full cooperation in resolving this issue. They asked both governments to form a joint commission which would finally resolve the problem of delimitation in this area "due to the inconvenient tapering that occurred between the local Croatian and Slovene populations". They even suggested a solution, according to which "the territory of the local committees of Razkrižje and Robadije should be placed under the People's Republic of Slovenia, and the rest of the former Municipality of Štrigova under the People's Republic of Croatia".<sup>43</sup> In the following few weeks, while the commission was being formed, the situation escalated even more as the local police arrested some pro-Slovenian protesters.<sup>44</sup>

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## Towards the Solution

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The central government and the National Assembly of the new socialist Yugoslavia could no longer close their eyes to the Štrigova-Razkrižje issue, especially after Kutnjak and Horvatič visited Belgrade in June of 1946, emerging with the credentials of the local people's committees from Jalšovec, Robadije, Razkrižje, Stanetinec, Sveti Urban and Železna Gora, demanding the revision of the Slovenian-Croatian border during multiple audiences with the highest state-executives.<sup>45</sup>

The situation intensified and became more serious. For instance, Simon Kutnjak was arrested shortly after he returned from Belgrade. The Croatian side claimed that he was incarcerated for the economic crimes he had committed as president of Razkrižje's people's committee, while the Slovenian side claimed he was arrested for his agitation.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, during the summer of 1946, various banners and

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41 Ibid., 151–53, doc. 75.

42 § 12 of the 1946 Constitution, 5.

43 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 117, doc. 57.

44 Ibid., 127, 152, doc. 62 and 75.

45 Dimitrijevič, *Državne granice*, 399–404.

46 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 151–53, doc. 75.

triumphal arches appeared in the villages, bearing slogans such as “Štrigova is Slovene”, “We are Slovenes, and we will stay Slovenes”, while during one celebration in Ljutomer, a large number of farmers from Razkrižje and Robadije appeared with a banner saying: “Trieste is Yugoslavia, Razkrižje is Slovenia”.<sup>47</sup>

The Yugoslav authorities had to react and resolve this issue as it might have deepened the dispute between their two constituent nations and their republics. Prompted by official complaints, the federal *Control Commission* was sent to examine the Štrigova-Razkrižje border problem. This Commission, which was to decide about the demarcation in the Štrigova-Razkrižje area consisted of three members: Lepa Perović, Pavle Gregorić and Vida Tomšić. Gregorić and Tomšić were actually presidents of the Croatian and Slovenian republican Control Commissions, while Lepa Perović, as the inspector general of the federal Control Commission, had seniority.<sup>48</sup>

The three members of the Commission tried to objectively determine the Slovenian-Croatian border in this area and offer reconciliation, with the intention of providing the best solution possible for the people. The Commission conducted a multitude of interviews with various citizens, farmers, teachers, common people, etc. They wrote down all the valid and invalid arguments of both sides, who admitted that there were little or no differences in the language, culture and mentality between the inhabitants of Razkrižje and Štrigova. The Croatian side claimed that the commoners were seduced by stories of better life in Slovenia. At the same time they still acknowledged that the inhabitants of Razkrižje, Šafarsko, Gibina, Veščica and Robadije were indeed more linked to Ljutomer, at least in terms of transportation and economy.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, when confronted with the direct questions of their national and cultural belonging, some people gave vague answers. For instance, although the commission concluded that the residents of the villages closer to Ljutomer “didn’t have a clearly defined national affiliation, and were in many ways (mentality, similar language) closer to Slovenes”, the answer to the question of what language residents of Razkrižje should use was: “The same as in Štrigova”.<sup>50</sup> Self-declaration on the basis of language shows that the process of nation-building was not completed in this area by 1946. In reality, the people who opted for Slovenia felt that their language was Slovenian, and those who opted for Croatia felt that they spoke and wrote Croatian. In fact, individuals often refused to declare themselves nationally, preferring regional self-awareness. Even when they were directly confronted by the Control Commission about whether they felt as Slovenes or Croats, most of the interviewed residents often argued that they were in fact “Međimurci”.<sup>51</sup>

47 Ibid.

48 Dimitrijević, *Državne granice*, 405.

49 CSA, CCLCC; Calls, box 5, The Control Commission – meeting with the inhabitants in Štrigova, July 26, 1946.

50 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 150, doc. 75.

51 Ibid., 148, doc. 75.

The most direct interviewees were children. When Croatian authorities asked them what language they would like to learn in their elementary school, the majority voted for Slovenian. "Some of them even said it was because the Croatian language was the language of cows [?]."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the attempt to replace Slovene teachers with teachers from Croatia in June 1946 had a disastrous effect. The residents of Razkrižje and the surrounding villages gathered and refused to let new teachers into their schools and also stopped sending their children to school.<sup>53</sup>

The Commission concluded that it was necessary to avoid a deeper national dispute and apathy towards the authorities of socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>54</sup> Their final report concluded that the entire Štrigova-Razkrižje micro-region was historically a part of the Croatian Međimurje and that in the past the inhabitants of this territory used both languages, received and read books and newspapers printed both in Slovenia and Croatia. Nevertheless, they stated that this does not change the fact that in "this moment [1946] one part of the [Štrigova] municipality now declares itself Slovene", especially because young people and women are a predominant factor in siding with Slovenia.<sup>55</sup> They also acknowledged the fact that authorities in this dispute made many errors in terms of handling the situation, while the leaders of both sides, – i.e. Alt, Horvatič and Kutnjak were described as "kulaks" and "nationalists".<sup>56</sup> The Commission concluded that they need to be placed under a close watch and, if possible, removed from their positions. In the meantime, new, reconciling and more responsible faces should accept the leadership of the local people's committees and hold joint meetings with the people living in the area, in order to interpret the benefits of "the politics of brotherhood and unity, and explain how harmful national hatred could be".<sup>57</sup>

Of course, the most important thing was to resolve the border issue. Following discussions in which some maps were drawn, the Commission adopted a temporary solution according to which the northern part, or one third of the disputed territory, should belong to Slovenia, while the southern and western part should belong to Croatia. The border line was described as temporary, subject to further and final direct negotiations between the Slovenian and Croatian sides. It followed the 1937 delineation between the municipalities of Štrigova and Razkrižje for almost its entire course. The Commission clearly identified that this line also served as an ethnic border, since in the north most of the people declared themselves as Slovenes and in the south as Croats. In addition, they were against additional border redrawing, because it could have led to further border disputes.<sup>58</sup> The final report informed

52 CSA, CCLCC; Calls, box 5, The Croatian official concluded his report with a statement that this was a clear sign of Slovenian agitation among the pupils and that parents obviously do not pay enough attention to the education of their children. Meeting between the people and the envoy of Varaždin County, June 19, 1946.

53 Dimitrijevič, *Državne granice*, 403.

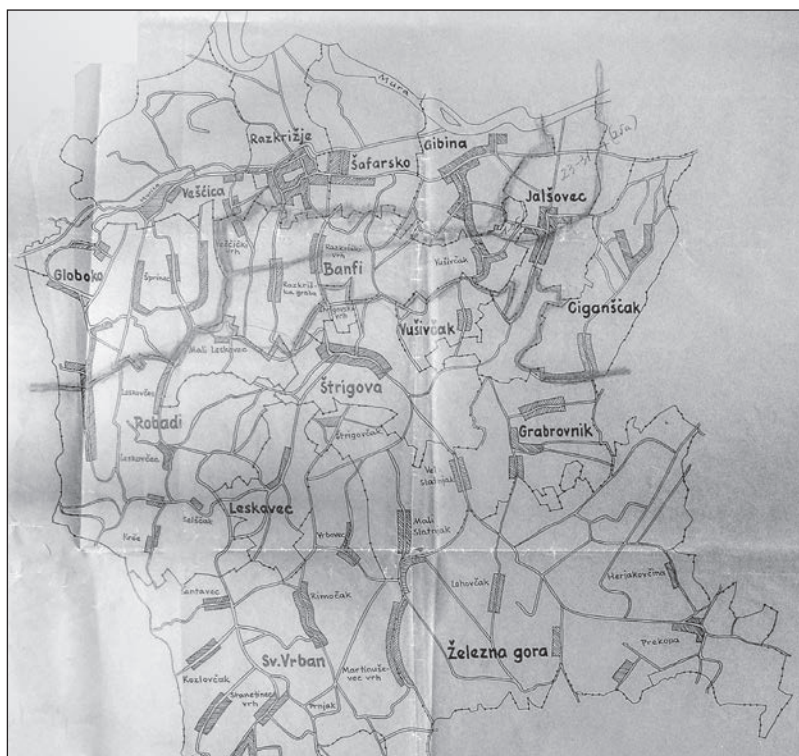
54 Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 150–54, doc. 75.

55 *Ibid.*, 153, doc. 75.

56 *Ibid.*, 152, 162, doc. 75 and 79.

57 *Ibid.*, 153, doc. 75.

58 *Ibid.*, 165, doc. 79.



Undated maps – The Control Commission's attempts to determine the Slovenia-Croatia border (1946), CSA, CCLCC; Calls, box 5.

both sides that after this temporary solution, which they thought could become a permanent one, definitive delimitation between Croatia and Slovenia would be resolved with a special act which would be passed by the National Assembly of Yugoslavia.<sup>59</sup>

At the end of 1946, having accepted that the villages and hamlets Globoka, Veščica, Gibina, Razkrižje, Šafarsko and a greater part of Banfi, become a part of Slovenia, while other settlements in the wide disputed area become a part of Croatia (Grabrovnik, Leskovec, Jalšovec, Sveti Urban, Stanetinec, Mali Leskovec, Robadije, Štrigova, Železna Gora, and a small part of the village Banfi), the Croatian side informed the central Yugoslav government and the federal Slovenian government that it no longer had any territorial disputes with Slovenia. They also stated that it was their opinion that this temporary solution should become the definitive demarcation between the two republics.<sup>60</sup> It is unclear whether Slovenian government gave any similar statement.

Both republics, Croatia and Slovenia, accepted this solution and accepted their exclusive right to install school teachers, police officers and other civil servants in the area that now respectively belonged to Croatia and Slovenia. On the other hand, after some new letters came during the summer of 1946, the federal Control Commission clearly emphasized that it would reject all new redrawing demands, except those requests which resulted from thorough discussions among the relevant district or county authorities (Ljutomer and Maribor on the Slovenian side, Čakovec and Varaždin on the Croatian side). They thought these types of requests “just [serve] to incite chauvinistic hatred and ruin the reputation of the [Yugoslav communist] *people's power*”.<sup>61</sup>

In a similar way, in the late 1946, the *Maršalat*, i.e. the office of Josip Broz Tito, rated these demands as products of “reactionary individuals”, “former Korošec's people”, who sought to sow the seed of national discord between Slovenes and Croats. “With this campaign, they gained popularity among the people, while the [local] representatives of the national authorities – instead of working in the spirit of brotherhood and unity – joined their efforts, while the work on reconstruction and construction [of the state] remained neglected.”<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, after the Control Commission announced this solution, drew the temporary border and insisted on preventing further spread of national hatred, the situation actually calmed down in the Razkrižje-Štrigova area. Indeed, with some exceptions, it seemed that both sides accepted this transitional solution.

In the decades which followed there were some local initiatives from this area which applied for the “correction” of this part of the Slovenia-Croatia border, especially in the last 25 years, after Slovenia and Croatia became independent

59 Ibid., 159, doc. 78.

60 Ibid., 174, doc. 83.

61 Ibid., 159, doc. 78.

62 Dimitrijević, *Državne granice*, 378.

countries.<sup>63</sup> However, the governments of both Slovenia and Croatia have not shown much interest in becoming involved in the border dispute(s) in this area. Ultimately, the above mentioned temporary solution of the border problem became a permanent solution. It is valid even today and the people who live in this area are well aware of all the positive and negative effects of the border. Nevertheless, most of the institutions which claim responsibilities for this area from both sides of the border agree that cooperation is better than conflict.<sup>64</sup>

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## Conclusion

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The problem of the Slovenian-Croatian border in Međimurje, in today's municipalities of Štrigova and Razkrižje, is more complex than it first appears. We can argue that many factors conditioned the present configuration of the border. One of the most important ones is the constant change of the state borders in this area. From the end of the First World War in 1918 until 1946, the first year after the end of World War II, this whole area was under the Hungarian authorities twice (1918, 1941–1945), three times under Slovenian authority (1924–1929, 1931–1941, 1945–1946), three times under Croatian authority (1918–1924, 1929–1931, 1946), and even under the Third Reich for a few months (1941). This brought instability, especially in an area where people identified themselves differently and national division had not yet been clearly established. However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the work of some “old” institutions (the Catholic Church, schools), as well as some new institutions (for instance the new Municipality of Razkrižje, established in 1937), the inhabitants became increasingly politically fragmented and they started to notice their differences in terms of language, school and economic preferences. By the summer of 1946, the situation changed again. Harsh post-war years brought economic and political instability and generated the local Štrigova-Razkrižje conflict, which grew into a conflict between the pro-Slovene and pro-Croatian sides. Both sides claimed that they had the support of most of the inhabitants of the Štrigova-Razkrižje micro-region and promised the people a better life if they supported their claims. After a large number of complaints reached the highest state authorities, three members of the federal Control Commission came out to this territory in 1946. They conducted interviews with the residents and in the end they draw a temporary border between the two republics in this area, the border that for the most part followed the 1937 border between the municipalities of Štrigova and Razkrižje. Although the National Assembly later never discussed nor passed the law concerning the Slovene-Croatian border in this area, this line became the national border between the Republic of Slovenia and Republic of Croatia as we know it today.

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<sup>63</sup> For instance: Klasinc, *Arhivski*, 184–200, doc. 93–107,

<sup>64</sup> Ivica Beti, “Humano preseljenje u Sloveniju?,” *Večernji list*, July 9, 2017, 10–13.



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## Stipica Grgić

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### **SPREJEMANJE MEJE, IZBIRANJE MEJE: ŠTRIGOVA IN RAZKRIŽJE V PRVI POLOVICI 20. STOLETJA**

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#### POVZETEK

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Oblikovanje slovensko-hrvaške meje na področju Štrigova–Razkrižje je zgodba o kompleksnosti določanja državnih mej ter o dolgotrajnih učinkih, ki so vodili do njenih današnjih obrisov. Res je mogoče trditi, da je na določanje meje pustilo veliko sled pogosto spreminjanje administrativnih meja na tem področju v preteklosti, saj je samo od leta 1918 pa do leta 1946 področje občine Štrigova, od katere je bil leta 1937 odcepljen del in ustanovljena samostojna občina Razkrižje, z vidika središč, ki so bila zanj pristojna, celo devetkrat zamenjalo pripadnost med današnjo Madžarsko, Slovenijo in Hrvaško. Poleg tega lahko rečemo, da niti sami prebivalci tega kraja niso imeli popolnoma jasne predstave o svoji nacionalni identiteti ter da so se opredeljevali za prebivalce posameznih naselij ali pa regionalno kot Medžimurci.

Kljub dolgoročnemu delovanju raznih lokalnih institucij, ki so se trudile z nacionalnim profiliranjem prebivalcev (šole, cerkev, občine), je konec druge svetovne vojne temu pretežno agrarnemu kraju prinesel nove težave. Gospodarska in politična nestabilnost je leta 1946 privedla do vse močnejšega profiliranja lokalnega prebivalstva v proslovensko in prohrvaško strujo, ki so se trudile, da bi področje prejšnjih občin Razkrižje in Štrigova spadalo v Slovenijo oziroma Hrvaško. Ker je spor teh dveh taborov vse bolj preraščal v nacionalni spor, so se v določanje meje vključile osrednje institucije socialistične Jugoslavije. Nadzorna komisija Zvezne skupščine je leta 1946 ustanovila posebno tričlansko komisijo (Lepa Perović, Vida Tomšič, Pavle Gregorić), ki je prišla na teren in po preučitvi vseh argumentov leta 1946 določila mejo, in sicer tako, da je severna tretjina spornega območja pripadla Sloveniji (vasi in zaselki Globoka, Veščica, Gibina, Razkrižje, Šafarsko in del vasi Banfi), preostali del pa je pripadel Hrvaški (vasi in zaselki Grabrovnik, Leskovec, Jalšovec, Sveti Urban, Stanetinec, Mali Leskovec, Robadije, Štrigova, Železna Gora in manjši del vasi Banfi). Tačasna odločitev nikoli ni bila potrjena, a jo v bistvu še danes sprejemata tako slovenska kot hrvaška stran kot končno mejo dveh suverenih držav na tem področju.