

THE GEOPOLITICAL LOCATION OF SLOVENIA IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESSES

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Abstract

The paper will briefly present some basic political geographical features of Slovenia, particularly for what regards its 'border' position from a geopolitical perspective. The most evident result of the most recent geopolitical transformations is represented by a general geopolitical re-orientation of the country towards north and west, a changing territorial affiliation and mediation role, which before 1991 appeared to be oriented from the Balkans towards Central and Western Europe, and has after that turned from Central and Western Europe towards the Balkans. The paper also aims to give an analysis of the various border and contact areas in Slovenia.

Key words: Slovenia, geopolitical location and re-location, borders, cross border co-operation, European integration processes

GEOPOLITIČNA LOKACIJA SLOVENIJE V PERSPEKTIVI EVROPSKIH INTEGRACIJSKIH PROCESOV

Izvleček

Članek obravnava nekaj temeljnih političnogeografskih značilnosti Slovenije, še zlasti njen »obmejni« položaj v geopolitičnem pogledu, probleme, ki izhajajo iz novejših geopolitičnih transformacij, predvsem v zvezi z geopolitično re-lokacijo države v smeri severa in zahoda, spremenjene oblike prostorske povezanosti ter smeri posredovanja, ki so bile pred letom 1991 pretežno usmerjene od Balkana proti Srednji in Zahodni Evropi, sedaj pa potekajo predvsem v obratni smeri. Po drugi strani podaja analizo različnih obmejnih in kontaktnih območij v Sloveniji.

Ključne besede: Slovenija, geopolitična lokacija in re-lokacija, meja, prekomejno sodelovanje, evropski integracijski procesi

INTRODUCTION

The article will try to exam three major issues related to Slovenia as an area of geopolitical and geocultural contact within the European realm, namely: problems concerning its geographical and geopolitical situation and reorientation; political geographical processes related to its 'contact' status; and finally, co-operation and integration perspectives deriving from the shift from divergence to convergence potentials within the area and its stabilisation in the frame of European integration. This article will focus primarily on Slovenia and its geopolitical location in Central and South-Eastern Europe as that part of Europe which has traditionally represented an European »frontier« or rather »contact area«, even in the period when Europe has actually been commanded by »marginal« or »extra-European« forces, and is now becoming crucial in terms of enlargement strategies of the EU and the NATO, trying to find a new way between convergence and divergence tendencies in this part of Europe, but also to work out if the European integration programme, which could be summarized in terms of »unity in diversity« is practicable as a real alternative to a possible global »melting-pot« future development.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND RE-LOCATION

When talking about central, eastern, western, southern or northern Europe in terms of location of different European countries, we have to consider firstly the difficulty to provide a general and accetable geographical regionalization of the continent, and secondly that geopolitical and geocultural labels have often provided a more powerful instrument, dividing Europe in the second half of the 20th Century only in the West and the East part (Cohen, 1963), following the bipolar divide, and only after the fall of the Iron Curtain putting the attention on Central or Central-Eastern Europe as an area of political and economic transition, increasing »western« influence, but also political fragmentation and ethnic conflict.

All these developments have produced an intense process of re-location and re-orientation of Central European countries. Among these group of countries, Slovenia is the smallest, counting only about 2 million inhabitants but with a GDP per capita which is almost double of that of the Czech Republic, putting thus the country on the top position among the EU applicants, even if it is considerably less »visible« than other candidates for the first enlargement (Rey, 1996). Its strategic position on the cross-road between North and South, and West and East seemed to be for the Slovenian leaders a sufficient reason for being included in the NATO during its first enlargement, and they were quite disappointed when they found that the Slovenian application were not granted. But the fact is that Slovenia, as a former Yugoslav republic, was at that time - and partly is still - considered as a »south-eastern«, that means »Balkan« country in the strategic and intelligence offices of the US and the NATO. In the case of Slovenia, the

geographical re-location is particularly interesting: until 1918 it always belonged to the Roman Germanic Empire and the Hapsburgs, being thus included among the central European countries and having strong economic and cultural relations with Vienna and Prague, whilst in the period of the Yugoslav kingdom and the Tito's federal Yugoslavia it turned towards Belgrade and Zagreb, now replaced again by Brussels and Vienna. In the Yugoslav period, Slovenia was presenting itself as a country »on the sunny side of the Alps«, that means »on the south«, whilst the current tourist slogan concerning Slovenia is »the green heart of Europe« putting thus the country in central Europe. Its location remains controversial even in Slovenian geographical textbooks: the major part have opted for central Europe, some have preserved the formerly more common southern European position.

This »border« situation of Slovenia between Central Europe and the Balkans was in fact confirmed by both the former and the current presidents of the US when visiting Slovenia. Mr. Clinton stressing that the US and the Western countries are expecting that Slovenia will play a major role in bringing coexistence practices in the region, and Mr. Bush (during his first summit with Mr. Putin at the Brdo castle near Ljubljana in June 2001) asserting that Slovenia represents a »successful story« in terms of democracy and economy which should serve as a good example also for other former Yugoslav republics. But the very Bush-Putin summit in Slovenia which contributed to make the country more »visible«, bringing out its »qualities« and thus making it eligible for the next NATO enlargement, has also opened the debate if Slovenia would not receive greater benefits by remaining »neutral«, as a sort of Alpine-Dinaric Switzerland, and maintaining thus its leading position in the former Yugoslav region (Bufon, 2002a).

SLOVENIA – A EUROPEAN CONTACT AREA

We must first consider that the context of "contact" area creates some difficulties in the allocation of Slovene territory to standardized categories. From the point of view of physical geography, in Slovenia four European macroregions meet: the Alps, the Pannonian plain, the Dinaric-Karst mountains and the Adriatic-Mediterranean coast. The meeting-points between natural regions are characterized by a mixing of the properties of each, emphasizing the transitional character of Slovenia. For this reason, apart from the four above mentioned natural macro-regions, Slovene physical geographers (Gams, 1992; Perko, 1997) have identified 9 different sub-macro-regions and as many as 50 mezo-regions in the country.

Both geographical configuration of Slovenia - where the mountainous landscape prevails, and plain areas, where an eventual concentration of population and economic activities could have taken place, covers only one sixth of the country -, and a lack of natural resources, have resulted in a lower density of population and the relatively peripheral status of the area. In consequence the territory of present-day Slovenia has remained largely "uninteresting" for the neighbouring population giving the Slovenians

the opportunity of surviving in spite of living next to politically and numerically stronger communities.

The relative peripheral condition that characterized Slovenia does not imply that Slovenia had not felt external influences. These can be seen, in fact, even in the development of different dialects and were, after all, the natural consequence of the fact, that the whole Slovenian territory, at different times and to different extent, was incorporated into different neighbouring social and political entities. Romance influences are more visible in western Slovenia, which includes Primorska and Notranjska regions; Germanic influences are more felt in northern Slovenia (Gorenjska and northern Štajerska); Hungarian influences can be detected in Prekmurje, whereas Croatian influences are present in Bela krajina and along the whole Slovenian-Croatian border area. We could say that, just as four European macro-regions meet on the Slovenian territory in the natural sphere, so the four more representative European language groups meet on the Slovenian territory in the cultural sphere: Slavic, Germanic, Romance, and Hungaro-Finnish. From this point of view Slovenia is, together with Austria, the only European country representing the contact area of all these language groups. But only in Slovenia these four linguistic groups coexist within one state (Bufon, 1996c). This used to be even more true in the past, when the Slovenian territory was part of the multiethnic Austrian monarchy, especially in the urban centres.

According to the Austrian census of 1910 the Slovenian component on the territory of present-day Slovenia reached more than 80% of the total population. The other 20% was more or less equally divided between German and other ethnic groups, among which the greatest proportion were Italian and Hungarian. The Germans, as the dominant group in Austria, lived especially in some towns, such as Celje and Ptuj, where they represented between 40 and 45% of the whole population, and as much as 55% in Maribor, whereas in Ljubljana this community represented only 10% of the whole population. Germans represented then also an autochthonous territorial ethnic group in the area of Kočevje, in the southern part of Slovenia, where, in 1910, 17 thousand out of the 105 thousand Germans in present-day Slovenia lived (Klemenčič, 1988). In the area of present Slovenian Istria, in the municipalities of Koper, Izola, and Piran, in 1910, nearly 30 thousand Italians lived, representing 75% to 80% of the local population, whilst about 15 thousand Hungarians lived in the area between the river Mura and the present Slovenian-Hungarian border. Because the neighbouring ethno-linguistic communities, particularly the German, but also the Italian and the Hungarian, were quite powerful and dominant both at the local and regional level, the Slovenian population was subject to constant assimilation. This was even more evident on the "border" of the Slovenian ethnic territory outside present-day Slovenia, where Slovenian minorities are still present. According to Slovenian estimations there are currently more than 80 thousand Slovenes in Italy, more than 40 thousand in Austria, and about 5 thousand in Hungary (Zupančič, 1998), whilst 1910 censuses showed for the same areas quite different figures : about 130 thousand Slovenes in present-day Italy, 65 thousand in present-day Austria (but Slovenian estimations for that period was about 100 thousand), and about 10 thousand in present-day Hungary.

This process of “normalisation”, or standardisation of the population structure within state systems, and the consequential assimilation of minority groups into the dominant nation, was, as in other parts of Europe, most evident in the first half of the 20th century, when a number of intense political–geographic changes, which will be discussed in more details later, took place. At this point it is important to notice that a certain kind of “normalisation” took place in the Upper Adriatic area, after the First World War and particularly after the Second World War (Bufon, 1997 and 1999a). It was also the case in the rest of Slovenia (Gosar, 1993), due to the emigration of German-speaking state employees, after the First World War, and of a larger number of those associated with the invading forces during the Second World War. The size of the German, Italian, and Hungarian communities decreased drastically. By 1921, the German community had been halved, and barely existed after the Second World War (the census of 1991 shows only 750 Germans living in Slovenia). Similarly, the Italian community decreased most in the first decades after the Second World War : from 1961 onwards it stabilized at about 3000 persons. Only the Hungarian community went through a less severe reduction. According to the 1991 census, there are about 8500 Hungarians in Prekmurje.

Regardless of the different “atmospheres” and causes that led to a change of the ethnic structure in Slovenia after the First and the Second World Wars, a certain social and geopolitical “reorientation” of the Slovenian territory southwards may be detected, since it became first part of the Kingdom and later of the Federative Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. However this “reorientation” did not have immediate consequences for the ethnic structure of Slovenia, which continued to remain almost “pure” until 1971, considering that about 95% of the population was Slovenian. Only after this year the population structure changed due to the intense immigration of labour from other Yugoslav republics. Thus the percentage of Slovenes was 90% in 1981 and less than 88% in 1991. The number of immigrant communities, which have only partly assimilated into the dominant community since the independence of Slovenia, still outnumber the autochthonous minorities (the latter are only 1% of the whole population of Slovenia), and are mainly present in the industrial centres such as Jesenice, Koper, Celje, Ljubljana, and Maribor, where, according to the 1991 census, they represented between 15% and 30%, and in Jesenice more than 35% of the population. Here, a certain territorialization of the immigrant communities is noticeable : the Croats (nearly 3% of the whole Slovenian population) are more present in the north-east and south-east of the country, whilst the Serbs (about 2,5% of the whole Slovenian population) live mostly in Ljubljana and western Slovenia. Mixed marriages are more typical between Slovenians and Croats in the border area, and therefore also the integration of the Croatian ethnic group into the Slovenian social context is the highest. In Slovenian Istria the immigrants from inner Slovenia or Yugoslavia have had an additional “revitalising” function. They have almost completely replaced the once dominant Italian population, which moved to Italy after World War II for economic and political reasons, and provided the demographic potential necessary for a quick economic growth of the area (Medica, 1987). Generally speaking, in a country where there has not been a demographic increase, only a positive

migration balance can account for the demographic growth. Thus, similar to the situation in many European states, the extent of immigration to Slovenia from other Yugoslav republics, making Slovenia a sort of “Yugoslav Switzerland”, has played an important role in the industrialisation of the country. In consequence Slovenia is, in fact, the only transitional state in Central-Eastern Europe to have experienced such a strong immigration flux equivalent only to that of Switzerland: in both countries the percentage of economic migrants exceed 10% of the whole population.

Slovenia is nowadays still “on the edge” or in the contact area of many geopolitical and interest spheres. This can be seen in its new political and social reorientation towards north and west. Therefore, its communication with Vienna and Brussels is as frequent as it used to be with Zagreb and Belgrade before the independence. The traffic role of Slovenia has changed as well: in the past the prevalent direction within the Slovenian traffic “cross” used to be NW–SE; nowadays, also due to the Yugoslav conflict, the direction SW–NE on the new European line Barcelona-Milan- Ljubljana-Budapest-Kiev is much more important. Although Slovenia has an important strategic and traffic and gate-way position (Černe, 1992; Klemenčič and Genorio, 1993; Pak, 1993), it is still somehow on “the edge” of the developing fluxes, being Ljubljana 300 to 500 km away from the nearest European metropolis. This condition of geopolitical contact area, traffic transitoriness and marginality brings a number of paradoxes. The largest number of Slovenian economic exchanges are made with EU countries, and Slovenia is one of the major candidates for membership of the EU. However, from a recent survey, is clear that only a few EU citizens know Slovenia well enough to support its application for a membership of the EU. Moreover, some Slovenian businessmen are convinced that it would be better if Slovenia maintained its status of “developed among underdeveloped” in the ex-Yugoslav context, rather than experiencing the unknown as the “underdeveloped among developed” in a EU context. Last, but not least, the relationship between the European political-economic integration plans and the American political-strategic interests for the “control” of the Balkan as a contact point between USAE on one side and RU and TU on the other has to be considered.

Slovenia reacted, however, rather soon to such geostrategic challenges, forming interregional links such as the work group Alpe-Adria, formally constituted in 1978 but based on previously existing co-operation between the Yugoslav republic of Slovenia, the Italian region Friuli–Venezia Giulia, and the Austrian land Carinthia. Even if the political work performed by this interregional community, which aims to link areas with rather different social and economic systems, has been taken over since the events in 1989-1991 by the Central-European Initiative, the will of strengthening the existing links and of further co-operation is still deeply rooted in the “hard core” of this community. These local or regional aspects of the border position of Slovenia will be discussed further on.

SLOVENIA AS A BORDERLAND: GENERAL FEATURES OF ITS BORDER SECTIONS

The present status of Slovenia as a borderland is clear from the ratio between the surface of the state (20.256 km²) and the total length of the political borders (1160 km). On the basis of these two data we can calculate that there is 5,7 km of border per 100 km². A higher proportion of borders to land is present in Europe only in Luxembourg (nearly 9 km each 100 km²). Slovenia is thus second, followed by Moldavia, Switzerland, and Belgium. Even if we consider as a criterion of defining the border status of the country, a 25 km wide stretch of border area, and multiply it by the length of the political borders, we realise that in Slovenia border areas include nearly the whole territory of the state, similarly to the already-mentioned small countries, where border areas represent more than 75% of the whole territory (Bufon, 1996a). The “borderness” of Slovenia can be understood more accurately by calculating the ratio between all the bordering municipalities, i.e the municipalities which are located within a 25 km distance from the border, and all the municipalities in Slovenia. In this way we find that as much as 61% of the Slovenian municipalities are bordering municipalities. Even if we limit the border belt to a width of 10 km, the percentage of bordering municipalities still account for a 50%. The border character of Slovenia is furthermore made evident by the fact that its capital town Ljubljana, if travelling by car, is only 60 km from the Austrian border, 90 km from the Italian border, and 110 km from the Croatian border. The most distant border from Ljubljana is the Hungarian, about 220 km.

The traffic crossing the Slovenian border is also coherent with the Slovenia’s borderland status. The number of people crossing the Slovenian border by car increased between 1992 and 1998 from 140 millions to 180. This means that an average of half a million people travel across the Slovenian border every day. If we consider that 30% of these are Slovenian citizens, who make about 50 million border crossings a year, we find that about 140 thousand Slovenian citizens, or 7% of the whole population, travel across the border daily. This information is also an important feature in measuring the “borderness” of Slovenia, because it enables us to calculate that each Slovenian citizen (including children and elderly people) visits a foreign country on average once a fortnight. According to the information of the Slovenian Institute for Statistics, the foreigners who crossed the Slovenian border in 1998 were most often Croats (about 40 million, or 22% of all the crossings), Italians (about 38 millions, or 21%), Austrians (about 23 million, or 13%), and Germans (about 13 million), followed by Czechs (3 million), Hungarians (2,5 million), Swiss (2 million), Slovaks and Dutch (about 1 million). The inhabitants of other former Yugoslav republics made up in total about 2,5 million crossings. The above disposition show us that the structure of border crossing is a combination of dominant local or inter-state, and international transitional traffic, which is more frequent in the summer. Table 1 shows the division of border crossings in different border sectors, it also shows the structure of the crossings from year 1992 to 1998.

Table 1: Border crossings in different sectors in Slovenia in 1992 – 1998

	1992	1995	1998		1992	1995	1998
	(million passengers)				(%)		
SLO/I	51,4	74,5	64,9		36,0	41,3	36,3
SLO/A	39,4	50,7	48,6		27,6	28,1	27,1
SLO/H	1,9	4,8	4,1		1,3	2,7	2,3
SLO/CRO	50,2	50,3	61,3		35,1	27,9	34,3
Total	142,9	180,3	178,9		100,0	100,0	100,0

Source: The Slovenian Institute for Statistics

There has been a great increase in cross-border traffic on the Slovenian-Italian border until 1995 (from 51 to 74 millions, or an increase of 45%), and a stabilisation of this phenomenon to about 65 million border crossings. This is a consequence of the introduction of fuel cards in Friuli-Venezia Giulia which permit the inhabitants to purchase fuel at an equivalent price to that found in Slovenia. The traffic across the Austrian-Slovenian border increased between 1992 and 1995 by one fourth, and it has stabilized at about 50 million border crossings a year. The biggest relative increase of cross-border traffic has occurred on the Slovenian-Hungarian border. This border used to be virtually hermetically closed before the 90's. The cross-border traffic increased by 150% in the period between 1992 and 1995 and since then has stabilized to 4 million border crossings a year. Such an intense increase has been influenced by the liberalisation of Hungarian society, and by the modification of the Hungarian borderland, and its adjustment to the cross-border traffic. The border city of Lenti in Hungary, has become, in fact, one of the most attractive shopping centres with customers from the whole of eastern Slovenia and even from Ljubljana. A bigger change in figures can be noticed on the Slovenian-Croatian border, which reached its maximum in 1994 with 66 millions border crossings, about one third more than in year 1992. The next year, however, the number of passengers crossing the border dropped visibly, but it has increased again recently. These fluctuations are due to the situation in the former Yugoslavia and it emphasises the gap among the number of border crossings in this border section, which are due to local or inter-state cross-border traffic, and potential transitory traffic, that could derive from other regions of former Yugoslavia. Generally speaking, in the period between 1992 and 1998, the structure did not change much. About 36% of the total passenger traffic in Slovenia crossed the Italian-Slovenian border in both years, a slight decrease can be noticed on the Austrian-Slovenian border (from 27,6% to 27,1%), and the Slovenian-Croatian border (from 35,1% to 34, 3%). On the contrary a definite increase in border traffic occurred across the Slovenian-Hungarian border (from 1,3% to 2,3%).

It is evident from table 2 that the most intense cross-border traffic in the period 1992-1998, considering the length of the border line, was that on the Slovenian-Italian border. This border section represents only 17% of the entire border line, but as much as 38% of the whole cross-border traffic. The traffic across the Slovenian-Austrian border is more proportional with its length, whereas it is disproportional on the borders with Croatia and Hungary. The Slovenian-Italian border is also the most permeable, and we

find here 40% of all Slovenian border posts. This means more than 17 border passes per 100 km, and in the southern part of the Slovenian-Italian border they are even more frequent with about 25 border posts per 100 km, or one per 4 km, whilst the general Slovenian average is 8 border passes per 100 km. The Slovenian-Austrian and Slovenian-Hungarian averages are quite close to this average, with 7 border posts per 100 km, whereas the Slovenian-Croatian border has a rather lower average: less than 5 border passes per 100 km.

Table 2: *Some basic features of the Slovenian borders*

	1	2	3	4	5
SLO/I	17,4	35	38,5	17,3	38,0
SLO/A	27,9	24	26,3	7,4	27,6
SLO/H	7,6	6	6,6	6,8	2,2
SLO/CRO	47,1	26	28,6	4,8	32,2
Total	100,0	91	100,0	7,8	100,0

1 – Percentage of the total border length ;

2 – Number of border passes with statistically relevant cross-border traffic ;

3 – Percentage of border passes ;

4 – Average number of border passes per 100 km ;

5 – Percentage of the total cross-border traffic (period 1992-1998).

Source : The Slovenian Institute for Statistics

The development of border areas depends on a number of factors. These include different geopolitical situations and different historical experiences of each border section; the nature of political and economic relationships between bordering states; the extent of border permeability; regional conditions, the dynamics of social-economic development in the border area, and the attitude of the population towards the maintenance and development of cross-border links (Klemenčič and Bufon, 1994). It is possible to categorise different borderland types according to the number of border posts, frequency of cross-border movements, their functional motivations, and other factors. The surveys carried out in Slovenia so far show that the combination of international factors, such as the increase of economic exchange, tourist fluxes and transitory traffic, and regional factors, that are prevalently linked to the movement of people, goods, and communication within the border area, creates a more complete development, involving not only the traffic corridors and the border centres, but also wider border areas. In this way some border areas along the Slovenian borders have already become real border regions, although they do not have an institutional basis. In contrast to other Euroregions, they are based on spontaneous cross-border links, that involve smaller territories (Bufon, 1998). Their common feature is the great influence of local factors, which derive from common territorial bonds, and not from momentary international-political and economic demands.

CONVERGENCE, DIVERGENCE AND FURTHER INTEGRATION PERSPECTIVES: THE UPPER ADRIATIC AS A CASE STUDY

In general, we can detect two major factors which contribute towards a positive evaluation of cross-border co-operation in the studied area and thus towards a greater social integration of the border population. Firstly, functional cross-border relations and their intensity: as the analysis of the Gorizia transborder region has demonstrated, more intense functional relations also determine a more positive evaluation of this type of co-operation. Secondly, a similar or even more decisive part is played by cultural and in this case ethnic affinity between the populations on both sides of the border, which influences not only the evaluation but also the intensity of cross-border relations. Also preparedness for cross-border co-operation, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, was found to be greater in those areas where differences in the socio-cultural structure between the two border landscapes was substantially smaller (Bufon, 1993b, 1996b).

Thus, to support socio-cultural cross-border links, cultural affinity of the population on both sides of the border is very important. The Slovenian minority in Italy, for instance, was actually used to maintain a large part of the 'institutional' cross-border links with regard to sport, culture, economy, information, and co-operation between municipalities. Generally speaking, in the 1970's and 1980's, the Slovenian minority in Italy represented a kind of Yugoslav 'gateway into Europe', since a substantial part of Yugoslav transactions with Italy and western Europe passed through the bank owned by the Slovenian minority in Trieste (Klemenčič and Bufon, 1991). In addition to these early 'intra-ethnic' and spontaneous cross-border contacts, others have been developed. Since Slovenian independence, more formal and institutionalized types of cross-border integration between border municipalities and institutions began. Some of these had already been present in other European *Euroregions*; others are new and go beyond the limited bilateral interests into a wider Alps-Adriatic context, such as the planning of cross-border broadcasting, which should also include the minority radio and tv stations on both sides of the border, the above mentioned idea of organising the winter Olympic games in the border area between Slovenia, Austria, and Italy, or the establishment of a Slovene cultural centre in Trieste and an Italian one in Koper in association with the respective minorities.

It is to be expected that three functional transborder areas will develop in this region in the near future. The southern, Trieste cross-border region will include the northern part of Istria, since it has traditionally gravitated towards what is the actual 'capital' of the Upper Adriatic (Bufon, 1993a, 1999a); and also south-western Slovenia, in relation to which the regional influence of Trieste will increase when Slovenia becomes a member of the EU, and Trieste thus gains back its former regional function. On the other hand, it should be noted that new centres, such as Koper and Sežana, have developed in the Slovene borderland, and Trieste will have to co-operate more intensely with them (Minghi, 1994). A very significant fact in this regard is the decision made at the end of

2000 to give the management of the Trieste container terminal to the Port of Koper authority. In this way, co-operation between the two major ports of the Upper Adriatic will finally take place and contribute to the development of a new cross-border conurbation connecting Trieste and Koper.

Another expected consequence of cross-border integration will be that Trieste will again become more multicultural. Its autochthonous Slovenian population, restricted for most part of the 20th Century, as Trieste was targeted by irredentists and fascists to become the 'most Italian' town, will again obtain an important function in the communication between Slovenian and Italian cultural spaces (Kaplan, 2000). In the last decade Trieste has actually been trying to become something more than a border shopping centre (with 10 shops per 100 inhabitants), where in the 1970's and 1980's people from different parts of Yugoslavia, even from southern Dalmatia and eastern Serbia, used to do their shopping, and who in the 1990s were partly substituted by purchasers from Hungary, during the period of conflicts in former Yugoslavia. From this point of view, an increase of socio-economic cross-border relations, will support the 'Europeanization' of this border area, seeking a pragmatic and peaceful relationship, and thus a 'normalization' of inter-community and inter-ethnic relations as well.

In the central, Gorizia, border area there has been in the post-war period the separate development of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, with the latter becoming a kind of Slovenian 'substitute' for the lost regional centre, and recently almost a monostructural gambling centre for tourists from north-eastern Italy. Now towns and communities on both sides will have to establish more intense and cohesive links with each other, which will help in the creation of a single urban area, as it used to be before the existence of the border. The extraterritorial road under Mount Sabotin, that links Goriška Brda with Nova Gorica, is an example of how international policy lags behind local changes. The building of this road had already been demanded by Yugoslavia during the peace conferences after the end of the Second World War, when the boundary line was accepted. It was not built, however, until the 1980's, as an implementation of the *Osimo agreement* of 1975, when the major part of the traffic from the Goriška Brda had already diverted from Nova Gorica to the urban centres in Friuli, which represent the traditional centres for the Brda/Collio area. When Slovenia becomes a member of the EU, this fenced road will probably become a tourist attraction, not just for its fine view of the twin-towns of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, but also as a symbol of the divisive role of the political border in the area, similar to the wired fence that in some parts divides these two towns.

After the independence of Slovenia, the Italian post-fascists tried first to tear it down, because it was believed to hinder Italian influence across the border, but later tried to reinforce it in order to prevent immigration from the 'less developed' countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The open structure of this border sector is currently well known also to domestic (mostly Slovene) and international (Chinese and Albanian) traders in illegal migrants who enter into Slovenia from Bosnia and Croatia and then proceed to Italy and Germany. In order to prevent these illegal border crossings, a special international (Italian and Slovene) police border patrol has been recently established. It became famous when it stopped two members of the Italian parliament connected to the *Alleanza*

nazionale post-fascist party as they re-entered Italy illegally trying to demonstrate that the Italian border is too permeable to foreign immigration!

Stronger cross-border and inter-community contacts also means diminished social and spatial distances. For this purpose, language knowledge is particularly important and provides the basis for improving cross-border relations in areas where functional cross-border relations are not so intense. In the Alpine border area, connecting Italy to Slovenia and Austria, we find that there is a certain difference in the knowledge of the language of the neighbours: German is understood by 80% of those interviewed in Slovenia, and 70% of those in Italy; Italian is understood by 60% of those interviewed in Slovenia, mainly in the Isonzo valley, and 50% of those in Austria; Slovenian is understood by 40% of those interviewed in Italy and in Austria. Although the number of functional cross-border visits is lower than in the southern part of the Slovenian-Italian border, the potential socio-cultural links, shown by the knowledge of the neighbouring languages, is rather high.

This suggests that cultural spaces are much more stable than the political ones, in spite of evident changes caused by the partition of the original social and cultural structures, especially at the beginning of the 20th century (Moritsch, 1996; Armstrong, 1998). The elimination of geopolitical divisions, the normalization of international relationships, and international integration have helped to create new links, reducing the peripheral character of the Alpine 'three-borders' region. There are still differences between the Italian, Slovenian and Austrian parts of the 'three-borders'. Most of the Slovenian and Austrian parts, are, in fact, much better integrated in their state context than the Italian. A recent survey along the Slovenian-Italian border showed that about 60% of the respondents in Collio and Valcanale felt the need to improve cross-border integration, whereas this was not felt so strongly in the southern part of the border, and particularly in Trieste, where improvement of cross-border integration is supported by only 30% of respondents. The Slovenian results show a similar geographic disposition, although the respondents were not so enthusiastic about the potential for integration (Bufon, 2000). Unfortunately, no similar interviews have been performed in the Austrian part. In any case, the current situation in Carinthia, where the governor of this Austrian *land*, Jorg Haider, is stressing the priority to defend the German character of the region against the 'other', suggests that no special enthusiasm for the idea of stronger cross-border links could be expected.

Thus the 'three-borders' region represents both the advantages and the disadvantages of the Central European space and its social and political transformation which have opened processes of spatial convergence and divergence, respectively. The fact that this has long been a united cultural space with a common way of life, where different ethnic-linguistic communities have coexisted, has to be emphasized. The creation of nation-states divided this region into three parts and hindered normal communication. Later social and economic developments have created an area of intense transit in two simultaneous but separate directions at the Slovenian-Austrian and Italian-Austrian border. The tourist flows have also become more consistent (especially in Slovenia), but are not equally spread. Therefore, we can say that the 'normalization' of international rela-

tionships after the end of the 'Iron Curtain' period has not reached the local level yet, nor provided the basis for a stronger cross-border integration. On the macro-regional level, Austria became a EU member, and this opportunity is available to Slovenia. But so far, hardly any change has been noticed on the local level since the elimination of the border formalities between Italy and Austria. We can expect that no major changes will occur when border formalities will be abolished on the Slovene-Italian and Slovenian-Austrian borders as well.

This is also due to the lack of proper infrastructure and institutional decision-making to support cross-border communication, such as a forum for co-operation between municipalities of border area, the creation of other common social, economic, and cultural institutions, or of a common co-ordination plan, or information centre. Another priority is the improvement of the roads in an east-west direction which could also serve as a vehicle for the development of tourism in the region. The proposal for organising the winter Olympic games may create the opportunity for greater co-operation in this sense, although it is quite likely that its actual rejection will decrease the interest of the institutions for further co-operation with their neighbours. Another issue that has slowed down cross-border communication is the past state centralist and standardization policy. Other reasons can be sought in the lack of bigger urban centres, the low demographic and economic potential of the area, and in the lack of active national minorities on different sides of the border. Nevertheless, the answer to the original question can be found elsewhere: the existing local communities in the 'three-borders' region have maintained their distinctive features within a situation of coexistence, but only because in the past they did not communicate much with each other. This characteristic, typical of the 'old' borderlands and of the Alpine region in general, could continue to characterize the region even in the future, and it thus represents a possible means of maintaining its cultural and spatial diversity (Bufon, 1999b).

CONCLUSION: CO-OPERATION AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESSES

Co-operation and integration perspectives in today's Europe may be discussed on two different but inter-related levels. The first regards what could be called "regional globalization" or the integration of an increasing number of Central European countries in a wider trans-continental dimension; the second concerns regional aspects of cross-border co-operation. A direct consequence of the first process will be the actual disrupting of the Iron Curtain and all Cold War structural and mental legacies in the region, but also the transfer of both EU and NATO borders eastward. In the case of Slovenia, the new situation will change completely the function of its borders: the previous international borders with Italy, Austria and Hungary will only represent internal borders within the EU space, whilst the internal border with Croatia in the Yugoslav period will become, at least for some years, the outer border of the EU, facing new challenges in terms of con-

trol of international migrations and security. Considering the regional aspects of cross-border co-operation, instead, two major areas should be examined: the Alpine-Adriatic and the sub-Pannonian contact areas.

The first has been studied in greater extent and could serve as example for the still more peripheral sub-Pannonian region, connecting Austria, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia (Klemenčič, 1991 and 1993). The latter could be labelled as a “region in reconstruction”, deeply effected by the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, the Upper Adriatic represents an area of contact between Italy, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia (Bufon, 2002b), where institutional cross-border relations are based on the Alpe-Adria Community, whilst local functional border problems are usually solved within special bilateral agreements which had been signed as soon as in the 50’. This frame was very helpful in driving the region from a potential conflict area into an area of coexistence (Bufon and Minghi, 2000), and local authorities until now have not seen sufficient reasons for adopting the “Euroregion” cross-border co-operation model, even though local cross-border co-operation could be easily strengthen further, particularly between border towns. In fact, local cross-border contacts on the functional and socio-cultural levels along the more urbanized Italo-Slovene border are already for much exceeding the given institutional background and are in general also more intense than cross-border contacts within “western” border regions (Bufon, 1994a and 1994b).

The Upper Adriatic is a region of intense intertwining of cultural, social, economic and political spheres (Bufon, 2001). A diffused bilingual practice has in recent times been reinforced by developments in local cross-border relations and cross-border information exchange produced by the neighbouring mass media, in which border minorities have taken an important role in creating contact opportunities.

This area also provides an interesting illustration of an apparently paradoxical process within borderlands: the greater the conflicts created by the political partition of a previous homogeneous administrative, cultural and economic region, the greater in the longer run are the opportunities for such a divided area to develop into an integrated cross-border region. Reflecting on the border landscape concept on the basis of this case study, it becomes clear that the political or economic “macro” approach in studying cross-border regions is too limited and insufficient. The true nature and qualities of these regions may only be established when local cultural and social elements of cross-border relations are also taken into account. The great variety of micro-transactions at the local level, supported by the border population, is the result of its spatial mobility in satisfying some daily needs regarding such basic social functions as work, leisure and even education. But they are also the result of the activity of the border population in maintaining the traditional cultural links that are very often rooted in the relatively stable period preceding political partition. With respect to this, the study of border regions undoubtedly brings additional aspects to bear on the standard theory of the centre-periphery relations, while opening up a range of new problems which are becoming increasingly more topical in today’s world, as we try to enhance mutual understanding in the culturally rich and diverse European space. The geography of border landscapes in its social

and cultural dimensions is thus definitely assuming an important role in the “humanisation” of the traditional geographical approach to borders and border conflict resolution.

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