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# Slovenia and Austria at the Crossroads of Mutual Relations. Slovene-Austrian Relations as Hostage of the Troubled Legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

## Abstract

Austria and Slovenia are neighbours and friends, closely linked both geographically and historically. Over time, their peoples have developed various perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about each other. The rise of national movements and modern states has significantly shaped national historiographies, which have often drawn on past events in search of foundational ideas for the formation of their respective nation-states. This paper explores how this complex and sometimes troubled legacy has influenced cross-border relations.

## Keywords

Austria, Slovenia, cross-border relations, history, stereotypes

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## 1. Introduction

Austria and Slovenia are neighbouring and friendly countries, closely connected both geographically and historically, working together in co-existence to find common interests and shared pathways. Over time, various perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices have developed between the two countries and peoples, especially in the border areas on both sides of the Slovene-Austrian border. To analyse these prejudices, it is essential to know the history of relations on this territory, the social forces at play during specific historical periods, and the actions and political decisions of the social elites in both countries. Only through such an understanding can we explain the emergence of stereotypes and prejudices, which, it seems, have often influenced the behaviour of political elites in both countries and shaped their bilateral relations, especially over the last century.

A significant event in this context was the November 1993 meeting of the Slovene-Austrian Commission of Historians, whose Slovene/German title translates to *A Neighbour Through the Neighbour's Eyes* (Rozman 1995). This meeting was part of a series addressing the history and relations between the two countries and nations. For several decades, researchers from various fields – primarily historians, more so in Slovenia than in Austria – have been studying the diverse social intersections between the two countries. This paper builds on that tradition, examining how myths, stereotypes, and historical processes, alongside current events, shape generalised pictures of the other. These images often outgrow their purpose, shaping and influencing everyday life and society in general. The aim of the article is to show and explain – through an analysis of literature, research, and other sources, as well as by examining stereotypes and prejudices – how historiographical narratives influenced mutual relations between the two nations and states in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Former Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek (2002) observed that misinterpretation and irrational attachments to the past could fuel irresponsible populist policies. Any issues, he argued, should be resolved through reason. He emphasised the Slovene minority as a key factor in strengthening Austria's role as a partner for Slovenia and playing a crucial role in Slovenia's future integration into European structures. On that same occasion, former Austria's Prime Minister Wolfgang Schüssel (2002) highlighted the need to distinguish between the substantive and emotional aspects of unresolved issues. He argued that politicians should address the root causes of emotions and mistrust, taking the difficult but necessary steps to break existing clichés. Doing

so, he claimed, would make it easier to resolve outstanding issues between the two countries.

From a historical perspective, many stereotypes persist between Austria and Slovenia, with deeply rooted images of the neighbour often stemming from the past (cf., e.g., Bruckmüller 2002; Suppan 2002; Štih 2002; 2012; 2024; etc.). In today's context, as both countries share membership in the European Union, these stereotypes present obstacles. Consequently, discussions and dialogue between neighbours (Brousek et al. 2020) are essential to address and correct these images, highlighting those that affect good neighbourly relations and constructive coexistence in a common space. Such efforts are particularly significant for the social perception of national minorities in both countries, both the Slovene national community in Austria and the German-speaking ethnic community in Slovenia.

The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how the complex and challenging legacy between two neighbouring and friendly nations and states has influenced and continues to influence cross-border relations, both in the past and in the present. The research methodology is based on a range of methods and techniques that enable the analysis of the past and the understanding of historical processes. In addressing the topic, critical source analysis, comparative methods, the hermeneutic approach, and interdisciplinary methods were employed. These included historical, sociological, anthropological, and literary methods and techniques. Through contextualisation and qualitative approaches, diverse historical narratives were considered to interpret historical events and processes.

The article is structured into six subchapters. Following the introduction to the topic, it begins with an examination of the origins of stereotypes and myths, continues with an overview and analysis of the history of relations between the two nations and states, and includes a discussion of generalisations and imagery based on stereotypes. A significant part of the article focuses on the importance of minorities in mutual relations. The article concludes with subchapters that aim to present the most recent perceptions of neighbouring nations and, in the final section, highlight positive examples and developments of cross-border cooperation.

## 2. The Formation of Stereotypes and Myths

The rise of national movements and modern states has significantly shaped national historiographies, which have often drawn on past

events in search of foundational ideas for the formation of their respective nation-states (Vodopivec 2006). This process led to national stereotypes, which generalised historical and contemporary conditions and events to the extent that specific perceptions about the neighbouring nation became entrenched and embedded in national ideologies. As the latter gained social recognition and validity, the perception of the neighbouring nation became increasingly filtered and abstracted. Nationalisms, which have played a crucial role in social and political movements as well as personal lives since at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Wingfield 2004), mobilised social elites and sought equality or dominance in multicultural or border regions (Judson 2006). The formation of ethnic and national identities became both a unifying and dividing force in everyday social life in the region (cf. Hobsbawm 1990; Hroch 2015; Štih et al. 2008, etc.). The perception or image of the neighbouring nation has often been shaped by social elites, which had access to the means of mass communication, including schools, the press, cartoons, various media, film, public lectures, novels, arts, historiography, and modern social networks. The histories of European nations are, to a large extent, constructs and projections, shaped in their essential features in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and representing visions of the past formulated by intellectual elites in connection with their political and national ideals. These pseudo-historical images, which also contained contemporary needs, values, and contents projected onto the past, continue to prevail in Europe at the level of historical memory and are accepted as self-evident and unquestionable historical realities, even though they are, in essence, mere representations (Grafenauer & Wakounig 2025, 528).

The past is crucial for the formation of identity, mainly because of the re-emergence of marginalised, silenced, and unacknowledged stories of suffering (Assmann 2006). Historians have observed that past events are remembered, classified, and interpreted in relation to the present (Benjamin 1965). Collective memory within a social community or a nation primarily refers to the foundational and key events in its history. Most of these involve violence but are later legitimised and celebrated as milestones. Events glorified by some may be perceived as humiliating by others (Ricoer 1998).

Stereotypes originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century persist also today. For instance, the German-Austrian perspective portrays Slavs (including Slovenes) as a “people of servants” (Štih 2006), which, in contemporary terms, translates to distrust of their southern neighbours. For Slovenes, this aligns with their own auto-stereotype of an oppressed people with a glorious past (the era of the Carantanian princes) and a generally

hostile attitude toward the oppressive Germans/Austrians. Conversely, Austrians' auto-stereotype paints them as slightly conservative but polished, refined, and cultured (Bruckmüller 2001). Slovene literature, particularly after the First and Second World Wars, has reinforced a self-perception or auto-stereotype that drives the recent fears of Austrian economic dominance and the use of pejorative terms like yodellers or Nazis to describe Slovenia's neighbours. While these negative connotations are relatively isolated, they gain immediate resonance through mass media. Recently, however, these perceptions have begun to shift. The history of Slovenes is now increasingly viewed alongside the broader history of the Slovene territory, which has long been home to diverse identities – of which Slovene identity is just one (Štih 2001; 2002). Nevertheless, a still-contentious and potentially destabilising factor in maintaining hostile heterostereotypes is the way political elites in both countries treat indigenous, historically rooted national or linguistic communities (Jesih 2004).

The negative or hostile image of Germans/Austrians in Slovenia and Slovenes/Yugoslavs in Austria is rooted in viewing history through nationalist and nationalistic lens. Europe remains ensnared in perceptions that originated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when modern nation-states were taking shape (Štih 2002). Recent research indicates that certain events, such as the Carinthian plebiscite celebrations on 10 October, still hold significant relevance among young people in Carinthia. Slovene community members often feel excluded or boycott these celebrations, perceiving the plebiscite's significance differently than their Austrian counterparts (cf. Pirker 2013). National stereotypes play a key role in these differing perceptions (Bruckmüller 2001). While such celebrations serve as building blocks for nationalism and the popularisation of nationalist ideas and borders in Austria, the plebiscite is perceived as a national defeat in Slovenia. Therefore, Slovenia commemorates the struggle for the northern border, although to a much lesser degree (Pušnik 2011).

Slovenes' perception of their history is perhaps best encapsulated by the myth of the nation of servants, a long-standing auto-stereotype. Since their settlement in the wider territory of present-day Slovenia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Slovenes have experienced domination by more powerful neighbouring nations, particularly Germans (Štih & Winkler 2025, 43) and later also Italians. A brief exception was the *GLORIOUS AND INDEPENDENT* state of Carantania, symbolised by the Prince's Stone, which was used for the installation of princes and is now displayed at the Klagenfurt Landhaus, and the often mistakenly associated Duke's Chair.

This projection of national history stretches back to the settlement of Slavs in the Eastern Alps (Štih 2012). Slovenes perceive themselves as a hard-working, peaceful, and reasonable nation that has often been treated unfairly by history. The *SUN OF FREEDOM* truly shone for them only in 1918, 1945, and 1991 – dates that, today, are interpreted differently depending on the ideological viewpoint of individuals or political groups. However, one perception remains unanimous: the idea of the *1000-YEAR YOKE* under which the nation suffered at the hands of their, at least in the last century, bloodthirsty neighbours. In this narrative, Slovenes are seen as having been deprived of their own nobility and bourgeoisie, taken from them by foreigners. Language, as a constitutive element of statehood, remained central to their identity, but it could not fully flourish, as foreign rulers relegated Slovene to the language of servants and peasants. Only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did the situation begin to improve. Slovenia's greatest poet France Prešeren foreshadowed the nation's awakening and a brighter future in his *Wreath of Sonnets*, where he spoke of clearer skies and kinder stars shining upon the people of Upper Carniola. This perception, rooted in certain historical realities of the local population – such as cultural and linguistic traditions – became particularly pronounced during the formation of modern European nations. It also shaped heterostereotypes, i.e., perceptions of how other nations and their elites view Slovenes. In the multicultural Alpine-Adriatic region, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by processes of identity negotiation, demarcation, and adaptation within complex ethnic identifications (Fikfak & Schönberger 2024).

The terms used to describe this historical narrative classify Slovenes as either latecomers or martyrs of history – portrayed as a people ruled by foreign masters on their own land, oppressed and governed as a nation of serfs and peasants, without a political history of their own. These conceptual frameworks began to emerge as early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with Anton Tomaž Linhart, an Enlightenment intellectual, and his unfinished work *An Attempt at a History of Carniola and the Other Lands of the Southern Slavs of Austria*. In this work, Linhart examined Slovenes as a distinct national whole, tracing their history back to the early Middle Ages and Carantania. While Linhart himself did not yet present Slovenes as martyrs of history, his study – later reinforced by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Slovene historiography – played a crucial role in shaping Slovene historical consciousness. As a result, the ethnic history of the nation was projected backward along the chronological timeline, retroactively attributing essential elements of 19<sup>th</sup>-century national identity to earlier historical periods (Štih 2006; 2024).

The myth of the Prince's Stone and the installation of Carantanian princes remains deeply embedded in Slovenia's society. Following the country's independence in 1991, the stone was depicted on the young country's temporary currency. This, however, triggered political tensions between Ljubljana, Klagenfurt, and Vienna. As a result, the Prince's Stone did not feature on Slovenia's official currency tolar that was used until 2006. When Slovenia joined the EU in May 2004 and strived for an early introduction of the euro in January 2007, tensions with Austria resurfaced when the Prince's Stone appeared on the two-cent coin (cf. Štih 2024; Nikolay 2010).

In essence, this forms a central axis of Slovenia's history, leaving no room for interpretation other than that the Prince's Stone is a fundamental Slovene legal monument. However, historical evidence today suggests that it is primarily a monument to Carinthian heritage, where Carantanian princes and Carinthian dukes were enthroned in Old Slovene language.

### **3. History of Relations Between the Two Nations and Countries, Inclusion of Generalisations and Images Based on Stereotypes**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also later, particularly during the period of nation-building, the German language, supported by its broader base and more developed political thought, held greater social, cultural, and economic capital. This created a fluidity of ethnic identities in the interactions between German and Slovene speakers, with many shifting from Slovene to German – though the reverse also occurred. At the same time, an expanding circle of Slovene-minded intellectuals emerged, largely composed of individuals educated at universities across the Austrian Empire and later the monarchy. These intellectuals – including writers, poets, and scholars from various fields – reflected on the history of the Slovene nation, imbuing various tragedies with national significance and often depicting Slovenia as a key defender of Europe against the Turkish threat (Moritsch 1997; 2000; 2002).

Similar processes unfolded among German speakers, who also followed the patterns of modern nation-building. Their national aspirations included the idea that wherever German speakers lived or had strategic interests – such as access to the Adriatic Sea – German state formations should emerge. Caricatures that generalise stereotypes about Slovenes in ways accessible to the broader public (Suppan 2002)

offer a vivid illustration of how Slovenes were perceived in Austrian society. These depictions often reflected a paternalistic German attitude toward Slovene-speaking neighbours, portraying the latter as lacking the necessary attributes of a fully developed nation (no significant national achievements, language alone was deemed insufficient). The Germans adopted a patronising stance to the *PROBLEMS OF THE LITTLE NATION*, which they saw as destined to live and prosper under the influence of the German spirit (Grdina 2004, 707–732). Social organisation, power, and culture were considered privileges of the German-speaking population. This was reflected in the glorification of German culture and achievements, the emphasis on the German language as a cornerstone of intellectual and cultural life (evident, for instance, in the availability of translations of major world literature in German but not in Slovene), and the activities of various German nationalist societies advocating for the protection of German speakers in southern Styria, Carinthia, Upper Carniola, and other regions. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, these tensions escalated into violent confrontations between members of the two nations, amplified by media coverage. The mistrust between Slovenes and Germans reached its peak after the outbreak of World War I, when, at a politically charged moment, sections of the German press accused the Slovene intelligentsia – particularly priests and teachers – of Serbophilia and anti-Austrian, anti-German, and anti-dynastic activities (Heppner 2002; Suppan 1983, 175–212; 1996; 1998; 2002; Liška 1984).

After the victory of the national principle in 1918, the development of newly defined Austrian-Slovene (Yugoslav) relations was significantly shaped by the Carinthian plebiscite and the minority question (Pleterški 2003; Grafenauer 2016a). The plebiscite's outcome and the subsequent loss of *CARINTHIA AS THE CRADLE OF THE SLOVENE NATION* understandably caused great disappointment and frustration in Yugoslav Slovenia. Gospovetsko polje/Zollfeld was perceived as the Slovene equivalent of Kosovo Field, and the *Koroška bol* (Carinthian pain) resonated deeply among all Slovenes. This sense of loss played a crucial role in shaping Slovene collective consciousness, with the defeat framed as a national catastrophe. The pressures of Germanisation imposed by German nationalist societies and the Carinthian regional authorities on the Slovene minority in Carinthia were viewed as a profound injustice. In the minds of Slovenes in Yugoslavia, Carinthian Slovenes were seen as brothers who had not yet managed to break free from *A THOUSAND YEARS OF GERMAN DOMINATION*, while Austria was increasingly regarded as a German-oriented state. On both sides, plebiscite celebrations carried strong sym-

bolic and communicative value, reinforcing national cultural memory and identity (cf. Fikfak 2013; Grafenauer 2015). According to the Carinthian regional authorities, post-plebiscite exiles from Carinthia, who sought new livelihoods in Yugoslav Slovenia due to German nationalist pressures, significantly disrupted the good relations between the two newly formed states (Grafenauer 2010). For historical reasons, German Austrians were increasingly perceived as the fatal enemy of the Slovene nation – an image that culminated with Hitler’s Germany’s invasion of Yugoslav Slovenia and the substantial role Austrians played in the occupation regime during World War II. Even after the war ended, tensions persisted. The 1955 Austrian State Treaty on the Re-establishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria did not fully resolve these issues. The abolition of compulsory bilingual schools in southern Carinthia in 1958/59, the so-called *Ortstafelsturm* (the 1972 war against local bilingual signs), and the special nature of the 1976 census all further entrenched distrust between Slovenes and Austrians on both sides of the Karavanke mountains (cf. Stourzh 2005; Pandel et al. 2004; Klemenčič & Klemenčič 2010, 165–197; Grafenauer 2020; Suppan 2005).

The national tensions after 1918 also fuelled anti-Slavic sentiments and stereotypes in Austria. While the majority of Slovenes (along with other Slavic peoples of the former monarchy) found themselves in other, victorious state formations, Austria remained in the losers’ circle. The prevailing sentiment was associated with the victorious interpretation of the struggle for the northern Slovene or southern Austrian border which, despite Austria’s military defeat, ultimately resulted in Austria’s favour. The glorification of the Carinthian defensive struggle (*Abwehrkampf*) emphasised love for the country (Rumpler 2005). The defenders were venerated, and the defensive struggle became a core symbol of German nationalist ideology, shaping Carinthia’s culture of remembrance (Koschat 2010). Plebiscite propaganda also played a significant role in shaping stereotypes (Semlič Rajh 2020; Grafenauer 2016b, etc.) Conversely, Slovenia in 2005 elevated the 1918 *LIBERATION OF MARIBOR AND OTHER PARTS OF SOUTHERN STYRIA* to the status of a national holiday, officially naming it Rudolf Maister’s Day. In Austria, however, Rudolf Maister is viewed negatively as the man who *CAME WITH THE CARNIOLANS TO DISRUPT THE UNITY OF THE COUNTRY*. He is also associated with Bloody Sunday, a term used to describe the January 1919 shooting of more than ten German demonstrators in Maribor (Jenuš et al. 2020). Adding to these tensions was the presence of a German-speaking minority in the newly formed South Slavic state to which Slovenia now belonged. The

once politically and economically strong German minority experienced a significant regression of its rights.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, national perspectives on social developments in the Alpine-Adriatic region were deeply shaped by the consequences of both world wars. While these narratives are only slowly fading into the subconscious, they still resurface whenever tensions arise between the two neighbouring countries – most notably in the form of mistrust toward the other nation. For example, during the Covid-19 crisis in November 2020, an Austrian border police officer at the Lavamünd border crossing hung up a sign that read: “*Für Jugos gesperrt, da Österreicher sich auch nicht frei bewegen dürfen!*” “*Closed to Yugoslavs [pejor.], since Austrians are also not allowed to move freely!*” (Habich 2020). Another case occurred in late 2016 in the Austrian region of Styria, where posters appeared featuring images of Kekec, a well-known Slovene literary character and hero, accompanied by hostile slogans claiming that Kekec was an economic migrant who wanted to destroy Austrian culture and the social system and to harass Austrian women (Volksgruppen.orf.at 2016). A particularly sensitive and enduring element in this dynamic remains Austria’s policies toward the Slovene national community in Carinthia and Styria (Grafenauer 2020).

#### **4. Minorities in Both Countries: An Opportunity or an Obstacle to Cooperation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?**

The strong Nazification of the pre-war German minority in Slovenia, coupled with the pre-war activities of the Swabian-German Cultural Association (*Schwäbisch-Deutscher Kulturbund*) in the Slovene territory, further strained relations between the populations. The relocation of the Gotscheers to the Lower Sava and Sotla valleys – areas from which some 40,000 Slovenes had previously been expelled – and the alignment of the German minority leadership with Nazi plans, alongside wartime atrocities, laid the groundwork for the final post-war reckoning with the German minority (Biber 1966). When asked about post-war rights of the German minority at the December 1945 meeting of the Liberation Front Central Committee in Ljubljana, Boris Kidrič replied that the German minority “will have no right in our country because there will be none” (Jenuš 2013). After World War II, members of the German minority largely retreated northward, fearing retaliation by the victors. Many were forcibly deported, and some perished in camps or

through extrajudicial killings (Nećak et al. 2004). These actions were compounded by the violent revolution and class-oriented confiscation of property. In Austrian society, and particularly among the descendants, there is a general perception that the Republic of Slovenia failed to provide a fair and just restitution. To this day, their memory and culture of remembrance remain primarily focused on the actions of the post-war communist authorities, while their own Nazification and role in wartime atrocities are continuously minimised (cf. Marschnig 2010). Conversely, Slovene authorities and individuals viewed the post-war period as one of justified revenge and reckoning with those who had contributed to their suffering and war crimes. Similar patterns could be observed in Austria, where, until 1991, vigilance and fear of the communist south (Ljubljana and Belgrade) persisted. The southern neighbour was perceived as untrustworthy, continuing to cast its gaze beyond the Karavanke Mountains, as it had done since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, Slovenes in Carinthia and Styria were viewed as irredentists with secret ties to the south, scheming against Austria. In short, the largely expelled German minority perceives the post-war period as a time of immense injustice (cf. Karner 1998; 2005; Nećak et al. 2004; Ferenc & Repe 2004; Grafenauer 2014).

This legacy, amplified by politicians and the media, posed a challenge at the time of Slovenia's independence but was offset by Austria's strong support for Slovenia's aspirations for independence. Newly independent Slovenia and Austria began shaping their mutual relations from the outset. Or so it seemed in the milestone years of 1991 and 1992. Austria's support, particularly through the efforts of then Foreign Minister Alois Mock, left a lasting impression on the Slovene people. During his visits to the country on the sunny side of the Alps, Minister Mock was met with affection by the people on the streets (Eichtinger & Wohlnout 2012, 224–249).

It is worth noting that Slovenes tend to have a much deeper knowledge of their Austrian neighbours than vice versa. Austrians, outside the federal states of Carinthia and Styria, generally know little about Slovenes and have no particular stereotypes about them. Many general opinions about Slovenes in Austria – derived from public opinion surveys after 1918 – can be attributed to the association of Slovenes with other South Slavic peoples, thereby reinforcing the perception that other Yugoslavs could be found beyond the southern border alongside Slovenes (Bruckmüller 2001). The term Yugoslavia and its derivative Yugoslavs carried negative connotations within interpersonal and family relations that persisted into the 1990s. This sentiment was reinforced

by Austria's historically ambivalent attitude toward the larger state of which Slovenia was a part. During the Cold War, mistrust persisted, driven by fears of potential escalations and uncertainty about Yugoslavia's intentions. The border was internationally recognised but was perceived in different ways, depending on the viewpoint. In the Slovene public opinion and the views of intelligentsia, the border was perceived as unjust, particularly given the Slovene national community's ongoing deprivation of minority rights and the state's lack of intervention against national intolerance, particularly in Carinthia. From the perspective of Austria's elites, the border was viewed as the minimum Austria managed to preserve while having to relinquish certain areas and the old German towns of Maribor, Celje, Ptuj, etc., once predominantly inhabited by German speakers (cf. Bister & Vodopivec 1995; Lendvai 2001; Mayrhofer-Grünbühel & Polzer 2002).

The issue of Austrian property that was confiscated and nationalised in Slovenia at the end of World War II and after 1945 further contributes to Austria's image of its problematic southern neighbour. This also affects the implementation of minority rights for Carinthian Slovenes, which were eroded during and after the two world wars, with planned Germanisation efforts and the incomplete implementation of Article 7 of the 1955 Austrian State Treaty. Austria's failure to fully implement these provisions continues to consolidate anti-German and anti-Austrian sentiments among Slovenes (Grafenauer & Jesih 2020).

A particular point of tension is the Carinthian primal fear or *Ungest* which is sometimes ridiculed in Austria but draws from historical events, particularly the two world wars and post-war territorial claims by Slovenia/Yugoslavia for a part of the territory of once Austro-Hungary and later Republic of Austria inhabited by a majority Slovene-speaking population. German nationalist organisations such as the Carinthian Homeland Service (*Kärntner Heimatdienst*) called for vigilance against the communist south during the Cold War, fostering widespread suspicion by accusing Carinthian Slovenes of covert ties to Yugoslavia and labelling them as irredentists. These accusations intensified following a series of bombings in southern Carinthia during the 1970s, culminating in the 1979 explosion at the museum in Velikovec/Völkermarkt and the arrest of two collaborators of the Yugoslav State Security Service (*UDBA*) (cf. Omerza 2011). Thus, the cycle was complete once again, with all old prejudices reinforced and enriched with new elements. All of this has caused historical traumas that have been transmitted across generations among Carinthian Slovenes (Wutti 2013, 45–54). These experiences and the transmission of trauma influence various memory

narratives, which in turn shape the memory culture of a particular part of the population. Because of differing historical narratives, the memory culture is not unified and, in the past, did not engage in processes of confrontation or reconciliation. New initiatives seek to be more inclusive and to introduce an inclusive discourse also into the educational process (Wutti et al. 2021).

The media's reinforcement of sentiments toward the south contributed to a perception in Slovenia that, during EU accession negotiations, Austria was exploiting Slovenia's small size, inexperience, relative weakness, and ultimate submissiveness when it came to Austria's interests (e.g., the issue of the Lipizzaner horses). Regarding political awareness and perception of developments in both countries, the saying *WHEN AN AUSTRIAN POLITICIAN COUGHS, THE SLOVENE PRESS CATCHES A COLD* seems particularly fitting. Historical perceptions and stereotypes continue to be shaped by the idea of the German-loyalist Austria that enthusiastically joined the German Reich in 1938 and where denazification after World War II was not carried out to a sufficient extent. Austria's own ambiguities regarding its national identity further contributed to this. During EU accession negotiations, old fears resurfaced in Slovenia – particularly the irrational anxiety that open borders would lead to a renewed state of German servitude. This fear was reflected in Slovene media headlines such as "*IS SLOVENIA ALREADY AN AUSTRIAN COLONY?*" and references to Austrian hegemonic aspirations, arrogance, sanctimony, Viennese arrogance, manipulation, and other similar notions. The fear of history repeating itself remained ever-present (Drčar-Murko 2002).

It is well known that the majority of the German-speaking ethnic group in Slovenia today is dissatisfied with the arrangements provided by the Cultural Agreement between Slovenia and Austria (officially titled Act on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of the Republic of Austria on Cooperation in Culture, Education and Science, adopted in 2002). Article 15 thereof relates to the integration of cultural, educational, scientific, and other projects of the German-speaking population in Slovenia into interstate relations. The Austrian Parliament has repeatedly called for recognition and the regulation of their minority rights, such as those of the Italian and Hungarian national communities in Slovenia (J. R., 2020). These wishes of Austria were reiterated by Prime Minister Kurz during his visit to Slovenia in September 2020. Also, the umbrella organisation of the German-speaking ethnic community in Slovenia – the Association of Cultural Societies of the German-speaking Ethnic Community in Slovenia – has publicly called on the Slovene

government in several resolutions for constitutional recognition of its minority rights (cf. Škerl Kramberger 2018). Above all, efforts to ensure the national existence or revitalisation of the German-speaking ethnic group in Slovenia can be traced after 1991, when Slovenia became independent (Grafenauer 2014).

After Slovenia's independence and the change of the political system, relations between Slovenia and Austria became to thaw at all levels. However, certain stereotypes persist. On the Austrian side, Slovenes continue to be associated with folk music and accordion playing. Another stereotype, particularly in the southern regions, portrays Slovenes (including Carinthian Slovenes) as (former) partisans and Russophile-oriented pan-Slavists. Conversely, a common stereotype for Austrians is that they secretly sympathise with neo-Nazism, and that the German-speaking fellow countryman of Carinthian Slovenes still has his boots ready to march across the southern border and secure Germany's long-coveted access to the Adriatic Sea.

## 5. Recent Perceptions of Neighbours

In recent years, certain stereotypes have emerged regarding the approximately 27,000 daily migrants from Slovenia employed in Austrian companies, particularly in the border regions of Carinthia and Styria. Highly valued are Slovene nurses, nursing home staff, and 24-hour caregivers, alongside roughly 1,000 professionals from Slovenia who commute to Austria every day. Conversely, there are over 1,000 companies in Slovenia founded with Austrian capital, 760 of which are predominantly Austrian-owned. As a result, Austrian business owners and employees frequently travel to Slovenia, many of them daily. These perceptions of the neighbouring nation tend to be largely positive. Slovenes are regarded as diligent workers who share a similar cultural background with Austrians. Austrians, in turn, are seen as the employers who provide Slovenes with better economic opportunities. While occasional negative portrayals surface in public discourse, the overall relationship remains symbiotic. This positive shift is attributed to increased mutual understanding in recent years, bolstered by stronger cross-border cooperation in various fields, including economic, cultural, scientific, sports, etc. (Grafenauer & Jesih 2021).

Over the last three decades, Austrian perceptions and prejudices regarding Slovenia have been shaped by various issues, such as the debate surrounding the Krško nuclear power plant – where Slovenia was sometimes portrayed as unreliable or backward – and media cov-

erage of property restitution for the German-speaking ethnic community (in media reporting, restitution is not recognised as a complex legal issue, addressed in the Austrian State Treaty and court rulings). Additionally, Austria's view of its neighbour has been influenced by Slovenia's initiatives regarding the Slovene minority in Austria and its rights, and by some Slovene political parties' attempts to gain support from ideologically aligned Austrian counterparts. Historical events that have caused deep traumas and continue to shape a contradictory and often conflicting culture of remembrance include border disputes following World War I and the differing narratives of the border struggle (defensive struggle from the Austrian perspective versus the struggle for the northern border from the Slovene viewpoint), Nazism and the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, the Partisan resistance, the Yugoslav occupation of Carinthia, post-World War II border disputes, post-war executions, the communist regime in Slovenia, the rights of Carinthian Slovenes, Austrian-Yugoslav (Slovene) relations during the Cold War, and the status of the German-speaking minority in Slovenia after 1991 (Brousek et al. 2020). Numerous events have influenced and continue to influence the formation of prejudices and stereotypes, many of which are addressed by the author of this paper in the literature cited. National minorities themselves are also often triggers of tensions and creators of prejudices. More recently, this includes the illegal and disproportionate police intervention at the Peršman Homestead, a historical site preserving the memory of the partisan resistance of Carinthian Slovenes and the Nazi atrocities committed during the World War II (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2025), the incident at the football match between the Slovene Athletic Club (SAK) and Atus from Borovlje/Ferlach, when the assistant referee demanded that SAK's goalkeeping coach speak German to a player of the opposing team and issued him a yellow card when he refused (Rustia 2025), and the latest attack on bilingual place-name signs in October 2025 (Smrečnik 2025).

## 6. Conclusion

National antagonisms between Austria and Slovenia are gradually being overcome, particularly through cross-border cooperation in various fields – in economic, scientific, political, cultural, and sporting domains, as well as within civil society. A step toward improved bilateral cooperation was the 2001 Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Austria and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia on Cooperation in the Fields of Culture, Education and Science. This agreement

was the first official treaty in which Slovenia recognised the existence of a German-speaking ethnic group within its borders and committed to supporting its cultural and educational needs. In parallel, Austria acknowledged the cultural and educational needs of Slovenes outside the settlement area of the Slovene minority. Another key initiative toward better mutual understanding and coexistence in Carinthia was the establishment of the Carinthian Consensus Group in 2005. This group brought together previously irreconcilable opponents – the Carinthian *Heimatdienst* and a part of Carinthian Slovenes – who are now willing to engage in dialogue and reconciliation efforts. This was not a new initiative. Rather, it built upon earlier dialogue efforts between German and Slovene speakers within the Diocese of Gurk-Klagenfurt (Carinthian Diocesan Synod 1972) and the talks in the Alps-Adriatic Working Community (since 1978). The latter played a crucial role in fostering economic cooperation between Austria and Yugoslavia (especially Slovenia) and in garnering support among the German-speaking population for the Slovene national community in Austria. More recently, the Alps-Adriatic Peace Region project, founded in 2013, has continued efforts to enhance understanding, cooperation, and coexistence – not only in Carinthia but across a broader geographical area. A particularly symbolic and significant gesture of reconciliation is the annual commemorative event at the cemetery in Velikovec/Völkermarkt, where twelve Slovenes who fought for Slovenia's northern border and four Austrians who defended Austria's southern border, perished in the spring of 1919, now rest side by side. The commemoration's slogan reads: "They died believing in their respective homelands because politics failed to resolve the conflict peacefully". The cemetery in Velikovec/Völkermarkt, the only common burial site of former adversaries in Carinthia, has become a symbol of reconciliation. In 2021, a memorial plaque was unveiled listing 430 names of fighters who fell on both sides in 1918 and 1919, arranged alphabetically and without distinction of allegiance. The 2020 centenary ceremony of the Carinthian plebiscite in Klagenfurt/Celovec symbolically underscored reconciliation and cooperation, highlighted by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen's apology to the Slovene national community for past injustices and delays in implementing their constitutional rights ("Zgodovinsko opravičilo avstrijskega predsednika", 2020). A similar message of reconciliation is embodied in the Working Group for a Permanent Dialogue with the German-Speaking Ethnic Group in the Republic of Slovenia, established in 2021 within the Ministry of Culture of Slovenia.

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## **Slovenija in Avstrija na presečišču medsebojnih odnosov. Slovensko-avstrijski odnosi kot talec težavne dediščine 19. in 20. stoletja**

### **Izvleček**

Avstrija in Slovenija sta sosednji in prijateljski državi, ki sta geografsko in zgodovinsko tesno povezani. Skozi zgodovino so se med narodoma oz. državama izoblikovale določene predstave, stereotipi in predsodki. Nastanek nacionalnih gibanj in modernih držav je močno pospešil tudi nacionalna zgodovinopisja, ki so v preteklih dogodkih iskala konstitutivne ideje za oblikovanje svojih nacionalnih držav. V prispevku skušamo prikazati, kako je ta kompleksna in težavna dediščina vplivala na čezmejne odnose.

### **Ključne besede**

Avstrija, Slovenija, čezmejni odnosi, zgodovina, stereotipi