THE SLOVENIAN BORDERLANDS: BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND MARGINALITY

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Abstract. The present status of Slovenia as a EU borderland is given by border traffic which increased dramatically between 1992 and 2002 and by the ratio of the surface state and the total length of political borders (5.7 km of borders per 100 km$^2$). The current administrative system of Slovenia is incomparable with its neighbouring countries, mainly due to the absence of intermediate administrative levels, which inhibits the institutional cross-border cooperation. The geography of border landscapes approaches the traditional geographic borders in a humanized manner, bringing contributions in solving border conflicts. So, true cross-border relations in Slovenia will be established only when they take into account their social and cultural dimensions.

1. INTRODUCTION: SLOVENIA AS A BORDERLAND

The present status of Slovenia as a EU borderland is clear from the ratio between the surface of the state 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 borders per 100 km$^2$. A higher proportion of borders to land is present only in Luxembourg (nearly 9 km per 100 km$^2$).

The “border-character” of Slovenia can also be understood by calculating the ratio between the bordering municipalities, i.e. the municipalities, which are located within a 25 km distance from the border, and other municipalities of Slovenia. According to this measurement, 61% of the Slovenian municipalities are bordering municipalities. Even if we limit the border belt to a width of only 10 km, the percentage of bordering municipalities still account for more than 50%. The “border character” of Slovenia is furthermore made
evident by the fact that the nation-state’s capital Ljubljana is by road only 54 km away from the Austrian border, 81 km from the Italian border, and 82 km from the Croatian border. The most distant border is the Hungarian, about 193 km away (Bufon, 2002a).

The cross-border traffic is also coherent with the Slovenia’s borderland status. The number of people crossing the Slovenian border by car increased between 1992 and 2002 from about 140 million to 180 million. In average half a million people are crossing borders daily. 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 resident population, transit the border daily. This information is also an important feature in measuring the “border character” of Slovenia. It enables us to calculate that each Slovenian citizen (including children and elderly people) visits a foreign country in average once a fortnight. According the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, of all foreigners who have crossed the Slovenian border in 2002 22% were residents of Croatia, followed by Italy (21%), Austria (13%) and Germany (12%). The inhabitants of other former Yugoslav republics made up in total about 2.5 million border crossings. The above disposition shows 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 summer. Table 1 shows the structure of border crossing between the years 1992 and 2002.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Million passengers)</td>
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<td>(Million passengers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLO/I</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/A</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>27.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLO/H</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLO/CRO</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>34.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>142.9</td>
<td>180.3</td>
<td>178.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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There has been a 45% increase in cross-border traffic on the Slovenian-Italian border in the 1990s: from 51 to 74 millions. The flow has stabilized since at about 65 million border crossings. This was the consequence of the introduction of fuel cards in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, which enabled Italian residents of the province to purchase fuel in Italy at to Slovenia equal price. The traffic across the Austrian-Slovenian border increased in the same period by one fourth, and has stabilized at about 50 million border crossings a year. The biggest increase of cross-border traffic has occurred on the Slovenian-Hungarian border. This border used to be virtually closed before the 1990s. After that, the cross-border traffic increased for 150% and has since stabilized at about 4 million border crossings a year. Such an intense increase is the result of the democratization and liberalization of the Hungarian society and economy, and by the modification of the Hungarian borderland and its adjustment to the cross-border gateway function. Changes are noticed on the Slovenian-Croatian border as well. There, the maximum was reached in 1994 with 66 millions border crossings, a 33% increase in comparison to the year 1992.

The next year, however, the number of cross-border traffic dropped, but has improved recently and is in a constant rise due to Croatia’s improved position in world
tourism. In 2005 about 35% of the total passenger traffic crosses the Italo-Slovenian border, about 34% the Croato-Slovenian border and about 27% the Austro-Slovenian border. The traffic on the Hungaro-Slovenian border is in a constant rise and is at present close to 4%.

From Table 2 it is evident that the most intense cross-border traffic was and still is on the Italo-Slovene border. The Italo-Slovene borderline is just 17% of the entire nation-state border length, but it handles as much as 38% of the whole cross-border traffic. The traffic across the Austro-Slovenian border is more proportional with length, whereas it is disproportional on the borders with Croatia and Hungary. The Italo-Slovene border is also the most permeable, as we find there close to 40% of all border posts. In average, the Italo-Slovene border has 17 border-posts per 100 km, in the southern part of the border, in the section Trieste – Gorizia, the density is even bigger and comes to about 25 border-posts per 100 km, or one on every 4 km of the border length. The average for the nation-state is 8 border posts per 100 km. The Croato-Slovene border has the lowest number of border posts - just 5 border-posts per 100 km of the border.

Table 2: Selected Characteristics of Borders of the Republic of Slovenia, 2002.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SLO/I</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/A</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/H</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/CRO</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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1 – The total border length (in %);  
2 – Number of border posts in accordance with the relevant cross-border traffic;  
3 – Border posts in relation to border length (in %);  
4 – Number of border posts per 100 km;  
5 – The total cross-border traffic (in %).


2. CROSS – BORDER RELATIONS AFTER THE ENTRANCE OF SLOVENIA INTO THE EU AND THE SCHENGEN SPACE

Unlike other new EU Member States, Slovenia was far less centralised prior to its independence, mainly because it followed the model of polycentric development introduced in the 1970s. Nonetheless, this model did not bring to the consolidation of major regional centres, but merely paved the way to the introduction of competences and powers of municipal centres which at the time also exercised some competences at state level. Therefore in the 1980s, a system was set up of 12 functional regions as areas of inter-municipal cooperation. In the mid-1990s, after Slovenia’s independence, these regions were renamed “statistical regions”. They also function as NUTS 3 units and constitute a territorial basis for the implementation of regional development plans. The current administrative system of Slovenia is thus incomparable with its neighbouring countries, mainly due to the absence of intermediate administrative levels. This fact also inhibits the
institutional cross-border cooperation, whilst the functional cross-border cooperation and the related activities are fairly developed (Bufon, 2008a).

Nevertheless, there is at present no material obstacle for institutional cross-border cooperation of Slovenian and Italian, Austrian, Hungarian or Croatian municipalities. Neither the Constitution nor domestic legislation governing local self-government imposes any limitations on such form of cooperation. Real problems in establishing cooperative relations appear in practice, where certain laws legislation, such as on financial flows and others, not directly concerning cross-border cooperation may, in fact, represent a serious obstacle for its implementation. Other problems derive from the fact that Slovenia is forced to acts as a regional entity in developing several multilateral agreements, such as those that have established the ‘working group’ Alpe-Adria or other regional associations in the Alps-Adriatic-Pannonian macroregion. The aim of such agreements is to exchange opinions, organise study travels and joint consultations, prepare declarations of intent attending the introduction of cooperation programmes, and draw up legally binding agreements. The broad and complex array of activities implies the tendency towards a more institutionalised form of cooperation through establishing Euroregions and stable structures.

Yet, in the territory of Slovenia and its neighbouring countries, there is currently no Euroregion fully comparable to other such groupings in Europe. Coming closest to such an example is the “Euroregion Austrian Styria-Slovenia” established in 2001 as a union founded on the basis of a private economic contract concluded between the societies “Euregio-Steiermark” and “Evroregija” in Slovenia. This union primarily deals with the preparation and implementation of Interreg projects for the purposes of cross-border cooperation and development, operating through the Bilateral Euroregion Forum. Similar objectives are pursued by the association “Crossborder – regional partnership Karavanke”. Rather intense discussions on the creation of a true Euroregion are presently on-going in the Gorizia area at the Slovenian-Italian border, where various advisory bodies of border municipalities have already been set in operation. On the basis of the Protocol on Cross-Border Cooperation in the Gorizia Area from 2004, this Euroregion is to be called “EureGo” and function as an association governed by private law, with its own Assembly representing border municipalities and civil society organisations, Management Board and Secretariat.

With the entrance of Slovenia into the Schengen space in December 2007, border controls on the new internal EU borders with Italy, Austria and Hungary are eliminated, whilst controls on the new external EU border with Croatia are reinforced, both at border posts and along the border line. The Slovene and EU external border with Croatia represents the longest Slovenian border (670 km), currently equipped with 54 border posts, of which 10 are devoted to only bilateral traffic. Actually, the Croato-Slovene agreement has prospected a higher figure of local cross-border posts (22) to avoid the possible negative effects of the establishment of the Schengen border regime, but the difficult inter-state relations caused by border disputes in the Gulf of Piran and other border sections have given severe obstacles to the full implementation of a more open bilateral border regime (Bufon, 2002b).

A recent analysis of cross-border functional interdependence at Slovene borderlands (Bufon 2008a) reveals small functional differences, but more pronounced psychological differences between attitudes of dwellers at ‘internal’ and ‘external’ border areas. The highest intensity of cross-border visits could be found at the Italo-Slovene border where
almost 20% of border dwellers is used to cross the border either every day or at least once per week, whilst in other border areas this percentage ranges from 4.5 to 8.2 only. About 30% of border dwellers usually cross the border at least once per month, except at the Croato-Slovene border where this percentage is lower (20.2%). Occasional cross-border visits (some times per year) are more typical for border areas with Hungary and Croatia where count for about 51-57%. The percentage of border dwellers who never visit the neighboring countries consists of about 16-20%, and it is significantly lower only at the border with Italy (7%).

In consideration of motivations for cross-border traffic, ‘work’ is more often considered in the border areas with Italy (5.6%) and Croatia (3.6%); ‘shopping’ is the most often cited motivation in all border areas, ranging from 45% to 48%, except at the border with Croatia where this motivation is much lower (less than 9%). ‘Visits to relatives and friends’ are generally cited as a motivation for cross-border visits by about 15% of respondents; only at the border with Hungary is considered less important and cited by only 9% of respondents. Finally, ‘recreation’ is considered as a major motivation for cross-border movements by about 14% of respondents at the borders with Italy and Austria, by about 25% of respondents at the border with Hungary, and by as much as 48% of respondents at the border with Croatia.

Future expectations in consideration of the enlargement of the Schengen space to Slovenia, reveal that better cross-border relations are expected by the majority of border dwellers at the border with both Italy and Austria (about 48-49%); at the border with Hungary the majority of the respondents (about 51%) expect that these relations will remain at the same level as before, whilst the majority of the respondents at the border with Croatia (about 52%) expect that cross-border relations will get worse.

Table 3: Selected Characteristics of Cross-Border Relations at Slovene Borderlands

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SLO/I</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/A</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/H</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLO/CRO</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 – Percentage of respondents that have acquaintances/friends across the border;
2 – Percentage of respondents that have some family member working across the border;
3 – Percentage of respondents that actively speak the bordering language;
4 – Percentage of respondents that regularly follow the bordering TV;
5 – Percentage of respondents that visit the bordering places at least weekly.

Source: own research results – Bufon, 2008a

The support of socio-cultural cross-border links and a cultural affinity of the population on both sides of the border are crucial for a successful and prosperous arrangement of/in border regions. The Slovenian minority in Italy, for instance, was actually used to maintain a large part of the ‘institutional’ cross-border links in regard to sport, culture, economy, information, and municipality co-operation, and represented, as border became open in the 1960’s, a kind of Yugoslavia’s ‘gateway into Europe’, as a
substantial part of Yugoslavia’s transactions with Italy and Europe passed through the banks owned by the Slovenian minority in Trieste. Since Slovenian independence in 1991, more formal and institutionalized types of cross-border integration between border municipalities and institutions began (Bufon, 2003). Some co-operation forms are now similar to those existing in several European ‘Euroregions’ (Perkmann 2002; Bufon 2006a), others are innovative and often go beyond the limited bilateral interests, in particular within the so called Alps-Adriatic context (including the border regions of Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary), where we can find initiatives such as broadcasting cooperation or common development of EU’s Interreg projects. The bid to organize Winter Olympic Games in the Three Border Area of Slovenia, Austria and Italy in 2006 was another such step.

With the Slovenian inclusion into the EU in 2004, southwestern Slovenia, including Istria, is re-directing its interest and potential towards the Adriatic, opening up the question of inter-port cooperation between Trieste and Koper, which could contribute to the development of a new cross-border urban conurbation in the Upper Adriatic. Expected consequence of the cross-border integration will be that Trieste and its broader hinterland will again become more multicultural and play an important function in the communication between Slovenian and Italian cultural spaces. Another increasing development ‘line’ is related to the Graz-Maribor cross-border area where the border created after World War One has divided the previous multicultural Austrian region of Styria. But we can say that an increase of socio-economic cross-border relations will support the ‘Europeanization’ of all Slovenian ‘internal’ border areas, seeking a pragmatic and peaceful relationship, and thus a ‘normalization’ of inter-community and inter-ethnic relations as well (Bufon, 2006b).

In respect of the above discussed forms of cross-border cooperation, we should also mention that in former federal Yugoslavia, these forms of cooperation were of major importance for the then republic of Slovenia to establish its international legitimacy and additional opportunities for economic development. Cooperation with Austrian Carinthia and Styria, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and other ‘Western’ regions was also crucial for the Slovenian geopolitical re-orientation from the Balkans to Central Europe, with which Slovenia had strongly identified itself already in the 1980s. Paradoxically, being an independent state, Slovenia shows a notable tendency towards the decrease in such forms of cooperation. This tendency may be the result of its statehood, due to which Slovenia cannot act as an equal partner to Italian and Austrian regions. But the very need to develop more balanced institutional solutions for cross-border cooperation should direct the government to perform a more active and innovative role in this cooperation and to support local communities in developing better and closer relations with their neighbours.

Of course, we should point out first that the basic social and spatial changes in Slovenia following its accession to the EU were deeply affected by political reorganization, privatisation, economic globalisation and increased multi-culturalism. These changes enhanced the spatial mobility of the population and increased the functional and strategic significance of Slovenian border areas, especially those marked by a considerable level of urbanisation and cross-border communication, whilst other areas, due to their lower development and innovative potentials, are facing a trend of marginalization. The most vulnerable among these areas are those along the Slovenian-Croatian border and the Prekmurje region on the border with Hungary. The first are experiencing the negative
effects deriving from the territorial disputes between the neighbouring countries and the transformation of the border status from an almost non-existing administrative line to a well-controlled outer EU’s border, but is maintaining a very high potential level of socio-cultural cross-border integration. The latter, instead, emerged from an ‘iron-curtain’ experience, but represents perhaps the only Slovenian border area with a potentially notable regional impact extending to the neighbouring border areas in Austria, Hungary and Croatia. Recent researches using a standardized methodology (Bufon, 2008a) have confirmed the complex border situation in Slovenia and shown that the highest expectations for a more intense cross-border cooperation could be found at the border with Austria, whilst the lowest are present at the border with Croatia; the highest potentials for cross-border cooperation have been detected at the border with Italy and the lowest at the border with Austria; the highest socio-cultural affinity is present at the border with Croatia, the lowest at the border with Hungary; finally, a higher functional interdependence could be noted at the border with Italy, whilst in other border sectors is rather lower.

Table 4: Attitudes for cross-border cooperation in the Slovenian border sectors

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<tr>
<th>SLO/I</th>
<th>SLO/A</th>
<th>SLO/H</th>
<th>SLO/CRO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Index of cross-border expectation</td>
<td>51,2</td>
<td>54,9</td>
<td>52,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of potential interdependence</td>
<td>62,3</td>
<td>52,9</td>
<td>58,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of socio-cultural affinity</td>
<td>59,3</td>
<td>41,6</td>
<td>28,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of functional interdepend.</td>
<td>20,3</td>
<td>14,4</td>
<td>14,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General index of interdependence</td>
<td>48,3</td>
<td>41,0</td>
<td>38,5</td>
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Source: own research results – Bufon, 2008a

3. CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES IN REGIONAL CROSS – BORDER COOPERATION AND THE SLOVENE ‘MODEL’

Following its accession to the EU, Slovenia has not only been facing various structural aspects of harmonisation with the European reality, but also its new geopolitical situation and a new potential role of a bridging area between the EU and South-Eastern Europe, as well as between the Mediterranean and Continental Europe (Bufon 2005). Aside from that, Slovenia will also have to examine its position on the edge of Schengen space and on the cross-roads of different cross-border socio-economic and socio-cultural flows and interests (Bufon, 2008b). The surveys carried out in Slovenia so far show that beside 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, a generally more complete development occurs involving not only the traffic corridors and the border centres, but also the wider border areas.

Thus different border areas along the Slovenian borders have already turned into fairly interdependent border regions, thanks to spontaneous cross-border links that involve smaller territories, although they do not have developed yet the institutional bases, typical of Euroregions. Local cross-border functional interdependence at the Slovene borders derives from long-lasting common territorial bonds and not from momentary international-
political and economic demands. This feature is present especially in historical and multicultural regions, and this is a normal condition, rather than an exception, for many other European border areas. These are, however, only starting points that have to be pushed further: the territorial behaviour of local and regional communities along the borders have to be studied more in-depth, as well as their cultural and spatial identity; not only the functional more linked areas have to be studied, but also the reasons for a lower level of integration have to be detected.

Nevertheless, all this shows a number of new aspects which have become more important for the process of European integration, eliminating the traditional exclusive functions of the political border and improving mutual respect in such a different cultural space as Europe (Bufon, 2008c). So far, Slovenia, considering its dimension and surveying themes, seems to be a handy ‘laboratory’ for studying border phenomena, border relationships, and cross-border interdependence in both marginal and multicultural regions, as well as convergence and divergence drivers, and their spatial influences on the European ‘new’ and ‘old’ border areas. Acting out of the Slovenian experience, cooperation and integration perspectives in today’s Europe may be discussed on two different but inter-related levels: (1) The first regards what could be called ‘regional globalization’, namely the integration of an increasing number of Central European countries in a wider transcontinental dimension; (2) The second concerns local aspects of cross-border co-operation. A direct consequence of this process will be the elimination of the (negative) mental and historical legacies in the region. And good cross-border relations are crucial in this regard (Bufon and Gosar, 2007).

The case of Slovenia’s borders 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 (like on many sections on the border towards Italy, Austria and Hungary), 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 Slovenia’s border areas, it becomes clear that the political or economic “macro” approach in studying cross-border regions is limited. 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 namely the result of its spatial mobility in satisfying daily needs in regard to such basic functions as work, leisure/recreation, supply, and education. These functions are also the result of the activity of the border population in maintaining the many traditional cultural links that are rooted in the relatively stable period preceding political partition.

Nevertheless, the study of border regions undoubtedly brings additional aspects to bear on the standard theory of the center-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 (Berezin and Schain, 2003). The geography of border landscapes in its social and cultural dimensions is thus definitely assuming an important role in the ‘humanization’ of the traditional geographical approach to borders and border conflict resolution. Three major factors which contribute towards a positive evaluation of cross-border co-operation could be detected (Bufon, 2006a): (1) By orchestrating a functional, in intensity strong cross-
border mobility, existing relations determine a generally positive evaluation of co-operation; (2) By stimulating cultural/ethnic affinity between the resident populations on both sides of the border, cross-border activities become natural, more intense, definitely impacting the evaluation of the relationship in the long run; (3) By stressing how cross-border co-operation is greater in areas where differences in the socio-cultural and socio-economic structure of border landscapes on both sides of the border are small and/or compatible with a modern society. All three areas should be taken into account in the process of engineering borders and management of cross-border cooperation and integration, as they are representing the pre-conditions for a true re-integration of the European continent (Calhoun 2003), and cannot be treated just as ‘side-effects’ of the Schengen regime and the EU’s bureaucracy attempt to consolidate the ‘European fortress’.

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