

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AND THE EUROPEANIZATION OF THE SLOVENIAN-HUNGARIAN BORDER REGION

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This paper will examine how EU integration processes inform developments in the border region between Slovenia and Hungary by focusing on EU funding as an instrument of cross-border integration. Ethnographic interviews serve as a means for ascertaining how actors in the border region experience these EU funding initiatives, what sorts of changes these projects introduce, what sorts of networks they facilitate, and how they inform borderland experience and development. Keywords: border regions, EU integration, Slovenia, Goričko, Hungary, cross-border funding programs, debordering, anthropology of borders

Na podlagi analize projektov Evropske unije (EU) kot instrumentov čezmejnega povezovanja avtorica preučuje vplive procesov evropske integracije na dogajanja na obmejnem območju med Slovenijo in Madžarsko. Z etnografskimi intervjuji ugotavlja, kako akterji v obmejni regiji doživljajo te programe EU, kakšne spremembe uvajajo ti projekti, kakšne socialne mreže omogočajo in kako vplivajo na obmejne izkušnje ter razvoj obmejnega območja. Ključne besede: obmejna območja, integracija v Evropsko unijo, Slovenija, Goričko, Madžarska, čezmejni finančni programi, od-mejevanje, antropologija mej

INTRODUCTION

The European Union, which started as a post-war peace initiative, has developed into the only supranational body of its kind, one that far transcends previous multilateral pacts and conventions that articulate nations' joint decisions to cooperate in diverse spheres - political, economic, and social. Thomas M. Wilson has posited that the EU "represents what is perhaps the greatest experiment in postnational and supranational polity building in the world today, and the greatest reconfiguration of social space since the days of the British Empire" (Wilson 2012: 169). The EU operates not only on the basis of institutions to which member states cede a certain measure of their sovereignty but also of shifts in the space of the EU territory that facilitate the free flow of persons and goods within it (Bajuk Senčar 2014), flows that hinge on changes of border regimes between member states.

As such, the EU and the EU institutions operate as engines of European integration understood as a set of reterritorialization processes that, as John Borneman and Nick Fowler argue, together constitute an "accelerated process and a set of effects that are redefining forms of identification with territory and people" (Borneman and Fowler 1997: 488). Borders and borderlands have become in this context significant sites not only for policymakers but also for researchers. Some transnational flows seem rootless – for example, digital or financial flows. However, many such processes – particularly those related to mobility or migration, security, and commerce – can be more evident on borders than at national centers (Favell et al. 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012).

This paper will examine how EU integration processes inform developments in the borderlands between Slovenia and Hungary, a region that has withstood tremendous change during the last century, including a broad range of border regimes.¹ After the fall of the Iron Curtain, which had for decades imposed a virtually impenetrable barrier between countries along it (Borneman 1992; Pelkmans 2012), the years-long process of EU expansion to the East resulted in the creation – at least in theory – of a virtually “border-less” region between Slovenia and Hungary. Becoming members of the EU in 2004 and part of the Schengen Area in 2007 resulted in both countries forming part of a larger region that allows for the free movement of people and goods without controls at national borders, which are in turn classified as “disappearing borders” (Girtler 1992; Donnan and Haller 2000).²

While EU membership has brought with it radical changes to the border regimes between Slovenia and Hungary, this paper focuses primarily on another instrument of cross-border integration: EU funding. EU funding has played a significant role in supporting cross-border cooperation, particularly in the area of nature conservation, as it was instrumental in the creation of a trilateral protected area composed of Raab Nature Park (Austria), Órség National Park (Hungary) and Goričko Nature Park (Slovenia). Field research for this analysis was conducted in the northwestern portion of the Slovenian-Hungarian borderlands (a region that encompasses the Goričko and Órség parks), with an emphasis on the Slovenian border region.

The present-day EU has 40 internal borderland regions, which represent approximately 40% of its entire territory and are home to close to 30% of its entire population. It is thus not surprising that border regions have historically been a priority for the EU. Border areas have also been long-time recipients of targeted EU aid; often peripheral to national centers, they have historically been marginalized in terms of development commonly defined in national terms. Against this backdrop, EU cross-border funding programs are examined as a set of bordering – or, more specifically, debordering – practices (Goddard et al. 1994; van Houtum et al. 2005; Green 2012) that, from the perspective of the EU, are meant to encourage initiatives that transcend national boundaries. As James Wesley Scott argues, “cross-border cooperation at the interstate, regional and local levels is seen to provide the ideational foundations for a networked Europe through symbolic representations of European space and its further development perspectives” (Wesley Scott 2012: 89).

¹ This article is based on research conducted within the scope of the ongoing research project *Zavarovana območja ob slovensko-madžarski meji. Izzivi sodelovanja in trajnostnega razvoja / Protected areas along the Slovenian-Hungarian Border: Challenges of Cooperation and Sustainable Development* (J6-8254, 2017–2020) funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

² Currently, the Schengen region comprises 26 European states, not all of which are EU member states. Ireland and the United Kingdom have opted to remain outside Schengen, and four EU member states are involved in the preparations to form part of Schengen: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Romania. The four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) member states – Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland – are not members of the EU but form part of the Schengen zone.

EU cross-border funding programs have received analytical attention primarily from border analysts specialized in political science or geography, who examine the role of these projects as instruments of debordering understood as re-territorialization (see, for example, Popescu 2008; Lechevalier and Wielgohs 2013). These studies focus on examining these programs in terms of new developed institutional infrastructures and networks that inform the exercise of national sovereignty and their consequent effects on the mutually constitutive relationship between territory and identity in border regions.

The following discussion is meant to contribute a ground-level, local perspective to an interdisciplinary discussion that, for the most part, employs a top-down approach that focuses primarily on identifying new institutions and networks introduced by cross-border projects. Instead, this analysis expands on the argument that borderwork in the EU is no longer the sole domain of the state (Rumford 2006) but instead is multiply defined, including the bordering – and debordering – practices of local actors along the Slovenian-Hungarian border. In addition, it does not approach EU integration as a self-evident, natural progression of things, as is the case in economic discourses of European integration (van Houtum 2002), which views borders as barriers to the flow of goods, ideas, and people to be removed. Instead, it builds upon existing research of specialists in the anthropology of EU borders, some of whom argue that existing bordering (and debordering) practices have resulted in the proliferation of borders as opposed to their reduction (Donnan and Wilson 2003; Green 2013).

The research upon which this analysis is based includes archival research on EU cross-border funding programs as well as ethnographic interviews with persons living in different areas of the borderland region (primarily in the Slovenian Goričko border region) who participate in a range of EU funded projects.³ My interlocutors in the field included members of municipal governments, tourism organizations, state agencies, park administrations, regional cultural institutions, and regional development agencies. These interviews help ascertain how these actors experience these EU initiatives, what sorts of changes (or lack thereof) these projects introduce, what sorts of networks develop, and how these projects inform borderland experience.

A SHORT HISTORY OF EU CROSS-BORDER (CBC) FUNDING IN THE SLOVENIAN-HUNGARIAN BORDERLANDS

The EU has set up a complex system of funding programs to encourage cross-border cooperation: some are focused on cooperation between two adjoining member states, some among numerous member states, and some between member states and non-EU member states. In short, the programs are meant to encourage various forms of cross-border relationships.

³ I conducted many of the interviews together with project colleague Dr. Marjeta Pisk (particularly those carried out in early 2019).

One of the first cross-border programs that included projects for the Slovenian-Hungarian border was the Phare program. Phare (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring Economies) was established in 1989, initially as an economic aid program for Poland and Hungary. Over the years, it was expanded to include all candidate countries, including most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, who began the accession process in the late 1990s. As a result, the Phare program became one of the central aid instruments for countries preparing for EU membership, and it was structured in terms of two main objectives: strengthening public administrations and institutions to function effectively within the EU and promoting the convergence of national and EU legislation.

One of the first Phare projects that included Slovenia and Hungary was a multi-country project that linked partner countries around the common issue of transportation. It focused on facilitating flows of traffic along chosen transnational corridors within the EU. In 1995, funds were allocated to “unblock the border-crossing to Hungary at Dolga Vas, a major transport bottleneck on one of the principal routes into central Europe.”⁴ Funding the changes to the Dolga vas – Redics border crossing, as the excerpt from the 1995 Phare report implies, was to render the border more permeable and thus accessible to the sort of flows facilitated by a presumably “borderless” Europe (Jenko 1995).

Cross-border cooperation between Hungary and Slovenia continued in the scope of a Phare trilateral cross-border program between Hungary, Austria, and Slovenia in 1995 and 1996, and then a bilateral program between Slovenia and Hungary from the year 2000 onwards (2000-2003). One of the first projects to be funded was meant to support the creation of a trilateral regional park Goričko-Orseg-Raab in the year 2000 (project SI.00.08.01). It aimed to support coordinated nature preservation as well as sustainable development in the border region between Austria, Slovenia, and Hungary (Dešnik and Domanjko 2011).⁵

The second and more significant cross-border program for Hungary and Slovenia was the Interreg program, founded to stimulate cooperation between regions in the EU. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the main goal of the Interreg program is to promote cohesion within the EU in order to facilitate balanced social and economic development (and the consequent lack of significant disparities) across the EU. Achieving a certain level of balance in this regard is crucial for the EU as a multi-national body to work, particularly one dedicated to lowering barriers among member states. To this end, the program promotes three forms and scales of cooperation to promote cohesion: cross-border cooperation, transnational cooperation, and inter-regional cooperation. Currently, the Interreg program covers all 28 EU member states, three participating EFTA countries (Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein), six accession countries, and eighteen neighboring countries.

⁴ European Commission. The Phare Programme Annual Report 1995 Brussels. 23.07.1996 Com (96) 360 final. [http://aei.pitt.edu/33801/1/COM_\(96\)_360_final.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/33801/1/COM_(96)_360_final.pdf), p. 9 (accessed September 30, 2019).

⁵ While the trilateral park exists primarily on paper, the Phare project funding provided crucial support to the establishment of the Goričko Nature Park on the Slovenian side of this borderland region.

Slovenia and Hungary's cooperation in the Interreg program began in the context of the trilateral Neighborhood Program that included Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia, which took place from 2004 through 2006. This provided the foundation for the development of a bilateral cross-border program between Hungary and Slovenia that has run for the programming periods: 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, with preparations underway for the following programming period that will start in 2021.⁶ The strategic objectives of both programs involved improving conditions and possibilities for sustainable development in the region in order to maintain and even attract inhabitants to come to live in the area. At the time of the interviews, existing Interreg projects funded during the 2014-2020 program period were slowly coming to a conclusion. At the same time, it was also a time of expectation, as interviewees were awaiting the guidelines for the new program period that would start in 2021. These guidelines would define the framework both for project ideas and partnerships for the following years.⁷

POSITIONING THE BORDERLANDS: PERIPHERALITY AND REMOTENESS

The analysis of conversations and interviews involved identifying the connections and positionalities in terms of which my interlocutors talk about the EU and cross-border funding – be it their experiences, practices, or opinions on the significance of EU projects. What are the coordinates, if you will, of their talk about the EU and cross-border initiatives? How do they inform the way they define the borders and borderlands in which they live?

I was surprised to realize that the state was one of the primary coordinates according to which my interlocutors would frame their talk about EU cross-border projects cross-border and partnerships. One would imagine that the state or a national center would not be present in narratives about transnational programs, but this is not the case. In fact, one of the civil servants that I interviewed argued that these programs hinge on the active role of nation-states. She had been involved in EU funding programs from before Slovenia's EU membership and explained that the first funding programs were entirely centralized – meaning that all processes went through EU institutions (primarily Brussels). However, these early EU funding programs also served an additional purpose: to help teach candidate countries (and their administrations) how the EU funding system operates. Approved EU projects were to help prepare member states for an inevitable de-centralization of EU project management, meaning that a certain level of decision-making and implementation would

⁶ For more on the completed Slovenian-Hungarian Interreg Programs see: Služba Vlade RS za razvoj in kohezijo 2015 and Žvokelj Jazbinšek et al. 2015.

⁷ Slovenia and Hungary have cooperated and currently participate in numerous EU transnational and inter-regional projects, as partners of broader, international project groups. However, this analysis focuses on bilateral cross-border cooperation and EU cross-border projects.

be delegated to the national (member state) level.⁸ Part of this training included imparting how funding procedures operate (including reporting and accountability) and which principles and modes of cooperation among member states are favored in cross-border and multi-national projects. This sort of training was meant to help the state become an effective actor in EU funding processes and cross-border development.⁹

However, the state as a recurring theme is not primarily associated with its role in EU funding programs. Instead, the state operates as a cardinal point according to which people would characterize their position, defined in terms of distance from the national center instead of proximity to the border and the country beyond it. This distance – expressed in terms of peripherality – is not only physical, but also social, political, and economic. At the most basic level, being a border region *vis à vis* the national center implies a significant difference in status and scale that manifests itself in numerous ways.

These differences are often invoked in conversations about the significance of EU funding programs. One of my interlocutors, who works in a regional cultural institution in the border region, described how being a regional as opposed to a national institution implied massive differences in terms of funding. The difference lies in having funds only for basic operation but not for the institutional development that quality work requires:

We do not have 100% funding, and in some ways, these projects have become a necessity...We are a regional, public sector institution for the [broader]Pomurje region. While the ministry of culture finances a large part of our budget, a smaller portion is covered by the institution's co-founders: the municipalities of Murska Sobota and Moravske Toplice. However, the state does not offer any funds for investments to help carry out our work (computers, cameras, software, hardware for documentation, archival work, digitalization of heritage). The municipalities do not have the funds to assist with any such investments. Without the aid of EU projects, we could not afford to purchase that which has become a necessity for the production of quality work in this day and age. The number of employees has not changed since 1994, and we have the same number of curators since 1992...With these projects, we can either buy something or hire someone for a time or do something that should have been part of our basic program.¹⁰

⁸ Anonymous interview with Slovenian civil servant, held 05.01.2018. This sort of training also extended to EU project partners (no matter their positioning), who needed to learn how the programs functioned, how they were structured, what sorts of partnerships they favored, and how these programs evolved.

⁹ Over 75% of EU funding is managed in partnership with national and regional authorities through a system of “shared management”, mainly through the Structural and Investment Funds: European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, Cohesion Fund, European Agricultural Fund For Rural Development, and European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The remainder is disbursed directly by the EU through a range of programs.

¹⁰ Anonymous interview with a representative of a regional cultural institution of the (broader) Pomurje region, 13.03.2019.

Peripherality is defined here in terms of an ambivalent relationship with the state – a status (or lack thereof) expressed as a distinction between the support given to regional institutions as opposed to national ones. The primary motivation for securing EU funding is to compensate for a difference in status, which in this case is defined according to distance from the center or the discrepancies between the national and the regional. While it could be inferred from this passage that EU funds are earmarked to invest in “extra” tasks and initiatives, this sense of peripherality is also associated with a lack of basic amenities such as infrastructure. During my interviews, it became apparent that one of the more popular projects (albeit not a cross-border project) made possible with EU funding has been the modernization and expansion of the water supply network for the region. While the network is not yet complete, the need to search for outside sources of funding to install the infrastructure necessary to provide all border residents with a connection to the public water system is a telling indicator of the gap between center and periphery.

The sense of distance between center and periphery is apparent in some contexts more than others; in some cases, the distance seems to be increasing. A member of one of the region’s development agencies was outlining the importance of potential cross-border projects that would improve mobility infrastructure. Improvements of this kind could help capitalize on the region’s location on a trilateral border and provide better access to local businesses and cross-border markets. These projects hinge on connecting regional networks across borders, which in some cases is more feasible than extending networks within a country. Nevertheless, the improvement of regional cross-border mobility infrastructure is taking place while the mobility of actors on the periphery is decreasing. As my interlocutor explained, the latest timetables of the state railway system show that the existing direct connection between Slovenia’s capital of Ljubljana and the regional center of Murska Sobota has been canceled despite the use of EU cohesion funds to modernize the railways to Murska Sobota for this very purpose. This has made daily commuting to the capital from the border by train virtually impossible, as it takes almost twice as long as it would by car. He commented, *I often joke that if a foreigner traveled by train in Slovenia, he would think that Slovenia is an enormous country!*¹¹

PERIPHERALITY, THE STATE AND BORDERLAND PARTNERSHIPS

These cross-border program tailored to border regions are, in the minds of those living there, meant to compensate for this peripherality by funding projects aimed at forging ties between border regions and encouraging networking across borders, which would also reframe the sense of distance from a political and economic center that manifests itself in diverse ways. However, numerous factors would hinder this reframing, one of them being

¹¹ Anonymous interview with a representative of a regional development agency, 14.03.2019.

that the role of the state – cast predominantly in negative terms. It is often invoked as a way of explaining the challenges or obstacles to attaining cross-border projects.

An example of this is the way that my interlocutors would discuss the issue of co-financing. While the first EU projects provided full funding, later EU projects, including Interreg projects, would fund the majority of a project's proposed budget, with each applicant having to provide evidence of the fact that they would finance the remainder of the budget on their own. In many of the cases that I discussed with my interlocutors, approved projects would receive 85% percent of the proposed budget from the EU, with applicants setting aside an amount that equals 15% of the budget. This change in funding policy was significant, as it decreased the number and range of potential applicants for EU funding. For many (notably smaller organizations or businesses), setting aside the necessary co-financing of a project was not a possibility. More importantly, the issue of co-financing became a significant point of comparison between Hungarians and Slovenes when partners from both sides work to apply for funding – highlighting differences between both border regions:

They (the Hungarians) are extremely fortunate, given that, in principle, the state helps guarantee their percentage of funding they can work more freely. Besides, they get these funds in advance, as a sort of prepayment, right after the signing of the project contract, so that the money can start to flow back to them. If we are talking about 15% of 100.000 EU, then every year for three years, you can imagine that this implies having some secure funding.¹²

Comparing the actions of the Hungarian and Slovene states in this matter serves to emphasize differences on either side of the border – which Slovenes believe are due to a lack of support on the Slovene side. As a result, organizations and institutions on the Slovene side of the border thus elaborate varied strategies to fulfill the requirement of co-financing. Some take out loans to secure the necessary money; others seek out partnerships with other (i.e., Slovene) organizations who could provide the necessary funds to be able to move forward:

In the last twenty years, our tourism center has participated in numerous cross-border projects and even national ones because we cannot carry out our entire program – including everything that we think is necessary and important – with our own funds... Our activities go through the founding organization, the municipality, which also helps us with the co-financing issue. We are a small center; the funds needed for co-financing every year could destroy our budget. Luckily, our founding organization has an ear for projects and supports us.¹³

¹² Anonymous interview with a municipal official, 15.03.2019.

¹³ Anonymous interview with a tourism official, 14.03.2019.

At the municipal level, one can observe networking among municipal actors and organizations to secure financing, define project ideas, compile project partnerships, and apply for projects. For example, municipalities are often co-founders or co-owners of a number of different local or regional institutions – from tourist centers, regional museums, and even energy companies. A municipality may not always be an appropriate partner for the calls for cross-border projects; however, it can participate in another role by supporting other, more eligible agencies or institutions in project partnerships. This sort of ground-level, albeit quasi-institutional networking differs from the top-down coordination carried out by regional or local development agencies, whose interests lie in coordinating project ideas and partnerships in order to increase chances of success:

It is best to coordinate partnerships for any given theme instead of every potential partner applying for their own project. It can result in cannibalism and in a situation where all the project ideas are not well prepared, and none get funded. This is not a good outcome if we are talking about our region's strategic interests.¹⁴

As the development agency official implies in the previous excerpt, the fact that local, municipal, and regional actors and institutions in the Slovene borderlands form strategic partnerships to secure funding does not preclude the existence of competition or competing interests and agendas. While some consider this competition to be normal, others call attention to what they consider to be problematic instrumentalizations of cross-border programs. Each interlocutor that I spoke with had explicit interests that motivated their search for EU funding; they would use project ideas to complement or expand upon existing plans of operation. Thus, project ideas often serve particular interests while also addressing the priorities that structure each specific program period of any given EU funding program. However, one can observe tensions in connection with the activities of the institutions, which have become specialized in EU project consulting and management and for whom EU projects represent their primary source of funding. For them, these projects become an end in themselves. These are often smaller organizations or agencies, which have found a niche by capitalizing on their experience and skills. However, many consider their activities to be problematic because their definitions of project ideas are not defined by what is needed in the region or by a broader institutional agenda that needs additional (financial) support. Instead, their project proposals are defined primarily by two criteria: the feasibility of a project idea and the benefits that any given project can provide. Upon asking representatives of such agencies about their long-term interests and projects that they wish to fulfill with the aid of EU funding, the answer would invariably be linked to the priorities of the operational program.

¹⁴ Anonymous interview with a representative of a regional development agency, 13.03.2019.

CROSS-BORDER WORK

Partnership and competition are thus the ways that my interlocutors defined their interactions with other Slovene border actors involved in EU projects. However, in what terms do they describe their interactions with the cross-border actors and partners that are their main partners in cross-border work? How do they define the obstacles and opportunities linked to setting up and carrying out cross-border projects? Having a virtually impermeable border for most of the postwar period left its traces on a region that once formed part of a single empire. In addition to the physical changes to the landscape that the border left behind, my interlocutors argued that the border has also helped create a language barrier:

The border then closed off this region to such an extent that today, in my mind, the greatest problem is the language barrier between us. Things go all right with the Austrians, but less so with the Hungarians because of the lack of language proficiency. Few people along the border speak Hungarian, and while Hungarians in Budapest may speak foreign languages, fewer do so in the border areas. This results in considerable problems in communication. While the border may be open, the language barrier is not. I say this because before the First World War ... people knew all these languages. They spoke German, Hungarian, and Slovene. This richness is gone. It is very good that we Slovenes are part of Slovenia, but we have lost something precious. My grandmother, who lived here under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, spoke five languages. None of our young educated people do so. My grandmother, who had only finished secondary school, she did.¹⁵

There are several strategies that my interlocutors mentioned to get around the language barrier. Most prevalent – besides depending on the few people who speak both languages – is the use of a common third language (typically German or English) and the use of interpreters and translators for “official” events, when both languages were required. The language barrier begs the question as to the sorts of interests and ideas that can transcend such an obstacle to forming cross-border partnerships and defining project ideas. In this final section, I will address these questions by discussing an Interreg project that was often brought up in conversations with my interlocutors: Green Exercise, a project aimed at promoting cross-border tourism. I will structure this discussion by analyzing the interviews I had with representatives of the different project partners.

Green Exercise, which is running from 2016 through 2019, is led by Őrség National Park and is composed of four Hungarian partners and four Slovene partners. Project partners aim to promote cross-border tourism that highlights the region’s natural and cultural heritage as well as healthy forms of mobility (primarily cycling). In order to fulfill this

¹⁵ Anonymous interview with a local tourism official, 15.03.2019.

objective, the project partners have created nine small parks in the border region as well as five cycling paths that encourage specific cross-border trajectories of mobility. In addition to these parks and paths, the project also includes financing particular infrastructure along the routes for cyclists (including rest sites and a hostel), joint training for cyclists, and cycling tours. The project thus aims to provide the necessary infrastructure, products, and services that would attract tourists to the cross-border region while also encouraging and facilitating particular forms of touristic practice.¹⁶

LEADING PARTNER: ŐRSÉG NATIONAL PARK

Őrség National Park, located on the Hungarian side of the border, is the project's leading partner. Of the three parks in the border region, Őrség is the largest and has the highest number of staff working the park's administration: approximately 70 persons are employed in the park's existing directorates. While primarily funded by the Hungarian state, the park applies for funding to provide extra support for specific activities: nature conservation, education, promotion of the park's natural heritage, and eco-tourism. Őrség park officials explained that their relationship with Goričko Nature Park is based primarily on project partnerships. Some of these projects have involved the preservation of the natural heritage of the region. However, officials have singled out eco-tourism as the topic with the most potential for cross-border cooperation, which would encourage sustainable development in the region. Park officials also spoke of their efforts to forge and maintain good working relationships with park inhabitants in the 44 villages located in the park, as not all of them agree with the implications of living in a protected area. Their objective in devising eco-tourism projects is to provide a sustainable and viable alternative for border inhabitants, providing them with initiatives that could benefit them economically, be it directly or indirectly. Moreover, in their eyes, eco-tourism is a point of connection and an opportunity for communities on both sides of the border:

We would like people to stay in this region...The main task of Green Exercise is to have tourists stay one night or more in the region. We have built new accommodations in Slovenia, in Šalovci, near the border; we have bought bikes, and each partner has to build a park.¹⁷

Őrség park officials view projects such as Green Exercise that involve the border region's protected areas as a foundation for cross-border eco-tourism that could benefit the entire region. In addition, they argue that such projects serve as a basis for trilateral cooperation among the border region's three parks (Őrség-Goričko-Raab), which has yet to become fully realized.

¹⁶ For more on the project, see its official website: <http://www.si-hu.eu/en2/green-exercise/>

¹⁷ Anonymous interview with Őrség National Park officials, 13.09.2019.

THE MUNICIPALITY OF MORAVSKE TOPLICE

A little over 15 km away from the Slovenian- Hungarian border lies the small town of Moravske Toplice, the administrative center of the border municipality of the same name, which is best known for its thermal waters and its spas. The discovery of thermal waters in the area in the early 1960s transformed a primarily agricultural region into a touristic one, with agriculture becoming primarily a supplementary activity. Since then, tourism has, in many ways, marked the path and pace of development in the municipality, which, according to my interlocutors, has both positive and negative implications:

Tourism is the biggest business in Moravske Toplice, but the high tourist tax does not cover the municipality's investments in infrastructure that tourism demands. Every new hotel, every new accommodation, implies pressure on the water supply, sewage system, and other communal services. Furthermore, tourists are no longer satisfied with pools and warm water; they need bike paths, signs, additional activities... The municipality is very dispersed and continually invests in infrastructure: roads, lighting, even running paths. The municipality does all this, but [local] companies do not invest in the area, and neither do other investors.¹⁸

Tourism in Moravske Toplice initially centered primarily around thermal bath complexes, which were also the primary beneficiaries of tourism profits. However, as a municipal official explains in the previous excerpt, the expansion of the tourism industry brings with it several challenges, including the need to expand local infrastructure and invest in local tourism in the face of changing tourist needs and expectations. The municipality and tourism agency of Moravske Toplice turn to EU funding to supplement existing funds for additional investments. They participate in projects aimed at linking Moravske Toplice to other tourist destinations in the border area, as in the case of Green Exercise project.

Within the scope of Green Exercise, two small parks were built in the municipality, in Prosenjakovci and Martjanici (for more see Pomurec 2017). These parks were designed with specific groups in mind, including children and the physically disabled. What my interlocutors have pointed out is that the bike paths and the parks are not only meant for tourists but also for residents, which they see as an added bonus. The project also addresses the concerns of residents who question the logic behind investment in tourism infrastructure instead of investment with the local community in mind:

Sometimes the locals argue that we have not done anything for them... A lot of money has been invested in, for example, resting places for cyclists; however, they were not

¹⁸ Anonymous interview with a tourism official (Moravske Toplice), 14.03.2019.

*made only for tourists but also locals. These are things that will stay here. Tourists cannot take them when they leave... All this is meant to last, it stays [here]... The benefits are meant for everyone.*¹⁹

In effect, in addition to training seminar tailored to local tourism service providers, the parks that have been built in the border region in the last two years have become sites for workshops and camps for children from the border regions – workshops that focus on healthy lifestyles as well as the borderland's natural and cultural heritage²⁰

THE MUNICIPALITY OF ŠALOVCI

Šalovci is a municipality that lies at the northeastern corner of Slovenia. It is among Slovenia's smaller municipalities and faces numerous challenges that are common to the area. A traditionally agriculture-based municipality of rolling hills, plains, and forests, Šalovci has no industrial plants or major crafts, and poor economic prospects have spurred residents to search for employment elsewhere – primarily in urban or business centers elsewhere in Slovenia and abroad. Emigration has left its mark in an already sparsely populated region, with mostly older persons and those involved in agriculture remaining in the area. Numbers are dwindling in the latter group, with many dedicating themselves to their farms primarily in their free time, after work. Given the situation, it is not surprising that the municipal officials in Šalovci look to the municipality's natural and cultural landscapes as an economic potential, searching for opportunities to develop ecological, recreational and cultural tourism – with the help of EU cross-border programs.

*None of these projects would have been possible if we hadn't received any funding. Of course, we also invested in them, as has the state, but if we did not have this funding, it would have taken us years to put together the necessary funds. We would not have been able to do any of this, or at most just a little.*²¹

As the municipal official from Šalovci explains, EU projects provide them with the necessary resources to realize specific ideas that they could not complete in the short term on their own. Projects such as Green Exercise provide them with the funds to help finance several small yet significant additions to existing tourism infrastructure, including the transformation of the former elementary school in the village of Markovci into an activity center named *Peterloug* (meaning rainbow in the local dialect), which also offers accommodations for approximately 50 persons (Nemeš 2018). The refurbished center and the

¹⁹ Anonymous interview with a municipal official from Moravske Toplice, 14.03.2019.

²⁰ https://www.czr.si/index.php/projekti_reader/green-exercise.html

²¹ Anonymous interview with a municipal official from Šalovci, 15.03.2019.

visitors/tourists that it will attract are meant to provide new opportunities for local businesses, as municipality official in Šalovci explains:

Our goal is not for the municipality to make money. It is to have people come visit us, to stay here for a while, to offer our local businesses a chance to profit from these visits, and to help people get to know this region, on our side of the border as well as on the other side.²²

Another significant issue involves Šalovci's proximity to the cross-border Slovene minorities living in the Raba region (Hung. Szlovén Rába-vidék, Sln. Slovensko Porabje) in Hungary, where many have relatives and thus an interest in building up ties (Ravnik 1999; Kozorog 2019). Two municipalities in the Porabje region – Szakonyfalu/Sakalovci and Alsószölnök/Dolnji Senik – are also partners in the Green Exercise project, which is only the most recent of numerous projects that the municipality of Šalovci has had with Slovenes on the other side of the border. This is but one sort of networking that is considered to be crucial for tourism development in the entire border region, with the future of tourism in Šalovci linked to forming part of a broader, cross-border network:

In this project, we are trying to link together tourism service providers from the Slovene side and the Hungarian side to create a network, attract tourists to the area, and guide them to all these sites.²³

In this light, EU cross-border projects such as Green Exercise are seen as a means to fulfill local interests in terms of tourism development. Moreover, these interests are explicitly based on a consideration of the benefits of cross-border connection – from the personal to the economic. These include forging or reviving cross-border ties of friendship and kinship as well as collaborating on cross-border initiatives (particularly touristic) aimed at providing economic opportunities to the border region as a whole.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: BORDERING, DEBORDERING, REBORDERING

To what extent do EU cross-border projects inform border actors' experiences of the borderlands, and if so, in what ways? The vast majority of my interlocutors included those who were directly involved in the development and implementation of EU cross-border projects. Their professional involvement in such activities distinguishes them from other

²² Anonymous interview with a municipal official from Šalovci, 15.03.2019.

²³ Anonymous interview with a tourism official from Šalovci, 15.03.2019.

local actors, whose contact with EU projects may be limited to their products or outcomes – be they some element of infrastructure or certain events or workshops. This implies that the opinions and experiences of my interlocutors may not reflect more general positions of persons with much less contact with EU projects. However, their narratives can offer insights into how those who are actively involved in imagining and defining the development of their localities in the border region experience EU-funded cross-border initiatives.

One of the article's insights involves the peripheral position from which the majority of my interlocutors speak. This center-periphery axis is articulated in terms of distance, neglect, and a problematic relationship with the state. This relationship is underscored in the context of cross-border funding, especially when compared to the role of the Hungarian state cast as a supporter of its border region. The potential of EU funding, compounded by Slovenian state policies, results in the strategic networking of Slovene border actors to comply with funding stipulations as well as collaborations with potential partners across the border. These partnerships and projects are cast primarily in terms of local needs and interests, and the local impact of the projects is considered to be the primary criterion for success – as well as the purported condition for local support of EU projects.

Benefits to the locality and the region are the primary standards according to which my interlocutors evaluated the impact of EU projects as well as the activities of other border actors involved in EU funding. They also operated as the normative frame in terms of which interlocutors talk about the problematic behavior or practices linked to cross-border projects. One of these problems lies in what some interlocutors define as the private or short-term agendas of specific projects. One example of this are discussions concerning institutions who submit project proposals that are an end in themselves, that provide funding for institutions that survive primarily off EU projects:

This project-based financing is very questionable for these institutions in the long run. The problem is ensuring financial stability. Unfortunately, not all the projects that are submitted are meant to have a specific aim or purpose. However, they are meant to ensure the survival of the institutions, to be a source of financing so that the institution can keep working.²⁴

The project-based financing of institutions mentioned above is considered problematic insofar as it goes hand in hand with the submission of projects that do not seem to have an explicit purpose in mind – one that benefits the locality either directly or indirectly. Instead, it can result in projects whose final products create problems instead of solving them because the development of project ideas was not extrapolated long-term into the future or did not account for what projects would require upon completion. This is a concern expressed by a municipal official in the following excerpt:

²⁴ Anonymous interview with a local development agency official, held 13.03.2019.

The problem with tourism projects is that they require management and maintenance after the project is completed. This is the case, for example, with thematic paths, including cross-border ones that form part of international thematic routes. More and more people come to visit, and if these routes are not maintained, then signs disappear, paths are not maintained, visitors get lost among the vineyards... This is a problem with many such routes; they are not maintained but are still being promoted.²⁵

Does the concept of debordering and or Wesley Scott's image of a debordered, networked Europe encompass the dynamics of cooperation and interaction in the border region linked to EU cross-border projects? On the one hand, it is important to position this question within the broader framework of the multiple regimes of mapping and bordering that the European Union enacts, not only through treaties and agreements – as Sara Green pointed out (Green 2013). These practices also extend to the EU's varied cross-border and transnational funding programs, through which it marks the boundaries of transnational regions of cooperation while at the same time encouraging cross-border networking within them. Funding stipulations and bureaucratic procedures limit the range of possible applicants as well as delineate the sorts of partnerships necessary for positive project evaluations (and approval).

At the same time, the creation of cross-border programs results in the establishment of new institutions and networks in the border region. These assume a range of influence on developments both within each country as well as within the cross-border region. For some border analysts, this in itself could be an indicator of debordering understood strictly in terms of an exercise of authority that is usually the sole domain of the state. However, my interlocutors have pointed out is the extent of the role of the state in EU funding programs, including the formal authority it is accorded in specific EU programs, particularly in the spheres of program assessment and management. In addition, their narratives continually demonstrate the extent to which the state is a crucial element of cross-border practice – even at an informal level.

Despite the still central role of the state as one of the principal coordinates in terms of which border actors define their peripheral positioning, border actors have in recent years established a tradition of cross-border cooperative practices within the framework of the EU's programs. Certain legacies of the historically strict border regime during the socialist period still inform the present dynamics of interaction – such as the language barrier – and emphasize border distinctions instead of diminishing them. Differences between neighboring states that become apparent only through interaction sometimes seem to mark boundaries instead of transcending them.

Many of my interlocutors cast their experiences with cross-border projects in terms of fulfilling local needs and interests. However, their participation in a range of EU programs has also provided them with established partnership networks as well as an evolving perception of the cross-border region as an expanded frame in terms of which they can launch and realize

²⁵ Anonymous interview with a local municipal official, held 14.03.2019.

ideas. An analysis of the intricate dynamics of interaction in the borderlands highlights to a great extent the limits of debordering as a concept, which echoes the self-evidence of integration as a uni-directional process that is at the heart of EU discourse and identity (Abélès 2004; van Houtum 2002). Instead, these cross-border programs should be assessed as ongoing social processes, during which participants are continually learning and adapting, evaluating past actions, developing skills, highlighting differences, and forging ties, often in the face of shifting rules and circumstances. In this light, the broader implications of cross-border practices and partnerships for daily life on the border and borderland development are still unfolding.

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ČEZMEJNO SODELOVANJE IN EVROPEIZACIJA SLOVENSKO-MADŽARSKEGA OBMEJNEGA OBMOČJA

V članku so obravnavani načini, kako so procesi integracije v Evropsko unijo (EU) vplivali na razvoj obmejnega območja med Slovenijo in Madžarsko. To je v zadnjem stoletju doživelo velike spremembe, vključno s širokim nizom mejnih režimov. Po padcu železne zaves je dolgoletni proces širitve EU na vzhod med Slovenijo in Madžarsko ustvaril tako rekoč "brezmejno" območje.

Čeprav je članstvo v EU prineslo korenite spremembe mejnih režimov med državama, se pričujoča analiza osredinja predvsem na instrument čezmejnega povezovanja, tj. na projekte, ki jih financira EU. Programi čezmejnega financiranja EU, ki so jim doslej analitično pozornost namenili predvsem geografi in politologi, so tu obravnavani kot sklop mejnih – ali natančneje od-mejnih – praks za spodbujanje projektov, ki presegajo nacionalne meje. Pristop k od-mejevanju (angl. debordering), ki ga avtorica uporablja v tej analizi, se opira na delo Jamesa Wesleyja Scotta, ki je trdil, da »čezmejno sodelovanje na meddržavni, regionalni in lokalni ravni s pomočjo simboličnih predstav evropskega prostora in njegovih perspektiv nadaljnjega razvoja zagotavlja idejne temelje za omreženo Evropo« (Wesley Scott 2012: 89).

Raziskava temelji predvsem na etnografskih intervjujih s sogovorniki z obmejnega območja, predvsem z Goriškega na slovenski strani meje. Z analizo intervjujev avtorica pokaže, kako akterji doživljajo projekte EU, kakšne spremembe (ali njihov primanjkljaj) prinašajo ti projekti, kakšne mreže – predvsem čezmejne – se pri tem oblikujejo in kako ti projekti vplivajo na življenje ob meji. Poleg tega je cilj analize določiti glavne koordinate, v katerih ti akterji razumejo dogajanje in izkušnje ob meji. Pokazalo se je, da v tem kontekstu akterji pripisujejo pomembno vlogo državi, pri čemer njihov odnos do nje temelji na močnem občutku obrobnosti.

S programi EU so akterji ob meji v zadnjih desetletjih ustvarili tradicijo čezmejnega sodelovanja. Vendar se zdi, da razlike med sosednjima državama, ki postanejo očitne le v stikih, včasih meje poudarjajo, namesto da bi jih presegle. Projekte bi bilo treba opredeliti kot stalne družbene procese, v katerih se udeleženci nenehno učijo in prilagajajo, presojajo pretekle ukrepe, razvijajo spretnosti in znanja, poudarjajo razlike in krepijo vezi, pogosto ob spremembi pravil in okoliščin. Če to upoštevamo, se širše posledice čezmejnih praks in partnerstev za življenje na ob meji in razvoj mejnega območja dogajajo nenehno.

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