

Social Dynamics in the Austrian-Slovak Border Region

Summary



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The Austrian Chancellery, Dept. IV/4, commissioned this research study to provide insights into the living situation of people in the region along the Austrian-Slovak border. The study concentrated on questions relating to the subjective and objective changes which have occurred since the opening of the border, the relationship between the neighbouring population groups, and the extent and significance of local and regional cooperation.

Finding answers to these questions implied that the study had to address people in their relevant social contexts, rather than single out individuals as research "objects". This contextual approach was made possible by way of qualitative survey methods, such as interviews based on a semi-standardised guideline, panel discussions and expert interviews.

In the course of the study, the authors visited five Austrian and five Slovak communities in the border region.¹ During these visits, each of which lasted three days, we conducted many interviews with individual community inhabitants, as well as panel discussions with student groups in the local primary and secondary schools. In nine of the ten communities, we organised discussion evenings – with the support of the communities – for which invitations were sent out to all households in the community. All in all, we talked to more than 500 persons. Another 43 interviews were conducted with experts on cross-border cooperation on the local and regional levels (between communities, schools, local associations, etc.). On the regional level, we had talks with experts from the areas of business, regional development, labour market, public security, culture and the environment.

I. Old borders – new bridges?

The general feeling with regard to the changes that have occurred since the opening of the border² may be described as one of "resigned joy" on the Slovak side and a "suspicious wait-and-see" attitude on the Austrian side.

¹ The following Austrian and Slovak communities were included in the study: Hohenau on the river March, Dürnkrot, Angern and Marchegg – all situated in the Austrian province of Lower Austria – and Kittsee in the province Burgenland; the Slovak communities were Moravský Sv. Ján, Gajary, Záhorská Ves, Zohor and Jarovce.

² The border was, of course, not completely closed before 1989; but in most cases, leaving the country was very difficult for Slovak citizens.

What were people's hopes and expectations with regard to the opening of the border?

The first wave of euphoria following the fall of the Iron Curtain was not marked by any specific expectations on the part of the Austrian population – people simply shared in their neighbours' joy over their regained freedom. These were the expectations after the opening of the border (in some cases accompanied by fears on the Austrian side):

- *Good neighbourly relations.* People hoped to be able to re-establish good neighbourly relations, make new friends and to resume and keep up family ties and old friendships.
- *Establishment of border crossing points.* Initially, both sides expressed a pronounced desire that new bridges be built. However, Austrians soon began to voice apprehension with regard to a possible increase in crime, growth of traffic volume, and exodus of purchasing power.

Elderly Austrians (60 and above) are the most vehement supporters of additional border crossing points. Elderly Slovaks tend to take an indifferent attitude, but they emphasise the importance of border crossing points for the younger generation.

- *Economic development.* People on either side of the river March have high hopes for an economic upturn in the border region. Expectations have been that the new geopolitical situation would bring additional investments in infrastructure, attract businesses to the region, and would eliminate the lack of workers which previously existed in some sectors. Around the communities of Kittsee and Marchegg, some respondents also believe that the proximity to Bratislava may in the long run provide an economic stimulus.
- *Improved quality of life.* The possibility for unrestricted travelling is most often cited by Slovaks. Overall, people on both sides of the border hoped that rural exodus would come to a halt and that the re-establishment of new-old neighbourhood relations and the building of bridges would lead to a revival of their communities. Some Austrian respondents said that the opening of the border gave communities a chance to redefine themselves.

What were the effects of the border opening from the perspective of the region's inhabitants?

One out of five Austrian respondents said that the fall of the Iron Curtain did not result in any changes in their personal lives or in their communities. In general, Austrian inhabitants of the border region cited effects mainly in two areas:

- *Public security.* Respondents most often complain about a decrease of public security, claiming that especially property offences have risen dramatically.³ A small number of respondents – exclusively from the communities of Kittsee and Marchegg – also fear that drug-related offences may be on the rise. Illegal border crossings are also mentioned, but only infrequently.

Increased policing of the communities, and in connection with this, a higher number of driver's licence withdrawals, is also mentioned as a consequence of the border opening.

- *Impact on the economy.* In general, more positive effects are noted in this field. While some sectors, such as the catering industry, dentists, hairstylists and others suffer from the shifting of purchasing power to the reform states with their lower price level, others benefit from the open border. Respondents point out that some employers profit from cheap Slovak labour, and that no businesses have left the region's communities. The exodus of purchasing power is not exclusively attributed to the border opening, but also to the emigration of local inhabitants and a growing trend towards shopping trips to the shopping centres of Vienna and Gänserndorf.

A socio-demographic analysis of statements relating to increased crime rates did not show any differences as regards age, education level and gender. Attitudes towards economic effects are closely related to individual experiences. Women take a more positive view of the border police than men, and increased divorce numbers in connection with the border opening are only mentioned by women.

³ Police statistics on the incidence of property offences in the districts of Gänserndorf and Neusiedl am See provide a more differentiated picture, however. According to these figures, property offences had peaked in 1987, and that level was reached again in 1996. In the Neusiedl am See district, the number of property offences was also on the rise prior to 1989; however, the growth rate accelerated after the opening of the border.

Because of the change of Slovakia's political system, people in the Slovak border communities which we studied on the whole saw changes of a more comprehensive nature:

- *New values and standards.* Democracy, freedom of speech and the possibility to shape one's life according to one's own, individual ideas are most often cited as new values. Respondents also frequently mention a new, performance-oriented attitude and changing standards as regards tidiness and order.
- *Socio-political changes.* Social differences are becoming more marked in Slovakia. Respondents point out that there is no longer a right to work – a fact which in their opinion also contributes to more profound socio-economic differences. These social policy changes imply that everyone has a chance to improve his or her position through work, but also that social networks are destroyed.
- *Economic changes.* A majority of Slovak respondents say that their personal economic situation has taken a rather negative turn since the "velvet revolution". Wages are not increasing in step with inflation, and there is growing unemployment. People cite as one positive development that economic structures in the communities have been reanimated. Since 1989, a host of shops and small businesses have been founded in the border communities.

What are contacts between Austrians and Slovaks like?

Contacts have intensified since the opening of the border, but they remain sporadic in areas without border crossing points. Contacts most often exist between relatives, but geographical and social proximity determine if and on what level of intensity contacts are maintained; the same is true for friendships and acquaintances. In Austria, most efforts towards contacts with the Slovak neighbours are made by elderly people (alone or in the context of associations or clubs). Business contacts or professional ties are only infrequently mentioned.

What connects the "new" neighbours, what divides them?

Historical events have shaped connections, but have also been divisive. In the past, close economic ties existed throughout the region, many people had relatives across the border, and numerous bridges spanned the river March. In contrast to these "connecting historical facts", the end of the Second World War brought very divisive events; allegedly, Slovak

soldiers in Russian uniform were involved in plundering raids in Austria. What is surprising is that this historical knowledge is still very present in the minds of old and young people alike. It must also be noted that during the 40 years of existence of the Iron Curtain, both Slovaks and Austrians were consistently told that their neighbours across the border were "the enemy". Another factor that is seen as separating Austrians and Slovaks is the difference in economic wealth between the two groups.

How do the neighbours see each other?

When trying to characterise Slovaks, Austrians often refer to negative experiences which they – or, more often, friends and acquaintances – have made with Slovaks. Even positive experiences do nothing to change the overall negative image. Respondents' characterisations are based mainly on work- and performance-oriented criteria. They sometimes claim that the allegedly missing work ethic of Slovaks leads them to criminal behaviour. Hospitality and sociability are mentioned as positive characteristics of the Slovak neighbours.

No differences along age or gender lines were found in a socio-demographic analysis of these statements. Children in primary school are the only group which attributes nearly exclusively positive characteristics.

In contrast to Austrians, Slovak respondents consistently reject generalisations and a homogenising view of the other group. They say that they have often had positive experiences in contacts with Austrians, and their characterisation of Austrians is correspondingly positive. Many Slovaks see Austria as a model to be emulated with regard to work ethic, careful treatment of buildings, communities and the natural environment, politeness in personal relations, etc. Slovaks living in the border region take a very self-critical view; to some extent, their statements even express a negative drift taken over from their external image. Slovaks criticise Austrians for their aloofness and – infrequently – for arrogance.

Is a common future conceivable for the border region inhabitants?

Slovak respondents say they can imagine a common future only together with "the West". A vast majority is convinced that Slovakia must join the European Union, even though they believe it unlikely in the current political situation. It is stated that the neighbours can

move closer to each other only if the material preconditions for this move are fulfilled – i.e., construction of bridges across the river March.

Austrians also believe that a common future with the Slovaks is possible, but only under certain conditions: Austria's prosperity must be safeguarded, and Slovakia would have to raise its wages and develop democratic structures.

Respondents see opportunities for cooperation mainly in the areas of culture, sports and education, to a restricted extent also in tourism.

II. Cross-border cooperation

In analysing cross-border cooperation, we differentiated between instances of cooperation on the local level and those on the regional level.

Initiative

On the local level, most initiatives for cross-border cooperation were taken by the Slovak side, while on the regional level, both sides have been equally involved in efforts toward such cooperation.

What has happened

On the local level, contacts were quite intensive at the outset, but they have meanwhile dwindled or have been broken off altogether. In most cases, it was the Austrian side that discontinued the contacts. Cooperation on the regional level tends to function on a more continuous basis, but is not very intensive either. There are hardly any instances of institutionalised cross-border cooperation – a fact which Slovak experts deplore. Their efforts in this direction have not been successful so far.

There are three causes for the reduction of local cross-border contacts: firstly, local cooperation is in nearly all cases driven by individuals and their personal commitment; secondly, there is often no tangible/visible immediate success, especially if the aims are very ambitious, and this lack of success eventually leads to frustration; and thirdly, the wish to promote "understanding between the nations" is probably not sufficient as a motivating factor to maintain continuous relationships.

Motivation

International understanding, assistance for the Slovak neighbours and exchange of information are the main motives for cross-border cooperation on the local level, while economic and socio-political considerations are dominant on the regional cooperation level. Slovakia's potential membership in the EU is important for the willingness to cooperate, too. The wish to promote international understanding is of secondary importance.

Cooperation difficulties

On the local level, lack of border crossing points and language barriers are most often mentioned as obstacles for cooperation. Austrian cooperation partners in some cases believe that their Slovak counterparts' expectations with regard to cross-border cooperation are too high, whereas Slovak cooperation partners criticise aloofness and a suspicious attitude on the part of Austrians.

On the regional level, problems that work against cooperation are observed in five areas:

- *Politics.* Respondents most often cite Slovakia's unstable political situation; Austrian politicians' ambivalent position towards Eastern enlargement of the EU and towards the promotion of cross-border cooperation are also frequently mentioned.
- *Administration.* Slovak experts state that cross-border matters are sluggishly processed, that cooperation between ministries is slowed down by bureaucratic red tape – or is altogether missing – and that constant changes in tax laws create an additional difficulty. Long waiting periods at border crossings are also regarded as an obstacle for functioning cross-border cooperation. Slovak experts fear that this situation will further deteriorate as the Schengen agreement is implemented. Another point of criticism is that the necessary bureaucratic processes in connection with EU-supported projects are taking their toll on resources.

Austrian experts cite the long-winded process required for project funding as a major administrative obstacle for cooperation. They also criticise that administrative bodies and communities are not sufficiently willing to cooperate. Furthermore, Slovakia's centralist structures sometimes work against effective cooperation, they say.

- *Resources.* Both sides mention scarcity of funds, lack of time and of language skills and the insufficient number of border crossing points.

- *Content and organisational structure of cooperation projects.* Respondents state that cross-border projects often fail because their objectives are not defined with sufficient clarity. Slovak partners also complain that cooperation is not institutionalised; this is one reason why there are no sufficient internal structures which could secure a smooth functioning of cooperation, they say.
- *Personal relationships.* As is the case on the local level, Slovak experts mention Austrians' lack of trust and their aloofness. Austrian experts for their part criticise what they see as exaggerated expectations of the Slovaks. The result is an overburdening of Austrian partners and disappointment and frustration on the Slovak side.

III. Measures

The most pressing aim is to promote the normalisation of relations between Slovak and Austrian inhabitants of the border region. To this end, two vital preconditions must be fulfilled:

- construction of new communication channels, i.e., bridges and border crossing points, a special lane for Slovaks on access roads to border crossing points, etc.;
- elimination of psychological barriers – borders of the mind – through confidence-building measures.

Confidence-building measures have to include improved communication – an *active search for common traces* could contribute to a promotion of cross-border communication. Shared experiences and differences could be actively researched in the context of school projects, adult education courses, activities of local museums, etc. Potential subjects are: common features in architecture and settlement structures; the eventful history of the bridges over the river March; German loanwords in the Slovak language as spoken in the Záhorie region, and Slovak loanwords used in the Weinviertel region in Austria; working relations then and now, and so on. Another opportunity for bringing the population groups closer to each other would be to carry out *surveys among Slovak and Austrian students* about their likings, interests, wishes and dreams. A public presentation of the "research results" would be essential to make sure that a broad public is addressed.

Schools should continue to offer *Slovak language classes* as an optional subject. Besides building up required know-how for economic cooperation between Austria and its neighbour states, this is also a sign of appreciation towards our neighbours. *Bilingual language classes* (Slovak and German) would be another option to promote cross-border communication.

Improvement of the flow of information is generally an important measure which gains all the more weight in the context of major projects, such as the establishment of new border crossing points. Key factors are the timing, frequency and presentation of information. International and national examples have demonstrated the effectiveness of citizens' participation procedures. Community papers could also be used as forums for discussion. Among other things, a "page for the neighbours" could be set aside in every community paper to promote cross-border communication. This page could be used by neighbouring Slovak communities to present themselves and announce public events.

On the regional and political level, we recommend that the following measures be taken: special programme slots for information on the Austrian and Slovak border region on *regional TV and radio stations*; establishment of a *trilateral centre for information and communication*, including, for example, a database with the dates of local events, groups and activities in the region of Weinviertel-Western Slovakia-Southern Moravia; an "ideas mart" and a "complaints body" for the local population and for project groups pursuing cross-border activities; a higher profile for the *promotion programme for the border region* and support for potential applicants for funds under this programme; *improvement of infrastructure* (border crossing points, road construction, development of additional tourist accommodation facilities, etc.); *support* for the conception and elaboration of projects and for applications for support under the *INTERREG* programme; annual *summit meetings of the mayors* of the region to promote information exchange and cooperation, etc. A major regional exhibition dealing with the Austrian-Slovak border region would also constitute a good opportunity to promote personal and neighbourly relations.

On the political level, a *debate* on the *Assistance for the East* programme ("*Osthilfe*"), its purpose, direction and aims would be useful. A *political debate about Eastern enlargement* of the European Union would be equally helpful, provided that it is not dominated by panic-mongering. At least some thought should be given to a potential *reallocation of*

European Recovery Program funds in order to expand financial support of the reform states without creating additional burdens for the Austrian taxpayer.