

REGIONAL POLICIES AND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION: NEW CHALLENGES AND NEW DEVELOPMENT MODELS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract: The article analyses the emergence of local cross-border institutions in public governance by addressing their context, dimensions and causal underpinnings. First, it provides a brief background on the typology of border areas and border regions in Europe and history of cross-border regions in Europe. Second, it offers a conceptual definition of cross-border regions and co-operation policies in Europe. Third, it analyses the experiences of cross-border co-operation in Central Europe in the case of Slovenia and shown advantages and obstacles of established forms of cross-border co-operation. It concludes stressing the future development perspectives in regional cross-border co-operation.

Key words: Regional policies, EU, Central Europe, cross-border co-operation, cross-border region, Euroregion

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 20th century social and cultural communication has become increasingly complex in Europe, bringing new forms of social organization, not only within individual countries but also between national systems. Most of the interstate and international activities are not guided to modify or adapt border lines to changing geopolitical situation, as was characteristic for the period of nationalism and early modernism, but mainly to their loosening and removing. The European Union, with the elimination of internal economic and political boundaries, made possible that policies of inter-state convergence could finally replace previous policies of inter-state divergence in our continent. Nevertheless, the European space is now facing with new problems presented by relation between regionalization and globalization or, rather, problems related with processes of spatial and social integration and re-integration on a local/regional and inter-national/macro-regional scale.

In fact, European integration or re-integration is no longer following the model that individual European countries have adopted and developed in the past for their internal standardization, which results also in forms of political

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centralization and cultural homogenization. A major challenge of today's European reality is represented by the attempt to give solid bases for social, economic and political integration in conditions of cultural diversity, subsidiarity and multi-level governance. More recently, interest for vertical or functional boundaries increased because the traditional approach to border study, which only considered development and permeability issues of horizontal or political boundaries, is now replaced by new concerns about their social and economic functions, due to the growing decentralization of power and intensified international cooperation and integration. The political divide, traditionally performed by borders, is currently retreating in a large part of Europe, and they are becoming just one of the many other lines, which represent the diversity of cultural landscapes and the complex regional organization of the space in our continent. For this very reason, Europe is now seeking to develop a multi-level governance approach, which is even more necessary for its many border areas (Hooghe, 1996; Marks and Hooghe, 2001).

The idea of Europe as a (re)integrated macro-region could not be implemented without a straight social and economic development of all its areas and regions. This puts the border areas and border regions in a rather new situation, as they are both marginal within individual state systems and cohesive and central in consideration of the EU integration programmes (Blatter, 2003). In contrast to the pre-war period of industrialization, when border regions have been deprived by state centralized policies of development opportunities and forced into marginalization, the current processes of decentralization and integration make possible a reorganization of social relations and the emergence of new development opportunities in the economic field. This also promotes new forms of territorial cohesion, which increases the competitiveness of the European territory. The new development "philosophy" of Europe aiming to eliminate borders as barriers and at the same time trying to boost regional policy instruments for less developed, marginal and border areas, will necessarily improve cross-border cooperation and give new responses to common needs of environmental protection, regional planning, transport and information integration, as well as employment, education and culture (Clement, 2004; O'Dowd, 2003). The elimination of the traditional dividing function of borders may be seen as a threat to classic forms of sovereignty and cultural diversity which would be replaced by a monotonous social space with a common citizenship and thin relationships with territory and place. However, any integration or process of social and spatial convergence necessarily produce other forms of divergence and transformation of other types of relationships, as borders on the one hand help to create and preserve diversity and membership on the other. A possible solution to this dilemma may be represented by the introduction of regions as a viable and intermediate level of governance, as they give opportunities for both territorial identification and functional integration, particularly if they lean on historical and multicultural habits that created overlapping and intertwined cultural, social and functional spaces (Bufon, 2006a).

The article will first discuss a typology of border areas in Europe in the frame of their cross-border cooperation potentials. We will then present the case of Slovenia reviewing the development of its regional policy and institutional cross-border cooperation on the basis of a recently accomplished research project (Bufon, 2008a). The article will finally discuss both strengths and weaknesses of cross-border cooperation which derive from an analysis of past

experiences in Slovenian border areas. These experiences will give a basis for the final discussion about the development opportunities of the EU's cross-border and integration policies in the future.

TYOLOGY OF BORDER AREAS AND BORDER REGIONS IN EUROPE

Being the cradle of modern nationalism and consequently the part of the world where the most numerous political-territorial divisions took place, it is only natural that Europe should also be the continent with the highest "border character degree" and a suitably great need for cross-border cooperation and integration (Hansen, 1983). If we define border areas or areas where the effects of the proximity of a political border are most evident and strong, as a 25 km-wide strip of land extending alongside the borderline, we discover that in Europe, where there are over 10,000 km of borders, border areas measure approximately 500,000 square kilometres in total and are inhabited by more than 50 million people, which equals the demographic and territorial potential of a large European country, such as, for example, France.

In terms of *typology*, border areas and border regions in Europe fall into three basic groups: the *Western European*, the *Central European* and the *Eastern European* (Bufon, 1998). Typical of the Western European group is the presence of "old" borders, which either belong to the antecedent type or developed parallel to the historical regions in this area. In such an environment relatively early forms of institutional cross-border cooperation emerged as early as the sixties and seventies, and in the same period the first cross-border regions or 'Euroregions' were formed as well. Euroregions include individual regions and other administrative units from both sides of the border and endeavour to solve determinate common functional and planning problems, while at the same time encouraging cross-border cooperation on a socio-cultural level too, as people in these border regions are used to leave separate and social contacts are usually underdeveloped. Also characteristic of this type of border region is the existence of individual administrative units of different rank conjoining into an institutional cross-border interest network that could be defined as a "*region of regions.*"

The second typological group of border areas and regions is most characteristic of Central Europe. In this area historical regions often do not match the actual spatial regionalisation in the framework of individual states because numerous subsequent delimitation processes took place - especially following the two world wars in the last century - thus politically dividing the originally functionally integrated historical regions into several units. The persistence of socio-cultural and socio-economic links among the border populations within such historical regions in most cases led to the spontaneous formation of functional cross-border areas. Consequently, these cross-border areas do not fit the administrative spaces, rather match the previously existing historical regions; also, they do not enjoy any institutional support from the local or state authorities, which at times even resent cross-border cooperation because of unresolved issues between the neighbouring states that were caused by the partition processes. Nevertheless, aside from 'official' inter-state cooperation and openness, such types of border region display a remarkably high potential level of social (re)integration, which usually leads to the formation of functional cross-border systems that could be defined as "*regions within regions.*"

The third and last type group is typical of Eastern Europe, where we have to deal with a combination of old and new borders in a space that has been

traditionally less developed and sparsely populated. Most significantly, the communist regime after World War II magnified this originally unfavourable situation in border areas of Eastern Europe by encouraging or causing the emigration of autochthonous populations and hindering the social and economic development of border areas in general, creating a network of 'iron-curtain' border situations along almost closed borders. The areas marked by such characteristics have, due to their own poor socio-economic and demographic potentials, even in new circumstances – with the powerful ideological modification influences eliminated – very limited possibilities of creating more intense forms of cross-border cooperation and (re)integration. Such border areas and the existing, often only nominal, cross-border regions, could therefore be defined as “*regions under reconstruction.*”

CROSS-BORDER REGIONS AND CO-OPERATION POLICIES IN EUROPE

At the moment there are around 55 cross-border regions of the *institutional type* and over 30 cross-border spatial associations of the *informal type* in Europe (Bufon, 2006b). The first forms of cross-border cooperation have emerged in the 1950s of the 20th century. Usually, the so-called Euroregions worked in the first phase on attracting new companies and economic activities to the Euroregion area in order to strengthen their own economic potential, while in the second phase they have been especially active in promoting and extending cross-border social communication, decreasing operational costs in this field and encouraging the cross-border flow of technology. This kind of orientation – very pragmatic and directed towards the planning/functional aspects of cross-border cooperation and integration – is a reference point for various European commissions and especially the Working Community of European Border Regions (with the original abbreviation AGEK [*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Grenzregionen*]). AGEK has to date contributed to the adoption of an important European convention on cross-border cooperation that was signed in Madrid in 1981 (Ratti and Reichman, 1993).

Further development in the creation of Euroregions, which are particularly numerous along the western German border, was accelerated by the reunification of Germany and the establishment of parliamentary democratic socio-political systems in the former communist countries of the Eastern block. Many European initiatives designed to benefit the less developed and peripheral areas of the EU member states were expanded or introduced anew for the border areas in the East as well. One of the programmes to be expanded and transformed within this framework was *Interreg*, which had until 1990 provided financial stimulation for the less developed border areas of Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Greece. The new *Interreg* programme has since dedicated its attention as well to the eastern border areas of the EU member states, such as Germany, Austria and Italy, while its mirror programme *Phare* was later created expressly with the objective of international cooperation and modernisation of Central-Eastern European countries in their accession process to the EU. This foundation has already enabled the formation of new Euroregions between Germany and Poland, and Germany and the Czech Republic, while regional cross-border initiatives in the border areas between Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia, and in those between Italy and Slovenia remain in their early stages (Perkmann and Sum, 2002).

In preparation of the proposals for legislation acts related to the financial perspective 2007-2013, the European Commission has significantly upgraded the present initiative Interreg IIIA and presented the draft Regulation on the establishment of the so-called "European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation" (EGTC). This proposal resulted from the report drawn up by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), which concluded that border regions remain to be faced with major, especially legal and administrative obstacles thwarting effective implementation of Interreg initiatives and other cross-border cooperation programmes (Hattenberger, 2007; Houtum, 2003). With the Regulation on EGTC, the entire area of cooperation in Europe received a single legal basis for all future efforts in this direction, whatever the nature or location of territorial cooperation efforts within the EU. The legal personality of the EGTC should greatly simplify the administrative procedures and contracting, especially in relation consisting of a large number of partners. On the other hand, it also opened up new problems in the construction of the multi-level governance of cross-border initiatives, in particular for what the dualism between the already established Euroregions and the increasingly powerful regional governments, which would like to become the main actors in the creation of the new EGTC 'architecture' and thus the recipients of the EU Interreg funds, is concerned.

EXPERIENCES OF CROSS-BORDER CO-OPERATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE: THE CASE OF SLOVENIA

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 (for a more extensive discussion of these issues see: Bufon, 2008a).

Since the Slovenian constitutional provisions require to establish a more operational and decentralized administrative system, the government set up 58 local administrative units which, on the one hand are engaged in certain activities on behalf of the ministries, on the other control the work of local communities. In consideration of the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 1996 and the growing pressures of the European Commission for the introduction of a more suitable regional system for the implementation of the European regional policy, Slovenia tried to develop some new intermediate administrative units. In terms of drawing European structural and cohesion funds at the level NUTS 2, Slovenia is divided into two informal 'statistical' regions (the Western region including Ljubljana and the Eastern Maribor), whilst in terms of NUTS 3 organization it will probably consist of 8

provinces, but their status and scope of jurisdiction are not yet clearly defined. Also, they will probably have only a limited role for what the EU cohesion policy and international regional cooperation is concerned. Cross-border cooperation in Slovenia developed on the basis of three important elements: (1) the internal legislation on local self-government, (2) regionalism and local development, (3) multilateral and bilateral international agreements and policies of the EU and other bodies. In order to satisfy the needs of their communities, municipalities also foster cooperation with their counterparts abroad and international organisations of local communities. For such relations, where municipalities act as public authorities or government entities, public law is applied. Private law is applicable in other cases. There are, however, cases where the nature of a relationship cannot be clearly determined. For example, the granting of right to specific use of public good is subject to public law, by analogy with the concession granted by a public utility. And moreover: in respect of public utility contractors, the contractual obligation is not established pursuant to the general regulations of the obligation law, but pursuant to special provisions of the *Public Utilities Act* providing for an administrative approach.

Therefore, 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 act 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. Common interest areas and problems that this Euroregion is to take into consideration and solve are quite similar to those tackled by other such institutions, including the Alpe-Adria working community:

- general and financial matters;
- transport and infrastructures;
- tourism;
- cross-border economy and labour market;
- environment and social welfare issues;
- media, culture and mutual familiarity.

In practice, the diversified scope of professional competences inevitably restricts cross-border cooperation to the minimum common denominator, i.e. planning and implementing projects for drawing on the resources from the Interreg Programme. Free selection of the mode of cooperation is also the reason for different conceptions of cooperation (the Protocol, Declaration of Intent, Framework Agreement, Euroregion, etc.). Cross-border cooperation rests on a rather general concept and comprises a vast number of topics: considerable emphasis is placed on the improvement of economic cooperation, spatial planning and harmonisation of transport infrastructures; another important area is tourism, while agricultural, innovation, education and research sectors, as well as health care and social welfare sectors receive considerably less attention.

Our spatial analysis of European programmes for cross-border cooperation in Slovenia revealed significant differences in their implementation in different territorial units. What is more, a case-by-case analysis shows notable differences in the structure of interest fields benefiting from financial assistance in individual border areas. Thus, in Slovenian-Italian and Slovenian-Hungarian border areas, the main part of resources from cross-border cooperation programmes were allocated to environment protection and improvement, as well as tourism development, while in Slovenian-Austrian border areas, the bulk of resources was allocated to provide support for economy and the development of rural areas.

Established forms of cross-border cooperation have so far shown both advantages and obstacles, as listed below:

Advantages of regional cross-border cooperation:

- Partnerships across state borders facilitate contacts between regions, municipalities and institutions, and as such provide a basis for target-oriented communication and cooperation; they help bridge the lack of information on one's neighbours, their communities, mentality and culture, and possible lasting grudges; they also facilitate the identification of development problems in partner regions, thus eliminating prejudice and fears.

- Through activities and projects under cross-border cooperation, communication and mutual awareness extend to an ever broader circle of population; the main beneficiaries of such commitments are national and language minorities.

- Cross-border partnerships stimulate the exchange of experience of competent professional authorities, ensuring a more effective use of instruments under Interreg programmes and especially faster transfer of the know-how in the preparation and implementation of operational programmes at regional and local level.

- Such cooperation can make a significant contribution to solving everyday problems at local and regional level, particularly at the external EU borders.

- Cross-border cooperation is an important factor in enhancing the competitiveness of economy in border areas and mitigating their, often characteristic, peripheral status and marginality.

- Cross-border cooperation concretely enables the harmonisation of development plans for spatial planning, nature protection and other common problems in border areas.

- Cross-border partnerships contribute to greater recognisability of border regions, enabling the latter to be more directly involved in international efforts (for example, in the Committee of the Regions or in other EU and CE bodies) and in this manner represent the interests of local communities.

- The instrument of cross-border cooperation does not only allow horizontal, i.e. spatial integration, but also several vertical forms of cooperation between public administrations of local character, companies and other institutions and civil society organisations.

Weaknesses of cross-border regional development:

- In certain cases partner agreements pursue too-ambitious goals or aim more at increasing the political power of individual administrations vis-à-vis their own central government than at solving concrete problems of cross-border cooperation.

- The set initiatives and forms of cross-border cooperation often lack appropriate broad institutional conditions due to vague and unclear rules concerning competences, which may notably differ from one partner region to another, thereby seriously hindering the consolidation of common initiatives.

- Concluding agreements and joint planning build on considerable expectations related to financial assistance to be granted to them; quite often, these expectations are not fulfilled, leading to undermined motivation for further cooperation and subsequent withdrawal of local political support for envisaged projects.

- Partners in cross-border cooperation are often sought for the sole purpose of meeting certain formal criteria for obtaining appropriations from European funds, lacking genuine interest in cooperation or, in an attempt to meet one's own partial interests, disregarding the true and much broader needs of the border population.

- Personal qualification and organisation of forms of cross-border cooperation is often deficient, while the lacking financial means necessary for the implementation of joint projects remain unstable or only partial, which subsequently leads to competition between the neighbouring local administrations rather than their earnest sustainable cooperation.

CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES IN REGIONAL CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AND THE SLOVENE 'MODEL'

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 (see: 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.

Attitudes for cross-border cooperation in the Slovenian border sectors

Table 1

	SLO/CRO	SLO/I	SLO/A	SLO/H
Index of cross-border expectation	51,2	54,9	52,1	36,2
Index of potential interdependence	62,3	52,9	58,5	55,7
Index of socio-cultural affinity	59,3	41,6	28,6	64,4
Index of functional interdepend	20,3	14,4	14,7	14,0
<i>General index of interdependence</i>	48,3	41,0	38,5	42,6

Source: own research results – Bufon, 2008a

Also in consideration of the complexity of the Slovene border situation, it seems that the future institutional cross-border structures or Euroregions should be – as in other European areas with successful forms of cross-border cooperation – rather small and flexible in order to provide concrete solutions to the needs of individual border areas. Furthermore, it is recommendable to establish as few new, financially and administratively burdensome, structures as possible and, for the sake of a broader macro-regional harmonisation, intensify the use of the already existing institutional structures, such as the *Alpe-Adria*

working community (Langer, 2007). In this framework, small-scale Euroregions emerging in individual border sectors represent the most appropriate form of partnership: on the one hand, they enable the cooperation of local territorial communities and semi-public or private institutions; while on the other hand, they are both territorially determined and flexible enough to truly meet the expectations and needs of the border population.

At the same time coordination should be improved both in planning and implementing projects and incentives related to cross-border and inter-regional cooperation. This especially applies to Slovenia, which, bordering four countries in a relatively small stretch of territory, attracts a significant number of new incentives and associations for cross-border and inter-regional cooperation. Such conditions provide a perfect opportunity to use new instruments of cross-border and inter-regional cooperation developed by the Council of Europe and the European Union (Macrory and Turner, 2003; Nijkamp, 1993). Nevertheless, there is a considerable confusion on the structure, scope and competences of these 'umbrella' regional integration units arising from the fact that the Slovenian territory lies in the area of balancing between different new interest spheres that are currently being launched within broader regional environments, such as the Styrian "*EU Region of the Future*", the Friuli-Venezia Giulia-sponsored "*Villa Manin*" initiative and the "*Adriatic Euroregion*", fostered by the Italian and Croatian regions. In these frameworks, it is necessary to take into account the aforementioned *Alpe-Adria* working community on the one hand, and well-established bilateral advisory bodies, on the other, which might prove most effective in assuming the role of meso- and macro-regional coordinators in the area.

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 (a more in-depth discussion of these aspects could be found in: 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, 2006b). 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.

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