

SLOVENIA AS A EUROPEAN CONTACT AREA

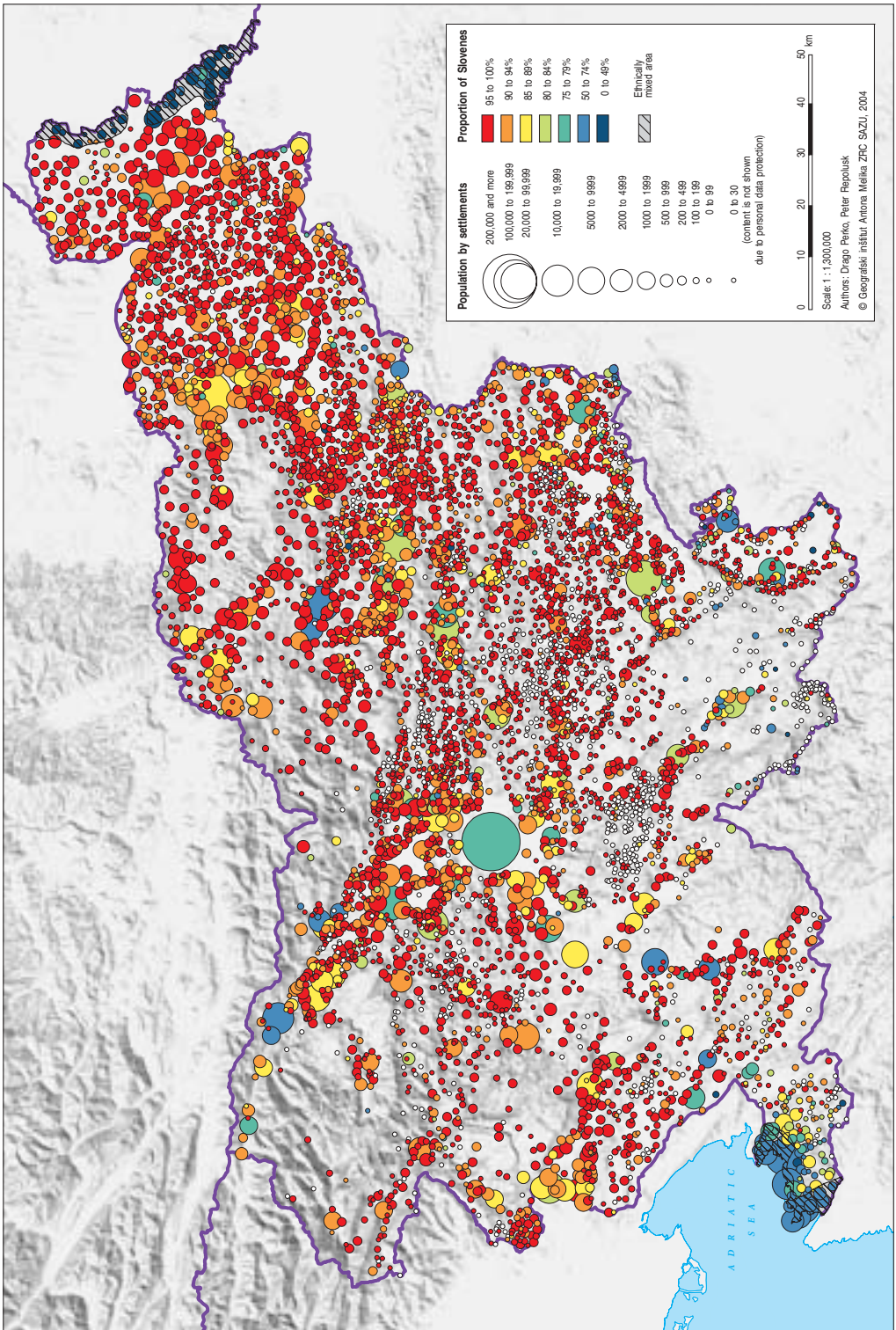
Milan Bufon

Slovenia: Area of Contact or Periphery?

In a wider sense, we could say that in the framework of the natural sphere, four European landscape macroregions meet on the Slovene territory, and at the same time, in the framework of cultural sphere, Slovenia is also the meeting place of four major European language groups: Slavic, Germanic, Romance, and Finno-Ugric. In this view, Slovenia, together with Austria, is the only European country at the contact point of all the listed language groups; however, these groups only actually coexist inside the national territory of Slovenia. This was even more true of past periods when Slovene territory was included in the multi-ethnic Austrian state, which enabled the dynamic flow of various ethnic and language groups within the national territory, particularly in the direction of larger urban centers. In spite of this, the Austrian census for 1910 established that the Slovene population on today's territory of Slovenia comprised over 80% of all the inhabitants of the territory with the remaining proportion more or less equally divided between Germans and other nationalities, among whom Italians and Hungarians were the most numerous. Because these »strong« neighbouring ethnic and language communities, especially the Germans but also Italians and Hungarians, were dominant on the local and even more so on a wider regional level, their influence was evident in the gradual assimilation of nearby Slovene populations to these communities, which was particularly obvious at the »edges« of Slovene ethnic territory or in areas where today a Slovene population is present as a minority outside the borders of Slovenia (according to Slovenia's estimates, more than 80,000 Slovenes live in Italy, more than 40,000 in Austria, and about 5,000 in Hungary – Zupančič 1998).

This procedure of »normalization« or standardization of the structure of the population in the framework of state systems and the subsequent assimilation of minority social groups into the majority pattern, was here, as elsewhere in Europe, most pronounced in the first half of the twentieth century when intensive political-geographical changes and consequential changes to national borders occurred. Here, I would like to point out only that to a certain degree, a similar »normalization« also occurred after World War I and World War II, especially in the territory of the Upper Adriatic (Bufon 1997 and 2002b) but also in the remaining territory of Slovenia (Gosar 1993), when the number of members of the German, Italian, and Hungarian communities fell drastically, first due to emigration of public servants and later of other categories of the population who were in one way or another connected with the aggressor countries. Regardless of the various »backgrounds« and causes of the changing of the ethnic structure in Slovenia after World War I, it also contains the influence of a certain social and geopolitical »reorientation« of Slovene territory toward the south, since it became a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later of the Federative Socialist Yugoslavia.

This »reorientation« did not have immediate consequences from the viewpoint of the ethnic structure of Slovenia, since in 1971 it showed an almost »pure« national image (about 95% of the population was of Slovene nationality). After 1971, the proportion of the Slovene population in Slovenia decreased to about 90% in 1981 and less than 88% in 1991 due to the intensive immigration flow of the labour force from other Yugoslav republics. This is why the numbers of immigrant non-autochthonous groups, which since the independence of Slovenia have only partly assimilated into the Slovene population, today by far exceed the numbers of autochthonous minorities (the latter today total less than 1% of the entire population of Slovenia) and are mostly concentrated in industrial centers where they comprise mostly between 15% and 30% of the urban population, in Jesenice even more than 35%.



◀ *Figure 1: Ethnic structure in 1991.*

In general, the positive migration balance is the only source of demographic increase for the country, which in the last few years has no longer recorded a natural increase in population. In short, as with many other countries of Western and Central Europe, economic migration has played an important role in the process of the industrialization of Slovenia, which in this way gained recognition as a kind of »Yugoslav Switzerland.«

After 1991, a renewed political and social reorientation toward the north and west appeared, because of which the level of communication with Vienna and Brussels today is as it was with Zagreb and Belgrade before independence. The transportation role of Slovene territory has also changed: if the north-west-southeast direction dominated the Slovene traffic »cross« in the past, today, because of the Yugoslav conflict, the southwest-northeast direction dominates strongly. Although Slovenia has an important strategic and traffic position from the international viewpoint (Klemenčič and Genorio 1993), it still remains somewhat on the »edge« of developmental currents because Ljubljana is 300 to 500 kilometers away from the closest European metropolises. The position of geocultural and geopolitical contact and simultaneous peripheralness brings a number of discrepancies. The great majority of Slovenia's economic exchange occurs with countries of the European Union and Slovenia itself soon ranked among the main candidates for the next expansion of the Union, but a recent survey indicated that only a few citizens of the member countries of the European Union know Slovenia well enough to support its entering the Union. But also, many Slovene economists still think it would be better for Slovenia to preserve its status of »developed among the developing« relative to the space of former Yugoslavia rather than to head for the insecurity brought by the status of »developing among the developed« in the framework of the European Union (Bufon 2003).

Slovenia as a Border Area

The border status of Slovenia can easily be understood from the ratio between the amount of national territory (20,256 km²) and total length of its political borders (1,160 km), on the basis of which we can calculate that in Slovenia, every 100 km² has on average 5.7 kilometers of international border. In Europe, only Luxemburg has a higher level of border character (almost 9 kilometers of border per 100 km² of territory). If we take a 25 kilometer wide border zone to define the criteria of establishing the border area and multiply that zone by the length of political borders, we establish according to this criteria that Slovene border areas essentially cover the entire national territory, this ranks Slovenia, together with Switzerland and Belgium, in the category of small border countries where border areas comprise 75% to 100% of the national territory (Bufon 1996). Somewhat more concretely, we can further define the degree of Slovenia's border character by calculating the proportion of Slovene border municipalities that lie not more than 25 kilometers from a national border of all the municipalities in Slovenia. According to this method, some 61% of Slovenia's municipalities can be defined as border municipalities, and if the border zone is limited to only a 10-kilometer distance from the border line, their proportion still totals 50%. The border character of Slovenia is further underlined by the fact that Slovenia's capital Ljubljana is on average only 60 kilometers from the Austrian border, 90 kilometers from the Italian border, and 110 kilometers from the Croatian border, while the Hungarian border, about 220 kilometers away, lies the farthest away.

In congruence with the border character of Slovenia, its cross-border traffic increased from about 140 million passengers in 1992 to 180 million in 2002 (considering only road border crossings). This means that almost half a million people on average travel across Slovene border crossings every day. Of the total cross-border traffic, Slovene citizens make almost 30% or just above 50 million annual cross-

ings, meaning that about 140,000 Slovene citizens or 7% of the entire population of Slovenia cross the Slovene borders daily. This data also gives us a clear picture of the level of the border character of Slovenia, since in accordance with the above data it is possible to calculate that on average every Slovene citizen (including children and older people) visits a foreign country once every fourteen days. Among foreign citizens, according to the data from the Statistical Office of Slovenia, Croatians (about 40 million or 22% of all crossings), Italians (about 38 million or 21% of all crossings), Austrians (about 23 million or 13% of all crossings), and Germans (about 13 million crossings) dominate, followed by Czechs (3 million), Hungarians (2.5 million), Swiss (2 million), and Slovaks and Dutch (about 1 million) while residents of other former Yugoslav republics together total over 2.5 million crossings of Slovenia's borders. This distribution indicates that the structure of cross-border crossings in the territory of Slovenia is a combination of prevailing local, inter-state, and transitional traffic, which is more pronounced in the summer period although Slovenia is the tourist destination of less than a million tourists. The distribution of crossings over Slovene borders according to border sectors is illustrated in Table 1, where the change in the structure of border crossings from 1992 to 2001 is also evident.

Table 1. Changes in the structure of border crossings by border sectors in Slovenia between 1992 and 2001.

	1992		1995		2001	
	passengers in millions	proportion (%)	passengers in millions	proportion (%)	passengers in millions	proportion (%)
SLO/I	51.4	36.0	74.5	41.3	64.9	36.3
SLO/A ¹	39.4	27.6	50.7	28.1	48.6	27.1
SLO/H ¹	1.9	1.3	4.8	2.7	4.1	2.3
SLO/CRO	50.2	35.1	50.3	27.9	61.3	34.3
Total	142.9	100.0	180.3	100.0	178.9	100.0

Source¹: Statistical Office of Slovenia.

In general, in trends of border traffic by border sectors, we observe an intensive increase of crossings over the Slovene-Italian border until 1995 and then a decrease or stabilization to about 65 million crossings, which is undoubtedly the result of introducing special gasoline cards for the residents of

Table 2. Some basic characteristics of Slovene border sections.

	1	2	3	4	5
SLO/I	17.4	35.0	38.5	17.3	38.0
SLO/A ¹	27.9	24.0	26.3	7.4	27.6
SLO/H ¹	7.6	6.0	6.6	6.8	2.2
SLO/CRO	47.1	26.0	28.6	4.8	32.2
Total	100.0	91	100.0	7.8	100.0

1 – Proportion of total length of Slovenia's land border;

2 – Number of road border crossings, where the extent of cross-border traffic is recorded;

3 – Proportion of border crossings or border buildings

4 – Average number of border crossings per 100 kilometers of border;

5 – Proportion of total cross-border traffic (average for 1992–1998 period).

Source¹: Processing of data from the Statistical Office of Slovenia

Friuli-Venezia Giulia that allowed gasoline to be purchased at the considerably lower »Slovene« price in the Italian border zone. Traffic over Slovene-Austrian border crossings also increased between 1992 and 1995 and then stabilized at about 50 million crossings annually. The largest relative increase in cross-border movement was recorded on the Slovene-Hungarian border, which had been almost hermetically sealed until the early 1990's. Between 1992 and 1995, border traffic increased here by some 150% and then stabilized at about 4 million crossings annually. A major oscillation on the annual level is recorded for cross-border movements on the Slovene-Croatian border, which reached a maximum in 1994 with 66 million crossings, almost a third more than in 1992, decreased greatly in the following year, and then began to rise again in the last few years.

It is clear from Table 2 that relative to the length of the border, the mean cross-border traffic is of above-average intensity on the Slovene-Italian border, which comprises only 17% of the total border length but records some 38% of all border traffic, in proportion with the length of the Slovene-Austrian border, and below average for the borders with Croatia and Hungary. Of all the borders, the Slovene-Italian border is the most accessible or furnished with border crossings, since almost 40% of all Slovenia's border crossings are in this border sector, on average more than seventeen border crossings per 100 kilometers of border. This figure is even higher in the southern part of the Slovene-Italian border where the density of border infrastructure rises to twenty-five border crossings per 100 kilometers of border or one border crossing every four kilometers, while the general Slovene average totals less than eight crossings per 100 kilometers of border. Only the Slovene-Austrian and Slovene-Hungarian border sections with about 7 border crossings per 100 kilometers of border approach this average, while the Slovene-Croatian border section remains below-average »equipped« with border infrastructure with less than five border crossings per 100 kilometers of border.

We should draw attention to the fact that two European traffic corridors cross Slovenia: Corridor 5 on the Milan–Trieste–Ljubljana–Budapest route and Corridor 10 on the Nürnberg–Graz–Maribor–Zagreb route. The transit importance of Slovenia relative to linking Europe's west and north with its south and east will undoubtedly be further reinforced in future with the construction of a suitable road and rail network, and at the same time, the possibilities for the integration of border regions, which are now entirely included in the Interreg programs, will increase as well.

Conclusion: Slovenia as Europe's »Integration Laboratory«

Cross-border integration depends on a number of factors, including wider geopolitical conditions and the diverse history of individual border sectors, inter-state political and economic relations, border accessibility, the degree of social and cultural affinity, regional conditions, and the dynamics of socio-economic development in border regions (Klemenčič and Bufon 1994). In the case of Slovenia, previous research shows that a combination of international factors such as an increase of business exchanges, tourist streams, and transit traffic and regional factors that are primarily related to the flow of people, goods, and communications in the framework of border regions leads to the more comprehensive development not only of individual traffic corridors or border centers but also of the wider border area. In this way, different border areas along Slovenia's borders have already developed into true border regions, even though, in contrast to other Euro-regions, they are still not based on institutional but rather on spontaneous forms of cross-border links, which also occupy a smaller territorial area (Bufon 1998). The considerable influence of local factors is therefore characteristic of them, originating more from common territorial bonds than in the international political and economic demands of any given moment. Here, we observe the seemingly paradoxical fact that those border areas which have experienced the greatest problems relative to the splitting of previously unified administrative, cultural, and functional space in the recent past also have the greatest possibilities for developing into border regions.

In this sense, border areas and the cross-border relations developing in them have great significance not only in the field of social and economic integration at the inter-state and inter-regional levels but also in the preservation of cultural characteristics and the strengthening of inter-ethnic coexistence and links. In border areas, all this opens up a series of new aspects that are becoming increasingly important in the process of European integration, the abolition of the traditional functions of political borders, and the greater appreciation of mutual understanding in the culturally very diverse European space. After Slovenia joins the European Union, along with planning the social and spatial development of border areas, it will be necessary to think more thoroughly about Slovenia's new role as a border country between the European Union and the Balkans from the viewpoint of its political and economic geopolitical integration and its effects on internal regional development. In short, it appears that Slovenia, considering its size and its properties as a European contact territory, might be a very suitable and handy »laboratory« for studying integration processes in conditions of preserving cultural diversity as well as for its spatial and social influences on the »new« and »old« border areas of Central Europe.

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