

The Slovenian-Hungarian Border: A Historical Outline¹

Received: April 16, 2020 • Accepted: June 23, 2020

Katalin Munda Hirnök – Ingrid Slavec Gradišnik

Institute for Ethnic Studies, Ljubljana – ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Ljubljana

Abstract: The article presents the facts relating to a century of shifting borders along the frontier between today's Slovenia and Hungary. As borders primarily symbolize the physical strength of the state, they are an essential subject for people living in borderlands anywhere in the world. Following the Great War, the 1919 delineation of borders in what had for centuries been a stable area (Slovenian March) caused upheaval not only for political actors but also for those persons who suddenly found themselves living in separate states. Later in 1948, the border became part of the Iron Curtain, which completely paralyzed communications in the Yugoslavian (Slovenian)-Hungarian cross-border region and branded it with a highly specific historical and social dynamic. The turn of the 1980s to the 1990s was marked by the fall of the Iron Curtain between the East-European (communist) and Western (capitalist) worlds. After 2004 and 2007, when the Slovenian and Hungarian states became first members of the European Union and then the Schengen area, it seemed that the border would fade away.

Keywords: border, borderland, Slovenia, Hungary, Prekmurje, Rába Valley, Slovenians in Hungary

Guard towers and barbed wire may be extreme examples of the markers of sovereignty which inscribe the territorial limits of states, but they are neither uncommon nor in danger of disappearing from the world scene.

(DONNAN – WILSON 1999:1)

¹ The article is a revised version of the first part of a more comprehensive text (MUNDA HIRNÖK – SLAVEC GRADIŠNIK 2019). It is part of broader research on the historical-ethnographic study in the area of the nature parks at the Slovenian-Hungarian border—the Goričko Nature Park and the Órség National Park. It was conducted within the framework of the research project *Protected Areas along the Slovenian-Hungarian Border: Challenges of Cooperation and Sustainable Development* (J6-4620, ARRS, 2017–2020); see more: FIKFAK – MÉSZÁROS 2019; TRADITIONES 2019. It also draws on materials collected in the field and from written sources during the project *Mobility, Integration and Adaptation along the Hungarian-Slovenian Border*, supported in the years 2013–2015 by the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Ljubljana and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest (part of the findings are published in MUNDA HIRNÖK – MEDVEŠEK 2016).

The Slovenian-Hungarian border, drawn onto the political map in the wake of the First World War and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was officially confirmed by the Treaty of Trianon on 4 June 1920. The delineation of that border as a dividing line, which cuts across what had for centuries been a community of people in a historically, ethnically, linguistically and culturally mixed, yet interconnected space, was followed by several groundbreaking milestones: the Second World War and its end, the year 1948, the break in the 1980s and 1990s marked by the fall of the “Iron Curtain” between the East-European (communist) and Western (capitalist) worlds, and the years 2004 and 2007, when the Slovenian and Hungarian states both first became members of the European Union, and then the Schengen Area. With this last “change”, the border seemed to dissolve into one of “no-borders” in the contemporary European Union.

Today, this border not only separates the two countries but also the nature parks which have, alongside the Raab Nature Park on the Austrian side, since 2006 been connected into the Trilateral Raab–Őrség–Goričko Nature Park.² The institution of the park with its outer boundaries also delineates the scope of the broader border area. The protected area is important for being one of the instruments tasked with the mission of not only protecting the ecological habitat and landscape, but also reviving the peripheries of both countries through the measures of European regional policy and sustainable development as well as strengthening cross-border cooperation based on existing connections traditionally characteristic of this borderland (see JUST et al. 2008; WILSON 2012; BAJUK SENČAR 2019; FIKFAK – MÉSZÁROS 2019).

Last year, the 100th anniversary of the annexation of Prekmurje (the Mura River region) to its ethnic homeland in Slovenia held a celebratory note for the Slovenian state, yet a solemn and commemorative one for the Hungarian side. From the Slovenian ethno-national perspective, this border “redressed” the “thousand-year destiny of the Slovenian people”, who had “long lived separate from their mother nation Slovenia” (VRATUŠA 2008a:19), whereas Hungary then lost some two thirds of the former Hungarian territory in the collapsed Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, along with over three million of its ethnically diverse citizens. In the context of national and political perspectives on the new Trianon border — separating the area that had been historically known as the Slovenian March (NOVAK ed. 1935a) into Prekmurje³ in today’s north-eastern Slovenia as well as Zala and Vas counties in Hungary — it is also significant that nine Slovenian villages from the area of the Rába Valley (Sln. Porabje, Hun. Rába-vidék) were included in the Hungarian state and eight were left in Austria, whereas an area with a majority Hungarian population in the surroundings of Lendava (Hung. Lendva) was incorporated in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (since 1929 The Kingdom of Yugoslavia).

The issue is not only that the new nation-state border did not match the ethnic Slovenian-Hungarian boundaries, but the intervention also provoked “considerable chaos” in the hitherto ethnically and religiously mixed area, reconfiguring the “multi-and-inter cultural tradition of this space” and establishing new practices of differentiation (LUTHAR 2008:34), inciting new, different identifications (KOSI 2018) that perpetuated people’s

² More on this: <https://www.park-goricko.info/go/1149/Partnerstvo-Tridezelnega-parka-Goricko-Raab-rs-g>

³ Today’s Prekmurje was the westernmost part of Transleithania or the Hungarian part of the monarchy, bordering on the crownland of Styria.

insecurity concerning their belonging (SLAVIČ 1935). In addition to the demographic, economic and social changes arising from the materialization of the border as a political-legal act, the national dividing line intervened into the cultural landscape of relatively congenial geographical and ecological conditions, forcefully reshaping that landscape through the politics of the fringe areas and varying changes in the border regime (BALÁZS et al. 2012, cit. in ISPÁN et al. 2018:476; cf. KOZOROG 2019). In this case, the border as “the point or line of separation between distinct entities, separating one category from another”, did not institutionalize present differences, but instead imposed “the difference where none existed previously” (see NEWMAN 2011). On the other hand, the separated parts — those of Prekmurje and the Rába Valley — were now forced to orient themselves anew: towards their respective Slovenian or Hungarian milieus.

Thus, Slovenia also had to integrate Prekmurje as “its own” region (VRŠIČ 2004).⁴ The administrative border — and also the border of both the new states with Austria⁵ — has ever since remained unchanged, though over the course of the century several border regimes have been put into effect, consequently reshaping the organization of the life of border inhabitants. The strictest regime, and the one most decidedly affecting daily interactions and the cross-border flow of persons and goods, was established in the years 1948–1949, characterized externally by barbed wire, sections of cleared-out land and even landmines and guard towers in some places.

An exhaustive historical overview of the definition and shifting of borders throughout the past century in the region of today’s protected nature parks is not a specific aim of this paper. Regarding the latter subject matter, which has been treated thoroughly from multi-disciplinary perspectives in the past, we have rather extracted the core historical breaks and their impact to emplace the issue of the border’s temporalities. In the following presentation, we acknowledge the political-legal aspects of the formation of the borders between today’s Slovenian, Hungarian and Austrian states. Since state borders are primarily “recognizable and concrete manifestations of government and politics” (WILSON – DONNAN 1998:2), they are “political constructs, imagined projections of territorial power” (BAUD – VAN SCHENDEL 1997:211). Even though they are drawn with precision, they above all reflect the conceptions of the politicians, lawmakers and intelligentsia, often resulting in unintended consequences.

“No matter how clearly borders are drawn on official maps, how many customs officials are appointed, or how many watchtowers are built, people will ignore borders whenever it suits them. In doing so, they challenge the political status quo of which borders are the ultimate symbol. People also take advantage of borders in ways that are not intended or anticipated by their creators. Revolutionaries hide behind them, seeking the protection of another sovereignty; local inhabitants cross them whenever services or products are cheaper or more attractive on the

⁴ It is a recurring comment that the Slovenians came to understand ‘where and what Prekmurje was’ only a century ago. It is reflected, for example, in research on folk songs: with few exceptions, (central) Slovenian folk collections have not included materials from Prekmurje (KLOBČAR 2014).

⁵ The Saint Germain Peace Treaty (10 September 1919) set the foundations of the border between the Kingdom of SCS and Austria. Under the leadership of General Maister, the Slovenian part of Styria remained in Slovenia; some Slovenian population was left in Austria in the region of Radgona/Radkesburg. The setting of borders across Carinthia ultimately acknowledged the results of the Carinthian plebiscite (10 October 1920).

other side; and traders are quick to take advantage of price and tax differentials. Because of such unintended and often subversive consequences, border regions have their own social dynamics and historical development.” (BAUD – VAN SCHENDEL 1997:211–212)

BEFORE THE TRIANON BORDER: “ONE SPACE FOR A THOUSAND YEARS”⁶

The Slovenian March (Sln. *Szlovenszka krajina*, *Szlovén krajina*, *Slovenska okroglina*; Hun. *Vendvidék*) was up until the end of the First World War the designation of the territory now divided into Prekmurje in Slovenia and the Rába Valley in Hungary.

“During the second half of the 19th century already, Slovenian nationalists from Styria coined a specific, if still unofficial term for that part of the imagined Slovenian national space—Prekmurje (literally ‘the land on the other side of the Mura River’)—denoting the area’s connectedness to the ‘Slovenian’ regions of Styria along the Mura River, between Radgona/Radkersburg and Ljutomer/Littenberg.” (KOSI 2018:88)

In the post-separation time, Slovenians in the area of Szentgotthárd/Monošter were mentioned as the “Rába” Slovenians (Hun. *rábai szlovének*) in the Slovenian press; this term appears also in the monograph *Slovensko Porabje/Szlovénvidék* (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:89). The Slovenian designation *Porabski Slovenci* (“Porabje”/Rába Valley Slovenians, Hun. *Rába-vidéki szlovének*) and the designation *Porabje* (the Rába Valley, Hun. *Rába-vidék*) emerged following the Second World War. Maučec and Novak (1945:6) likewise named these people “Rába Slovenians”; in 1932, Jožef Klekl sr. published a short article titled *Rába Slovenians*,⁷ whereas Fran Ivanocy had previously advocated for the use of the name “szlovén” (NOVAK ed. 1988:9). The people of Rába Valley in general perceived Prekmurje as “Slavic” (Sln. *Slavsko*) (RAVNIK 1999:333). The Hungarian press has inaccurately named the Slovenian Rába Region “Vendvidék”, a term that had once encompassed the complete Prekmurje area, and its inhabitants, the “Vends/Vendslovenes”. To note, a special decree of the Vas County council dismissed the term “Vend” in 1981, recommending instead the official term “Slovenian”, in Hungarian “szlovén”. “The Rába Valley Slovenians refer to themselves as ‘Slovênge, Slovênje’, ‘gê djâ se Slóven, Slovênc’” (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:7).

Since the 10th century, this area had been an ethnically heterogeneous region in the easternmost part of the Kingdom of Hungary, and since the second half of the 19th century a Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Administratively, it was divided into the Zala County (Hun. *Zala megye*) and the Vas County (Hun. *Vas megye*), and three districts with centers in Lower Lendava, Murska Sobota, and Szentgotthárd. Until the end of the 18th century, it belonged under two dioceses, namely upper Prekmurje, with the Rába Valley as part of Vas County under the Diocese of Győr, and lower Prekmurje as part of Zala County, following the establishment of the Zagreb Diocese, to the latter.

⁶ This is how the long period up until the end of the Great War was described by one of our interviewees.

⁷ *Novine* 19 (17), 24. 4. 1932:1.

After the great ecclesiastical administrative reorganization of 1777, the entire area of Prekmurje fell under the Diocese of Szombathely (ZELKO 1996:97–104; SEDAR 2014).

For the first decades of the 19th century, Jožef Košič states that “the area, which stretches 15 miles wide, from Lower Lendava in the east, the Mura River in the south, Radgona in the west, where it borders with Lower Styria and the Rába River in the north” houses 40,800 Slovenians, which the Hungarians call ‘*Vandalus* — though falsely, as the more accurate title would be *Vendus-Tótok*’—, and the landscape *Tótság* (Košič 1992 [1824]:17, 18). In addition, he provided a detailed account of the other areas where these people lived mixed with the majority Hungarian population (cf. KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:4).

The Hungarian census of 1890 (and also 1900 and 1910) demonstrates that the settlements that are today part of Prekmurje were then populated predominantly with Slovenian–Wendish⁸ people, followed by Hungarians and others, mostly Germans. Notable in this is the fact that carriers of non-agricultural professions (officials, doctors, barristers, bankers, merchants, businessmen) were generally Hungarians or Jews, while educated Slovenians were predominantly teachers or clergymen (FUJS 2008:24–25). By faith, most of the inhabitants were Catholic, some third were Lutheran, and the rest were Jewish or Calvinist (FUJS 2019:10). The ethnic composition of the places in today’s Rába Valley was similar to that of Prekmurje.

In relation to the multi-ethnic character of the region, it could generally be stated that up until “the implementation of dualism, the issue of non-Hungarian nationalities was not a particularly troublesome one” (KOZAR 2017:17). Even though the Slovenians in the region were separated from other ethnic Slovenians, they have since Protestantism onward managed to elevate their “Old Slovenian language” to the literary standard (NOVAK 1935, 1976). The School Act of 1868 likewise foresaw the usage of languages of other nationalities as well, though it was in time “precisely the schools that became the epicenters of ‘Hungarization’” (KOZAR 2017:17). Additionally, Hungarians founded the Hungarian Educational Society for Prekmurje, which set out to establish Hungarian libraries, schools and kindergartens, and to spread the written Hungarian word. In the late 19th century, local toponyms were “Hungarianized” (KOŠTRIC 2011:33). The persistence of language consciousness, understood as the foundation of ethnic belonging, was nevertheless reinforced by the clergy, among others, and also through the publication of periodicals in the vernacular of Prekmurje.

Economic conditions in the area were not particularly advantageous. In mountainous Goričko, the fields yielded poorly, and people obtained some income from winegrowing and fruit growing. Farmers were unable to meet the steep taxes and socage tributes, and so lands in these parts were already being leased in the 18th century, whereas the local population in times of harvest and threshing pursued seasonal work in other parishes. During the second half of the 19th century, when overall economic conditions were on the upswing across the land, the poorly developed remote areas were still lagging behind (FUJS 2008:24).

⁸ Hungarian censuses used various criteria for the establishment of the population and the structure of the minorities and ethnic groups. From 1880 onward, the census asked people about their mother language. For the inhabitants of the Slovenian March, the stated censuses listed the Wendish language or “other” with the notation “Wendish.”

Characteristic of the social structure of the population in the late 19th and early 20th century was that many were small or cottage farmers. Ethnological records show that the economy of Vas County held on average 3–6 hectares of land per household (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:54). Relative poverty forced people to seek income elsewhere. Data for the mountainous parts of Goričko attests that some inhabitants pursued seasonal work in the inlands of Hungary, in Slavonia and Vojvodina; others sought work in Belgian, French and German mines or factories. Many people emigrated to Canada and South America, some to Australia (VRATUŠA 2008b:5). From Vas County, some 25,000 inhabitants left for trans-Atlantic countries between 1899 and 1913, most of them from the Szentgotthárd district (6,000 persons), which also included nine Slovenian villages in the Rába Valley (KOZAR-MUKIČ 2003:211; FUJS 2008:24). To note, the Szentgotthárd area was undergoing gradual economic development, closely connected to the construction of the railway to Graz (1872), and the locale quickly developed links with the better-developed lands of Styria and with the Small Hungarian Plain. These connections positively influenced the economic and, consequently, the social development of Szentgotthárd. One after another, industrial facilities and factories were being opened (for more on the industrial development see: KISS 1981:241–249). Still, data reveals that in the late 19th and early 20th century, industry employed chiefly the inhabitants of the Rábatótfalu/Slovenska ves settlement (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:45). Many of the region's people were rather expatriates, and it has been reported that “nearly every household then had a relative in the United States.” People chain-migrated overseas, frequently marrying other expats from nearby home villages. Some eventually came back to settle on this or that side of the Trianon border (RAVNIK 1999:333). This is another reason why relatives might find themselves in separate countries. The First World War put a stop to trans-oceanic migration, which again picked up after 1920 in spite of limitations on immigration by the American congress in 1921; those who already had relatives in America made hasty use of their advantageous legal status.

AFTER THE TREATY OF TRIANON

Inhabitants in the area of today's Prekmurje and Rába Valley shared a common fate under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy up until the end of the First World War. According to the peace treaty, signed on 4 July 1920 in the palace Grand Trianon in Versailles near Paris, nine Slovenian settlements with mostly Slovenian populations in the vicinity of Szentgotthárd were left in Hungary. According to the 1920 census, 4,988 people lived in the villages Alsószölnök/Dolnji Senik, Felsőszölnök/Gornji Senik, Apátistvánfalva/Števanovci, Börgölin, Balázsfalu, Ujbalázsfalu/Otkovci (from 1937 under Števanovci), Szakonyfalva/Sakalovci, Orfalva/Andovci, Permise/Verica, Ritkaháza/Ritkarovci, and Rábatótfalu/Slovenska ves, while those identifying with the “Wendish” (Slovenian) mother tongue numbered 4,166 (Az 1920. évi népszámlálás 1923). Other settlements of the Slovenian March were annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians. Eight villages — Mogensdorf/Modinci, Unterfrauenhaid/Svetica, Jennersdorf/Ženavci, Neumarkt an der Raab/Stankovci, Sankt Martin an der Raab/Sveti Martin, Dobra/Dobra, Gritsch/Grič and Welten/Velika —, which historically were also majority Slovenian, were granted to Austria (MAUČEC – NOVAK 1945:11).

The Trianon Peace Treaty between the Entente and Hungary specified the border line; the division was based on the principle of the water divide between the rivers Rába and Mura in Upper Goričko. It is known that a decisive part in the delineation of the Trianon border was played by the United States of America. The geographer Douglas W. Johnson, a professor at the University of Columbia, was the leader of the US delegation for border demarcation issues and was active in several commissions at the Paris Peace Conference towards the solution of border issues between Austria, Hungary, Italy and the Kingdom of SCS (ŽIVOJNOVIĆ 2017:220). General Johnson acted in the territorial interest of the Kingdom of SCS and was not preoccupied with national issues. As a consequence, the area around Lendava, with a majority Hungarian population, was annexed to the Kingdom of SCS, but not Szentgotthárd with its Rába Valley-Prekmurje surroundings (JOSIPOVIČ 2016:23). The aspiration of the Slovenians in the region of Szentgotthárd to be joined with the Kingdom of SCS was not fulfilled, despite the efforts of the Yugoslav delegation (Matija Slavič in particular) at the Paris Peace Conference. As a result, the unity of the Slovenian March was shattered, and a separate economic, political and national development between the areas of Prekmurje and the Rába Valley set underway.

The new demarcation line created ethnic minorities on both sides of the border—a Hungarian one in Prekmurje and a Slovenian one in the Rába Valley, where they had previously held the status of a majority population. Data from the census of 1921 indicates that 74,383 Slovenians and 14,064 Hungarians populated the area of Prekmurje. The latter were densely concentrated in the far eastern part of Prekmurje, in the Lower Lendava district, and the border area of Goričko in the Murska Sobota district. Though the Treaty of Trianon did ensure some degree of protection to the Hungarian inhabitants of Prekmurje and the Slovenian inhabitants of the Rába Valley through certain specific provisions,⁹ their situation gradually worsened as time went by, especially in economic, cultural and linguistic terms.

Prekmurje between the Two World Wars

Following unification with their ethnic motherland of Slovenia, a new era began for the Slovenians of Prekmurje. For some time after the war, political and economic life were still under significant Hungarian influence (FUJS 1992). The new authorities were opposed by the ethnic Hungarian population along the eastern border and in the town Lendava as well as a considerable segment of the gentry, officials and protestant priests.¹⁰ The sentiment had several reasons, arising mostly from the fact their previously dominant position had been jeopardized in all aspects of life. New economic problems were emerging (general shortages, price hikes, the end of seasonal employment in inland Hungary), there was no

⁹ Chapter VI (Articles 54–60) of the Trianon Peace Treaty addressed the protection of minorities.

¹⁰ Even after 1919, these are said to have perpetuated the stance that the people between the rivers Mura and Rába were “Wends, Wendslovenes” with no desire to unite with “central Slovenians” (VRBNJAK 2007:105).

railway connection with central Slovenia,¹¹ new administration brought new procedures and customs, new officials, new teachers; these used and enforced the Slovenian literary language, which competed with the Prekmurje vernacular and was understood poorly by the locals, whose previous familial, trade and intellectual relations were largely limited to Styria (KOŠTRIC 2011:30–31).

Demographic changes were also characteristic of the inter-war period: Prekmurje was being systematically populated by littoral Slovenians and Istrians, which incited friction and resistance in the local population (KOVÁCS 2013:187–190; LOKAR 2014). Similarly to the Slovenian minority in Hungary, the Hungarians in Prekmurje were in many respects second-class citizens: “Their numbers fell considerably both because they were subjected to the ‘statistical assimilation’ and because they were excluded from the land reform, which encouraged many to emigrate” (KOSI 2018:100; for more see KOVÁCS 2006, 2007).

Industry was developing very slowly in these areas and was practically non-existent prior to the Second World War (ŠARF 1988:88–89; LORENČIČ 2018:68). Due to inconsistent implementation, agrarian reform failed to fully meet the expectations of the rural population in Prekmurje (KOVÁCS 2007).

Though the new border took into account cadastral boundaries, it did not take into consideration land plots, especially forests, which were owned by various landholders on both sides of the border (KOZAR 2017:24). Due to the shortage of employment, many continued travelling to Slavonia and Vojvodina for seasonal work, whereas significant numbers of inhabitants emigrated to the United States, intending to return, but then remaining permanently. During the 1930s, the wave of emigration shifted to France, to which 17,000 people emigrated from Prekmurje between 1929 and 1937 (KOZAR 2017:32). Seasonal work and its underlying causes also left deep traces in the literary creativity of those and later times (JUST 2003; AVSENIK NABERGOJ 2014), which transposed lived reality into literary interpretations.

Another factor contributing to a situation where the share of the population employed abroad exceeded the number of those employed at home was underdeveloped transport infrastructure. The railway connection with Hungary across Hodoš/Hodos was discontinued, whereas other formerly favorable transit channels that might facilitate economic development “crossed political and state borders and thus suffered interruptions,” which brought negative consequences not only to Prekmurje, but also to Burgenland, the Rába Valley and Órség (FUJS 2008:26).

The unification of Prekmurje with its ethnic motherland lasted for 22 years; at the outset of the Second World War and the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia¹² in 1941, Hungary once again occupied its territory. The Hungarian army took control of Prekmurje on 16 April 1941, when it was handed power by the Germans ten days after their successful invasion (FUJS 1991:65). Up to the end of the war, Prekmurje thus once again lived under Hungary, with the Trianon border nullified. Administratively, the land was again divided the same way it had been managed in the time of the Dual Monarchy.

¹¹ The cancellation of the railway connection Murska Sobota–Körmend and Lendava–Zalaegerszeg (the center of Zala County, 45 km east of Hodoš) cut off the area from the rest of the world.

¹² The Independent State of Croatia was established on 10 April 1941, effectively cutting off Slovenia from Yugoslavia.

In early April 1945, the Soviet Red Army occupied Prekmurje. The Slovenian National Liberation Council (SNOS) delegation had already arrived to the region on 8 April and began to take over local governance (PEROVŠEK 2016:421–425). The delegation completed its work at the turn of May 1945, assisting in the annexation of Prekmurje and thus its ethnic Slovenian people to the Democratic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Paris Peace Conference following the war did not enforce modifications to the Trianon borders of Hungary, and Prekmurje remained in the new Yugoslavian state, and consequently in contemporary Slovenia.

The Slovenian Rába Valley between the Two Wars

The new situation following enforcement of the Trianon borders brought a restructuring of Hungarian civic administration. After 1920, among the 80 villages that had comprised what had been the Szentgotthárd district, 37 were left within the framework of Hungary (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:15). Three that had belonged under the Murska Sobota district prior to the peace treaty were annexed (Magyarszombatfa, Gödörháza, Velemér). Due to the annexation of certain villages to the Kingdom of SCS and to Austria, notary offices etc. were also transformed (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:15).

Changes in church organization interrupted or shook up the established religious life of the border inhabitants. The Felsőszölnök parish lost three branches (Markovci, Trdkova and Čepinci) while gaining Ritkaháza, which had prior to 1920 belonged to the Veliki Dolenci parish (KOZAR-MUKIČ 1984:16–17). The reorganization affected devotees on both sides of the border: those from the Goričko region (Trdkova, Martinje) who had previously belonged to the Felsőszölnök parish were allocated to the new parish in Gornji Petrovci after 1920. The new border also separated four villages of the Hetés¹³ region from the Dobrovnik/Dobronak presbytery (Bödeháza, Gáborjánháza, Szijártóháza and Zalaszombatfa), which remained in Hungary (GÖNCZ 2000:61).

The implementation of the Trianon border affected the socio-economic situation of all inhabitants of the Rába Valley at large. The border impeded, if not outright disabled, the long-standing connections to Prekmurje trade centers. In terms of economy and transportation infrastructure, the Rába Valley was traditionally more open to the south and west than to the north and east (MAUČEC – NOVAK 1945:8). Szentgotthárd was the seat of the district and its administrative center, with a rather well developed industry. The further progress of the town slowed to a halt following the Treaty of Trianon since a major part of the broader surroundings, from which a significant part of the population had once been employed in the Szentgotthárd factories, was annexed to the Kingdom of SCS and to Austria. The diminished role of Szentgotthárd as a regional hub of commerce and employment was not strong enough to carry the region. Small farms were not sufficient for the provision of social existence, and so the number of seasonal workers and emigrants was perpetually increasing. In this period, seasonal workers from the Rába Valley especially pursued various agricultural activities across the estates of western Hungary (MUNDA HIRNÖK 2003:123–124), and to a lesser extent abroad.

¹³ Hetés is a characteristic ethnographic landscape, part of historical Zala County and sharing many similarities with the neighbouring regions Göcsej and Őrség.

The control of the border enforced according to the Treaty of Trianon quickly affected the established communication (familial, economic, and religious) among the border inhabitants.¹⁴ The protocol, namely, was rather strict, as attested by the following report:

“Mr. Civilian Commissioner in M. Sobota, with the accord of the military authorities, hereby decrees the following: Passage across the dem. line is allowed *exclusively to such landholders who own property on both sides of the dem. line, and only for the purposes of working these properties*. Passage is allowed only at location points specified the military authorities.

Owners of land on both sides of the border *must possess documents from their municipal offices, confirmed by the competent gendarmerie and the civ. commissioner, in Lower Lendava the deputy civilian commissioner, in which precise records shall be stated of the land holdings on this or that side of the demarcation line*.

These certificates must then be verified by the Murska Sobota or Lower Lendava authorities, confirming ownership and location of the land on both sides of the border.

Other persons may only enter Hungary across Gyékényeš, and German Austria only across Špilj. In the exclusive cases of illness or death, which must be proven by official documents, special passports may be issued and verified.”¹⁵

Despite the stern regime, smuggling activities flourished during the inter-war years. In the Rába Valley, especially in Felsőszölnök, these were mostly pursued by cross-border landholders or the unemployed (KOZAR-MUKIČ 2000:95–96).

IN POST-WAR EUROPE

The temporary borders of Hungary at the end of the Second World War were set by the armistice concluded on 20 January 1945 in Moscow, with boundary lines corresponding to those of 31 December 1937. Based on the agreement between the Allies and the temporary Hungarian government, the nation was ensured its old Trianon border, which was set in legislation by the treaty ratified in Paris on 10 February 1947. Following the signing of the Paris Peace Treaties, relations between Hungary and its neighbors began to improve, especially with regard to Yugoslavia: Hungary signed a cultural agreement with Yugoslavia in 1947, and on 8 December 1947 the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.

At that time, interactions between the inhabitants on both sides of the borderline were quite undisturbed, and the owners of cross-border properties were bilaterally issued crossing documents so they might continue tending to their lands (STIPKOVITS 1994). Already in 1948, however, due to the Cominform resolution, all connections between Yugoslavia and the other Eastern countries were abruptly severed. On the Hungarian side,

¹⁴ The hindered administrative and economic life of the borderland regions was somewhat eased by frontier-zone agreements concluded by Hungary with its neighbouring states in the second half of the 1920s (GRÁFIK 2001:14–15).

¹⁵ Osebni promet blüzi demarkacijske črte [Personal Traffic near the Demarcation Line]. *Novine 7* (40), 3. 10. 1920:3. Cf. contribution on how the people of Prekmurje experienced restrictions of movement: Položaj v Prekmurju [The Situation in Prekmurje]. *Novine 7* (40), 3. 10. 1920:1.

anti-Yugoslavian sentiment was brewing, followed by military incidents and provocations at the border. The hostile atmosphere materialized in the construction of a barbed wire barrier or the “Iron Curtain”,¹⁶ which strictly isolated Hungary from Yugoslavia and Austria (GRÁFIK 2001:17). With the impassable border regime, connections between borderland inhabitants were completely suspended.

The grim political relations between Yugoslavia and Hungary then began to improve after 1956, following János Kádár’s rise to power. The barbed wire and mines were gradually removed from the border—which does not imply the context of an open border regime, though its initial glimpses were evident in the establishment of the first two international border crossings: Dolga Vas–Rédics (1966) and Hodoš–Bajánsenye (MUNDA HIRNÖK – MEDVEŠEK 2016:94).

Prekmurje after the Second World War

In the time between the two wars, the Slovenian lands were undergoing transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society, whereas Prekmurje remained the most agrarian part of the Drava ban domain. According to the census of 1931, in 121 out of 170 municipalities of Prekmurje, over 90% of the population were peasants, and in 55 municipalities the percentage exceeded 95% (LORENČIČ 2019:68). Directly after the war as well, Prekmurje was still an entirely rural landscape. The new post-war economic policy focused on establishing a construction industry (brickworks), a processing industry (mills for grain processing) (ROJHT 2010:43) and a clothing industry (Mura) (PRINČIČ 2008). Highly significant for the development of the Lendava area was the discovery of oil fields in Petišovci. The rise of the oil industry critically impacted not only the development of the municipality, but the broader Prekmurje region as well (ŠARF 1988:92–95). During the 1960s, metal industries and construction had begun to develop in the region (KOVÁCS 2000:40).

Industrial development in the 1960s and 1970s accelerated the internal migration of inhabitants from Goričko and the surrounding ethnically mixed lands: these migrations in many cases shifted to permanent settlement in Murska Sobota or its vicinity, or in other regions of the country. Consequently, the borderlands space began to empty (KOVÁCS 2016:114). Furthermore, locals were then already able to find legal employment in Austria and Germany as *Gastarbeiters*.

Owing to a politics of polycentric development, Prekmurje in the 1980s finally managed to reach the Slovenian average (VRATUŠA 2008b:7), whereas divergent rates of adaptation to the “transitional” circumstances of the new independent Slovenian state after 1990 were again impacting negatively on its economy. According to most indicators of economic and social development, Prekmurje continues to rank among the most poorly developed Slovenian regions (LORENČIČ 2019:68).

¹⁶ The term “Iron Curtain” came into wider use following a 1946 speech by the British PM Winston Churchill in the USA, though it had already surfaced before. During the so-called Cold War, which lasted until 1990, the curtain signified the border between Europe under the influence of the Soviet Union (the communist world), and its other (capitalist) states in the west. The Iron Curtain ran from the North Sea to the Black Sea and on the western part to the Adriatic Sea.

Goričko, similarly to the Rába Valley in Hungary, represented (and continues to represent) the periphery in national terms. Since it is a mountainous area, its inhabitants had poorer conditions for agricultural activity compared to other parts of Prekmurje. Nevertheless, it was and continues to be a mostly agrarian landscape with small, scattered land plots (HUBER 2014:172) gravitating towards cattle breeding and fruit cultivation. In particular due to the decline of local economic conditions in the transition period marked by the collapse of industry in Prekmurje, relatively large numbers of people are still seeking work abroad, especially in Austria (daily commuting, seasonal employment), which contributes to the deterioration and aging of local demographics.

Data shows that relations between the majority Slovenian population and the Hungarian minority began to show a general improvement in the second half of the 20th century. This was facilitated by the implementation of bilingual schooling (in 1959) and especially by the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia constitution of 1974, which set into legislation the understanding that autochthonous ethnic communities in Slovenia were state-building subjects, and that in ethnically mixed regions their language should be equal to official Slovenian (USTAVA SRS 1974). The Hungarian ethnic community in Prekmurje now enjoys the highest international standards of minority protection (SLOVENIJA IN EVROPSKI STANDARDI 2002).

The Slovenian Rába Region after the Second World War

Immediately following the Second World War, at their assembly in Martinje on 3 June 1945, Slovenians were once again striving to join the Rába Valley to their ethnic homeland (MAUČEC – NOVAK 1945:24–26), though unsuccessfully. In the subsequent, extremely strict post-Cominform regime, the Rába Valley found itself an utterly isolated region. Measures introduced by the Hungarian state aggravated the socio-economic situation of the people due to collectivization practices enacted following the Soviet model. During the Rákosi regime (1948–1956), peasant land was confiscated with the implementation of agricultural cooperatives, which peasants were forcibly made members of (MUNDA HIRNÖK 2016:95). Moreover, by October 1956, peasants were ordered to sell a specific portion of their produce to the state below price, with additional mandatory contributions of grain, cattle, milk, poultry, eggs and wine (KOZAR-MUKIČ 2000:56). Lands by the frontier were closely guarded by bodies of national security and the police, which exerted various pressures on the population, including the banishment of individuals or the deportation of Rába Valley families (MUNDA HIRNÖK 2013). It is therefore not surprising that large numbers of inhabitants emigrated from the border area during the Rákosi regime over poor existential prospects and fear of political repression, especially after the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was quelled. Data shows that over 200,000 people left Hungary in the aftermath of the suppressed revolt. On a national level, the share of refugees was highest in the Szentgotthárd district, from which 2,100 persons, or 8.7% of the population, fled abroad (KOVÁCS 2011:78). The decrease in the number of Rába Valley inhabitants was also affected by internal migrations within the borders of Hungary.

The socialist system and economy allowed for little business initiative. Furthermore, the development plans of the Hungarian government completely circumvented the borderland. Due to its modest natural conditions, the Rába Valley was left out of broader

national projects, abandoned by the state to be a forest region, a sort of woodlands reserve, which today enables a surprising niche advantage in the establishment of protected natural areas catering to ecologic agriculture and nature tourism. At any rate, the consequences of the post-uprising Hungarian regional policy turned the borderland into an economic dead end, eventually leading to demographic exhaustion as well.

During the era of social and political changes in the 1970s and 1980s, when the political climate in Hungary began to relax, efforts arose towards the normalization of bilateral contacts in various fields with Yugoslavia and Austria. Nevertheless, inhabitants' personal contacts with Slovenia were still burdened by the remote locations of border crossings and the strict border regime. The hindered administrative and economic life of the borderlands was, in addition to the open international crossings, somewhat ameliorated by the frontier-zone agreements concluded by Hungary with its neighboring states (GRÁFIK 2001:14–15). The Slovenian minority was finally granted protection by constitutional changes in 1972 — at least in a formal sense.

A turnover in the life of the tristate borderlands occurred in 1989 at the so-called Meeting of Friendship. On 27 May of 1989, leaders and inhabitants of three nations met at the Triple Border Stone. Also in Felsőszölnök, the same day witnessed the meeting of separated relatives (dissidents) and the symbolic crossing of the border without authorization, which were in principle forbidden. In light of the tolerant stance of the border police, their reunion grew into a euphoric celebration (GRÁFIK 2001:18–19). The intent of the event to become traditional and regional was also subsequently achieved (-DM- 2019:2–3).

With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the life of frontier inhabitants began to see improvements. At the international press conference near Hegyeshalom on 2 May 1989, authorities informed the public that the Iron Curtain at the western border of Hungary was about to be removed. Deconstruction of the border barriers took until late 1990.

The post-1990 living conditions as well as cross-border interaction were shaped by the democratic processes in Hungary (new legal and political order), the independence of Slovenia, the organization of the Slovenian national community, a gradual opening of the region with the establishment of proper transportation infrastructure¹⁷ and European integration processes, in which both Hungary and Slovenia first became members of the EU in 2004 and then members of the Schengen Area in 2007. After a long century of changes and shifts, the contemporary borderland “has become more open than ever before. (...) The latest geopolitical developments have reconfigured existing borders in this region. All of these events and interventions — shifting borders and border regimes — have changed the nature and identity of the borderlands as well as the challenges they face as peripheral areas.” (FIKFAK – MÉSZÁROS 2019:9).

¹⁷ There are seven road crossings and one railroad crossing at the Slovenian-Hungarian border. In addition to those mentioned, two opened in the 1960s and 1970s. The crossings at Pince–Tornyiszentmiklós and Martinje–Felsőszölnök (since 2005 an international crossing) were opened in 1992, the crossings Kobilje–Nemesnép and Prosenjakovci–Magyarszombatfa in 1997, and finally the border crossing Čepinci–Kétyölgy in 2002.

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Katalin Munda Hirnök, ethnologist, is a research advisor at the Institute for Ethnic Studies in Ljubljana, where she has been employed since 1991. Her research focuses mainly on issues related to Slovenians in Hungary in Porabje and outside the autochthonous settlement areas, i.e., legal, socio-political, socio-economic and linguistic issues, internal migration, recent history, biographies; the cultural heritage of Slovenians in neighboring countries and the role of culture and media in inter-ethnic relations in border regions. From 2009 to 2012, she led the research project *Porabje Slovenes in the "Hungarian Gulag"* and collaborated on the bilateral research project *Mobility, Adaptation and Integration along the Slovenian-Hungarian Border* (2013–2015). E-mail: katalin.hirnok@inv.si

Ingrid Slavec Gradišnik, ethnologist, is a research advisor at the ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, where she has been employed since 2001. The main topics of her research include general and regional ethnology, historical ethnology, theory and methodology, culture, identity, rituals, cultural heritage and ethnological lexicography. She led the bilateral research project *Mobility, Adaptation and Integration along the Slovenian-Hungarian Border* (2013–2015, project partners: ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Ethnology and Institute of Ethnology, Research Center for Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences). E-mail: ingrid.slavec-gradisnik@zrc-sazu.si
