

Challenges of Cross-Border Cooperation: The Initiative of Trilateral Goričko–Raab–Őrség Nature Park

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Abstract: The trajectories of social actions comprising nature conservation and regional economic development in the Slovenian-Austrian-Hungarian tri-border area discussed in this paper are closely linked to the landscape of the Slovenian-Austrian-Hungarian border. Processual understanding bounds landscape to human activities and other non-human agents, all of whom constitute the landscape-in-the-making. The Őrség National Park and Goričko Landscape Park, as designated nature reserves, are subject to human influences through their protection and, as intrinsically objects of human agency, are rich sites of social production and interaction. The cross-border initiative of the Trilateral Goričko–Raab–Őrség Nature Park is analyzed through the politics of European integration and territorial cooperation in the peripheral regions and their financial programs. Through field research and interviews with social actors, the complexity of the obstacles that hinder the functioning and effective management of the actions of the proposed Trilateral Nature Park initiative and the ambivalent attitude of the inhabitants towards the actions of the three parks is observed.

Keywords: Trilateral Goričko–Raab–Őrség Nature Park, cross-border cooperation, European Union funds, regional development, landscape-in-the-making, nature conservation

The idea of European integration and cross-border cooperation comprises the cohesion of peripheral parts of the nation state into a supranational political unit. Like many other borderline regions, Goričko and Őrség have for decades remained on the side-lines of the modernization processes, awaiting a time when what has been a weakness so far can be an opportunity (BANCHIG 2016). The very elements of “tradition” and “unique landscapes” that were characterized as “cultural backwardness” and “agro-environmental marginality” are in the changed cultural and political settings constructing a rhetoric of quality, a way of marketing local nature and culture (PIERMATTEI 2006:137). Due to the recent boom in various alternative forms of tourism (ecological, cultural, culinary, ethnological, etc.), a number of border areas have become attractive touristic sites because of their natural landscapes and different cultural patterns (MARKOV 2015:241). Moreover, if institutional and discursive practices change, the border could also acquire

new meanings for people living on both sides of it, especially if various social actors propose the concept of the region as a symbol of cooperation and common heritage in order to be eligible for the funding mechanisms of European Union cross-border cooperation policy (ENI CBC 2014).

The changes of various European borders occurring after the late 1980s have provoked extensive methodologically and disciplinary diverse research. Most of the ethnographies of various European border regions (MARKOV 2015; KOCKEL et al. 2012; HEYMAN – CUNNINGHAM 2004; BALLINGER 2002; HALLER – DONNAN 2000; BELLIER – WILSON 2000) sought to document how local communities were important participants in much wider relations of power, exploitation, domination, and subversion (WILSON 2012:166). The complex changes affecting the regions of Goričko and Órség following the great enlargement of the European Union and introduction of the Schengen regime have only received greater attention in recent years (FIKFAK – MÉSZÁROS 2019; MÓD 2019; MUNDA HIRNÖK – SLAVEC GRADIŠNIK 2019; ISPÁN et al. 2018).

A special attention has been paid to the landscape in these regions, which is not a static object separated from human beings and therefore the ecological effects of human activities cannot be seen as unnatural (WEST et al. 2006:256). Human and non-human are constitutive components of the same world and it is unhelpful to think of them in terms of a binary nature/culture distinction (TILLEY 1994:23). The forms of the landscape are not prepared for people to live in — not by nature, not by human hands — for it is in the very process of dwelling that these forms are constituted (INGOLD 2000:193). Instead of the antagonism between the concepts of pristine and of anthropoid nature (ISPÁN 2019; PIERMATTEI 2006:142), blurred distinctions in different perceptions and valuations of changes in the landscape and in the life among various social actors strove to be recognized. The landscape constitutes the background of the medium for human, non-human, material dwellings as well as their agencies and institutional development discussed in this paper.¹ This processual understanding bounds landscape to human activities and other non-human agents, all of which constitute the landscape-in-the-making (KATIĆ et al. 2017:7). Even designated nature reserves and national parks, as in case of the initiative of Trilateral Goričko–Raab–Órség Nature Park, are subjected to human influence precisely through their protection (FISCHER 2012:326). Therefore, protected areas, as intrinsic objects of human agency, cannot be evaluated merely on the basis of their ecological characteristics (ISPÁN et al. 2018:474), but as rich sites of social production and social interaction (WEST et al. 2006:252). Following these premises, the trajectories of social actions comprising nature conservation and regional economic development in Slovenian-Austrian-Hungarian tri-border area appeared to be the main topic of research. The article attempts to analyze the initiative of the trilateral park in light of its origins within the politics of European integration and territorial cooperation in the peripheral regions and their financial resources, following the idea that European integration and “Europeanization” might have their greatest impact in borderlands (BAJUK SENČAR 2019; WILSON 2012:168). Therefore, I try to anchor the

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park's activities in co-constructing landscape-in-the-making within the framework of the European Union's cohesion and cross-border cooperation programs. Methodologically, I have approached the field in two ways: using an observation method and conversing with local Slovenian speaking people in informal situations and by interviewing the representatives of public and private bodies who are considered experts within the Slovenian and Hungarian community. Following the principle of the snowball, we² have interviewed the representatives of the most important public and private bodies, organizers and community leaders (cf. VRANJEŠ 2006:75).

THE UNBEARABLE EASE OF CHANGING BORDERS

Before the Treaty of Trianon demarcation crushed the gravitational hinterlands from the local regional centers and cut the traffic vessel, the region along today's Slovenian-Hungarian-Austrian border was an organic market unit (OLAS – KERT 1993:135–136). The separation deepened after the World War II, followed by the erection of the Iron Curtain, causing border regions to depopulate due to special legislative and military regimes, restricting free movement in the border area. The important anthropogenic imprint on the landscape caused by the military safeguarding the border remained visible even after the liberation of the border regimes (e.g. KOZOROG 2019), but a rich biodiversity was preserved due to the isolative effects of the border regimes spurred by the German Green Belt, founded to protect the landscapes and unused lands along the former inner-German border. Following the German Green Belt, the European Green Belt was established, connecting the landscape along the former Iron Curtain in 23 countries, including the Slovenian-Austrian-Hungarian border “whilst respecting the economic, social and cultural needs of local communities.” (THE EUROPEAN 2014). The initiative of a trilateral park across the Austrian-Slovenian-Hungarian border, primarily oriented towards the congruence of the landscape and life in these border regions, has arisen under the ideational umbrella of Green Belt. However, the peripheral position with regards to national centers, limited infrastructure and low income in these regions was not a fertile matrix for nature conservation of this kind (THE EUROPEAN 2014:7).

The notion of past border regimes and peripheral position occupies a central place in the narratives of the region gathered among the interlocutors (see also MUNDA HIRNÖK – SLAVEC GRADIŠNIK 2019). On today's border between Slovenia, Hungary, and Austria people had a long and complex history of living under the frame of the same state until 1919, followed by complete separation after 1945 and faced with new challenges after the European great enlargement (more in KOZOROG 2019). Despite formal institutional cooperation, the break in human relations can be observed in the fact that the interlocutor from Murska Sobota crossed the Hungarian border with her family the day after the implementation of the Schengen Agreement in order to get to know “the unknown world”.³ It is also of special significance that I was told by the person who provides

² I conducted many of the interviews together with a colleague, Dr Tatiana Bajuk Senčar, whom I thank for many deep insights during the fieldwork and her thoughtful comments on the first version of this paper. I am also greatly indebted to the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript.

³ Conversation with a local, Murska Sobota, 1. 3. 2019.

postal services in north-eastern part of Goričko that I can only buy Hungarian Forints in Murska Sobota. Borders have not only been delineated limits of a state's sovereignty, but also the external frames of people's everyday identifications and activities, although their nature has been significantly changed since the enlargement of the European Union. After the implementation of the Schengen border regime, there has normally been no clear manifestation of the presence of the state through military posts, border guards and customs checkpoints (ŁADYKOWSKA – ŁADYKOWSKI 2013:165). Nevertheless, state borders are still understood as multifaceted social institutions that help condition how societies and individuals shape their identities (MÉSZÁROS 2019; SCOTT 2016:84). Therefore, they are of special importance in the wider narratives of the European Union, the *raison d'être* of which has been closely intertwined with the symbolism of transcending and transforming national borders in the interests of integration and peaceful co-existence. Concerning political interests, border areas are crucial testing grounds for the instruments of European Regional Policy, aiming to reduce disparities and contribute to cohesion in the EU (more in BAJUK SENČAR 2019).

Borderlands have been often marginalized zones, not only in the geographical sense, but also in the economic and socio-cultural terms (MARKOV 2015:241) caused by remoteness from central governments, insufficiently developed industry and infrastructure, and political hostility in relation to the neighboring countries. In Goričko, there is a strong sense of peripherality, not only being left out of the central financial mechanisms of the state but also being in a disadvantageous position in comparison to other Slovenian regions. European cohesion focuses mainly on regional development, especially on improving the development of disadvantaged regions, promoting effective use of the instruments of regional policy and enhancing territorial capital (RUIDISCH 2013:95, 98). All three regions along the Slovenian-Hungarian-Austrian border have faced comparable development problems, such as a depopulated landscape with a low birth rate and a high percentage of elderly people, mostly small farms without prospects in farming, no industry or major infrastructure, long distances from national centers, etc. New possibilities for cooperation have been proposed to overcome these developmental drawbacks. One of the most well-known is the cross-border cooperation (CBC) that has become a "trademark" of integration and Europeanization, providing ideational foundations for a networked Europe through symbolic representations of European space and its future development perspectives (SCOTT 2016:85, 89). One of the first Phare projects that included Slovenia and Hungary focused on facilitating flows of traffic. In 1995, funds were allocated for changes at the Dolga vas — Redics border crossing to render the border more permeable and thus accessible to such flows (BAJUK SENČAR 2019:216).

Anderson et al. (2003) stressed that CBC is not only a political, but also a social and cultural arena; it has provided a framework within which new regional ideas have been promoted. Region-building at borders was encouraged by European policy makers, especially in the period leading up the EU's enlargement in 2004, as a means of bringing people to encounter and become acquainted with each other before the final opening of the border (SCOTT 2015:33), but could fully come to a life after the waiving of border control. Through new institutional and discursive practices, contested borders became a resource for economic and cultural exchange as well as for building political coalitions for regional development purposes (SCOTT 2016:90). In accordance

with territorial cohesion, in attempts to build bridges “between economic effectiveness, social cohesion and ecological balance” (CEC 2008) voices were also raised for the protection of the habitats, which form an intrinsic component of the landscape (TÓTH et al. 2019; PETERLIN – SIMONETI 2013, 2015; VASILJEVIĆ – PEZOLD 2011). In the scope of a Phare trilateral cross-border program between Hungary, Austria, and Slovenia in 1995 and 1996, and then a bilateral program between Slovenia and Hungary from the year 2000 onwards, one of the first projects to be funded was meant to support the creation of a trilateral regional park, Goričko–Raab–Őrség (project SI.00.08.01) (BAJUK SENČAR 2019:216). Research on the environmental aspects of borders (e. g. KOZOROG 2019; ISPAN et al. 2018; HESZ 2016; DONNAN – WILSON 2010) has concentrated on the diverse roles of non-human and human agents within landscape-in-the-making processes and on novel forms of economic regionalism in border areas as well as cross-border nature conservation (CUNNINGHAM 2016:376, 380).

TRILATERAL NATURE PROTECTION?

Three protected areas — The Raab Nature Park, The Órség National Park and the Goričko Landscape Park — were established for nature conservation but also to incite regional development (ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT 2006). This development was conceptualized on the promotion and experience of the untouched nature (cf. KÖSTLIN 2017:61), which has an economic value on the basis of visitors’ consumption (WEST et al. 2006:263). Hungary already proclaimed the landscape protection of Órség in 1978, leading to the establishment of the national park in 2002. In Austria, the Raab Nature Reserve was proclaimed in 1998. Following the Phare CBC SLO/H/A, ZZ-9524 Joint Strategy in the Tri-D Border Region Slovenia-Austria-Hungary (PHARE 1995), the Goričko Landscape Park was established in October 2003, directly before the Phare CBC SI/H Project SI.00.08.01 Joint Nature Park Development disbursements had to be completed. The current director of the Goričko Landscape Park, Stanka Dešnik, clearly stressed the crucial impact of the European financial mechanism on the establishment of the park:

“At first, I doubted that we would even manage to establish the park since Goričko is too far from central Slovenia. That is why I was delighted that in 2003 we managed to succeed and that Goričko became part of the Órség-Raab-Goričko Trilateral Park. However, if the establishment of the park had not been supported by the EU with pre-accession financial incentives, the landscape park would probably not exist.”⁴

After the establishment of all three parks in 2003, the challenges of how to manage the proposed trilateral Park had to be addressed. A joint trilateral park authority with an equal share of authority and experts involved and the development of a joint management plan as followed from the Phare project SI.00.08.01 were not achieved, even after the Memorandum of Understanding from 21 May 2006 signed by representatives of all three parks and the renewed Partnership Agreement (2009). The most important obstacles have

⁴ Interview, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019.

been the non-existence of the trilateral park's joint management plan (ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT 2006:53) and the transformation of trilateral cross-border programs into bilateral programs, causing insufficient co-financing of the trilateral projects. The Slovenian partner was hence not able to participate in the strategically important project Competence Netzwerk Musterregion 3-Country Nature Park Órség-Raab-Goričko (ÖRRAGO) as it was financed within the frame of Interreg Austria-Hungary. However, eligibility to participate in cooperation programs financially supported by the EU is perceived by many public authorities as the only real chance to overcome the peripheral position of the region. The directorates of the Goričko and Órség parks continually work on applications for various bilateral Interreg projects (e.g. Upkač, Landscape in harmony, Rokodelska akademija 1 and 2, Green Exercise etc.) that have proven to have the highest rate of success⁵ and provide new contract employments. In addition to the financial resources, social actors on the Slovenian side stressed the importance of gaining a deeper insight and offering the transfer of good practices as the most important advantages of participating in the cross-border cooperation and transnational European projects.⁶

Many differences among the parks caused by different national legislations and practices prevent the trilateral park from becoming a fully functional public entity. These differences in national laws and policies reduce the possibilities of establishing one joint trilateral park directorate, implying the need for the harmonization of norms regarding the most critical issues (TAMBURELLI 2007), like the "common denominator" level of ecological balance in connection with the common measures of nature conservation. The Órség National Park, as a representative of the public interest for nature protection, participates in the system of spatial planning and development on the county level (PETERLIN – SIMONETI 2013:11). Because of this, it has 72 permanent employees and 8 contract workers⁷ while the Goričko Landscape Park complements its staff of 11,5 full-time employees with 6 project and contract workers (PROGRAM DELA 2019:35). Raab Park is not aimed at imposing nature protection measures and, as a branch of the consortium Tourismusverband Jennersdorf, employs only a few people.⁸

The pressing financial issue on the Slovenian side is a considerable drawback, as the funding received from the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning is used for the regular operations of the park, i. e. for the wages and maintenance of the Grad castle, which had been proposed as a headquarters of the trilateral park and is far from suitable for future oriented development.⁹ In Hungary, a great deal of money has been allocated to the recovery, treatment, and improvement of habitats, while the Goričko Landscape Park faces great difficulties in purchasing the lands, due not only to the financial shortage but also to farmers' reluctance to sell the land for the proposed price.¹⁰ The Goričko

⁵ Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019; interview with Órség National Park officials, Óriszentpéter, 13. 3. 2019.

⁶ Interview with a municipality official, Šalovci, 15. 3. 2019; interview with a representative of the regional development agency, Murska Sobota, 14. 3. 2019; interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019.

⁷ Personal correspondence with Zsolt Horváth, 26. 9. 2019.

⁸ Conversation with the representative of Nature Raab Park, Grad, 9. 9. 2019.

⁹ Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019; interview with Órség National Park officials, Óriszentpéter, 13. 3. 2019.

Park's administration has only limited legal means compared to the directorate of the Órség National Park. Consequently, the Goričko Landscape Park has to achieve its goals by communicating with local actors, persuading, encouraging, building a good system of relationships, whereas the Órség National Park can operate with instruments of authority (HESZ 2016:40). When the Goričko park officials narrated their position towards the local people as an important drawback, the Hungarian interlocutors perceived *modus operandi* of the Slovenian colleagues as an example to be learnt from in terms of communication with locals.¹¹ The long-term sustainable development of the trilateral park would require stable financing resources: the Slovenian Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning was supposed to assure the annual allocation of funds after the establishment of the Trilateral Goričko-Raab-Órség Nature Park, which did not happen.¹²

Even though the trilateral park has not achieved its full operational mode as a public entity, cooperation among the parks' administrative bodies continues, especially in building partnerships for various, mostly bilateral projects under the Interreg Cooperation Programs. However, the differences caused by national legislation and practices stand out. Slovenian interlocutors' criticism of the Slovenian central government stresses that the Órség National Park as a project partner is not required to co-finance the Interreg projects on its own. In addition to the 85% European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) co-financing, 10% is reallocated from the Hungarian government and the remaining 5% of the partner's own contribution is provided by the Hungarian state. The situation of the Goričko Landscape Park is less favorable since the projects must be co-financed from its own resources, provided by the entrance fee to the castle, the sale of local products and accommodation service. On the Austrian part, the nature parks are supported by provincial and state resources, although the Raab Nature Park is not formally structured and is run by the consortium of associations. Therefore, cross-border activities are not always jointly implemented by the bordering parks but in consortiums with various partners: the Goričko Landscape Park and the Styrian League for Nature Protection (THE EUROPEAN 2014:33), as in the case of the revitalization and restoration of Kučnica/Kutschenitz within the project Promoting the Ecological Network in the European Green Belt (Interreg Central Europe 2007–2013) or the Association for the Promotion of the Nature Park Raab and municipal government Csörötnek and Tourism Destination Management of Szentgotthárd in 3 Határos Project — Inwertsetzung der grenzüberschreitenden Natur- und Nationalparkregion durch die Entwicklung von neuen naturtouristischen Angeboten.

Progressing the economic situation of the tri-border region through elaboration of the Trilateral Nature Park's trademark of environmentally friendly products with a quality assurance system as envisaged in the Phare SI.00.08.01 project (FINANCING MEMORANDUM 2000:3) remains half way. Awareness of local eco-, bio- and traditional products under the particular national region's trademark (Goričko Landscape Park trademark, National Park Product) inside the trilateral area varies significantly and is still nationally bounded, causing some categories of trademarks to be economically unsuccessful.¹³

¹¹ Interview with Órség National Park officials, Óriszantpeter, 13. 3. 2019; conversation with a representative of Órség National Park, Grad, 9. 9. 2019.

¹² Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019.

¹³ Conversation with the representative of Órség National Park, Grad, 9. 9. 2019.

The dissonant perception of these trademarks is caused not only by the economic issue, but also the fact that some of the brands in question were not originally developed and owned by local people.

In addition to the structural obstacles, there is another problem that arises in practice because the cultural border still proved to be important in everyday life long after the shift in politically defined state borders, as Cole and Wolf showed in their seminal work *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (1974). Although cross-border cooperation initiatives have flourished, spurred by the promise of EU funding for local and regional development projects, regions along the borders still remain quite divided (e.g. SCOTT 2016:46).¹⁴ As recognized among tourist managers, there is no possibility for a sufficient customer advisory service because tourism actors' knowledge of tourist offers across the border is still very limited (3 HATÁRLOS). Social cohesion in such border areas, where mental borders are still alive — in addition to language barriers and dependencies on national legislation and practices — have created a division between people and businesses, making it very challenging to achieve. The aim of EU cooperation programs is to facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas between people across borders, at both formal and informal levels, increasing trust and strengthening informal ties between actors participating in cross-border projects. However, a significant language problem causes important communication barriers. Park employees with appropriate knowledge of all three languages (Slovenian, German, and Hungarian) and of English, with regards to leadership in projects co-financed by the European Union, are rare. It is relatively difficult to find a language that suits all partners so that none of the parties fall behind. The integrative role of national minorities with knowledge of at least of two languages has not yet been fully exploited, but project managers make use of the personal assistance of bilingual persons belonging to minorities for translation. Direct and unequivocal communication is hindered and long lasting when discussions have to be organized so as to include an interpreter.¹⁵ Therefore, it is of no surprise that the original idea of three employees of three parks with three different first languages working together in the same office has not come to life. Even the launch of an exchange program in which colleagues of one park would spend a week working in the offices of partner administrations to become familiar with partner's work and to create personal ties has not been successful yet.¹⁶ The cross-border vision of the founding fathers of the trilateral park has not spread widely among the parks' employees, thus annual joint activities are perceived by many employees as a top-down initiative.¹⁷ The park authorities propose various outdoor activities for local communities, especially focusing on younger generations. The first summer camp and student trail across the trilateral park was organized and financed by park officials in summer 2014 (PRVO POPOTOVANJE 2014). In addition to the activities of the Trilateral Park Schools Network, the annual trilateral park hike on Earth Day, Tour de RÓG Cycling Marathon (L 919 trail) and the Trilateral Park Games on European Nature Park Day are organized to provide a place for socialization among employees of the three parks as well as of other people in the region.

¹⁴ Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019

¹⁵ Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019.

¹⁶ Interview with a Goričko Landscape Park official, Murska Sobota, 28. 2. 2019.

¹⁷ Conversation with the representative of Órség National Park, Grad, 9. 9. 2019.

LANDSCAPE-IN-THE-MAKING: PARKS AND OTHER AGENTS

The initiative of a joint trilateral park as a cross-border cooperation structure would have to face a major challenge, considering the scattered needs and wishes of various actors in the cross-border region. Even though ecological balance and inclusive regional development cannot be achieved without cross-border cooperation, success highly depends on the complex dynamic with domestic stakeholders. “Ecological goals need to be matched with the expectations of the local population living in the protected area.” (PETERLIN – SIMONETI 2013:15). In the first few years after its foundation, it was expected that the Goričko Landscape Park would provide numerous development opportunities for the local population (UREDBA 2003) since parks for the people should really be protected (SIMONIČ 2006:7). As one local tourist accommodation provider stated: “At first, we were very enthusiastic about the newly established park. We expected that the development of Goričko would finally begin after all these years being left behind. But then it started ... You shouldn’t do this, you shouldn’t do that ... All the butterflies became more important than the people.”¹⁸

It is of special significance that the Goričko Landscape Park is often referred to among local people in Goričko with the personal names of its authorities. These trajectories therefore also reflect the wider personal and political standpoints of the interlocutors, not strictly connected to the park’s activities. Narrations of the Trilateral Nature Park as an obstacle to agricultural and industrial activity (SZÉKELY 2003) appeared even before the formal agreement on the cooperation of the three parks. Since it does not enforce conservation measures, the Raab Nature Park has been perceived not as a scapegoat, but as part of the broader development narrative.

The community-based approaches that have dominated conservation strategies in recent decades (ADAMS – HUTTON 2007; BROSIUS et al. 2005) have been implemented in all three parks at official level through meetings of park councils as the highest governing bodies, consisting of representatives of the state, local communities, NGOs and a representative of the park. However, an important part of the community is not entirely satisfied with the presence of the parks. Some mayors of the municipalities within the framework of Goričko Landscape Park perceive the park’s actions for the preservation of flora and fauna and biodiversity positively, but stress that the advantages of branded products and tourism should be used to a greater extent, or as pointed by one mayor, the presence of the landscape park and Nature 2000 is positive in terms of preserving unspoiled nature and biodiversity, but negative with regards to the way out of underdevelopment (MIHALIČ 2019). It is stressed that the level of development in nine Goričko municipalities has decreased by 10% over the last ten years compared to the Slovenian average, and villages are emptying as they are considered unpromising places (MARKOJA 2019). The mayors also point to the negative effects of hindering development with bureaucratic obstacles, especially in construction and real estate (ŽUPANI PREKMURJA 2019). Therefore, in certain segments, local people continue to feel that they remain in subordinate positions—on the Slovenian side in comparison to the central regions and on the Hungarian side compared to newcomers from cities. Some mayors mention the lack

¹⁸ Conversation with an inhabitant of Goričko, Serdica, 14. 8. 2017.

of dialogue between the park and municipalities as well as the need for more efficient management of the park. On the other hand, some emphasize the lack of networking and cooperation among all actors within the framework of the Goričko Landscape Park (FARTEK 2019). The park is well received by those local people who either benefit from it economically or who feel that they can improve the quality of their living through broader development in their hometowns. Otherwise, the landscape park is seen as a duty-guard for everything the state or other national institutions prescribe, even though the Goričko Landscape Park is not directly responsible.

Frequently, the highly emotional disputes over whether the park is a blessing or a burden remain in the public sphere while many common people take no sides in these controversies (POJBIČ 2013). Many of the local people I have spoken to have mixed feelings, depending on their personal life situation, and only few interlocutors had explicitly one-sided — positive or negative — opinions of the Goričko Landscape Park. It is therefore misleading to strictly assume that there is a clash between the park authorities and local communities (PIERMATTEI 2006:141) since there is a much greater interplay of factors at work. The newly established interpretative heritage path in Lončarovci proves that it is communities willing to improve their habitats that provide fertile ground for actions in accordance with the values promoted by the landscape park. When the older generation sees that the younger generation is willing to do something for their village — in this case, the maintenance of the wetland meadows before they become overgrown — they give up their criticism and start working together.¹⁹ Many locals feel that “the park will not matter in a few years if there are no more young families in this area who would like to live and work in Goričko. But young families will only stay if it makes sense to do so” (GOMBOC 2013).

The visibility of actual physical work, especially of the “sweaty park workers mowing,” is of particular importance in the positive attitude of the local population towards the park.²⁰

On the other side, many complain that park employees remain distant in the castle and also that many of the development strategies of Goričko have been elaborated by experts who have not fully grasped and utilized the potential of the existing infrastructure and the landscape as a whole.²¹ Even some of the Interreg projects carried out by the Goričko Landscape Park in accordance with the development goals of the region collide with the protectionist role of the park.²² The Green Exercise project, led by the Órség National Park in partnership with the Goričko Landscape Park and the municipalities Sakalovci/Szakonyfalu, Dolnji Senik/Alsószölnök and Development agency Slovenska Krajina under the co-operational program Interreg Slovenia-Hungary, reveals the conflicting issues of nature conservation and efforts for sustainable regional development based on green tourism. The growing biking tourism sector has been one of the prime pillars of promoting the region as a unique natural and cycling region (COMPETENCE NETWORK), which is sometimes in conflict with the protective role of the landscape park:

¹⁹ Conversation with an inhabitant of Lončarovci, Lončarovci, 27. 6. 2020.

²⁰ Conversation with an inhabitant of Šalovci, Čepinci, 25. 6. 2020.

²¹ Interview with the representative of a regional institution, Murska Sobota, 13. 3. 2019.

²² Interview with the municipality official, Šalovci, 15. 3. 2019; interview with the representative of a regional development agency, Murska Sobota, 14. 3. 2019.

“We understand that they (the Goričko Landscape Park, comm. Pisk) have to take care of nature, which is right, but the essence of cycling is genuine contact with nature. Therefore, we cannot rigidly stick to the rules, but have to step together and find a solution. Strict regulations, long-term procedures and bureaucracy inhibit the development of these places; it is just off the ground in the region, but only on the Austrian and Hungarian sides, where cycling tourism is flourishing, the routes are arranged, and both the tourists and the locals are satisfied” (NEMEŠ 2019).

Different practices on different border sides provoke criticism among the inhabitants: while the regulations of the landscape park and Nature 2000 regulations are being strictly implemented on the Slovenian side, on the Austrian side of the Mura River a paved bike path has been built. The tension between restrictions to protect certain ecological balances and the creation of new income through the attraction of tourism seems to be one of the most constant discussions among local inhabitants.

Along with the three parks, the participation of regional development agencies and municipalities is needed for successful implementation of the operational goals. The appointed regional development agencies or local action groups (LAS) carry out the financially smaller Community Led Local Development (CLLD) projects, which improve the quality of life in certain areas. On the other side, the development agency Slovenska Krajina from Szentgotthárd/Monošter is attempting to achieve its development goals, e.g. to prevent young people from leaving the region, by applying for Interreg infrastructural projects.²³ Visible results notwithstanding (Hiša jabolk, TNC Peterloug etc.), many local people have only partial knowledge of the implemented projects, or consider them to be only for tourists.²⁴ When cross-border projects target some members of communities and leave others by the wayside, this partly exacerbates social differences within a community (WEST – BROCKINGTON 2006:613), as sometimes expressed by those left out.²⁵ Therefore, wide partnerships with a common vision and interests are a key component in relation to the future development of the region. Informal cooperation between different social actors on both sides of the border is crucial for the formulation of common objectives, but formal frameworks are needed to maintain commitment to these goals (PETERLIN – SIMONETI 2013:19).

CHALLENGES OF THE INITIATIVE

The main challenge of the trilateral park initiative is how to develop a common cross border management plan that could integrate nature conservation goals with the economically sustainable development of the cross-border region and the diverse interests of local communities. In addition to the differences already described, which are caused by different national legislation, the crucial question is how to implement inclusive management that meets the needs and interests of all three different parks and their stakeholders. One way towards the realization of joint planning processes aiming

²³ Interview with the representative of a regional development agency, Szentgotthárd/Monošter, 1. 3. 2019.

²⁴ Interview with the representative of a regional development agency, Moravske Toplice, 14. 3. 2019.

²⁵ Conversation with an inhabitant of Goričko, Serdica, 14. 8. 2017.

at inclusive management could be learnt from the lessons in applying for the EU cross-border funds. Even though there are annual regional meetings among representatives of local communities to discuss development priorities, they remain nationally bounded, and there is no attempt to discuss pressing issues through a cross-border perspective. Regional development programs on all three sides of the border share many common features, but there is no common strategy for applying for European funding and they all remain national in scope.²⁶ Cross-border cooperation often takes place only for the possibility of access to financial resources needed to compensate for the lack of local resources. The project partners often focus on domestic needs while cross-border activities are of secondary importance. On the Austrian and Hungarian side of the border, strategic planning is intensified before the end of a given financial period of the European cooperation programs.

“When approaching the last years of the financial perspective, we meet regularly and discuss the urgent issues of our region. When we agree on development goals — like helping young people to stay in the region etc. — we focus on the specific actions and synergies among different actions undertaken. And then we start to think about the strategic partnerships — mostly with the people that we know and with whom we have already successfully collaborated on previous projects.”²⁷

On the Slovenian side, the annual meeting of mayors in Goričko is not strategically focused on upcoming tenders, but mainly on pressing issues.²⁸

The ability of the parks' management to congruently and carefully manage strategies and priorities in order to fit into wider European Union calls for proposals and policies therefore remains a challenge. The successful congruence of nature conservation as one of the deep-seated elements of the landscape-in-the-making processes, without becoming an obstacle to regional economic development and placing the cross-border region on the tourist map, taking advantage of the cross-border character of the region and its diversity, is therefore one of the most important issues that three park authorities must address. Even so, as agreed among many, park authorities can only take on a small part in a vision of a much grander scale because “systemic solutions would be needed that would enable these people to raise standards and improve their standard of living so that the quality of the landscape is maintained” (GOMBOC 2013).

²⁶ Interview with the representative of a regional development agency, Szentgotthárd/Monošter, 1. 3. 2019.

²⁷ Interview with the representative of a regional development agency, Szentgotthárd/Monošter, 1. 3. 2019.

²⁸ Interview with a municipality official, Šalovci, 15. 3. 2019.

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