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**To plan cross-border cooperation through  
the developmental Programme Slovenia-  
Croatia 2007-2013: Some dilemmas**

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In recent decades, the discussions about political priority of cross-border cooperation within and outside the EU have been burgeoning. In the process of the EU enlargement, such cooperation is additionally emphasised. The message is clear: European integration in future demands also development at its borders (Gabbe 2006). As a result, the planners of cross-border activities uphold the balance between the three pillars of the Lisbon Strategy at the borders: growth and employment, social cohesion and sustainable environment. Following some “good practices” of cross-border cooperation, they recommend a “bottom up” approach. They believe that only actors from the cross-border region can efficiently design developmental tasks and projects, which fit to broader developmental strategies at regional, state or Community level. In this regard, the longstanding aim of cross-border cooperation, to build the basis for Euroregion, is feasible (Gabbe 2006).

Parallel with political discussions, a substantial increase in academic production on the issue is evidenced. On the one hand, there are studies that prove the advantages of multilevel cross-border cooperation yet on the other hand, there is a literature that shows the limits and shortcomings of such endeavour. This essay belongs to the latter, discussing some weak points of Cross-border Operational Programme between Slovenia and Croatia 2007–2013. Discussion revolves around the question, whether the “successful” project application in the framework of the Programme necessarily calls for preliminary study on partners’ eligibility. It is argued that ambitiously designed vision of the Programme, “to make the cross-border area between Croatia and Slovenia highly competitive, and to create sustainable living conditions and wellbeing for its inhabitants by exploiting developmental opportunities arising from joint cross-border actions” (OP 2007: 36),<sup>1</sup> fails to make endogenously designed projects in the most unfavourable border area feasible. The article draws on some findings of the author’s long-term anthropological fieldwork along the Slovenian-Croatian border, her interviews with contact persons of the Programme and potential project partners.

In Slovenia, cross-border cooperation is mainly investigated by political geographers (e.g. Bufon 2008). Yet in 2008, an interesting monograph *Living environment in the global information age*, written by a sociologist, academic Zdravko Mlinar, was published. The last chapter discusses cross-border cooperation,

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<sup>1</sup> OP stands for the document entitled, Slovenia-Croatia Operational Programme 2007-2013, CCI number: 2007 CB 16 I PO 002, 2007.

stressing the advantages of multilevel cooperation in view of border regions development, particularly Euroregions. Mlinar believes that multilevel cooperation is grounded in the concept of power sharing, which postulates “the equal participation in the power” (Mlinar 2008: 412). According to him, inter-level connections and cooperation in power should lead to overpassing the logic of zero sum game regarding higher and lower levels of decision making. Instead the win-lose perspective among various levels (among the locality, region, state, and Community), the concept supports the win-win perspective. In this regard, Mlinar refers to an example of “good practice”, the programme of establishment of the Faculty of Tourism studies in Portorož in border region between Slovenia, Croatia and Italy. According to him, the programme was successful mainly because of multilevel equal participation of various actors (individuals, regional economy, local municipalities, the EU) in implementation of cross-border developmental programme (*ibid.*: 412).

Such and the like superficial descriptions of good practices of cross-border cooperation additionally instigated the author of this essay to tackle a challenging task, an application for the project within the OP in 2010. As an anthropologist, she has been involved in boundaries research since 1992, when she completed her first fieldwork in the Upper Kolpa valley along the Slovenian-Croatian border. Since then, her fieldwork has expanded to two other locations along the border. All three research locales (chosen settlements on both sides of the border) were situated along the border river Kolpa/Kupa. In these settlements, she studied the way of life of three generations of the locals, comparing their understandings of and knowledge about their social space with the official explanations of border regimes since the WWII. The research topics related to the common repertoire of the study agenda of the anthropology of international borders (Donnan and Wilson 1999) and anthropology of ethnicity and nationalism (Barth 1969), focusing mostly on identity issues. Future prospects of the people’s life along the state border were of secondary research interest, mostly discussed as the final part of their life history narratives (Knežević Hočevar 1999, 2003, 2007).

To summarize some findings of long-term fieldwork it can be stressed that characteristics of this part of the border region (three research locales) are typical for marginalised areas. This area is mainly rural and depopulated, and those rare people who still insist to live there are mainly old. The interviewees of the generation, born in the 1940s, mostly abandoned the villages soon after they completed some

schooling, usually following the socialist slogan “Everybody to the factories”. So, they moved to the urban centres, located outside the border region. Moreover, the first and the second agrarian reform, introduced in ex-Socialist Yugoslavia in the 1940s and the 1950s, made life of the majority farmers “unbearable”. However, despite poor economic conditions, people did not experience at that time the border between two Republics of ex-Yugoslavia as the barrier. Without difficulties they worked on both sides of the border, mostly in poorly developed yet extant industry or small factories, attended nearby schools irrespective of the border side, owned and cultivated agrarian land in cross-border area, intermarried and maintained various intensive daily cross-border contacts among themselves. According to the older interlocutor, “Borderlanders have always manipulated the border for practical reasons.”

Dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia in 1991, and the resulting changed border regime between two sovereign states, Slovenia and Croatia, substantially affected the locals’ lives as the borderlanders. Suddenly it became important who lived in which country, and who was of Slovenian or Croatian origin. As they put themselves: “Before we were as one and now we are divided”.

In the third research locale, in Bela Krajina and south west Žumberak, the author conducted a fieldwork from 2002 to 2005 among Žumberčani. Irrespective of the border, these locals have also comprised a homogeneous social space where most of them have been employed, attended schools, and made families since the WWII. Intricately intertwined and diverse social relationships have been seriously damaged by the imposition of the international border regime. Following these experiences, people along the border were greatly concerned about the imposition of the Schengen regime at Slovenian-Croatian border. They doubted the success of prospect cross-border economic activities because, as they said, on the other side (Croatian) of the border there lived impoverished neighbours. However, they were ready to contribute to the development of the region and preserve their local identity as Žumberčani, i.e. descendants of famous Uskoki, Christian refugees from the Balkans who settled the area, which was a part of the Austrian Military Border under the Empire’s protection, during the sixteenth century. Today, most of them are proud of being the Greek Catholics, and they seek to maintain their specific regional identity by some activities in Cultural associations on both sides of the border.

In this regard, the first call for project application within the OP in 2008 proved as the best opportunity to commence a concrete action in the area. Yet initial

enthusiasm of potential partners-applicants (two research organisations, local cultural organisations, two counties from Slovenia and Croatia) disappeared when they faced the programme demands and criteria. In turn, OP Slovenia-Croatia 2007-2013 is financed by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), a new legal and financial instrument of the EU applicable to Candidate Countries and Potential Candidate Countries as well as to the Member States, which share a cross-border programme with those countries. The rate of funding is up to 85% of the total eligible public funding. The authors of the Programme believed that programme aims could be implemented by increasing the competitiveness of key sectors, supporting the cooperation among different sectors (tourism, SME development), and through protection of nature and environment and cultural heritage for long-lasting sustainable development (OP 2007: 36).

The draft idea for the project proposal in 2010, established through some meetings with potential partners, pertains to the protection of nature and environment and cultural heritage for long-lasting sustainable development. After some meetings in 2009, partners agreed that the restoration of the mowers' path over the cross-border Žumberak would prevent overgrowing of the region and contribute to the maintaining of regional Žumberak identity. However, the first difficulties appeared when partners met the eligibility criteria. Eligible applicants-partners are only bodies playing an active role (legal, financial and operational capacities) in project preparation and implementation. Such partners can only be non-profit legal persons, established by public or private law for the purposes of public and general interest, they must provide at least 5% (in Slovenia) or at least 15% (in Croatia) of the total eligible costs, and at least one project partner has to be from Slovenia and one from Croatia, located in the programme eligible area (NUTS 3).

Potential partners from Croatia are unfortunately non-eligible in financial view. Irrespective of their ardent engagement in project design and fulfilment of two other necessary preconditions, their institutions, at least for now, cannot provide 15% of financing. Looking for the other solution, another eligible institution, interested in the project, takes time. Namely, many people emigrated from Žumberak in the 60s of the previous century to other European countries or urban centres outside the border area. They still maintain close contacts with Žumberčani, either with relatives or neighbours, priests, cultural associations. According to some interviewees, they are potential donators or investors in the region. However, according to the programme

criteria, those who live outside Slovenia and Croatia, i.e. outside the NUTS 3 region, are not eligible.

Next difficulty stems from the fact that the Greek Catholics are registered as religious minority only in Croatia; in Slovenia, such minority is not evidenced. As a result, the project content cannot refer to the programme priority – minorities as preservers of traditional bonds in the border area (OP 2007: 16). Moreover, a religious minority *per se* is not an eligible minority in the Programme, which refers only to ethnic and national minorities in both countries.

Finally, in the view of this particle of border (third research locale), mainly depopulated and overgrown area with poor economic prospects, two shortcomings of the Programme are worth to be emphasised. The first one pertains to the already mentioned partnership criteria, which are not realistic for those partners who are active in the marginalised border area but are financially non-eligible. In a case when they fulfil the financial criterion, they usually do not act in eligible region. The latter is a second weakness of the Programme that deserves a critique. As mentioned above, the authors of the Programme defined as the programme-targeted area the area of the common Slovenian-Croatian border. The counties and regions concerned are the territorial units on the NUTS level 3, which include also the 20% of Central Slovenian region with the capital Ljubljana and 20% of the City of Zagreb. Consequently, more than a half of Slovenian territory is defined as an eligible border area. The rationale was the broader the area the more potential partners are included. However, potential partners from other regions and European countries, who are interested in the development of the location and are financially eligible, are excluded. Moreover, the SWOT analysis does not pertain to the under developed cross-border area but to the area of potential applicants. In this regard one can find a lot of contradictions in the analysis. For instance, analysing strengths of the cross-border area “well developed system of education and training” is identified. However, analysing weaknesses of the area “low education and qualification structure of the population” is emphasised as well. Such inconsistencies are numerous in the SWOT analysis mostly due to weakly designed programme.

Programme fails to incorporate the most marginalised border areas either because potential applicants in such areas are few or they do not fulfil the eligible criteria, or because such areas are not interesting for eligible applicants from more distant but still eligible area. Despite the underlying rationale of the Programme, to

neutralise various disparities between the geographically nearest partners by their inclusion in multilateral programmes (e.g. EU programmes) based on general norms and higher internationalization, the question remains, whether the application for that kind of project demands preliminary investigation, an exhaustive search for eligible partners from eligible area?

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