

**Ľubomír Falt'an (ed.): Mental Border. The Representations of Neighbours in Slovak-Austrian Border Regions. (Mentálna hranica. Obraz suseda v slovensko-rakúskom pohraničí).**

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Border regions have often become a topic for authors of different science disciplines. Border areas are characteristic for their specific economic, social and cultural context. They often represent marginal regions from social, economic as well infrastructural point of view. Cultural aspects of these social areas and of the citizens who live there are particularly distinctive. Immediate territorial proximity brings together people with diverse national identities and with diverse conceptions and consciousness of „the others“.

This publication concerns the phenomenon of borders from various perspectives, such as mental, territorial, social, and linguistic, while framing the issue within the setting of the Slovak – Austrian (Austrian – Slovak) borderland. Contributions analyse the long-term formed national stereotypes of inhabitants from this borderland. They attempt to depict retrospectively the stereotype formation process and to uncover how barbed wire and „iron curtain“ had influenced the consciousness of people on both sides. An important turning point in this area was the year 1989 and the change that brought a new situation to the border. The border lost its character of a barrier only to be crossed with difficulty and allowed to examine how the „breaking“ of images and borders in the consciousness of people has been accomplished. The publication provides several research findings covering a broad time period in which the mutual representations and the perceptions of the neighbours were created. A major portion of the research was realised in communities located on both sides of the national border and the empirical material was analysed by several research methods.

The international (Slovak – Austrian) and multidisciplinary authorial team made it possible to survey the problem from various viewpoints and to clarify the broader context. Such an approach allows the reader to follow the problem through all of its layers and stages of development. The publication comprises several levels of motives and attitudes towards foreigners – the historic level as well as the level of personal and current experiences and perspectives of inhabitants.

Reflections about the origin, development and perceptions of neighbour relations could be, according to the editor's forewords, considered as a constituent of the reconstruction of cultural parameters of the European Union's enlargement processes. Images and portrayals of „ourselves“ and „the others“ on the other side of the border, and the symbolic character of crucial actors at the local, regional, national or European level contribute to knowledge about the processes of expansion of European identity. Contributions to the publication attempt to convey a better understanding of the meaning inhabitants of both sides attribute to the phenomenon of separated territories and the links and aspects of the creation and maintenance of the mental border.

In the introduction, Ľubomír Falt'an and Silvia Miháliková expound the social context of the publication's genesis and explain the authors' focus on local sites of towns situated on both sides of the border with Austria. Pairs of towns were chosen within the project which have a close neighbour on the other side of the Morava river border: Záhorská Ves (SR) - Angern (A), Gajary (SR) - Dúrnkrut (A), Moravský Svätý Ján (SR) - Hohenau (A). Surveys in Slovak and Austrian regions were accomplished already in 2002 on two levels: surveys in towns and analyses of media outputs focused on the „neighbour“ in regional and national newspapers. Findings are presented in the second through fifth sections of the book. An exception is the first section which presents the research results of Slovak human geographers and sociologists from the 1990's which concern the Slovak-Austrian borderland.

Daniel Kollár's study (conducted in 2003) is an attempt to analyse the perceptions of the Slovak-Austrian border and the inhabitants' ideas about the impact of opening the border on life in their town. The findings of previous research made in 1998 in four towns of the Slovak-Austrian border region seem even more productive. They made it possible to identify differences in the portrayals of Austria and Slovakia as well as to evaluate the reasons for and the sufficiency of cross-border co-operation.

In another contribution, Zdenek Šťastný presents sociological research focused on the analysis of co-operation in the attitudes and contacts between municipalities such as educational and cultural activities, interest groups activities, economic cross-border activities and co-operation in the Slovak-Austrian borderland. The research was realised within a broader research project carried out by the Institute for Sociology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 1994-1995. The author suggests not only an analysis of the social actor's attitudes, but also documents existing socio-economic conditions for development of co-operation.

The second section of the publication deals with pre- and post- 1989 social, political and economic contexts and their influence on the different portrayals of neighbours on both the Slovak and Austrian side of the border. Authentic narratives of people delineate a retrospective of the neighbour's portrayal from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until 1989 and show us images and stereotypes that exist in the consciousness of individuals as well as social groups in the context of local historic memory. This section is followed by a reflection of events that accompanied the fall of the iron curtain and the first contacts between the Slovaks and the Austrians, which formed the portrayal of the neighbour. Informants' narratives and researchers' interpretations, either Austrian (Sonja Dejanović, Karin Liebhart) or Slovak (Ľubomír Falt'an), highlight the processes of representation and stereotypes formation as well as factors that influence these processes.

The next section surveys the development and dynamics of this mental border from 1989 to 2000. In this section, a distinctly prevailing phenomenon is the problem of the mental border which is connected with the physical border – the river Morava and with the building of border crossings – bridges. This factor proves to be one of the most significant, not only in the rapprochement of inhabitants from both sides but also for municipal development. Other topics, which represent other stereotypes – either at the individual level or as component of a national collective memory, are criminality, illegal migration, the enlargement of the European Union, language barriers, bias against ethnic minorities, the peripheral location of these municipalities etc. This contribution (authored by Zdenek Šťastný, Karin Liebhart a Sonja Dejanović) enables the reader to compare perceptions of these issues between Slovak and Austrian inhabitants by preserving the authenticity of their narratives supplied with researchers' reflections on the issue.

The last section deals with the representations of Slovak-Austrian relationships and Austria in Slovak press, the perception of the east-west border in the media and the comparison of Slovak and Austrian press from the viewpoint of the creation of the neighbour's representations. In this case, the authors chose the method of content analysis on both regional and national levels. From the Slovak side, there is the work of Oľga Gyárfášová, while the Austrian team was again represented by Sonja Dejanović a Karin Liebhart. A greater amount of contributions in Austrian regional weekly press enabled the authors to make better generalisations and comparisons with other countries and to point out the crucial categories that define „cross-border discourse.“

In the end of her chapter, Gyárfášová compares these various analysis and draws the conclusions that we also partially found in previous chapters. In the Austrian media concerning Slovakia, the negative emotions of a threat from the East and the dramatizing of

related risks are apparent. The Slovak regional press, instead of reflecting neighbours, focused on self-reflection and comparison with neighbours (as did the informants' narratives).

In the afterword, the editor emphasizes the period of Euroregions as it is connected with the search for new solutions and approaches to cross-border co-operation. He completes the mosaic of the portrayal of co-operation development that was depicted in the previous chapters. He highlights the new quality of relationships within Euroregions and shows how coordinated regional politics create preconditions for the development of these borderlands.

The publication uncovers several stereotypes on both sides of the border which persist in political and public debates. The book provides insight into national stereotypes and the formation of national identity, but its task is not purely academic. It provides insights and perspectives on more developed possible co-operation in this region within an enlarged Europe.

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