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## BELA KRAJINA

### Introduction

Bela krajina is a peripheral Slovenian region remote from Slovenia's central areas in terms of both traffic, it is reached via the main road through Novo mesto, and relief. The wooded plateaux of Kočevski Rog and Gorjanci separate it from the most significant economic and population centres of the country. Because of this and its relatively low population density, dispersed settlements, lack of urban centres, and high unemployment rates since the mid-1980s, this region is one of the most problematic Slovenian regions from the point of view of development, although it has some noticeable development possibilities.

The central part of Bela krajina is low and mostly level karstland, whose waterless surface is broken only by some rare water courses and smaller sources. The karstic surface, along with very unfavourable conditions for agriculture, prevent greater population density. The area was settled very early, although not very densely. Today, smaller settlements and hamlets predominate. Only Črnomelj and Metlika are urban settlements, each with a couple of thousands of inhabitants and several central functions. The lack of urban centres is felt even more strongly because of the remoteness of larger regional centres; the closest one, Novo mesto, is 25 km away. Bela krajina extends over an area of about 600 sq. km. and has a population of around 27,000. The average population density in the region is below 50 persons per a square kilometre. Greater population densities can be found only in its lowest part, between Črnomelj and Metlika, and in the slightly raised thermal belt on the slopes of Kočevski Rog, where the majority of the region's vineyards are located. The possibilities for the development of industry were quite modest in the past, the only large company being the coal mine in Kanižarica, which closed down in the 1970s. Later, some enterprises engaged in the textile, metal, and electrical industries developed, but since the beginning of the 1990s all of them have been facing serious crisis's. This is also reflected in the region's unemployment rates, which are slightly above the national average. The climatic conditions are good for agriculture, particularly for viticulture and fruit growing, but because of the karstic surface and scattered plots and land tenure, agricultural production is barely profitable and, moreover, has had great difficulties in finding markets. The region's infrastructure also lags behind the national average, especially with regard to the telephone network and water supply.

Our research focused on the areas of Metlika, Vinica, and Stari trg ob Kolpi. The first represents an urban and sub-urban area in the immediate vicinity of the border, the second one is a larger local centre, and the third is a fairly remote area faced with numerous demographic problems. Unlike the other Slovenian regions researched, Bela krajina is an ethnically mixed area, which is a result of substantial Croatian immigration, chiefly in and around the area of Metlika. Furthermore, during the war, this region was in the immediate proximity of Croatian and Bosnian battlefields — between 1991 and 1995 the line of combat between Serbs and Croats ran through Karlovac, which is only 15 km. away. With its greater ethnic diversity and the presence of particular discord among the local populations and the immigrants coupled with the impact of the proximity of military conflicts and bloody inter-ethnic conflicts, is what precisely distinguishes Bela krajina from the other Slovenian regions researched.

### **The formation of new border. A brief historical overview and the present situation**

Until the 12<sup>th</sup> century the territory of Bela krajina belonged to Croatia. Later it was seized by seigniors of Višnja gora and came under the church authority of the Patriarchate of Aquileia. After 1209 the majority of the estates were first owned by the Andechs-Meran seigniors, later by the Spanheim family, and from 1374 on by the Habsburgs. Since 1440 Bela krajina was part of Carniola. Bela krajina got its present name in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Enciklopedija Slovenije, 1, pp. 214–215). For several centuries Žumberak, a settlement on the southern wing of the Gorjanci hills, also belonged within its environs (today it is in Croatia). In the late Middle Ages, a major part of Bela krajina was owned by the Frankopans, which is why Žumberak was later annexed to Croatia. As a result of the onetime border, there are still several border pockets or enclaves in the vicinity of Metlika which exist today. Between the World Wars and after the division of Yugoslavia into so-called *banovinas* or administrative and self-managing territorial-political units, Bela krajina was first annexed to *Savska banovina* (Croatia) in 1931, but because of protests it was soon returned into the framework of Slovenia (Dravska banovina); only the area of Marindol and neighbouring villages remained under Croatia for several years after World War II.

With the independence of Croatia and Slovenia a new element was brought into the region — the international political border. Although the border line has yet to be demarcated officially, the border as a legal, political and administrative factor already functions in the full sense of the word. The states have mutually recognised their independence and started exercising their powers as such. Croatia was somewhat slower in taking concrete measures in this respect, partly because of its insufficiently defined plans for independence, but mostly because of the military conflicts in its

territory. Moreover, the symbols one becomes aware of at the border crossings, border police, the customs authorities and activities, and corresponding international services and controls therefore represents a wide range of new factors in the region.



*Prelesje village with fields and meadows by the Kolpa.*

## **Migration dynamics of the population**

Communication between the Croatian and Slovenian population across the Kolpa river has always been very lively. Although the border is more than 600 years old, without taking into account some minor changes, it has never represented an actual political boundary but merely an administrative one. Because Slovenian territories belonged to the Austrians and the Croatian areas to the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, slightly different forms of cultural landscape, different settlement patterns, manners of land distribution, systems of inheritance, etc. developed. Because of frequent communication in both directions, the dialects have some similar or even common elements. These contacts created a number of mixed marriages, which, however, have not changed the global ethnic picture on either side of the border; the principle of assimilation into a receiving community applied. An exception to this is the tiny *Uskok* population which came to this area while running from the Turks. To this day its members have preserved some linguistic and, above all, some religious characteristics (Greek Catholicism), the latter being a decisive cohesive element that has preserved them as a group. The present-day ethnic diversity

is primarily a reflection of the modern post-industrialisation era that began in the sixties.

Because of its openness and its proximity to the Turkish empire during some four hundred years, Bela krajina also played the role of a transit region. Throughout the 18th century it represented a corridor through which groups of people, particularly refugees, moved frequently. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a period of calm, since the area on both sides of the border was agricultural and characterised by strong rural overpopulation. This led to massive emigrations in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to overseas countries, especially to the USA. The claims that every household in Bela krajina has a relative abroad therefore might not be exaggerated. Relatively few people returned (Genorio, 1989).

More intensive migration processes were triggered by industrialisation, which began in these parts of the country with the development of industrial plants engaged in the textile, metalworking, and food-processing industries, first in the region's urban cores, Metlika and Črnomelj, but later also in some other places, such as Semič, Vinica, and Gradec. In addition to the local Slovenian population, these also attracted some immigrants, most of whom settled in the area of Metlika, which has the best traffic links but also a large population density and rural overpopulation. Besides immigrants, there was also a considerable number of daily migrants who commuted to work in Slovenian companies. But unlike the Bosnians and Macedonians who worked in Slovenia during the same period, these workers were not employed predominantly in municipal services and construction (Repolusk, 1995; Hrvati u Sloveniji, 1997).

At the same time, highly qualified people were moving to Ljubljana and Zagreb. This was not only due to the lack of suitable jobs and working conditions at home, but also because there were no possibilities for daily commuting. This process continued throughout the eighties and nineties, when the hastily established industrial companies began to face serious economic problems during which they first trimmed their development departments — where they existed — and as problems escalated, some companies were brought to the brink of bankruptcy. The brown coal mine in Kanižarica near Črnomelj, the first herald of the industrial age in the region, operated up until the late seventies, when it was closed down because it was depleted and unprofitable. Migration dynamics in the border areas and in entire Bela krajina are primarily a reflection of the region's economic and social situation, which accelerates outmigration. But the most frequent type of migrations are short-distance migrations due to marriages (Klemenčič, 1992). Because of relatively modest trading in real estate and the population's great attachment to the local environment Bela krajina, like the entirety of Slovenia, is fairly passive as far as migrations are concerned.

Since migrations were strongly affected by factors associated with the population structure, most notably, by its educational and vocational structure, our field research paid attention to these factors, especially in connection with nationality.

In Bela krajina the survey was conducted among 365 persons, of whom approximately one third were male and two thirds female. The educational structure of those

surveyed exceeds the regional and even the national average, which can be explained by the nature of the sample. Since this was restricted to parents of children who are currently in primary school, their educational structure is better than that of the entire population, where older people are also included. The older generation still comprises about 50 % of persons with primary or even lower education (Letopis Slovenije, 1997). In our sample, persons with primary education account for only a fifth of those surveyed, this proportion was the same for Slovenes and Croats (members of other nationalities were very few and are therefore not presented separately). About 30 % of them have a three-year vocational education and about as many of them have a four-year secondary education. Persons with 'high' and 'higher' (university) education are more numerous among Slovenes (about a fifth) than among Croats (7 %).

By far the most common types of migrations are short-distance movements, chiefly because of a change of residence and/or marriage. Both of these reasons are often closely related and usually limited to an area within a radius of 20 km. Within this area the inhabitants satisfy most of their needs for education, work, supply, relaxation etc. Being that these are parents of school-aged children, most migrations occurred during 1971 and 1984 (this, however, is a characteristic of the sample in question and not of the entire population).



*Farms with the surrounding fields and meadows in the vicinity of Semič.*

At present only about one percent of those questioned expressed their readiness to move. The present generation of persons surveyed apparently have already provided

for themselves and their future life, which in this predominately rural area means that they have built a new house or repaired an old one, and therefore do not think about moving away. However, it should not be neglected that the migration flexibility of the entire Slovenian population is relatively small. The Croatian population is much more ready to move, which stems from the fact that most of them are immigrants presently living in apartment blocks. In view of the values of their environment (a family house is a symbol of the quality of living) and models from their original environment — the impact of which is quite strong because of its proximity — for them movement is associated with the acquisition of real-estate and spatial stabilisation in the future. But even in the case of Croats the share of those who are ready to move does not vary much from the average.

Among the reasons for outmigration the persons questioned mentioned, in the first place, various economic (job security comes before the amount of salary) and infrastructural conditions (particularly quality water supply and telephone). The telephone network is still poorly developed in this area, which is a great disadvantage since modern computer, telephone, and other links are one of the basic conditions for business activities. There are virtually no examples of people wishing to move away because of bad interpersonal relations and psychological and social reasons, which is certainly a good sign, at least for interpersonal and inter-ethnic relations.

## **The ethnic composition of the population and interethnic relations**

The latest census figures show that in 1991, a tenth of the inhabitants of Bela krajina or close to 3,000 were non-Slovenes, and that Croats were by far the most numerous among them. Ethnic diversity is greater in the urban area of Metlika and its neighbouring settlements, and in Črnomelj. The reasons for the relatively diverse ethnic composition of this region have already been mentioned in the introduction. Among the groups of immigrants Croats predominate. There is also a great number of mixed marriages among the immigrants: a quarter of Slovenes live in such marriages and as many as a half of Croats, which proves their immigrant origin. Such a high share of mixed marriages can be explained by the traditionally strong contacts between the inhabitants on both sides of this — once administrative, but currently international political — border, as well as by their linguistic, cultural, and religious similarities. Marriages are much more easily contracted if partners are of the same religion and if they also share certain cultural and linguistic characteristics (Kržišnik-Bukić, 1997).

Changes in the relations between particular ethnic groups of immigrants (especially in the Metlika area; elsewhere these are not as widely observed) are not a consequence of the new border and citizenship either, but a reflection of ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia. Differentiation, along these lines, has been observed among both school children and adults. Antagonism at local levels versus immigrants has

been somewhat relegated to the background, but it may be expected to re-emerge once the situation in the Balkans calms down; the immigrants will be faced with this because of their economic and social position and the factor of cultural shock can not be overlooked for it is the eternal companion of most first-generation immigrant groups in new environments.

The high portion of mixed marriages is also reflected in the opinions about inter-ethnic relations in the domestic social environment. The majority of the people questioned consider inter-ethnic relations to be good and mostly non-conflicting. Other answers are rare, but interesting enough. Two views, which are also strongly present in the public's opinion, stand out in particular. A comparatively frequent remark is that new-comers pay little attention to the habits, customs, culture, and language of the local population, thus placing themselves into a marginal position and waiting for the indigenous population to get used to them and to a set of new situations. The second remark is economically oriented and places the blame for economic failures primarily on the immigrants, claiming that they cause unfair competition in the fields of employment, entrepreneurship, and housing. This last reproach is apparently justified, since the locals had to build their houses by themselves while the immigrants got flats in apartment blocks that were built by the state or the local communities from public (state) funds. Also in the past, within the field of employment, the immigrants often had an advantage over the locals (this according to the survey results, 1996).

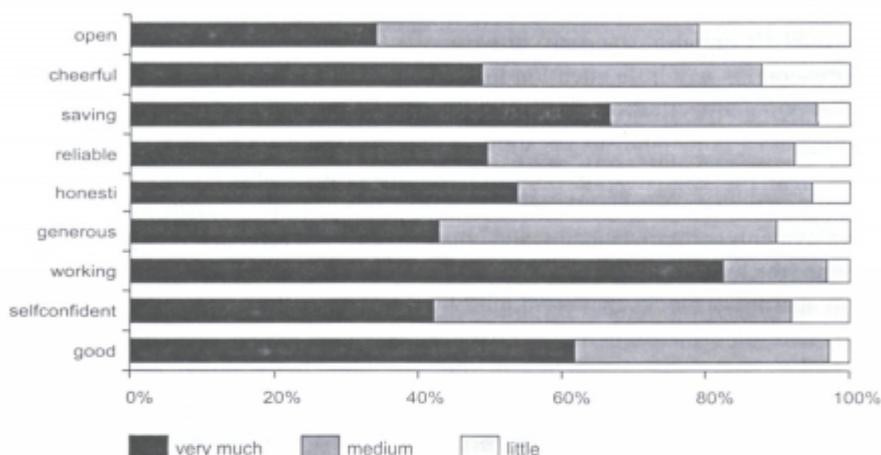
The country's independence has also faced the local population with new challenges in inter-ethnic relationships. Deeper divisions between the Slovene and Croatian populations here haven't, to date, developed mostly because during the process of Slovenia's emancipation Croats were in a similar position and later aroused compassion because of their affliction by the war that raged in the vicinity. But the attention people now pay to ethnic questions has greatly increased. The proximity of military and ethnic conflicts and the presence of refugees and problems related to them have, nevertheless, brought a great deal of unrest in inter-ethnic relations.

Most of the persons questioned estimate that the relations essentially have not changed. Only a small percentage of them believed they had improved, while a quarter of them stated that inter-ethnic relations had deteriorated. This is linked to the military and ethnic conflicts in Croatia, which also strongly resounded in Bela krajina since it was only some 15 kilometres away from the line of fire. Although this deterioration of relations applies mainly to those relations with Serbs, nevertheless, there is a marked difference between Slovenes and Croats regarding the perception of inter-ethnic relations. About a third of the Slovenes questioned are convinced the relations have deteriorated, whereas the same opinion is shared by only a quarter of those Croats questioned.

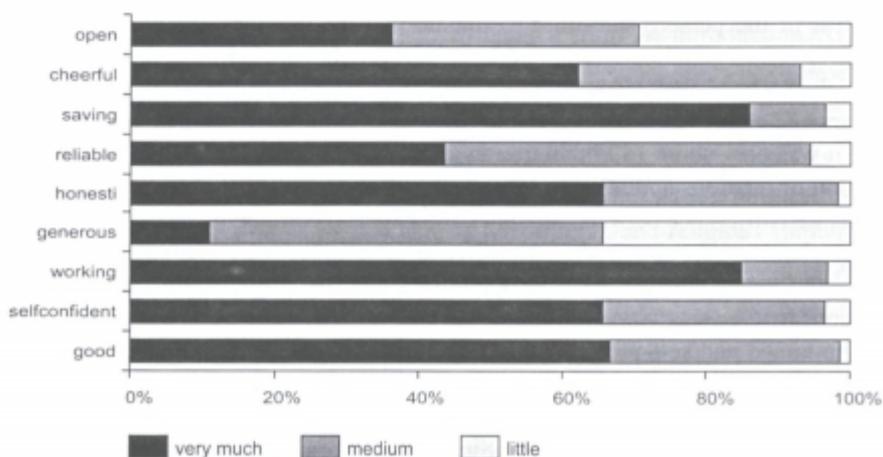
The image and self-image of the Slovenian and other, primarily Croatian, inhabitants is particularly interesting. In view of the fact that this is a highly sensitive theme, we could have obtained fairly stereotypical answers, but the interviewees provided some very interesting opinions. Since opinions on such matters are very subjective

tive, it is difficult to make a comparison between particular areas. But it is precisely this subjectivity that gives us an insight into the image and self-image of the border populations and, in a way, also shows the level of their inter-ethnic relations. When asked to assess the selected personality characteristics of their own and 'the other' ethnic community, they gave us the following answers.

#### Characteristics of Slovenes — self-opinions

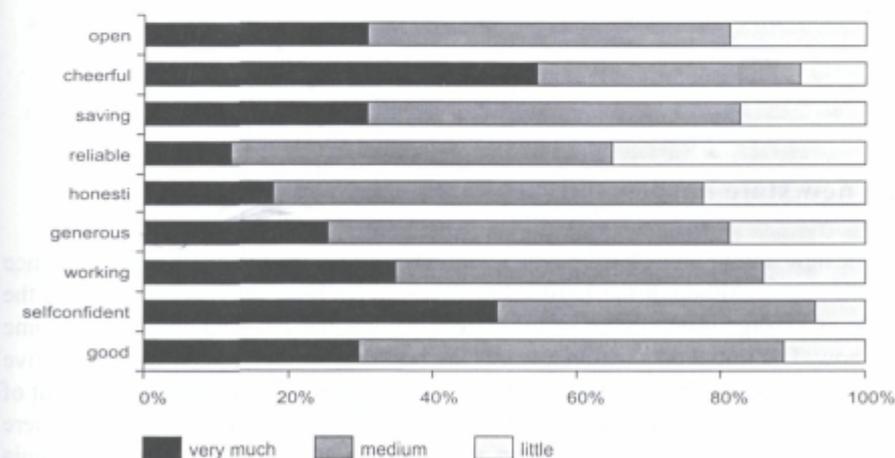


#### Characteristics of Slovenes — Croats' opinions



The fact that stands out particularly with respect to the image and self-image of Slovenes is that the Croats questioned assess the qualities of Slovenes better than Slovenes themselves. This is particularly interesting because within the framework of Slovenia the inhabitants of Bela krajina are regarded, in particular, as the most hospitable people of all Slovenes. The Slovenes questioned see themselves primarily as very thrifty and hardworking (70 %). The Croats also ascribe them these qualities, yet to an even greater extent. The Slovenes do not consider themselves as very open, self-confident, generous and reliable, and neither do the Croats. The only difference is that the Croats questioned see Slovenes as much more self-confident than the Slovenes see themselves. It is interesting to note that the Slovenes deny themselves qualities such as reliability and generosity, which are traditionally ascribed to the inhabitants of Bela krajina. Perhaps the reason for this can be sought in the difference between the traditional image and the present situation, where individualism and the pursuit of self-interest predominate — that is, as a kind of disappointment over the traditional values that have disappeared. At any rate, the fact that in assessing the qualities of Slovenes, the Slovenes and Croats more or less agree on nearly all points, shows that the answers reflect a certain reality and thereby also the quality of the results obtained in this field research.

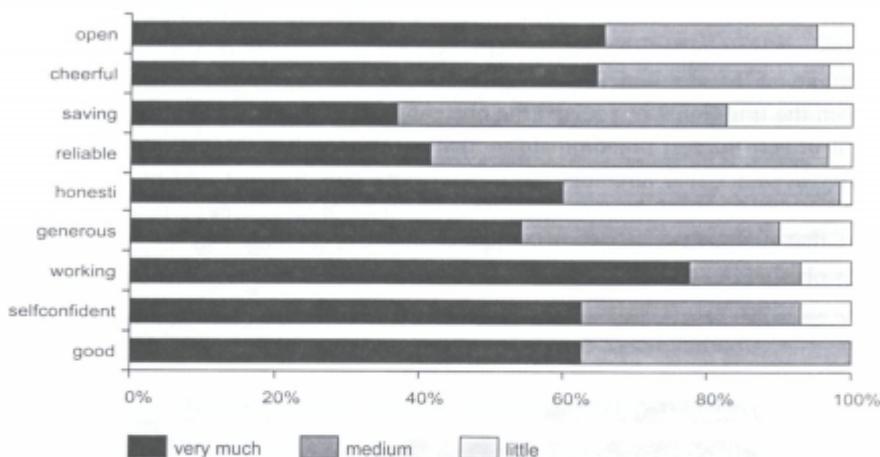
Characteristics of Croats — Slovenes' opinions



The situation is somewhat different in the case the image and self-image of Croats, as there are great differences between the answers provided by the Slovenes and those given by the Croats themselves. The general impression is that the Slovenes rate almost all the characteristics of Croats essentially lower than the Croats themselves rate them, or than the Slovenes and Croats questioned assess the characteristics of Slovenes. In evaluating the qualities of Croats, a relatively high portion of the Slo-

venes chose the 'middle possibility' — that describes them as "fairly open, fairly thrifty," etc. — which can also be regarded as a reflection of their indecision. The Slovenes rated them low, in particular with regards to their reliability, honesty, diligence, generosity, thriftiness, openness and goodness. The Croats themselves also gave the lowest ratings to previously mentioned qualities, but they nevertheless assessed them half better than the Slovenes did.

Characteristics of Croats — self-opinions



## The new state border and its effects

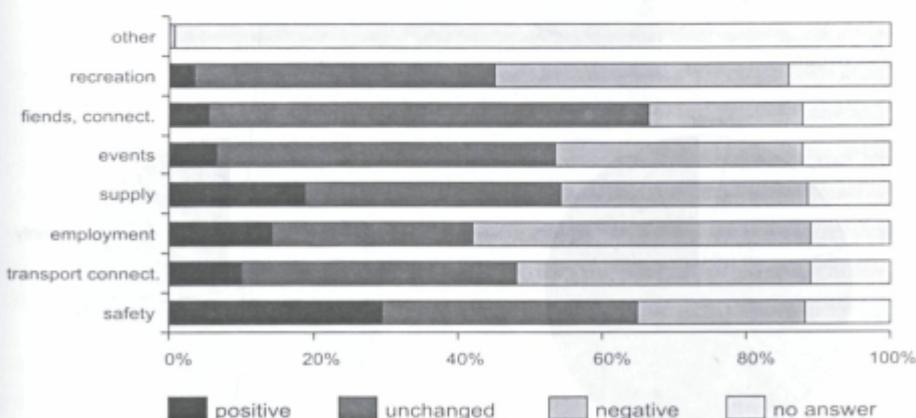
The new international border with Croatia became a reality with the independence of both states. Although the border line has not yet been delineated in detail, the border as an organised system of the state apparatus has been functioning for some time now. The initial disposition towards the border was often linked with a negative emotional response. This, however, often involves a 'learned' reflex and is a result of certain kinds of propaganda. At the time when this field research was carried out there was a lot of talk in the media about the elimination of borders. When Slovenia declared independence, the dominant process in Europe was the transformation of former international borders into mere administrative boundaries — that is the disappearance of borders. It was therefore expected that the border with Croatia would be an open ("green") border, but due to military and political complications, including the war in Croatia on the one hand, and relations in the peripheral areas of the European Union and Slovenia's efforts to join European integration processes on the other hand, these expectations have not been met. Part of the blame for this can

also be attributed to the rather inept approach of both countries towards solving some of the open questions regarding the border, where the Croatian side showed itself unreliable and Slovenia overindulgent and indecisive.

In such a climate, the room for available manoeuvring towards trans-border relations was reduced, and the border was almost invariably seen as something bad. The attitudes of the regions inhabitants towards the border widely varies: because of this, some have lost their income, some have been cut off from their friends, acquaintances, relatives, and entertainment, whereas to others it has brought a stable and relatively well-paid jobs with the border police, customs services and accompanying activities. Similar findings were also obtained by other older research studies (Zupančič, Repolusk, 1993).

However, it should not be taken for granted that the establishment of the new state border took place simultaneously with other socio-economic changes. The economic crisis that caused many companies to collapse, unemployment and, hence, an uncertain future, political changes, a new system of administration and decision-making, new ideological patterns of thinking, all of which was accompanied by Slovenia's political emancipation and the establishment of effective state authority and, of course, also reflected in the border area.

Evaluation of changes after the origin of state border



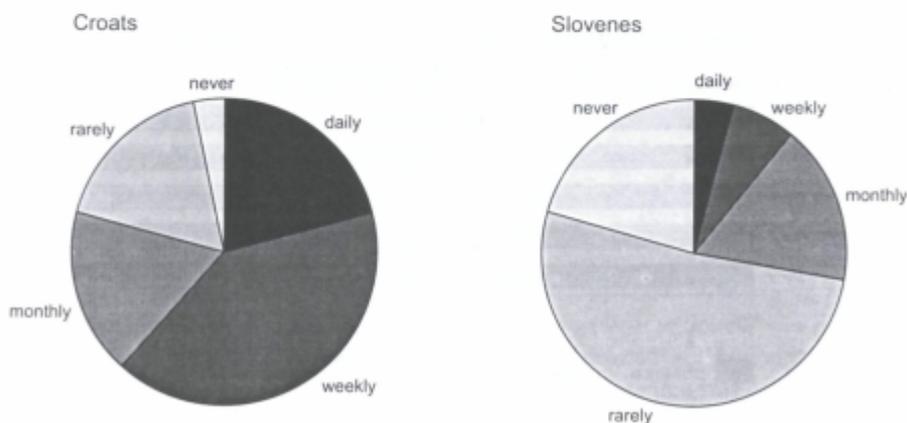
The creation of the new state border has also brought certain changes in people's feelings. Safety was assessed most positively, largely because of the proximity of military conflicts. The state border, with its infrastructure, functions as an effective mechanism and this gave many people a feeling of greater safety. But by far the most frequent answers were that the situation had essentially gone unchanged. The situation in the fields of employment (which, however, is not the effect of the border), supply, entertainment, recreation, and transportation was assessed slightly less favourably.

rably. The inhabitants of this area feel cut off from the rest of Slovenia, but this was a problem which previously existed.

## Transborder relations

Trans-border relations in this area comprise a wide range of different activities performed by the inhabitants of this border region. They primarily encompass the following three sets of activities: supply (of goods, cultural and other events), recreation, and business activities. In the area surveyed, there are great differences between Slovenes and Croats in the frequency of trans-border contacts. The Croatian population travels to Croatia much more frequently than Slovenes do. Only less than a tenth of the Slovenes questioned travel to Croatia on a daily basis, and a quarter of them travel there more than once a month. Three quarters of them pay visit to Croatia only rarely, mostly during the summer tourist season. In the case of the Croatian population, the situation is quite the opposite: three quarters of them pay daily, weekly, or monthly visits to Croatia to visit their friends and relatives and because of their attachment to their place of origin.

Frequency of travels to Croatia by nations

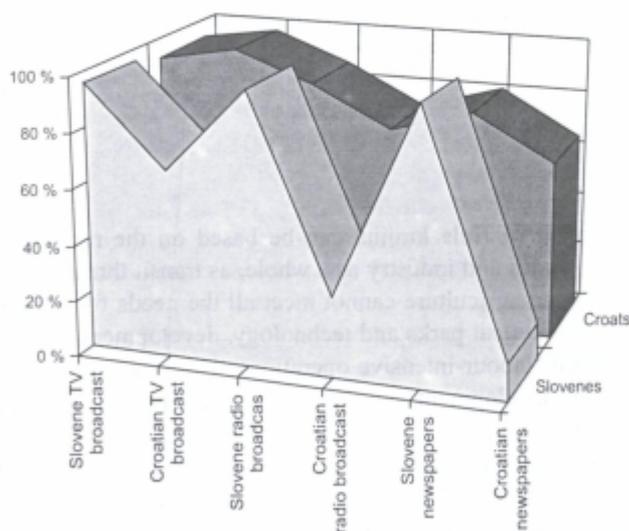


The most frequent motive for travels to Croatia is to visit acquaintances, friends, and relatives. This applies equally to the Slovenes and the Croats. The reason for such a great similarity between the motives for travel to Croatia can be found in the great number of mixed marriages. Another factor effecting the frequency of cross-border travel is the fact that people own land on both sides of the border (which was linked with citizenship). The actual amount of land and other real estate owned by foreign

citizens in this border area is not known, but judging from the traditionally frequent contacts, the great number of mixed marriages, and our experiences with other Slovenian border regions along the Slovenian-Croatian border it may be quite considerable (Belec, 1992; Belec, 1993). The third group is represented by vacationers whose visits to Croatia are more frequent during the summer tourist months.

Information about what is going on in the border area and on the other side of the state border is of special significance for trans-border contacts. Following the media — watching television, listening to radio programs and the reading of newspapers — is one of the prerequisites for communication to develop and it is crucial for the border area to first establish communication within its own framework. All this depends on the readiness of people to join these processes as well as on the technical and financial possibilities to realise such plans.

Listening to radio, watching TV and reading newspapers by Slovenes and Croats



According to survey results, Croats show great interest in both electronic and print media; 80 % of them read both Slovenian and Croatian newspapers and magazines, listen to Slovenian radio stations and watch Slovenian television programs. A similar percentage of Slovenes follow Slovenian media only, and solely half that percentage also follow the Croatian media. These figures are perfectly within expectations, because immigrant groups have to integrate into the environment in which they live and work.

Among the more outstanding obstacles for greater trans-border cooperation are the differences in the level of economic development and similarities between the

economic structure of the areas on both sides of the border. The two sides do not complement each other but compete with each other. Such a situation hinders further development of trans-border cooperation, despite the fact that there may be interest in it. Other obstacles are the lack of adequate information and several other factors of a traffic-geographic and strategic nature and, to a certain extent, the inter-ethnic relations between the two sides.

The last question was how these negative effects of the border could be exploited most rationally and converted into eventual advantages. To this question we obtained fairly stereotypical answers. By far the most frequently proposed solution is the establishment of a free trade zone, which is followed by various services, crafts and finally tourism and catering. Some people believe that changes are not necessary at all and that the present situation suits them perfectly well. Many see the prospects for social survival in the revitalisation of industrial and production activities. In such cases, trans-border cooperation would be merely a supplement. People have fairly high expectations of tourism, but in view of the region's actual spatial possibilities and its distance from tourist markets this does not seem very probable. The role of agriculture has often been totally ignored.

## New Prosperity

The future development of Bela krajina can be based on the revitalisation of particular industrial companies and industry as a whole, as transit through the region is too small and tourism and agriculture cannot meet all the needs for employment. Due to the lack of technological parks and technology, development will probably have to be directed towards labour-intensive operations. This does not represent the optimum course of social development, but there is no real basis for anything more demanding. Tourism in a well-preserved rural environment, backed up by vital tourist centres in Slovenia, also has considerable potential. Although it cannot become the basic economic activity in the region, it could be a good supplementary activity.

The ethnic structure will probably remain unchanged, as the region is not attractive for immigration and the demographic differences between particular ethnic groups are no longer so great. Minor conflicts, that have so far accompanied the relations between various groups, probably have no wider implications and are therefore not expected to grow into open confrontations. Differentiation will probably remain.

With the end of the war and the lessening of social, political, and ethnic troubles in Bosnia, transit in the direction of the Una corridor and Bihač will increase, which will benefit primarily Metlika as a border town and traffic cross-roads. In this case, and also otherwise, Bela krajina needs better traffic links with the nearest regional centre, Novo mesto and Ljubljana. This would eliminate the feeling of isolation — that eternal companion of life in border regions.

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