

Between social and spatial convergence and divergence: an exploration into the political geography of European contact areas

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Abstract The European continent, the motherland of nationalism, and the part of the world where political borders and different territorial and cultural identities are mostly interrelated, is now facing new challenges regarding how best to represent its numerous interests within one system. With the increase of international integration European countries began to devote greater attention to the development problems of their border areas that had to be helped to undertake certain functions in the international integration process. The fostering of a more balanced regional development also resulted in a strengthening of regional characteristics, which the new model could no longer ignore. Regional characteristics in turn have always been preserved in Europe by persistent historical and cultural elements of ethnic and linguistic variety. Therefore, it is not surprising that the process of European integration based on the new regional development model was accompanied by a parallel process of ethnic or regional awakening of minorities and other local communities. The key question for contemporary European (though of course this is not limited to Europe) political geography is, then, how the process summarised under the

twin labels of social convergence and deterritorialisation will effect the persistent maintenance of regional identities and the corresponding divergence of regional spaces. Or, in other words: is the ‘unity in diversity’ European programme ever practicable and exportable on a world-wide scale or are we to be absorbed by a new global ‘melting pot’?

Keywords Europe · Territoriality · Borders · Areas of contact · Integration · Globalisation

Introduction

The modern European political geography is based, in my opinion, on three basic elements: *territoriality*, *borders*, and *integration*, which in turn are the results of both convergence and divergence social and spatial processes. As Poulantzas pointed out, space-time matrices in the pre-capitalist period were open; there were only a single, known space, based on a common civilisation and a common religion, all the rest was perceived as a barbarian-inhabited no-land (Poulantzas, 1978). On the contrary, capitalist space differs by the appearance of borders, being the territorialisation of space a precondition for modernity. The previously open space is thus re-formed as a series of territories. Territory not only is, in the sense of belonging to, the national,

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it constitutes it, considering that national icons are territory, language, and culture (Sack, 1980). Therefore, there is a fixing of different borders and thus different insides and outsides, and citizenship, the segregation of aliens and their exclusion from full involvement in national life, are features of this spatial power matrix which takes in Poulantzas' opinion its purest form in the 'invention' of the concentration camp. He argues that both concentration camps and genocide represented in the period of state nationalism a modern invention bound up with the spatialisation peculiar to nation-states and designed to clean up the perceived 'national territory' by means of homogenizing enclosure. In this way, modern state capitalism creates a unified and clearly demarcated space suitable to the development of national markets.

The main characteristic of the post-war European integration process, as the reverse model of nation-state exclusivism and centralisation, is represented by the fact that it first ploughed its way gradually and not without difficulties within politically stable states, where the process of national emancipation, or rather of nation-building was long over and had resulted in the formation of solid territorial states. With the increase of international integration in Western Europe, especially after the 1960s, the previous non-flexible model of industrialisation, characterised by capital and job concentration as well as depopulation in peripheral areas and forced introduction of internal social standardisation and cultural homogenisation, began to disintegrate. In fact, modern development policies put more emphasis on indigenous growth, or the attraction of investment by qualities linked to the region like the environment, quality of life or a trained labour force, rather than investment incentives provided by the central state. Thus the new development paradigm, based on networks of territorial interdependence, gives an important role to the construction of identities and territorially organised social cohesion. Additionally, all these regional systems of action are now placed more directly in confrontation with the international market, reducing the previous exclusive role of the state (Keating & Loughlin, 1996). The fostering of a more balanced sub-state regional

development resulted also in a strengthening of regional characteristics, which the new regional development model could no longer ignore. Regional characteristics in turn have been preserved in Europe by persistent historical and cultural elements of ethnic and linguistic variety. Therefore, it is not surprising that the process of European integration was accompanied by a parallel process of ethnic or regional awakening of minorities and other local communities (Bufon, 2001).

Between integration and globalisation

The major question facing Europe at present is the effect of the collapse of the bipolar system on the new world order. There are at least two contradictory processes at work. The first is the opening up of Europe to democratic ideals and representative politics, which follows the advance of social democratic capitalism eastward and its creation of new markets, resources and social organisations. New interregional trade and activity has accelerated since the demise of centrally planned economies in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in terms of trans-border co-operation. Previously suspect or fragile strategic regions located on the geopolitical divide between West and East have been transformed into pivotal nodes in an expanded European network of communication and trade. Border regions are, therefore, changing their character from 'front lines' of sovereign states to socio-economic 'contact zones' for neighbouring societies. They are no longer at the 'periphery', but they are quite often witnessing economic prosperity above the national level. Such change emphasises how geography and place are periodically reinterpreted and transformed.

The second trend is a conservative reaction, which seeks to close, limit and protect the 'national' character of states. The resulting tension, which hinders the full and free movement of people, ideas and goods, is a major source of ethnic tension (Miles, 1992) which is reflected in the manner in which ethnicity and race are being used in different ways to categorise groups and to

structure policies which ‘defend’ the integrity of Europeans. Within sections of the media and political scene, ‘ethnicity’ is increasingly used to construct a positive, quasi-biological identity, which links a particular European ethnic or language group to a specific place. Race, as a contraposition between the ‘recognized Europeans’ and the ‘others’, instead, is used as a classificatory category to reflect primarily, if not exclusively, negative tendencies of dissociation and exclusion at state and European Union (EU) levels. In times of economic difficulty, race can once again be used as an exclusionary category in any of the European ‘shatterbelts’ and there has been a growing incidence of racial victimisation and a resurgence of neo-nationalism and fascism (Williams, 1997). However, both ethnicity and race have to deal with the unpredictable effects of the two great forces which impinge on all regional planning and social change, namely globalisation and European integration. Globalisation is an imperfect and developing process, an ideology and programme which challenges the current order. Together with European integration it changes the context within which civil society is mediated, posing a threat to the conventional territorial relationships and simultaneously opening up new forms of inter-regional interaction such as cable television and global multi-service networks.

European-level institutions are also reacting to trends such as globalisation and telematic networking. The most significant trend is that radical changes in mass communication technology have reinforced the dominance of English as a prime language of commerce and promoted a Pan-European, Trans-Atlantic melange of culture, values and entertainment which is spreading rapidly to most parts of the world. In comparative terms this has led other major international languages such as French, German and Spanish, to re-negotiate their positions within the educational, legal and commercial domains of an enlarged Europe. English has been strengthened by the admission of Nordic members to the EU, but there is no agreement as to whether other major languages are necessarily weakened by enlargement, neither do we know what long-term effect the enlargement of the EU towards

Central-Eastern Europe will have on the management of ethno-linguistic and regional issues.

A re-opened space matrix implies that the traditional solution to many problems in the past, namely relocation, no longer offers a means of coping with an external threat. Linguistic minorities cannot migrate so easily to avoid the penetration of a majority group. In consequence “the higher the level of globalization the narrower the scope for ‘escape alternatives’.” In this sense globalisation is also a kind of *totalitarianization* of world space.” (Mlinar, 1992, 20). Globalisation involves a hitherto unprecedented interdependence at the world level, in which widening circles of domination and dependence are accelerating the effects of uneven development, both internationally and within long-established states. The transfer of manufacturing from peripheral locations in Western Europe to Eastern European, Asian or Central American states mirrors today similar changes in, for example, the textile industry of North-West Europe in the mid-19th century. Core-periphery differentials are maintained because surplus regional capital is re-invested elsewhere.

Globalisation also influences cultural patterns and modes of thought because as a constant interactive process it is always seeking to break down the particular, the unique and the traditional so as to reconstruct them as a local response to a general set of systematic stimuli. This is the threat of the *detritorialisation* of society and space. For cultural conservatives and ethnic defence activists such processes are anathema to their existence. Thus cultural nationalism could also be seen as a reaction against globalisation, which dissolves the autonomy of institutions, organisations, and communication systems where people live. There is an increasing contrast between the principle of legitimising identity, which is still providing the basis of regional resurgence versus state centralism, and the principle of resistance identity, which is turned towards the maintenance of regional autonomy and diversity (Castells, 2004). Undoubtedly, global interdependence demand a fresh appreciation: for we have been quick to characterise the advantages which accrue to well placed groups and regions. We have been less careful to

scrutinise the impact such transitions might have on minorities and the disadvantaged.

Globalisation, as with modernisation, it is not merely an account of how the world is changing, but also a prescription of how it should change. As yet we do not have global economic change, rather we have macro-regional functional integration in Europe, North America and to a lesser extent, in parts of South and East Asia, as the EU, which is already much more than just a container for economic integration, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). All these new international bodies are not only revealing a broader range of political orders 'beyond Westphalia', but are also radically transforming the traditional centre-periphery system. In fact, the cumulative impact of these trading blocks is to establish a new regime whereby barriers to all developments and movements related to capital, trade, market influences, resources, uniform product standards, manufacturing and technology transfer are reduced. Social and cultural change are also deeply implicated in this world vision, and we have enough evidence to recognise that some groups and regions will be advantaged, and others marginalised as globalisation is getting more and more entrenched in the world system.

Between unity and diversity

The significance of place is usually related to individual subjects, drawing together the realms of nature, society and culture. On that basis, it becomes evident that place contributes not only to the understanding of self and identity, but also to the constitution of collective identity through territoriality based communities. Most often the relationships of self and community to place are associated with difference, particularism, and localism. This view is prominent in both anti-modernist nostalgia for traditional community and stable identities and the postmodernist valorisation of context and diversity. Each is contrasted with the centreless space of modernism in which difference is muted through homogenizing

and globalizing tendencies, where place becomes mere location in space. Thus the association of place with particularism and *ethnos*, and space with universalism and *demos* reflects the combination of two quite distinct philosophies (Casey, 1997).

These two views are also evident in discussions of building political community in the EU, in which both supporters and critics have been concerned with its apparent lack of a strong sense of identity and political community. Analysts have noted the EU's 'democratic deficit', referring in part to the common view of its bureaucratic or rather Eurocratic origins and its relatively weak connections to the population of Europe. The EU has sought various ways to overcome this deficit, such as the implementation of the subsidiarity principle, which involves a vertically distributed sovereignty matching functions with the appropriate spatial scale of political community, but public indifference remains a concern. Often the debate on European political community follows a continuum formed by two poles: liberalism and communitarianism (Entrikin, 2003). The first position emphasises rational planning and modernisation, the second stresses social attachments and belonging. On the one hand, there is space economy and concerns with location and barriers to movement as reported in several publications of the European Commission, seeking a land of the free flow of people and goods, which will necessarily produce a European citizenry with changeable and flexible identities and thin connections to place and regional cultures. On the other hand, we find cultural pluralist models that consider ethnic, regional, and national communities to be the locus of personal and group attachments and political identity. From this point of view, Europe is a composite of particularistic places and territories, usually associated with unassimilated cultures of various scales ranging from regions to nation-states (Smith, 1995), a model that implies at best a confederal common future. In this perspective a unified and integrated Europe becomes secondary to the goal of ethnic, regional, or national autonomy.

Of course, the process of European integration also consists in creating a supranational common

space or a sort of macro-region. In a way, the same process could be found during the national integration period, when internal regions of European countries were often more diverse than the countries were from one another. The problem is that a EU seeking common identity will have to provide both internal coherence and external closure, projecting thus nationalist ideology in European public life and integration (Calhoun, 2003). The alternative is not a strictly unitary but rather overlapping social and political organisation on various scales, not necessarily bounded at the edges of nations or nation-states. We must also not neglect that states remain a major actor, and that national governments have not only transferred power downward but have attempted to institutionalise competitive relations between major subnational administrative units as a means to position local and regional economies strategically within supranational, European, and global, circuits of capital. In this sense, central governments have attempted to retain control over major subnational political-economic spaces through the production of new regional scales of state spatial regulation.

After 1992, when the European Community took a further step toward economic unification, 'integration' became the watchword in public debate over the 'New Europe'. This discussion has revolved around the different ways of retaining local and 'national' competitiveness within a much enlarged 'post-national' territory, but retained a basically economic approach, qualifying the term 'integration' as the solution to problems set by the unification of markets and conditions of production. In the same time, there appeared a strong reassertion of 'subnationalism' in Central-Eastern Europe, providing a territorial frame for many small nations, which also turned in bloody inter-ethnic wars and ethnic cleansing policies. But reassertion of subnationalism was not restricted to Central-Eastern Europe, as the cases of Scottish, Welsh or Catalan nationalism make clear, providing a clear contradiction between the re-emerging 'pre-national' movements seeking further political fragmentation and cultural diversity and the process of creation of an integrated post-national Europe (Smith, 1992).

The differences among these geographic conceptions become more apparent in the consideration of borders. In the market model, the internal borders of Europe disappear, but an external border is erected instead. In the cultural pluralist model, the zones of inclusion and exclusion remain clear and marked by places of thick cultural attachments. The borders within Europe change but overall are strengthened or made increasingly impermeable, and since internal borders provides an instrument for diversity, external borders become redundant. Once again one faces the dilemma implied in the opposition of *ethnos* and *demos*: boundaries help create diversity and common identity, and their elimination risks to create a uniform, placeless world with weakly attached citizens. A possible solution to this situation is sought in the emergence of overlapping, differentiated places of attachment with relatively permeable boundaries: the regions.

As Keating argued in one of his papers (Keating, 1996), new types of regionalism and of *region* are the product of both decomposition and recomposition of the territorial framework of public life, consequent on changes in the state, the market and the international context. He noted how regions are not natural entities, but rather social constructions, in a given space, representing the confluence of various economic, social and political processes in territory. In this perspective, the regional space could be simultaneously a territorial space, a functional space, and a political space. But it should be also clear that there is no regional level of government in Europe and that regions remain in many parts of Europe an 'invented' category which plays only a sporadic and partial role in the continental architecture of politics. In some cases, powerful regions do emerge, in others, large cities may constitute themselves as social and spatial actors.

Nevertheless, the European integration process has deeply challenged the Westphalian system as an 'organization of the world into territorially exclusive, sovereign nation-states, each with an internal monopoly of legitimate violence' (Caporaso, 1996, 34). Even though such an idealised model has never been completely realised in practice, it continues to dominate our thinking about politics and institutional change in

the new millennium. In fact, the most far-reaching transformations beyond the Westphalian system have occurred in Europe, where integration is becoming embedded in a wider discourse on globalisation and regionalisation. The debate has been centered on two questions: first, does the EU still represent an inter-governmental regime dominated by the executives of the nation states or has it evolved beyond such a state-centered system, opening up the question of state-centric versus multi-level governance—a concept which is still inclined to the notion of territoriality. This is particularly the case of borderlands and cross-border regions, the ‘front lines’ of territorially demarcated modern states (Blatter, 2003). These areas are being shaped by intensive socioeconomic and sociocultural interdependencies and has been helpful not only in respect to new and concrete integration forms between neighbouring states but also in removing the problem of the ‘other’ within the EU space.

Borderlands and minorities: where convergence and divergence meet

Current processes in European ‘*contact*’ areas are increasingly influencing the shaping of people’s personalities, making them ‘multi-lingual’ and ‘multi-cultural’, despite the opposition of traditional ‘uni-national’ political structures. With the abandonment of the old demands for boundary revision, pursued by various nationalistic myths, modern European societies are intensifying their efforts to increase border or rather cross-border cooperation and in this framework the spatial function of national minorities and local communities in these borderlands is acquiring greater importance (Bufon, 2006). Thus, if on the one hand, it is true that the majority or dominant group, independently of its political attitude towards the minority, cannot deprive it of its potential regional role, then on the other hand, the actual implementation of this role still very much depends on its institutionalisation and wider social promotion.

Research investigations in Central European border areas have shown that the intensity of cross-border cooperation depends above all on

the presence on both sides of the border of urbanised areas and also of national minorities, together with traditional cultural and social ties on the basis of consolidated former territorial units (Bufon, 1998a). This situation could be explained by the need for the local population to maintain the historical regional structure, which the various border changes destroyed, especially in the gravitational, economic, social and cultural senses. Paradoxically, the greater the problems in the political division of a homogeneous administrative, cultural and economic region, the greater is the probability for such a politically divided area to develop into an integrated border region. These new forms of cross-border regionalisms are of particular interest in Central Europe, where they have not only an important functional role in the implementation of social and economic integration at the inter-state and inter-regional levels, but also in the preservation of cultural features and the strengthening of inter-ethnic coexistence and cooperation. This is especially the case in those areas where national minorities, resulting from a political division of a common ethnic space, or historical cross-border regional communities, resulting from a political division of long-lasting historical regions, are present, and such areas are more the rule than the exception not only in Central Europe.

As language is definitely one of the basic markers of ethnic and national difference, its typology and intensity of use indicates the dimension and the quality of different cultural spaces, the success of its survival across different generations, the vitality of the language code, and its level of social attraction and status. The language and its practice are not, however, the definite and exclusive indicators of ethnic and national identification. Every language has its own history, so each person and each community can change their attitude towards their original language, due to subjective or external causes. Emigration, social and political events in Europe, especially in the marginal areas or in areas of cultural contact, have contributed substantially to radical changes of the original language map creating among single national and single language also multiethnic and multilingual areas, i.e., variable identities, which are quite common in

both European and local context (Castles & Miller, 2003).

In analysing the ethnolinguistic development of our continent we may find an apparent paradox: that the most widely spoken languages in Europe are not the oldest European languages, which are usually spoken in more peripheral and distant areas of the British islands, in the Alps, and in the Pyrenean mountains. In fact, the success of the ‘new’ national, most widely spoken languages in Europe, is linked to national movements and the formation of states. The first question at this point is whether the nation is absolutely necessary, whether it is a kind of necessary development stage in the evolution of social-cultural organisation, as it was believed to be so by the romantics and the positivists. Taking a look at the political and cultural map of Europe the answer is positive, there are, in fact, 43 states and 31 nationalities in Europe. Moreover, these countries are usually representative of one dominant nation, whereas the ratio around the world is 1:10 (10 countries for each nation-state). It means that nations, which are such a common phenomenon in Europe, are rather rare around the world. This leads to two conclusions: on one hand, it is clear that nationalism is prevalently, if not exclusively, an European phenomenon, on the other hand, it becomes clear that nationalism as cultural national movement is aimed at shaping a nation fit for the social and political situation, this is a single language national country. The link between the nation as cultural entity and the state as political entity is thus so strong in Europe that in the majority of European languages, the same term is used to indicate both elements.

Nationalism is also closely linked to the new social-economic paradigm of ‘modern’ mercantilist industrial capitalism, which needed a united, standardised, and homogenous territory. And standardisation and homogenisation are in turn possible only in countries that have enough authority and control on the territory. Therefore, modern territorial countries were much more interested in the political rule of the actual or potential ‘national’ space than their ancestors had been. Especially during the romantic period and the period of classical nationalism (between 1850 and 1950) the so called ‘national’ border of

nations and countries despite their ethnic distribution was a common issue of contention. Nationalism as an expression of economic, social, and political ‘modernisation’, or better its development inside and outside the European space, developed in different periods and caused differently oriented national movements: the *proto-nationalism* based on state administration in Western Europe, where modern countries had developed before nations; the *uniting nationalism* based on economic unification in Central-Western Europe, where urban and regional entities united in a functional country; the *dividing nationalism* based on culture in Central-Eastern Europe, where multinational empires and states used to rule (Smith, 1995).

Who did not want to be subjected to the process of standardisation, became necessarily an outlaw within the classical conceit of national constitution. But since the mid 1960s things have changed: strong regional movements have developed and with them the so-called neo-nationalism, which does not aim at secession, as it did the classical nationalism, and at the constitution of an own state, but aims at enhancing the importance of the regional linguistic, cultural, social, and economic peculiarity of peripheral communities. Many central authorities and traditionally centralist states, such as Great Britain, Spain, Belgium, and partly France, have dealt with these movements and processes, becoming more regionalist countries: the ‘new’ actors on the scene are now: Scots, Welsh, Catalans, Basques, Flemish or Provençals. With the splitting up of multinational socialist countries in Central-Eastern Europe many ‘minority’ nations have become independent: Slovaks, Macedonians, Slovenians, Byelorussians, Estonians, or Lithuanians. Suddenly it has become evident that Europe is much more colourful and varied. The number of nations with their own states has, in fact, increased (31), and the number of nations or regional linguistic communities without a state is about the same (29). To these regional language communities, another 25 national minorities have to be added, each of which is present in two to three different countries, and there are about 35 million people in that condition, considering the Russian minorities as well (Vastergaard, 1999). So far, if

we united all the territories of these minorities and their inhabitants we could create a country similar to France in surface and number of inhabitants. This means that the image of Europe as a continent of few ‘big’ nations has been transforming (again) into a cultural and linguistic mosaic, where cultural contacts are normal rather than exceptional.

In this situation people even after long assimilation processes and alienation practices have started to discover their ethnic, regional, and language identity, which due to the above mentioned causes does not coincide with the language use, as it happens among the Celts in Ireland and Great Britain, or among the Beneski Slovenci in Italy. This means that the ‘*objective*’ ethnic or national identity, which is based on origins based on blood or place identification, does not always coincide with the *subjective identity*, which can be influenced by many factors and is thus very variable. In traditionally ethnically mixed urban areas even objective identification becomes impossible, because mixed marriages for many generations are quite common, and so the ethnic and linguistic choice, or the amount of absorption of the available cultures, depends only on the destiny of each individual. This occurs of course where the state-national exclusiveness and the use of a single language are not the dominant model any longer, so that individual choices are not so problematic as it used to be (Bufon, 2003a). People in cultural contact areas can, in fact, combine more freely the knowledge and the use of local languages with the command and the practice of standardised national languages, among which the international communication code, based on English, has become very popular.

From this point of view, not only the institutionalisation of the minority preservation, but also its territorialisation—that is the ‘social space’ where preservation rules are implemented—are very important. Such territories, however, hardly ever include the whole territory inhabited by the autochthonous minority. These imposed limits to the minority linguistic and social equality are felt even more in case of high mobility among the minority population, which usually follows social and economic trends, and migrates from its autochthonous, usually peripheral and less

developed, territory to urban areas and bigger employment basins. So spatial mobility is linked to social mobility too, and often represents the passage from the domestic minority ambience into the majority culture and the assimilation into it. Therefore, the actual problem of preserving minority languages in Europe relates not so much special social and linguistic guarantees in minority territories, but the implementation of development possibilities in these areas, i.e., a social, demographic, cultural, and ethnic harmonic reproduction in the areas populated by minorities. Modern revitalisation programs for minority cultures are in many aspects revitalisation programs for peripheral regions, as it is evident from the example of the rather developed Catalan region, but also of traditionally peripheral regions such as Wales or Scotland (Williams, 2000). For this reason, minorities in the regarded area have, beside their ‘internal’ cultural revitalisation function, the additional role of supporting regional development efforts as well as cross-border contacts and co-operation. Minority institutions, however, also have an important role in communicating with the majority environment, where inter-ethnic contacts are more common, offering the local population a multicultural and multilingual dimension. Therefore, areas of cultural and linguistic contact with sufficient protection for preserving minorities and their language play a special role. They do not represent a potential and actual area of conflict between peoples and countries any longer, but they have become areas of harmonic social mixture and coexistence (Klemencic & Bufon, 1994). Even in Eastern-Central Europe, where the formal elimination of political borders seems to be more difficult, they bring precious elements of both inter-ethnic and inter-national co-operation.

Being thus the cradle of modern nationalism and consequently the part of the world where the most numerous political-territorial divisions took place, it is only natural that Europe should also be the continent with the highest ‘border character degree,’ and a suitably great need for cross-border cooperation and integration. If we define border areas or areas where the effects of the proximity of a political border are quite strong, as a 25 km-wide strip of land extending alongside

the borderline, we discover that in Europe, where there are over 10,000 km of borders, border areas measure approximately 500,000 square kilometres in total and are inhabited by more than 50 million people, which equals again the demographic and territorial potential of a large European country, such as, France.

Border areas and border regions in Europe could be divided into three basic types (Bufon, 1998b): the Western European, the central European and the Eastern European. Typical of the Western European group is the presence of 'old' borders, which either belong to the antecedent type or developed parallel to the historical regions in this area. In these environments, relatively early forms of cross-border cooperation emerged as early as the 1960s and 1970s, and in the same period the first cross-border regions formed on institutional bases as well. These include individual regions and other administrative units from both sides of the border and endeavour to solve determinate functional and planning problems within these limits, while at the same time encouraging cross-border cooperation on a socio-cultural level, which is in these border regions usually underdeveloped. Also characteristic of this type of border region is the existence of individual administrative units of different rank conjoining into a cross-border interest network that could be defined as a '*region of regions*'.

The second typological group of border areas and regions is most characteristic of central Europe. In this area historical regions often do not match the actual space regionalisation in the framework of individual states because numerous subsequent delimitation processes took place—especially following the two World Wars in the last century—thus politically dividing the originally homogeneous historical regions into several units. The persistence of socio-cultural links among the border populations within such historical regions in most cases led to the spontaneous formation of cross-border regions. Consequently, these cross-border regions do not fit the administrative spaces, they rather match the existing or historical cultural regions; also, they do not enjoy any special support from the local or state authorities, which at times even resent cross-border cooperation because of unresolved issues

between the two states that were caused by the delimitation processes. Nevertheless, aside from interstate cooperation and openness, such types of border region also display a remarkably high level of social integration, which usually leads to the formation of special cross-border spatial systems that could be defined as '*regions within regions*'.

The third and last type group is typical of Eastern Europe, where we have to deal with a combination of old and new borders in a space that has been traditionally less developed and sparsely populated. Most significantly, the communist regime after World War II magnified this originally unfavourable situation in the border areas of Eastern Europe by encouraging or causing the emigration of autochthonous populations and hindering the social and economic development of border areas in general. The areas marked by such characteristics have, due to their own poor potentials, even in new circumstances—with the powerful ideological modification influences eliminated—very limited possibilities of creating advanced forms of cross-border cooperation and integration. Such border areas and the existing, often only nominal, cross-border regions, could therefore be defined as '*regions under reconstruction*'.

The development of border areas depends on a series of factors, such as broad geopolitical circumstances and a different history of determinate sections of the border, interstate political and economic relations, border permeability, regional circumstances and the dynamics of socio-economic development in border areas, but also the attitude of the border area population in relation to both maintenance and strengthening cross-border links. From this angle the different sections of the border can be classified by their permeability, dominant functional elements and other typological elements. The research conducted so far involving Slovenia (Bufon, 2002a), one of the most typical European border areas, has shown that international factors, such as the increase of economic exchange, tourist flow and transit transport, combined with regional factors primarily referring to the movement of people, goods and communications within border areas, encourage all-around development not only of

individual transport corridors or border centres, but also of a wider border area. Different border areas along Slovene borders have in this way grown into veritable border regions, although unlike other Euroregions they are not based on institutional but rather on spontaneous forms of cross-border integration, which are also of smaller territorial extent. One of their characteristic traits is a considerable influence of local factors, which originate more from a common territorial attachment than from current international-political and economic demands. In this sense Slovene geography has discovered new dimensions of research in the application of socio-geographical methods in the study of spatial functions of border communities, especially ethnic and other regional communities (Klemencic & Bufon, 1994).

Indeed, it is in exploring the spatial extent of certain relevant social activities near and over the border, and in defining spatial functions of border social groups that we recognise the main contribution of Slovene geography to the research of border areas. It has been stressed that border areas and the cross-border relationships taking place therein have great significance not only in the sphere of social and economic integration on interstate and interregional levels, but also in the preservation of cultural features and the strengthening of interethnic coexistence and integration (Bufon & Minghi, 2000). The element of border area is especially present where there are national minorities, and in Europe border areas with such characteristics are more the rule than exceptions. This is why it is possible to observe a marked predisposition for greater cross-border integration in all those Slovene border areas where members of autochthonous minorities or immigrant communities from the neighbouring areas populate at least one side of the border (Bufon, 2002b, 2003b). This potential can then more or less effectively be modified by different territorial and regional orientations of these communities, which originate in the persistence and permeability of individual border sections, and also by the different degree of protection and development of minority communities in the respective state systems. All this is opening a series of new aspects in border areas that are

gaining increasingly more importance in the process of European integration, eliminating traditional functions of political borders and laying the grounds for mutual understanding within the culturally diverse European space.

Conclusions

Even though not sufficient and not optimal yet, the question of the 'other' has gained importance lately on the European continent, a continent where classical nationalism was produced and whose big nations not only changed the political world map according to their imperialistic needs, but also started two world wars. About half a century later, the USA are the centre of the world, and Europe has the chance to become again the protagonist of world history. The integration of the continent, necessary for an apparently 'banal' social-economic reason of post-war reconstruction under the US 'supervision' first and economic globalisation later on, did not follow common patterns of internal standardisation: the challenge for present Europe is to perform a social, economic, and political integration maintaining cultural diversities, and accordingly to offer after three centuries a new civilisation model to the world, a model in which social-economic globalisation could not coincide with its social-cultural counterpart in the sense of Americanisation and the melting pot.

This challenge and the new European model will be tested and eventually become operative in many European 'contact' areas. It is not that much a question of international contact and of organisation of functional economic, social, and administration hindrances in cross-border traffic, as it is a question of contact between different nations, ethnic, and linguistic communities, and of creation of actual rules for coexistence and preservation of cultural peculiarities. The elimination of these last 'borders' will imply a definitely new idea of the traditional, ethnocentric conceit and social behaviour based on the exclusion of 'others' and 'different' ones represented by the classical nationalism. It will be necessary to realise that, among national identities, different ethnic,

regional, and linguistic identities exist, and that the borders between them are everything but linear and definite, creating a very complex and ‘subdivided’ social-cultural space, where continuous trespasses and exchanges are common. In spite of this continuous ‘movement’ on the edges, or better in the areas of cultural contact, cultural areas or cultural landscapes are incredibly stable and offer a kind of ‘longue-durée’ background to which eventual social spaces try to adapt more or less consciously.

We are thus turning back to ‘borders’ and ‘territoriality’, two terms, which reflect concrete observations of the ‘local spatial behaviour’. Political science and political economics addressed this ‘uncovering’ of local communities in the 1970s in their study of the relationship between centres and the periphery in Europe. In this regard, the role of local or regional communities was brought to the fore in an increasingly specific way in the preservation of their indigenous settlement area (the *cultural landscape*), but also in the establishment of cross-border and trans-community contacts and the limitation of conflicts in the event of the division of this area when boundaries were drawn, creating a new *functional space* (Ratti & Reichman, 1993).

In conclusion, we could say that once again Europe, the motherland of nationalism, and the continent where borders and different territorial and cultural identity are mostly interrelated, is facing new challenges of how best to represent its numerous interests within one system. As mentioned above, there are at least two contradictory processes at work. The first is the opening up of Europe to democratic ideals and representative politics, the second trend is a conservative reaction which seeks to close, limit and protect the ‘national’ character of single territories and societies, particularly from the ‘newcomers’ and the non-European racial groups, even though it create tensions among the autochthonous ethno-linguistic minorities too. The latter have now to deal with European integration and a wider globalisation process, posing a threat to the conventional territorial relationships and opening up new forms of inter-regional and global networks (O’Loughlin, Staeheli, & Greenberg, 2004). Globalisation and convergence forces also influ-

ence cultural patterns and are always seeking to break down the particular, opening up a process of deterritorialisation of space and society.

The key question for contemporary European—but not only European—political geography is then how will the process summarised under the twin labels of social convergence and deterritorialisation affects the persistent maintenance of regional and ethnic identities, and the corresponding diverse cultural spaces. Or in other words: is the ‘unity in diversity’ European programme ever practicable and exportable on a world-wide scale or are we to be absorbed by a new global ‘melting pot’ future development? There is much to be done in qualitative oriented political geography.

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