

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TERRITORIAL DISPARITIES: THE CASE OF THE BORDER REGION BETWEEN ITALY AND SLOVENIA

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ABSTRACT – The article is discussing both challenges and problems that emerge from the transformation of the regional structure in the border region between Italy and Slovenia in the period 1991-2015. In this period, Slovenia became first an independent state and a member of the EU and the Schengen space. All these political geographical changes have deeply influenced regional development trends on both sides of the studied border region, providing new opportunities for cross-border cooperation and integration, but have also created new forms of territorial disparities and challenges to common spatial and social planning. The paper will provide an analysis of the statistical data and the related socio-economic transformation processes, discussing thus the various territorial variations and trends within the studied area. It will also present some comparative results of the recent author's field research related to the people's attitude towards border perception and cross-border functional co-dependence. As the studied case is showing, cross-border regionalism is not only a system of government, but also a system of 'grass-rooted' social and spatial (re)integration of borderlands. This process is closely related to the question of chancing territoriality, preserving on the one hand the regional control and on the other hand re-acting societal and territorial co-dependence and integration.

Keywords: Italian-Slovenian border region, regional development, territorial disparities, cross-border cohesion

INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

Borders have always been a subject of intense geographical research as they divide different homogenous or functionally co-dependent areas (regions) on the one hand and different administrative and political units defined by joint administration, "property" and social identification or affiliation (territories) on the other. Spatial "demarcation" thus "decomposes" a common geographical area into individual units according to a variety of criteria mostly related to natural, cultural and social spheres (Bufon, 1996a). Taking into account both the elements of functionality and homogeneity, the process of spatial differentiation evolves in accordance with either inductive (bottom-up) or deductive (top-down) logic. As a result, an "open" geographical area can witness simultaneous "formation" of very different "self-contained" units, which can "co-exist" at different levels of social life and are subject to constant change in time.

This fact makes both geographical and social areas relative in nature and leads one to the conclusion that individuals and social groups can "interpret" and "understand" it in a variety of manners (Bufon, 2010). Social groups establish not only "real" political, administrative and spatial planning units or borders, but also "imagined" cultural and social boundaries based on the perception and construction of different cultural and social environments formed based on the existing lifestyles and customs, historical circumstances, etc. Geography addresses such topics within a variety of sub-disciplines and geographical "schools". Until recently, the Slovene area has modelled itself upon German social geography (Maier et al., 1977), which developed a special research method for determining and comparing the occurrence of the so-called "spatially relevant social activities" in a certain area, such as life in a community, work, shopping, education, spare time, etc. Having studied

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their occurrence in geographical space, researchers concluded that it is possible to determine certain shared customs that not only differentiate one social group from another, but also form special “areas of action”. Such environments can assume characteristics of potential spatial planning areas or even potential territories, thus “demarcating” individual or particular social areas.

For the purpose of this article, the term “cross-border region” denotes a system of border areas, reflecting different levels of social and cultural affinity and social and economic co-dependence (Bufon, 1993 and 2001). In many cases, both factors spring from the “youthfulness” of political and geographical transformations and, in accordance with the principle of spatial persistence, aspire to preserve traditionally unified cultural, historical or functional social areas. Based on such observations, we proposed the hypothesis that those border areas, which have recently witnessed the most serious troubles owing to the introduction of a political border, have at the same time the highest potential for cross-border (re)integration. As for the delimitation of border areas, one has to take into account that, in terms of institutional setting, European bilateral agreements usually stipulate special regimes for cross-border social and economic cooperation, valid within an area not exceeding the distance of 25 km from the borderline. In addition to this institutionally determined range, there also exist a range that is a result of functional, cultural and historical criteria and that gives rise to border areas characterized by different levels and types of the intensity of cross-border communication (Bufon, 1998).

In his well-known model of cross-border cohesion, House argued that spatial and social ties resulted not only from the cohesion between border areas and regional and national centres within one state, but also from the cohesion between the above-mentioned spatial levels of one state and those of the neighbouring state (House, 1981). He placed special emphasis on the importance of local cross-border ties between two border areas: they were weaker when the two states were in conflict or fostered a centralized national system of government, and formed the major part of cross-border cohesion in the case of “normal” international and national political situations. Even if the “borderless” Schengen area has not witnessed complete liberalization of border regimes and total abolition of border barriers, at least not from the point of view of administration and planning, one can nevertheless notice that cross-border regions have started to function in accordance with normal functional and gravitational principles. That is particularly noticeable in the case of not only urban border areas characterized by functional co-dependence, but also historical multicultural regions characterized by a shared cultural and spatial identity. Not surprisingly, such border areas witness an increasing need for appropriate “facilitation” and “management” of cross-border cooperation as it is in such areas that today’s process of European social and spatial (re)integration is being realized in the most tangible manner (Bufon, 2006 and 2011). Such developments naturally call for a more precise determination of those instruments that would help researchers and planners to “measure” the intensity of cross-border social and spatial ties and, consequently, the efficiency and success of the adopted policies of cross-border cooperation.

The article will discuss both challenges and problems that emerge from the transformation of the regional structure in the border region between Italy and Slovenia in the period 1991-2015. In this period, Slovenia became an independent state (1991), a member of the EU (2004) and the Schengen space (2007). All these political geographical changes have deeply influenced regional development trends on both sides of the studied border region, providing new opportunities for cross-border cooperation and integration, but have also created new forms of territorial disparities and challenges to common spatial and social planning. The paper will provide an analysis of the statistical data and the related socio-economic transformation processes, discussing thus the various territorial variations and trends within the studied area in the period 1991-2011. It will also present, for the first time, some comparative results of the recent author’s field research, produced in 2007 and 2015, aiming to understand the people’s attitude towards border perception and cross-border functional co-dependence. The research, according to the methodology developed by the author in his previous works (see in particular Bufon, 1995), is combining official sources and statistics with fieldwork results, as well as quantitative and qualitative data. It will also develop further the author’s methodology for “measuring” cross-border spatial and social cohesion (Bufon, 2008 and 2013), permitting to compare different border areas and to assess both affinities and disparities in terms of cross-border integration and

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development potentials. This process is closely related to the question of changing territoriality, preserving on the one hand the regional control and on the other hand re-acting societal and territorial co-dependence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The structure of the Italian-Slovenian border region and its transformation from 1991 to 2011

For the purpose of our research, considering the uneven administrative structure on the two sides and the fact that no institutional cross-border region has been established so far, on the Italian side, we have selected 35 border communes, representing also the Slovene minority area in the Italian region Friuli Venezia Giulia. These communes correspond from North to South to the eastern areas of the Italian provinces of Udine and Gorizia, and include the entire province of Trieste. On the Slovene side, the administrative system changed in a quite greater extent after 1991, opening a process of fragmentation of former socialist communes into smaller municipalities, even though they are still bigger than traditional municipalities in Italy. To create a more comparable border region, we have first taken in account the municipalities which previously formed the communes of Tolmin (3) and Nova Gorica (6), providing thus the corresponding first sub-regions to the Italian areas of Udine and Gorizia. We then created the third Slovenian sub-region, corresponding to the Italian province of Trieste, combining the municipalities of the former commune of Sežana (4) with the communes of Koper, Izola and Piran, which remained almost unchanged since 1991. This Slovene border area more or less coincide with the westernmost Slovene statistical regions of «Goriška» and «Primorska».

The Slovenian-Italian border region is not particularly big, extending from north to south for about one hundred kilometres, but it nevertheless provides a remarkable internal geographical diversity. For this reason, we have combined the so constructed border region into three sub/regions:

- the Alpine (Northern);
- the sub-Alpine or sub-Mediterranean (Central);
- the Mediterranean (Southern).

In 2011, the Northern sub-region counted together about 65 thousand people, of which more than 70% live on the Italian side; the Central sub-region counted together about 140 thousand people, of which 60% live on the Italian side; the Southern sub-region, instead, counted together almost 350 thousand people, of which two thirds live on the Italian side. It is clear that there are significant disparities in both terms of *amount and distribution of population*, not only in relation to northern and southern areas, but also in relation to Italian and Slovene areas. The total amount of population in the studied border region in 2011 was about 550 thousand people, of which about 365 thousand (66%) on the Italian side and 185 thousand on the Slovenian side. Out of these 550 thousand people, only 12% lived in the Northern sub-region, 26% in the Central sub-region, and the remaining 62% in the Southern sub-region.

In comparison to 1991, there was, on average, a demographic decline on the Italian side (by 8%), but a slight demographic increase on the Slovenian side (by 3%). On the sub-regional level, the population decrease on the Italian side was less important in both Northern and Central sub-regions (2-6%), but quite significant in the Southern sub-region (11%, corresponding to about 30 thousand people). On the contrary, on the Slovene side, the Northern and Central sub-regions experienced a decisive population decrease (7-10%) in the period 1991-2011, whilst the Southern sub-region registered an 11% increase in terms of number of inhabitants. The result of such uneven development trend is, paradoxically, that the internal demographic distribution, as shown in Table 1, in 2011 became more similar between the Italian and Slovenian side than it was in 1991. This process of “accommodation” could be observed in particular in the Central and Southern area. In 1991, the Central area registered 22% of the total border population on the Italian side, but almost 33% on the Slovenian side, whilst, in 2011, their share increased to almost 24% on the Italian side and decreased to less than 30% on the Slovenian side. Similarly, almost two thirds of the border dwellers on the Italian side lived in the Southern area in 1991 and about 55% on the Slovenian side, whilst in 2011 both figures met at the level of 60-64%.

Table 1. *Population change and distribution in the Italian-Slovene border region in the period 1991-2011*

Area	1991			2011		
	<i>N (000)</i>	%	<i>Index</i>	<i>N (000)</i>	%	<i>Index</i>
NORTHERN	50	12.5	100	47	12.8	94
CENTRAL	88	22.0	100	86	23.5	98
SOUTHERN	262	65.5	100	233	63.7	89
Total Italian side	400	100.0	100	366	100.0	92
NORTHERN	21	11.7	100	19	10.3	90
CENTRAL	59	32.8	100	55	29.7	93
SOUTHERN	100	55.5	100	111	60.0	111
Total Slovene side	180	100.0	100	185	100.0	103
Total Italian-Slovene border region	580	<i>It. side</i>	100	551	<i>It. side</i>	95
		69%			66%	

Data source: National Institutes of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 1991 and 2011

Let us now discuss some other selected statistical data for the studied border region, namely the aging index, the average number of family members, the educational structure, and some activity measures. The analysis of the *aging index* reveals that the population on the Slovenian side was and remain quite “younger” in comparison to their neighbours on the Italian side. In 1991, the average aging index on the Italian side was almost 200, but only about 70 on the Slovene side. That means that on the Italian side, on average, elder people, aged 60 or more, at that time already doubled the number of youngsters, aged 15 or less, whilst on the Slovenian side the first group of population represented about 70% of the second, still prevailing. By 2011, on the Italian side, the average aging index slightly increased to about 240, but more than doubled on the Slovenian side, reaching the 150 figure. In other words, the aging process after 1991 was much stronger on the Slovenian side than on the Italian side, leading to a possible future balance. On both sides, the Northern, more peripheral sub-region, had the highest aging indexes, even though this kind of disparities are more pronounced on the Italian side than on the Slovenian one.

The *average number of family members* was quite different in 1991 between the two sides of the studied border region: 3.5 on the Slovenian side, but only 2.5 on the Italian side, with only limited internal variations (3.7 in the Northern sub-region on the Slovenian side, and 2.7 in the Central sub-region on the Italian side). By 2011, as illustrated in Table 2, this figure already stabilized on the level of 2.2-2.4 average family members, showing again how the process of social “modernization” in the period 1991-2011 was more intense and quicker on the Slovenian side, providing thus a more comparable and equal structure on both sides of the Italian-Slovene border region. The *educational structure*, as the aging index, was and remained quite different on both sides, being much better on the Slovenian side than on the Italian, even though the initial gap tends to decrease in time. In 1991, in fact, only 18% of the adults on the Italian side held a secondary education and only 3% a university education, whilst on the Slovenian side these figures were almost three times higher: more than 40% of the population held a secondary education and almost 10% a university education. This educational level was reached on the Italian side more or less only in 2011, when on the Slovenian side more than half of the adult population held a secondary education and 17% a university education. Unfortunately, no detailed data are available for this year on the Slovenian side for the Northern sub-region, but looking on the developments on the Italian side, we may say that internal differences on both sides persist. This is particularly true for the Northern sub-regions, where in 1991 both secondary and university educational levels were lower than in the rest of the studied area. If by 2011, secondary education improved in the Northern sub-regions, important differences remain at the university level, which is here clearly under-represented.

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Table 2. *Changes of the aging index, the average number of family members, and of the education structure in the Italian-Slovene border region in the period 1991-2011*

Area	Aging index		Average number of family members		Percentage of population with secondary education		Percentage of population with tertiary education	
	1991	2011	1991	2011	1991	2011	1991	2011
NORTHERN	255	301	2.4	2.1	14	31	1	6
CENTRAL	169	200	2.7	2.3	20	33	3	10
SOUTHERN	169	226	2.5	2.2	21	33	4	13
Total Italian side	198	242	2.5	2.2	18	32	3	10
NORTHERN	87	166	3.7	2.4	36	51	7	17
CENTRAL	67	148	3.5	2.5	42	51	10	17
SOUTHERN	62	143	3.4	2.4	47	53	11	18
Total Slovene side	72	152	3.5	2.4	42	52	9	17
Total Italian-Slovene border region	135	197	3.0	2.3	30	42	6	13

Data source: National Institutes of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 1991 and 2011

For what the general and gender *activity measures* is concerned, we can say that they are improving on the Italian side, but remain almost unchanged on the Slovenian side, eliminating thus previously existing disparities. Some smaller internal differences could still be detected between the Northern sub-regions and the rest of the studied area, in particular if we look at the percentage of actives among the female population. Changes in the sectorial activity structure show that on the Italian side there is a trend towards a modest re-industrialization, whilst on the Slovenian side the active population was leaving not only the primary sector, but also the previously well-represented industrial sector, prominently heading to the tertiary sector. As a result, the previously significant structural disparities between the two sides of the border region disappeared, but internal differences still exist, as on both sides the process of tertiarization is clearly stronger in the Southern sub-regions than in the rest of the border area.

Table 3. *Changes in general and gender activity measures in the Italian-Slovene border region in the period 1991-2011*

Area	% actives out of total population		% female population out of actives		% of actives out of female population	
	1991	2011	1991	2011	1991	2011
NORTHERN	40	43	35	42	28	36
CENTRAL	45	45	39	44	34	39
SOUTHERN	45	44	39	46	35	39
Total Italian side	43	44	38	44	32	38
NORTHERN	46	45	44	43	39	38
CENTRAL	48	45	46	44	42	40
SOUTHERN	47	47	46	44	42	41
Total Slovene side	47	46	45	44	41	40
Total Italian-Slovene border region	45	45	41	44	36	39

Data source: National Institutes of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 1991 and 2011

Table 4. *Changes in the sectorial activity structure in the Italian-Slovene border region in the period 1991-2011*

Area	% actives in the primary sector		% actives in the secondary sector		% actives in the tertiary sector	
	1991	2011	1991	2011	1991	2011
NORTHERN	9	6	28	34	63	60
CENTRAL	11	9	24	27	65	64
SOUTHERN	2	2	17	21	81	77
Total Italian side	7	6	23	27	70	67
NORTHERN	15	3	50	36	35	61
CENTRAL	12	3	41	36	47	61
SOUTHERN	7	1	30	23	63	76
Total Slovene side	11	2	40	30	49	68
Total Italian-Slovene border region	9	4	31	28	60	67

Data source: National Institutes of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 1991 and 2011

In conclusion, we may say that the above given quantitative comparative analysis, based on selected socio-economic data (Bufon, 2016), has revealed how the structural gap still existing between the neighbouring border areas in 1991 has been almost fulfilled by 2011. Significant differences can be found only in the aging index and the educational structure, permitting to the Slovenian border area to achieve a slightly higher general social development level than the Italian area. Using the above-discussed data, we calculated that in 1991 the socio-economic differentiation within the studied area could be represented by a general disparity index of 153, meaning that the Slovenian side was showing a 53% better general socio-economic structure than the Italian side (the calculated difference was 57% between Southern sub-regions and 51% between Central sub-regions). In 2011, we observed a general disparity index of only 119 (114 between Central sub-regions and 122 in the rest of the border region), showing how the European integration process has supported also a greater cross-border cohesion on the socio-economic level, reducing thus previously existing structural disparities between border societies.

Towards a cross-border (re)integration: changes in values and attitudes in the period 2007-2015

We studied in more details the actual level of social cross-border cohesion and the attitude of border dwellers related to cross-border cooperation on the basis of a survey conducted in all Slovenian border areas first in 2007 (Bufon, 2008) and repeated in 2015 (Bufon, 2016). As for the impact of Slovenia's admission to the Schengen Area upon the development of cross-border ties, the majority of respondents living along the border with Italy in both 2007 and 2015 perceived the event as an opportunity to improve cross-border ties, even though their percentage slightly fell from 56% to around 54%. On the contrary, there was a significant increase in the percentage of those who concretely observed an improvement of cross-border relations with their Italian neighbours, namely from about 35% to more than 56%. Being aware that one can get fairly approximate answers when it comes to a general assessment of changes in cross-border ties, we tried to obtain more revealing views of the impact of Slovenia's admission to the Schengen Area upon the following selected elements of cross-border cohesion: attendance at cultural and sporting events held on the other side of the border, fostering of personal cross-border contacts, work possibilities, study opportunities, shopping, real estate purchase and similar.

According to the respondents living along the border with Italy, the free cross-border circulation had a major impact mostly on study opportunities (in the opinion of 57% of respondents), cooperation between local administrations (52%), cross-border work (51%), real estate purchase (49%), shopping (48%) and fostering of personal contacts (43%). In concrete, both in 2007 and 2015 about 25% of the

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families living in the border area involved in the survey had at least one family member or relative working across the border and more than 80% had friends across the border. In both years, in the opinion of about 90% of the respondents, tourists from abroad are regularly visiting their area, whilst significantly increasing seems to be the foreigners' interest to buy homes in the Slovene border area. This phenomenon was noticed by about 30% of the respondents in 2007, but by about 44% in 2015.

The surveys also confirmed the high level of cultural cross-border affinity. The neighbours' tongue was spoken by as many as about 70% of respondents living along the border with Italy, enabling them to be a regular audience of the Italian media. In fact, in 2007 the same percentage of respondents were regular watchers of Italian TV programs, but this figure dropped down in 2015 to about 55%, as new "global" media, in particular satellite and internet TV programs, have been developed. Another interesting aspect of the issue was the comparison of the results of the two surveys as regards the frequency of cross-border visits as it allowed us to examine whether the abolition of border controls indeed increased the intensity of functional cross-border ties. The data only partly confirms this hypothesis, showing that border dwellers have generally maintained the already quite intense frequency of cross-border visits, developed already in the Yugoslav period (Bufon, 2003), but have increased the range of functional motivations for these visits. The percentage of people who stated that they were a very frequent or, more precisely, regular (daily or at least weekly) visitors to neighbouring places in Italy was in both years as high as around 19%, the percentage of those visiting, and an additional 34% have been visiting the neighbouring area monthly.

If we consider the motivations for visiting the neighbouring area in Italy, we can observe a general intensification. Work as an individual motivation for cross-border commuting was cited by less than 6% of the respondents in 2007, but by more than 6% in 2015. We have also to note that the actual extent of cross-border commuting for working reasons is probably much higher, considering that almost one quarter of the respondents have stated that at least one family member or relative works across the border. Shopping, however, remained the main reason for cross-border commuting: it was indicated by about 48% of respondents in 2007, but almost 53% in 2015. Visiting relatives or friends as a motivation was listed by less than 18% in 2007, but almost 30% in 2015; attending cultural events by only 4% in 2007, but more than 18% in 2015; leisure activities/tourism by about 14% in 2007, but almost 40% in 2015. In other words, if in 2007 the majority of border dwellers on the Slovenian side were visiting the neighbouring Italian places mainly for shopping, in 2015, this motivation was still prevailing, but others also gained greater importance, creating thus a more complete and functionally inter-dependent cross-border region. One should also mention schooling, accounting for 2% of visits to neighbouring places in Italy. It is also interesting to note that along the border with Italy, more than 2% of respondents stated that they cross the neighbouring territory when commuting from the Karst region and other parts of Western Slovenia to the Slovene coast since the route via Trieste is quite shorter in terms of both distance and time.

Table 5. *Intensity of different elements of cross-border social cohesion and people's attitude in the Slovene border area with Italy in the period 2008-2015 (% of the respondents)*

Schengen space is a major opportunity		Relations with neighbours better after 2007		At least one family member/relative works across the border		Foreigners are buying homes in the border area		Foreign tourists are visiting the border area	
2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015
55,8	54,3	35,5	56,3	24,7	23,9	30,3	43,8	90,0	90,5
Have friends across the border		Speak Italian		Watch Italian TV		Cross-border visits: daily/weekly		Cross-border visits: monthly	
2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015
81,3	83,2	72,3	70,7	70,7	57,1	19,2	19,3	33,5	34,3

Motivations for cross-border visits: <i>work</i>		Motivations for cross-border visits: <i>shopping</i>		Motivations for cross-border visits: <i>visiting relatives/friends</i>		Motivations for cross-border visits: <i>attending cultural events</i>		Motivations for cross-border visits: <i>leisure activities/tourism</i>	
2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015
5,6	6,4	48,2	52,8	17,5	29,6	4,0	18,4	14,3	39,2

Data source: Own survey and data elaborations, 2008 and 2015

Using these data, we conceived a set of synthetic indices for determining the level of cross-border cohesion (Bufon, 2013) by joining individual indicators into four basic groups. The first is related to the border dwellers' *evaluation* of past and their *expectations* regarding future developments of cross-border relations. The second takes into account *potential factors* of cross-border cohesion (e.g. the percentage of respondents who stated that they had friends or relatives living across the border). The third is related to the elements of *social and cultural affinities* with the neighbouring area (e.g. the percentage of respondents who stated that they understand/speak the neighbours' language or were regular audience of the cross-border media). The fourth is related to the elements of cross-border *functional co-dependence* (e.g. the percentage of respondents who stated that they were regular visitors to neighbouring places owing to work or shopping). Based on these sections, we calculated also a synthetic index, expressing the mean value of previously calculated individual indicators.

Table 6. *Changes of the calculated indexes of cross-border social cohesion in the Slovene border area with Italy in the period 2008-2015*

Area	Index of cross-border evaluation/ expectation		Index of potential cross-border cohesion		Index of socio-cultural affinity		Index of functional cross-border cohesion		Synthetic index of cross-border cohesion	
	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015	2008	2015
North	46,0	61,3	65,8	65,5	44,0	27,8	15,5	16,1	42,8	42,7
Centre	52,2	59,3	63,5	65,6	61,7	52,5	22,4	22,4	50,0	50,0
South	52,4	60,0	60,2	64,9	63,3	55,7	16,1	18,8	48,0	49,9
Average	50,2	60,2	62,3	65,3	59,3	49,2	18,3	19,5	46,9	47,5

Data source: Own survey and data elaborations, 2008 and 2015

In general, the synthetic index of cross-border cohesion in the border area with Italy is the highest compared with the same calculated index in other Slovene border areas (Bufon, 2008 and 2016). However, table 6 reveals that the level of cross-border cohesion is higher in the central and southern part of the Slovenian border area, but lower in the northern part, where there are also greater orographic obstacles to cross-border communication. Watching more carefully the dynamic of the individual indexes in the three sub-units, we can see that the index of cross-border evaluation/ expectation was in 2008 much lower in the northern area than in the rest of the Slovene border region, but became the highest in 2015. That means that people in this area were initially more skeptical about the possible future development concerning general cross-border relations, but became later more confident and optimistic, similarly to their co-residents in the other two areas. As a whole, the index was in 2015 higher by ten points than in 2008. The index of potential cross-border cohesion, based on cross-border kinship and friendship relations, instead, was in 2008 significantly lower in the southern area, where post-war border consequences and disputes were bitterer (Bufon and Minghi, 2000), but has also improved by 2015, indicating a more relaxed cross-border social situation. Again, the index of socio-cultural affinity was quite lower in the northern area than in the rest of the border region, and even made worse by 2015, when it decreased also in the other two border sub-units. As a whole, it

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actually lost about ten points in the studied period. The reason for such a negative situation/development is that people in the northern area has a lower knowledge of the Italian language, due to the modest cross-border functional contacts, and this factor combined with a general decline concerning watching Italian TV programs. As already mentioned, functional cross-border contacts, and in particular the intensity of these contacts, did not increase very much in the period 2008-2015. For that reason, the index of functional cross-border cohesion remained almost unchanged in the northern and central area, but improved in the southern, Istrian and Karst area nearby Trieste. The latter showed in 2015 a similar general index of cross-border cohesion as the central area, consisting of the highly co-dependent urban area of Gorizia/Nova Gorica (Bufon, 1996b), improving thus its “performance” by two points, whereas the other two areas maintained the previous general level of cross-border cohesion.

CONCLUSIONS

The socio-economic analysis for the period 1991-2011 presented in this article has shown how the two sides of the Italian-Slovene borderland are becoming more homogeneous, after the geopolitical events in 2004 (Slovenia joined the EU) and 2007 (Slovenia joined the Schengen space), on the level of individual neighbouring cross-border sub-regions. However, we can still observe, on both sides, some persisting geographical disparities between the northern Alpine areas and the more urbanized central and southern areas. In general, structural cross-border disparities have been now replaced by a more balanced spatial and social organization, except for significant differences in the aging and educational structure, which remain quite better on the Slovenian side.

The surveys performed among Slovene border dwellers in 2007 and 2015 have instead revealed the general positive attitude towards cross-border cooperation and the intensive cross-border relations established much prior the Slovenian access to the Schengen space. This event has, however, produced an even better attitude towards their Italian neighbours and some more intense forms of cross-border cohesion, in particular in regard to housing (Italian citizens buying homes in Slovenia), socializing, visiting cultural events and leisure activities (which are now equally developed on both sides).

The processes and situations presented in this article show that the direction, intensity and type of cross-border ties can be not only appropriately studied and qualitatively and quantitatively assessed, but also compared both in terms of time (diachronic approach) and space (synchronic approach). All these trends are indicating how European integration processes may positively influence local cross-border integration practices, as well as socio-cultural and functional cohesion. It could be also noted that these developments and potentials should be better managed through a common regional planning policy that could also support and implement more concrete development perspectives in the more marginalized northern border sub-units. In general, the research into this phenomenon should be focused on different forms of cross-border cooperation, taking into account the impact of the abolition of political borders and liberalization of border regimes upon social and spatial ties. The subject gives rise to the question of how to plan and implement such institutional, administrative and functional regimes that would enable the border population and the border area to successfully deal with its development dilemmas in the context of an increasing regional social and spatial (re)integration (see a recent discussion of this issue in Bufon, 2014). What is of vital importance to such engagement is not only a more carefully planned government policy on border areas, but also the decentralization and (above all, cross-border) regionalization of local structures of government to better address the simultaneous forms of convergent and divergent processes in this and other numerous European border areas.

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