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## THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN BORDER-REGION. RESULTS OF RECENT FIELD STUDIES CONCERNING THE BILATERAL PATTERNS IN PERCEPTION OF CROSS-BORDER SPACES AND DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

*The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the Austrian membership in the European Union, the taking effect of the Schengen Treaty and the potential eastern enlargement of the EU are the most important general conditions which had and still have effects on the development of the Austro-Hungarian frontier area on both sides of the border. The paper is based on recently undertaken field studies in the region which are part of a broad interdisciplinary project on the "Qualitative Reconstruction of the 'mental' border-drawing since 1989". Comparable results of the survey carried out in four Austrian border municipalities in Burgenland and in their Hungarian neighbour villages will be discussed. The elicited patterns of attitudes and behaviour illustrate the huge mental dynamics of the border region since 1989.*

**Key words:** Austro-Hungarian border, images and perception patterns, cross-border spaces and development perspectives

### LA REGIONE DI CONFINE AUSTRO-UNGARICA. RISULTATI DEL RECENTE STUDIO SUI MECCANISMI BILATERALI DI PERCEZIONE, SUGLI SPAZI TRANSFRONTALIERI E SULLE PROSPETTIVE DI SVILUPPO

#### SINTESI

*La caduta della Cortina di Ferro nel 1989, l'entrata dell'Austria nell'Unione Europea, l'entrata in vigore del Trattato di Schengen e il possibile ampliamento dell'Unione Europea ai paesi dell'Est, rappresentano le condizioni generali più importanti che hanno avuto, e hanno ancora oggi, effetti sullo sviluppo di entrambe le parti dell'area di confine austro-ungarico. Questo saggio si basa su dei recenti studi svolti nella regione, i quali fanno parte di un progetto disciplinare più ampio sulla "Ricostruzione qualitativa della traccia 'mentale' dei confini a partire dal 1989". Verranno inoltre discussi i risultati ottenuti da un sondaggio svolto in quattro comuni austriaci di confine della Burgenland e nei villaggi ungheresi limitrofi. I modelli attitudinali e comportamentali ottenuti mostrano la grande dinamica mentale della regione di confine dal 1989 in poi.*

**Parole chiave:** confine austro-ungarico, modelli di percezione e immagine, spazi transfrontalieri e prospettive di sviluppo

## INTRODUCTION

The changes of the European political landscape in the wake of "1989/90" initiated a redefinition process of the border between Eastern and Western Europe. The breakdown of the Iron Curtain, the Austrian EU-membership, the implementation of the Schengen Treaty and the potential Eastern enlargement of the European Union created a new framework for policy options and restructured the development of the Austro-Hungarian border region on both sides as well as the public perception of this ongoing process.

Although recent opinion polls show that the Austrian population in general does not support a future EU-membership of the former single-party states, Hungary is seen as an exception: According to the May and June 1999 survey, not even one third of the interviewees personally favoured the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, and 44% stated their disapproval of the EU enlargement (SWS-Bildstatistiken, 1999, 242).<sup>1</sup> But, on the contrary, 52% of the Austrians welcomed Hungary as a new member of the EU (SWS-Bildstatistiken, 1997, 420).

To illustrate the political background of the mainly negative attitude of the Austrians towards the EU enlargement it should – among others – be mentioned that at the beginning of the 90s, a series of surveys on the possible extent of a future East-West-migration were published – overestimating the "real" size of potential migrants and the "input" of criminality" by far – and fears of mass-migration became an important topic of the political debates.<sup>2</sup>

Against that, the results of our research in the border region show that the perception of the people residing in the respective region is far more differentiated: in their perspective, with the opening of the border after 1989, a first step of the enlargement of the European Union has already taken place. These results mark a main difference to the public debate, as it is presented in mass media and political discourse at the national level. The reference to this regional public opinion may help to answer new questions raised by the challenge of EU enlargement and to discuss appropriate policy options, bridging the gap between local or regional concerns and European politics.

## GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The Austrian province Burgenland constitutes the far east of the country's territory. At the so called "Eastern border" it meets the Hungarian regions Vas and Győr-Moson-Sopron (see Map 1), the best developed region in Hungary.

The regions on both sides of the border share many similarities and do not only meet spatially. During the last years, INTERREG- and PHARE-projects supported cross-border co-operations and political plans emerged to gain the EUREGIO-status for this border region, which until 1918 has more or less altogether been part of the Hungarian kingdom. The relative economic similarity of the immediate cross-border-regions and common cultural traditions (at least until 1921, if not until the end of World War II) allow a basis for a fruitful neighbourhood policy, although the two border regions belonged to different political systems over a period of more than four decades. As a whole, the geographical situation of the border region – also regarding the natural environment – presents a relatively favourable precondition for future cross-border co-operations. Against this background, we were interested in the recent status of bilateral perception patterns, activity spaces and cross-border co-operation perspectives ten years after the fall of the Iron Curtain.



**Map 1: Field study areas of the Austro-Hungarian border.**

**Zemljevid 1: Območja raziskav vzdolž avstrijsko-madžarske meje.**

1 16% answered that they would not care and 9% did not give any answer at all or said they did not know (SWS-Bildstatistiken, 1999).

2 As a result of the discussion, Austrian soldiers have been stationed in the border regions of the provinces of Upper Austria, Lower Austria and Burgenland as frontier guards.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND AIMS

The article presents selective results of a trans-disciplinary, trilateral research project on the redefinition of the Eastern border of Austria since "1989", which has been carried out within the frame of a national research program on xenophobia, supported by the former Austrian Ministry of Science and Transport.<sup>3</sup>

The project aimed to reconstruct the "mental map" of residents in the border region, with a special emphasis on their construction of a mental border and the use they make of for their daily activities. The project design attempted to open up an additional perspective on the reconstruction of those social practices that people living on the two sides of the border use to redefine this border and on the consequences of the political changes and developments in the border region. The discussion of some of the main research results may be seen as an invitation to share the view of the regional population involved in the process of EU enlargement.

Between 1998 and 1999, a series of local case-studies on both sides of the Austro-Hungarian border served as a basis for comparative analysis: the results of those studies allow for a reconstruction of the perception of mutual (regional) identities as well as images of oneself and each other. They open up a closer look on the process of the shift of the EU Eastern border and the making of a trans-border region Vienna/ Burgenland – Lower Austria/ Bratislava/ Győr-Moson-Sopron-Megy (Austria/ Slovakia/ Hungary).

The research is based on a trans-disciplinary qualitative methodological setting, combining social sciences and behavioural geography approaches and focusing on main patterns of perception and stereotypes in everyday life experiences and contexts as well as in the public media discourse. This trans-disciplinary qualitative methodological approach allowed for different perspectives on the "social text" in the border region.

A qualitative, process-oriented approach has been chosen against the background that, as mentioned in the introduction, the currently available quantitative analyses (political culture research, opinion polls) on the enlargement process mainly offer a temporary picture of the acceptance as well as of the implications of the transformation process and do not provide sufficient knowledge on the variety or ambiguity of the attitudes and their underlying (historical) cultural patterns. In

comparison, a process-oriented approach, focusing on the use of identity concepts based on mutual auto- and hetero-stereotypes by the actors in the field, permits an analysis of the construction of those cultural patterns that frame the process of the EU enlargement in the region.

Therefore, step by step, the following social sciences and behavioural geography approaches have been used for the interdisciplinary research on both sides of the border:

- A survey by means of semi-standardized questionnaires (including semantic differential-, photo triad- and sketch map-techniques as well as association-tests) in selected municipalities along the border (four municipalities in Burgenland and their Hungarian neighbour municipalities, see Map 1).<sup>4</sup>

The semi-standardized questionnaires included, among others, the following leading research questions:

- ⇒ Which perception patterns regarding the border region (and the people living in this region) can be found? How can they be described?
- ⇒ How is the dynamics of the border-region represented in the perception and the behaviour of the people residing at the border? Did the perception and the behaviour of the regional population change during the last decade?
- ⇒ What kind of associations and understandings regarding the neighbourhood exist ten years after the fall of the Iron Curtain?
- ⇒ Which perspectives of common cross-border developments are perceived and how are they evaluated by the people in the region?

The questionnaires were analysed in the methodological frame of behavioural geography, which is based on information and data concerning the images, which individuals and social groups create of their surroundings as well as concerning the dynamics of these images, which are supposed to structure the spatial perception and influence patterns that underlie the social and political actions in a given field. This approach allows for the drawing of graphical sketches – the so-called "mental maps" or "cognitive maps".

- Eight Focus group discussions to confront the citizens in the respective villages with their own mental image of the border.
- A qualitative content analysis of regional newspapers, focussing on main patterns of perception and stereotypes as represented in public discourse.

3 The research has been undertaken by the Social Sciences Department of the Austrian Institute of East and Southeast European Studies in cooperation with the Institute of Geography and Regional Studies of the University of Vienna, the Centre for Regional Studies/ Győr and the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava. Results of the research on the Austro-Slovakian border are not included in this article due to the fact that the respective research started 12 month later than that on the Austro-Hungarian border and therefore the analysis has not been completed as yet (Österreichisches Ost- und Südosteuropa-Institut, 2000).

4 A sample of 1.250 people were asked during late spring and summer 1998.

## RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

### Bilateral patterns of perception

The introducing open question asked for free associations about typical identity marks for Austria respectively Hungary. Two categories achieved peak values in both countries: landscape marks on the one hand (like Puszta or Balaton and the Alps or Vienna) and "mentality and culture" on the other. A general comparison of the answers in the category "mentality and culture" showed considerable differences: while Austrians draw quite a positive image in this respect, the answers in Hungary are rather negatively connoted. The Austrians describe their neighbours as industrious, friendly and nice, whereas the Hungarian interviewees regard Austrians as rather arrogant and impolite and think they are looking down upon them. The number of negative characteristics was three times higher as the number of positive descriptions. Two more categories – one in each country – are significant: 27.5% of the Austrian interviewees associate consumption with Hungary, especially the possibility of cheap shopping and having cheap meals in restaurants (see Table). In Hungary, 24.9% of the interviewees associate wealth and prosperity with Austria. According to this, different consumption habits and possibilities seem to have a considerable share in the construction of a mental border. The number of associations concerning personal contacts with the neighbouring country in Hungary as well as in Austria is rather low – an astonishing fact compared to the cross-border activity.

**Table: Bilateral perception patterns in % (own survey, 1998).**

**Tabela: Bilateralni percepcijski vzorci v % (lastna anketa, 1998).**

Association categories	In Austria	In Hungary
Consumption	27,5	8,4
Mentality and culture	14,6	14,0
Landscape marks	12,0	26,7
History	7,4	3,4
Neighbourhood	6,9	5,5
Personal relations	6,1	2,3
Work (A), Working possibilities (H)	3,4	6,4
Reforms	9,0	-
Security	5,0	-
Traffic	4,0	-
Wealth, prosperity	-	24,9
Border, border traffic	-	3,7
Europe, the West	-	1,8
Other	4,1	2,9
Total	100,0	100,0

Austria: N=1.630; Hungary: N=1.416.

### Cross-border spaces

Although contacts between the two countries have always been quite intensive, the political changes of 1989 intensified the cross-border contacts. In Austria, about 50% of all contacts started in 1989 or afterwards, and about 60% of the contacts in Hungary. The intensity of cross-border contacts at the individual level regarding the inhabitants of our eight investigated communities has at least doubled.

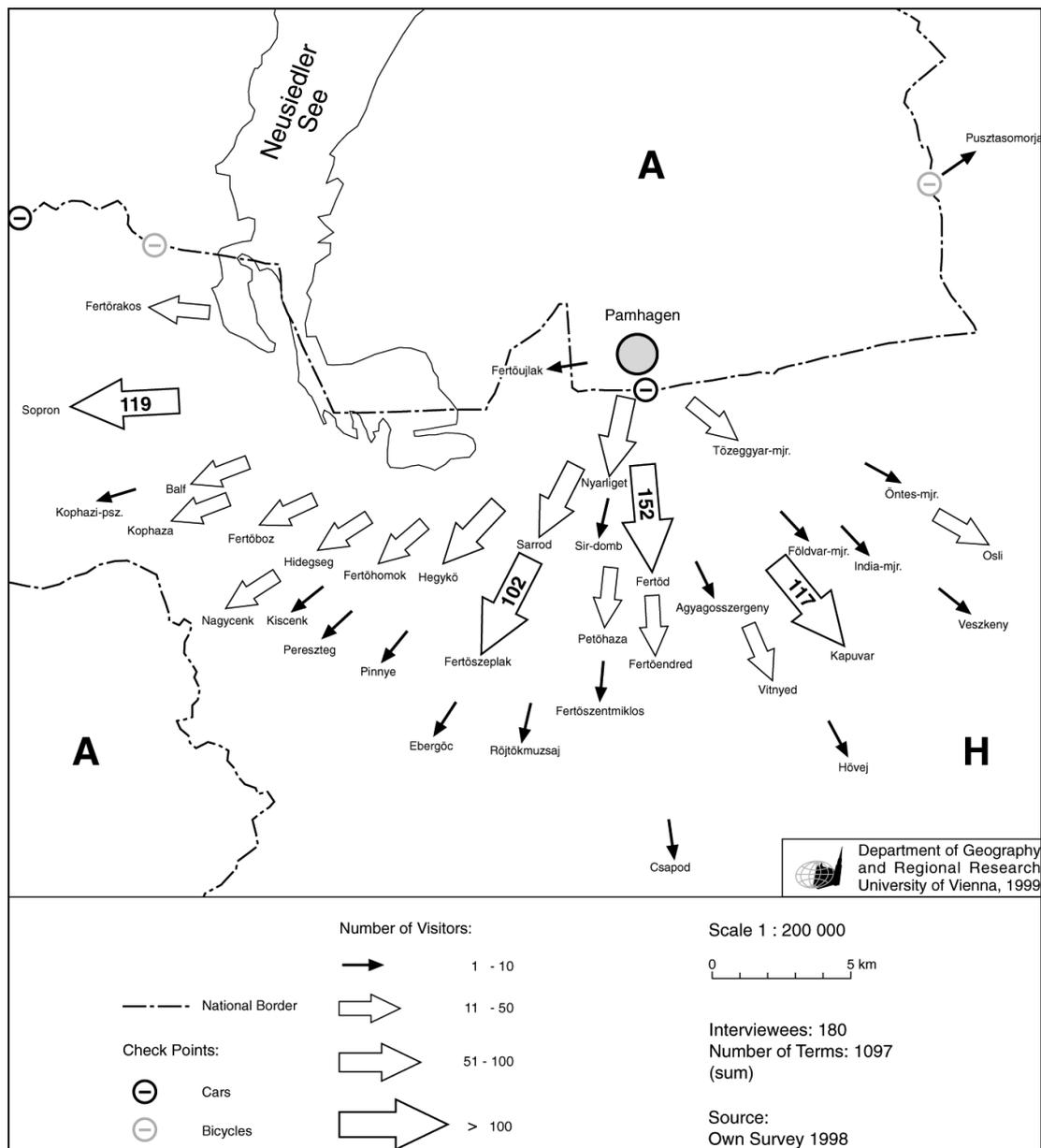
The new contacts on both sides of the border concern(ed) first of all activities like visiting friends, excursions and holiday or shopping trips. Business trips are only of minor importance. Only 17% of the interviewed Austrians and 14% of the Hungarians stated that they had never crossed the border. However, 15% of the Austrians and even 22% of the interviewed Hungarians declared that they were crossing the border daily or weekly.

Activity spaces are on the one hand determined by local places and sites in the closer surrounding of the border (e.g. local cross-border working places at vegetable farms in Austria or places of tourist and cultural interest like the Esterházy-castle near Fertöd in Hungary). On the other hand, regional centres with a higher degree of service are the main attraction points. Regarding the example of one field study area near the Neusiedlersee with the Austrian Pamhagen community and the Hungarian Fertöd community (see Maps 2 and 3), these regional centres are Illmitz and Rust in Austria and Sopron and Kapuvár in Hungary. The two maps on activity spaces show the intensified new dimension of the cross-border contacts since 1989. These new quantity and quality of individual cross-border activities represent a solid base for further and future bilateral developments.

### Cross-border development perspectives

Closely connected to a common cross-border development in this region is the topic of the potential Eastern enlargement of the EU. As already said, the Austrian population in general does not favour the integration of the former single-party states into the European Union, with the exception of Hungary. What is the opinion on this topic in the border region? Most of the interviewees in both countries support the Eastern enlargement of the EU, at least the membership of Hungary. Still, the extent of the approval differs considerably. The support in Hungary is with about 83% almost twice as high as in the Austrian survey communities, with an average approval of 43% (32% of the Austrian interviewees being against the Hungarian EU-membership).

The attitude of the population in the four Austrian communities towards the Eastern enlargement of the EU is rather ambiguous. Although almost half of them sup-

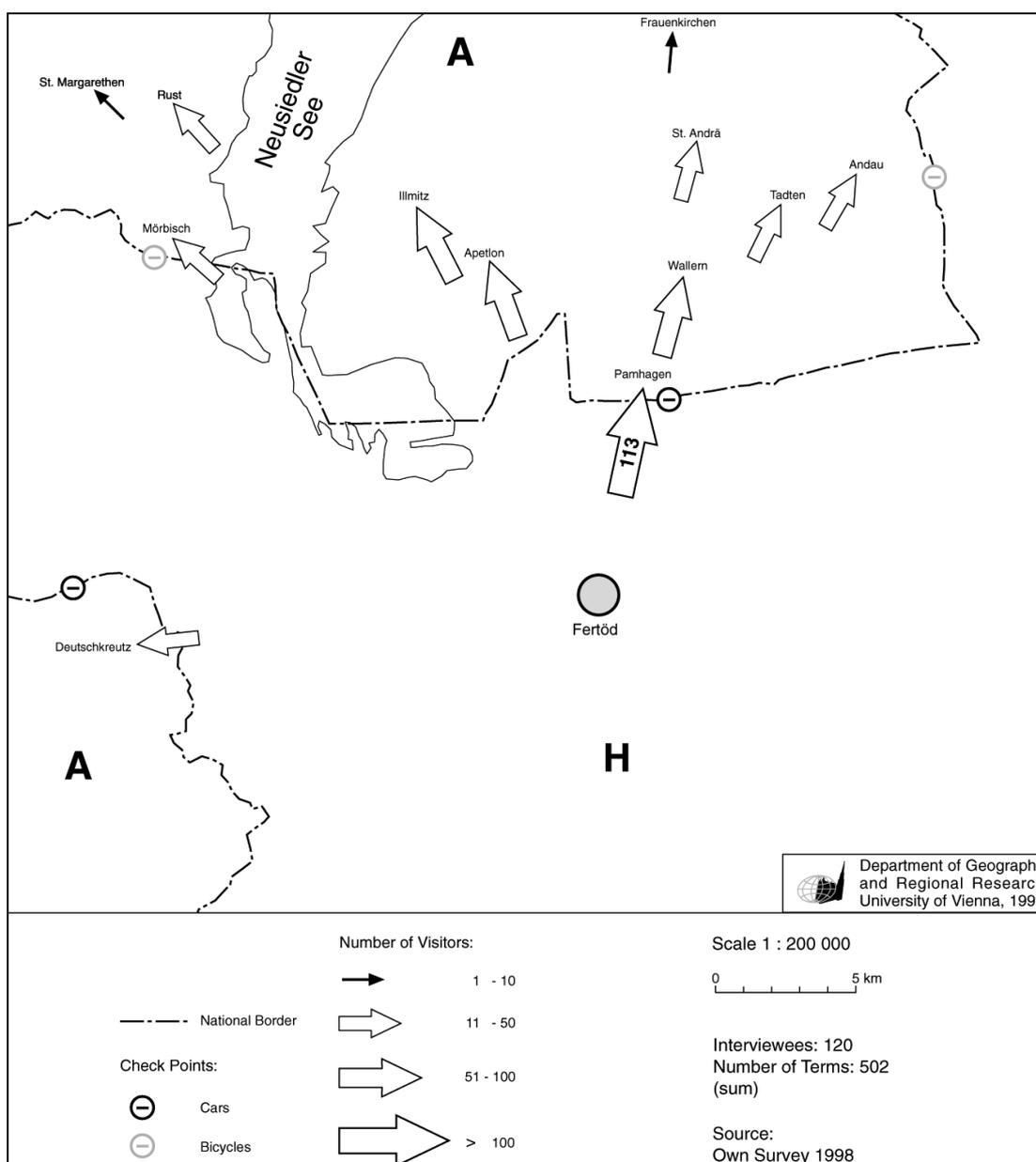


**Map 2: Pamhagen space of activity (Austria).**  
**Zemljevid 2: Področje dejavnosti - Pamhagen (Avstrija).**

port the future membership of the neighbouring countries, the expectations expressed in two thirds of the answers are very sceptical and rather negative. Economic fears of a potential closing of enterprises or fears of losing the job are mentioned most often. The answers on the Hungarian side of the border show an opposite picture: more than two thirds of the expectations are positive. Economic advantages, an improvement of the infrastructure or the expectation of a higher standard of living after the entry into the European Union are expressed by the Hungarians. These vague fears on the Austrian side ("everything is getting worse") and vague hopes on the

Hungarian side ("equality to Europe") exist simultaneously with very precise hopes and fears (like the hope for the fall of the Schengen border expressed by the Hungarians or the fear of increasing criminality expressed by the Austrians).

Taking into account these fears and hopes it is quite surprising that more than 60% of the Austrians and about 40% of the Hungarians do not think they will be affected in their personal life by the enlargement of the European Union. Those Austrians who expect any effects are again quite pessimistic, whereas the Hungarians believe in positive potential effects.



**Map 3: Fertöd space of activity (Hungary).**  
**Zemljevid 3: Področje dejavnosti - Fertöd (Madžarska).**

Cross-border co-operation can only succeed when the people concerned – the population in the border regions – actively support the respective ideas and projects. Co-operation that comes only "from above" is doomed to failure. The answers to the questions are in this respect quite encouraging. About 72% of the Austrian interviewees and more than 90% of the Hungarians believe in common cross-border development possibilities. This is, of course, a quite general assessment level, which does not say much about the readiness to participate actively in a cross-border project, but indicates a

favourable atmosphere for future co-operations. Another result points to the same: economy and culture are the fields where the best common development possibilities were seen. Besides that, tourist activities have been mentioned as an important branch for further and future cross-border co-operation on both sides of the border.

These corresponding assessments in both countries, together with the described positive atmosphere for cross-border co-operation in general, seem to be a promising basis for the actual realization of the projects.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the project show a more differentiated perspective of the regional population and therefore mark a main difference to the political and public debate as represented in mass media and political discourse at the national level. The main tendency of the results points at a far more differentiated and better developed regional public opinion than the "national" public debate on the regional consequences of EU enlargement in this region suggests. Although the changes in the Austro-Hungarian border region since "1989" are of great importance for the perception as well as the activities of the local population, residents in the region formulate their expectations concerning this ongoing process as ambiguous, but to a large extent as positive.

The analysis of the survey in connection with the focus group discussions show that in the perception of the regional population the enlargement of the European Union has already taken place. The symbolic date "1989/90" already marks a decisive break: Subsequently, the cross-border contacts have significantly increased and people residing in the region have changed their day-to-day habits and customs. The daily life experiences of the regional population give evidence for the shift of the border: People take advantage from a newly gained enlarged radius of life, which has already exceeded the border. The participants of the focus groups gave many examples of their use of the open border to increase their "radius of activity". The open border allows for additional possibilities in various spheres of daily life as in the field of family and friendship contacts, visits, short trips and tourism.

The enlargement of the EU is taken as given in the region itself, it is seen as a further logical step of development. To give an example, an exchange of labour and workers – legal and illegal – is already taking place and is part of daily life of the region, answering actual economical needs. From the Austrian point of view, Hungarian labour force is particularly needed in the field of agriculture, farming and house building. Moreover, Austrians take advantage of cheaper services as hair dressing and dental medicine in Hungary. The advantages which people in the region take from the open border may as well be described by such catchwords as "consumption of goods and services", "migration of labour", and "cooperation perspectives".

Disadvantages and problems or potential dangers, resulting from the "open" border, are mentioned as well by the respondents in our research (survey and focus group discussions) on both sides of the borders, e.g., the increased traffic across the border, criminality and illegal migration plus the fear of economic concurrence. It is of main interest that from the "national" Austrian perspective – as it is represented in mass media and political discourse in a stereotyped way – these problems are

mainly seen as exclusive Austrian respectively Western European problems. The detailed analysis nevertheless shows that these problems, most of which are still treated at the national level, are shared by the populations on both sides of the border and their trans-border-relevance awaits for a strengthening of the attempt to cross-border solutions.

In addition, there is a differentiated perception along regional respectively local criteria noticeable, due to specific local circumstances and problems, e.g. whether the economic basis of the respective villages is industry (f. e. Heiligenkreutz and Szent Gotthard) or tourism (f. e. Lutzmannsburg and Fertöd). These various constellations of local problems emerged especially in the focus group discussions and have given rise to the need for particular local solutions, which allow for specific and differentiated political answers. The problem is that regional expectations often do not find correspondence in national political decisions, which are mostly based on other criteria than regional accordance (e.g. in the question of frontier crossing points). Ambitious regional initiatives, such as the so-called "Bürgermeisterforum", an association of Mayors from Austrian, Hungarian and Slovak villages and small towns, try to bridge the gap between local respective regional and national as well as European politics.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite these regional developments, a mental border that separates the European West from the European (South)East – which is associated with all negative stereotypes of the Balkans – has been in existence until now and still serves as an orientation frame for the construction of auto- and hetero-stereotypes as well as of mutual images in everyday-life contexts. But this mental border nevertheless is no longer congruent with the state borders or the EU (and "Schengen") Eastern border: the underlying dynamics of construction of those cultural patterns, which the mental border is based on, have caused a shift putting it further away in a south-eastern direction. This phenomenon is represented clearly in the results of the focus group discussions.

The construction of this new border – a shift towards the Southeast – on both sides of the border does not follow exclusively geographical criteria, but it is also based on classifying ethnic attributions towards "foreigners" (especially identified as Rumanians, Albanians and "Gypsies", as it has been expressed by the discussants) associated with traditional negative stereotypes towards the European Southeast. On the other hand, this process of constructing a new mental border in everyday life-contexts, which is mainly influenced by the political development in the wake of "1989", as well as by historical mental and cultural patterns, permits the imagination of a "common mentality" of those people who live close to

both sides of the border and the mental construction of a new trans-border region.

In the light of the fact that critics of the EU enlargement are trying to challenge the legitimacy of the enlargement process by pointing out specific problems (e.g. regarding the labour market or migration), the reference to the process of regional identity shifting, with a potential for creating a trans-border identity, makes it

possible to conduct a reflexive discourse which may include a more specific problem consciousness. Regarding the function and the importance of borders and the cultural patterns that structure their perception, the already existing "regional bridges" offer a way to a better understanding of the new definition of the European border and possible ways how to overcome "mental barriers".

## AVSTRIJSKO-MADŽARSKO MEJNO OBMOČJE. REZULTATI NEDAVNIH TERENSKIH RAZISKAV BILATERALNIH VZORCEV DOJEMANJA ČEZMEJNIH PROSTOROV IN RAZVOJNIH PERSPEKTIV

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### POVZETEK

Če povzamemo, lahko rečemo, da so spremembe v avstrijsko-madžarskem mejnem območju od leta 1989 dalje – tako spremembe v mentalnih podobah intervjuvancev kot tudi druge očitne spremembe, kot na primer možnosti za prečkanje meje za obisk prijateljev ali sorodnikov – igrale pomembno vlogo v dojemanju lokalnega prebivalstva v preučevanih skupnostih.

Čezmejno sodelovanje se je do zdaj uresničevalo predvsem na področju športa in kulturnih dejavnosti, medtem ko je bilo gospodarsko sodelovanje med podjetji na obeh straneh meje neprimerno manjše. Sicer pa je čezmejno sodelovanje v regiji močno odvisno od posameznikov in osebnih čezmejnih stikov. Zelo primerna in tudi potrebna bi bila nekakšna institucionalizacija območja.

Vstop Madžarske v Evropsko Unijo bo naslednji pomembni datum za avstrijsko-madžarsko mejno območje in priložnost za "nov" skupen razvoj in seveda tudi za "novo" skupno zgodovino.

**Ključne besede:** avstrijsko-madžarska meja, vzorci dojemanja in mentalnih podob, čezmejni prostori in razvojni obeti

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