

The Frontiers of Europe

Edited by

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>About the Contributors</i>	viii
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi

1	European Frontiers at the End of the Twentieth Century: An Introduction	1
	<i>Malcolm Anderson</i>	
2	Whose Responsibility are Frontiers?	11
	<i>Peter-Christian Miller-Graff</i>	
3	Boundaries and Boundary-consciousness: Politicizing Cultural Identity	22
	<i>Anthony P. Cohen</i>	
4	Sovereignty, Citizenship and Nationality: Reflections on the Case of Germany	36
	<i>John Breuilly</i>	
5	Austria: Nationality and the Borders of Identity	68
	<i>Andrew Barker</i>	
6	Perspectives on Frontiers: The Case of Alpe Adria	75
	<i>Raimondo Strassoldo</i>	
7	Mitteleuropa: The Difficult Frontier	91
	<i>Eberhard Bort</i>	
8	The Mediterranean: Europe's Rio Grande	109
	<i>Russell King</i>	
9	After Brodningnag: Micro-states and their Future	135
	<i>Tom Nairn</i>	
10	Frontiers and Security in the European Union: The Illusion of Migration Control	148
	<i>Didier Bigo</i>	

1. Mayer (1981), p. 3.
2. Janik and Toulmin (1973), p. 36.
3. Zweig (1943), p. 13.
4. Rathkolb *et al.* (1990), pp. 15-16.
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Perspectives on Frontiers: The Case of Alpe Adria

RAIMONDO STRASSOLDI

A geo-historical introduction: frontier problems in North-Eastern Italy

When in 1968, in the Italian frontier town of Gorizia, a research institute was established with the specific aim to study the problems related to borders, there was no body of Italian social-scientific tradition on this matter to rely on, and very little material internationally (with the exception of political geography).

Borders and frontiers still do not appear to be a relevant topic for social-scientific inquiry in Italy. One reason may be that most of Italy is a peninsula, and the coasts are not commonly conceived as borders: most of the land borders run on the crest line of the High Alps and are therefore thinly populated. Physical contact between Italy and the rest of Europe takes place in a relatively limited number of border passes, where specialized settlements have developed. Italian alpine borders are characterized by remoteness, marginality, peripherality, out-migration (except where tourist development obtains) and by a series of often highly congested, mostly minor border towns. It seems that this dual nature has hindered the development of notions of borderlands and the 'border situation' as a unified problem worthy of scientific study. Also, the notion of 'frontier region' is problematic, since most of Northern Italy would fall into this category: all administrative regions north of the Po river extend to the state boundaries, but this hardly characterizes their identity.

The case of South Tyrol

The three Italian regions where the border is a relevant, even a central, problem, are Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol) and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In the first two cases, although the border runs along the highest alpine peaks, the state boundary cuts across regions unified from time immemorial, and it separates two halves of a unitary language community. In the case of South Tyrol, the frontier was imposed by military force in

1918, well beyond the expectations and claims of the Italian 'irredentist' groups: it has been highly resented, and never completely accepted, by the local population. After 1945, and after the bombings and killings of the fifties and the sixties, Italy could keep this boundary only at the price of granting South Tyrol a high degree of autonomy and many financial concessions. Nevertheless, problems of inter-ethnic relations, of federalism, of transfrontier co-operation, of border infrastructures and other typical issues of the frontier *problématique* continue to be at the centre of both political and social-scientific interest in this region. For example, recent (1995) plans for closer co-operation between North and South Tyrol were heavily handedly vetoed by Italian national authorities as getting too close to secession. Incidents like these stimulate meetings, conferences, debates, studies and publications which can be classified as belonging to 'frontier literature'.¹ Some of the same interests and outlooks have permeated the neighbouring Italian province of Trento, which has been very much influenced by the vicissitudes of South Tyrol: it has shown strong autonomist aspirations, stresses its 'Central-European' ties and ethno-regional peculiarities.²

The case of Friuli and Venezia Giulia

In Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the situation is even more complicated and, in the past, has been more tragic. This is the only place in Europe where the three main European culture areas – German, Latin, and Slav – meet, and have done so since the seventh century. Central European powers (in particular the Habsburg Empire) have here confronted the Mediterranean powers: especially Venice, and then Italy. In the easily passable Eastern section of the Alps, from Tarvis to Gorizia, the frontier between these powers has frequently been disputed, and subject to drastic relocation as a consequence of wars. For many centuries (1420–1866), it cut across the same populations, neo-Latin Friulians in the plains, and Slovenes in the highlands. In recent times, this has produced a problem of national minorities (Slovenes and some Germans on the Italian side, Italians on the Austrian and then Yugoslav side). As a consequence of victory in 1918, the Italian state pushed the boundary deep into ethnic Slovene territory. When the fortunes of war were reversed, in the late stages of the Second World War, Tito's Yugoslavia claimed half of Friuli up to the Tagliamento river, on the ground of ancient Slovene settlements, plus the two cities of Gorizia and Trieste. This led to bloody conflict within the anti-Nazi partisan forces, between the Communist/Slovene and their Italian Communist supporters on one side, and the rest of the Italian resistance on the other. Fascist policy of brutal repression and forced assimilation of the Slovene minority had built a deep hatred of Italians, which in 1945 flared into mass murders, genocide and

'ethnic cleansing' in the Tito-occupied 'Venezia Giulia' (Gorizia, Trieste, Istria and Dalmatia). Several thousand Italian civilians were horribly killed in Karst caves (the 'foibe') and about 350,000 fled their Yugoslav-occupied homelands. Conflict continued in the following years over the status of Trieste, and until 1953 Italy and Yugoslavia were rattling sabres. The problem of the north-eastern boundary was for many years one of the main focuses of Italian politics, both internal (it became the test of national dignity for the new democratic republic) and international. In 1954, a 'temporary' agreement called the London Memorandum was reached, but only in 1975 a final peace treaty between Italy and Yugoslavia was signed – the Treaty of Osimo.

The normalization of cross-border relations in the Upper Adriatic

For ten years – from 1945 to 1955 – the de facto boundary between Italy and Yugoslavia, running a few kilometres east of Trieste and through the town of Gorizia, was effectively sealed, and formed part of the Iron Curtain: the long conflict – from 1918 to 1954 – over minorities and territory, with its massacres, had left a legacy of deep suspicion and hate. After 1955, neighbouring relations were very cautiously resumed, mainly under the pressure of local economic needs (cross-border property rights, primary supplies, etc.). In the 1960s, with the growth of private motor car ownership and the receding of war memories, that border traffic began to grow, with Italians crossing into Yugoslavia to take advantage of the much lower prices there, particularly petrol and meat, and the Yugoslavs, in turn, buying manufactured goods (mainly clothing and home appliances) in Italy. Slowly, tourism drew adventurous Italians into the Alpine and coastal resorts of Slovenia, Istria and Dalmatia.

By the late 1960s, a new generation had matured, which had not personally experienced the horrors of Fascism and war. New attitudes towards the neighbours on the other side of the border developed. These new attitudes were shared by the political class; transfrontier contacts between local authorities started again. Common interests in the economic sphere were discussed, and also common social ties and cultural values. Cross-border relations became 'civilized' again.³

The role of the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia

An important stage was the institution, in 1963, of the autonomous region Friuli-Venezia Giulia which set itself the task of becoming the 'bridge' between Italy and its eastern neighbours, beginning with the Yugoslav federal republics of Slovenia and Croatia. The Austrian *Länder* of Carinthia

and Styria were also identified as partners in cross-border co-operation. Thus the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia started to develop an inter-regional, international policy of its own – informally, since its statutes and the Italian Constitution did not allow such activities. One of the means by which such policies were pursued was the establishment of semi-private institutions. Another was involvement in European initiatives – the Council of Europe and the EEC – in the field of cross-border co-operation, and in what has been called the 'European Frontier Region Movement'.

The Institute of International Sociology of Gorizia was one of those institutions; but there were others, like the Institute for Central-European Cultural Meetings, established in Gorizia in 1966, which revived contacts between intellectuals and artists of the area of the former Habsburg Empire which, at the time, mostly belonged to the Soviet 'empire'; the Regional Institute for European Studies which acted more on the middle-brow and popular-culture level, promoted European consciousness, values and knowledge; the Institute for the Study and Documentation on East Europe specialized in gathering, processing and distributing information on the economic developments in the area; and others. The region also patronized more contingent and special initiatives of a cross-border and inter-regional nature, thus strengthening the international outlook of the regional community: meetings of local authorities, conferences of special professional groups and interests, sports and cultural events, twinning of municipalities, etc.

Border studies at the Gorizia Institute of International Sociology (ISIG)

These activities formed one of the fields of research of ISIG: the second main interest was the study of inter-ethnic relations in this and other border areas. The early publications of the Institute include a theoretical-programmatic statement,⁴ a statistical-economic analysis of border traffic in Gorizia,⁵ a study of the technical-legal aspects of Italian boundary controls,⁶ and a historical-geographical study of the complex vicissitudes of Italy's north-eastern boundary.⁷ The psychological, cultural and social aspects of 'living at the border' were the topic for a properly sociological field research – a sample survey on 1,215 respondents from the Gorizia and Trieste area – carried out by Renzo Gubert in 1972.⁸ A study was done on a feature typical of conflictual frontier areas, that is, the militarization of the territory.⁹ This first wave of activities culminated in the calling of an international conference of experts in various social science disciplines concerned with border problems.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the expertise developed at ISIG in border-related problems was called on by both regional and European bodies. Researchers from the

Institute assisted the region in drawing up documents on cross-border co-operation, and acted as consultants to the Council of Europe in developing activities on behalf of frontier regions.¹¹ The study of border problems was then pursued at a more theoretical level.¹² The study of cross-border activities in the area of Friuli-Venezia Giulia continued into the 1980s, particularly by the work of Giovanni Delli Zotti.¹³

In the following years, research projects on ethnic minorities – a common feature of border areas – attracted the most attention. A sample survey of attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes among eleven ethnic communities (or sub-communities of Latin and Slavic stock) living along the Italian side of the Italian-Yugoslav border was carried out in 1973, although it was only published eight years later.¹⁴ In the same year, another sample survey was conducted by ISIG in a multi-ethnic area of Trentino-South Tyrol.¹⁵ A textbook on ethnic relations, a consequence of these research interests, was published, which for a long time remained the only book in this field available in Italian.¹⁶ ISIG also assisted Professor Feliks Gross of New York City University in a study on border-ethnic problems in this region.¹⁷ This emphasis on ethnic issues characterized the second main ISIG conference on border problems, organized to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Institute. The proceedings were published in two volumes (in English), one on various aspects of co-operation and conflict in border areas,¹⁸ and the other on ethnic minorities in the borderlands.¹⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, several studies on ethnic groups, minorities and language groups were undertaken at ISIG.²⁰

The development of cross-border, inter-regional co-operation in the Alpe Adria Area

One of the main objects of study, and one of the main sponsors of studies on border problems was, in the 1980s, that entity called Alpe Adria. Alpe Adria is one of the 'working communities' formed by regional and local authorities along European frontiers. It first appeared as 'Trigon', a private, informal group of regional planners of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Carinthia and Slovenia, meeting in the late 1960s to arrive at common ideas on the infrastructural and economic development of the area. The improvement of road and rail connections between the Danube basin and the upper Adriatic, overcoming the Alpine barrier, was the basic issue. Soon Croats joined the group (now re-christened 'Quadrignon'). At the same time, a variety of private and semi-public bodies (like universities and chambers of commerce) and local authorities promoted their own cross-border links.²¹

The need for more orderly institutional arrangements was felt, and the Regio, Euregio and Arge-Alp examples were at hand. About ten years after

the first beginnings, the Working Community Alpe Adria was officially christened in Venice in 1978. Its very name, echoing the word *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, stresses the important role played by the German partners as midwives. Although Bavaria participated only as an observer, albeit an active one, it was to be one of the most significant and most involved partners of Alpe Adria, mainly because of its need to improve connections with the Adriatic harbours (Venice and Trieste, but also Koper/Capodistria and Rijeka/Fiume). The original full members, besides the already mentioned Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Carinthia, Slovenia and Croatia, were the Austrian *Länder* of Salzburg, Upper Austria and Styria, and the Italian region of Veneto. The working programme included the setting up of a series of working committees for specific problems; the first was concerned with regional planning and environmental management. The others dealt with transport, culture, science and sports, economy and tourism, agriculture, forestry, animal production and mountain economy, health, and social affairs, respectively. Each committee was charged with establishing specific objectives, methods and schedules, and presenting results in the form of reports. These have usually an analytical-descriptive part, presenting the state of the question in each member region, and a policy-orientated part, commenting on the differences between the regions, recommending strategies for the harmonization of policies and setting common goals. Some of these reports were given wide circulation in the form of handsomely illustrated documents and books. Other public activities of Alpe Adria took the form of promotional events and exhibitions. Periodically, the senior political authorities of all member regions would meet in plenary sessions to discuss and approve the work done, work out new projects and issue high-sounding public declarations.

The organizational infrastructure supporting this work was, and remains, rather scanty. There is no permanent secretariat; Alpe Adria functions as a network of officials in each regional government. Until 1991 (Declaration of Linz), there was no common budget. Each member region would bear the costs of their own activities for and on behalf of Alpe Adria. An elaborate rotation system was adopted to share responsibilities and tasks. Each region was asked to play the leading role in each project for a certain time: it would act both as chair and as 'local organizing committee' for meetings, agendas, hosting, etc. Meetings took on all the formal features of diplomatic events, with strict observance of rules regarding the use of languages, precedents, etc.

In a short time, outer layers of regions applied for admittance to the original group. To the west, Alpe Adria incorporated Trentino-South Tyrol, Lombardy and the Swiss canton of Tessin; to the east, Austrian Burgenland, and then the Hungarian counties of Győr-Sopron, Vas, Zala, Somogy and Baranya. Talks were also begun to negotiate admission for some areas of

Czechoslovakia. Thus, a sizeable part of Central Europe seemed to be organizing around Alpe Adria.

It is hard to tell what would have become of Alpe Adria if it had been permitted to develop along the lines set in the first ten years of its life. To expand from nine to nineteen regions, from four to eight state systems, and from four to seven different languages, makes co-operation a difficult task. This is especially so considering that most of the work had to be done outside the formal legal competence of the regions involved. Most of the regional governments active in the Alpe Adria set-up had no statutory powers to do so: only Bavaria, Slovenia and Croatia had, to a limited extent. Austrian *Länder* had to wait until 1989 for constitutional amendments which would empower them to do what they had been doing for many years. Italian regions, to this day, have no powers whatsoever in the international field.

A central question concerns the practical effects of this activity. Somewhat cynically, it could be maintained that it amounts to mountains of printed paper – technical reports, statistical analyses, glossy promotional picture books – endless streams of political rhetoric and a plethora of meetings of politicians and officials in luxury hotels located in attractive tourist resorts. Indeed, the translation of all this activity into concrete legal changes and administrative decisions in each region seems to have been small, if at all.

But Alpe Adria managed to become a reality in the consciousness of ordinary citizens. Many enterprises, straddling borders in this area, have borrowed the name – for example, the motorway linking Friuli to Austria, radio stations, shopping centres, cultural associations, residential developments. A project is in train to have the International Olympic Committee design the *Dreiländereck* of Tarvis, Villach and Kranjska Gora as the venue for future Winter Olympics – the first Olympic Games jointly hosted by three countries. The promoting committee failed the 2002 target but is trying again for 2006.

Perhaps more important, Alpe Adria has produced a feeling of mutual knowledge and understanding, of goodwill and community among the highest officials and political leaders of the area.²² This has undoubtedly helped to ease the solution of concrete problems occurring between them such as, for instance, when Austria enforced a restrictive policy on commercial transit-traffic on its routes.

The role of Alpe Adria after the 1989–1991 revolution in Central Europe

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the concrete effects of the Alpe Adria co-operation was the unhesitant solidarity that the Italian neighbouring regions, and especially Friuli-Venezia Giulia, offered to Slovenia and Croatia

during the critical weeks of the breakaway from Yugoslavia in 1991. In contrast to the cautious and conservative pro-Belgrade, pro-Yugoslav policy of the Italian central government, the regional authorities of Friuli-Venezia Giulia quickly sided with Slovenia's and Croatia's bid for independence. It was widely acknowledged that this 'scandalous' difference between the central and the regional position on an international issue was largely due to the long experience of co-operation within the Alpe Adria community.²³

After 1989 and 1991, Alpe Adria underwent a period of uncertainty, which it has not yet overcome. The future is unclear, because the general political situation has fundamentally changed. One of the aims of Alpe Adria was to devise ways of practical co-operation among regional communities belonging to three different socio-economic-political systems – Western capitalism and liberal democracy, Yugoslav one-party self-management and Hungarian 'gulasch-socialism'. Since 1989–91, the latter two have disappeared: the former has become the system common to all regions of the area. In principle, co-operation could now be based on more traditional, formal, state-led channels. This has led to the launching of the so-called Central European Initiative, of which more below.

The second crucial change is that, after 1991, two of the member regions, Slovenia and Croatia, graduated into fully sovereign nation-states. This makes it awkward for them to keep their membership in an organization of sub-national entities. After independence day, Slovenia and Croatia vowed to keep their membership of Alpe Adria, in gratitude for the solidarity received from other members; but they would participate at the level of Foreign Ministers, not of Heads of State.

The third development is the integration of Austria into the European Union since January 1996 which has changed the character of the Italian-Austrian border from an 'external' to an 'internal' EU frontier and, in turn, has transformed Austria's borders with its neighbours to the west and east into external frontiers of the EU. This may be a temporary situation, since the extension of EU membership to the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and, probably a little later, to Slovakia and Croatia are on the European agenda. Yet all these changes in status of the borders are bound to have many practical consequences on border relations in the area.

The Central European Initiative and the revival of nationalisms in the Alpe Adria region

In the later 1980s the idea of Alpe Adria – whatever its real substance – seemed to be spreading into Central Europe, coalescing members from Lake Maggiore to the Balaton. With the dissolution of the Soviet empire, the opportunity arose for central governments of the area to step in and resume

the leading role in these activities. Largely under the prodding of the Italian government, in particular by Foreign Minister de Michelis, the idea of some sort of intergovernmental community-building in this area took form. The result was something called, first, the 'Quadrangle' (1989), comprising Italy, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Hungary, then 'Pentagon', adding Czechoslovakia, then 'Hexagon', when Poland joined, before it became finally known as the Central European Initiative. Other countries, like Belarus, Romania, and Bulgaria, expressed interest in an association. One of the first acts under this initiative was the Millstat Declaration (1991) in which the member states voiced, among other things, their appreciation and support for co-operative activities at the inter-regional level – such as Alpe Adria. However, it was clear that central governments intended to take the lead in this field. The need for autonomous, spontaneous initiatives of the regions was now less pressing, and initiatives such as Alpe Adria were jeopardized.

The second development was the revival of nationalist and right-wing attitudes in most countries of the Alpe Adria area. The roots of this phenomenon need not be discussed here, and are different in each country. Suffice it to note that in the 1990s they have seriously affected bilateral relations between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. In 1994, the new centre-right coalition in Rome revived controversy with the Yugoslav successor states, requesting a revision of the Treaty of Osimo, especially on the points concerning the property rights of Italian refugees. The equally strongly nationalist governments in Slovenia and Croatia resisted, and Italy brought the dispute to the European level, vetoing Slovenia's association agreement with the EU. The old questions of the status of the Slovenian minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia were also revived. Thus, intergovernmental relations between Rome, Ljubljana and Zagreb reverted to levels of tension almost as high as in the 1950s. The regional government of Friuli-Venezia Giulia made it clear that it did not agree with Rome's hard-line approach but, unavoidably, the inter-state tensions rebounded on transfrontier relations and on the working of Alpe Adria.

The re-emergence of the Istria question is connected with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. What had been an internal, administrative, invisible line between the federal republics of Slovenia and Croatia became a fully fledged, tightly guarded international boundary between two sovereign states. Among other consequences, the new boundary cut the Italian minority into two halves, with different legal status. The minority in the part now belonging to Croatia had many reasons for concern, in the face of the nationalist, centralist and authoritarian Tudjman regime. For this and other reasons, the idea spread among Istrian intellectuals of claiming for Istria a special status, with international implications. Taking the lead from the Tyrolean idea of integrating Austria's north Tyrol and Italy's South Tyrol

within a single 'Euregio Tyrol', the suggestion was made for a similar status for Istria: 'Euregio Istria', with complex and somewhat nebulous ties to all three states concerned – Slovenia, Croatia and Italy. This has stirred up heated discussion,²⁴ and causes deep suspicion in Ljubljana and Zagreb, ever fearful of Italian revanchism. However far-fetched Italian revisionist claims may be, the Istrian population manifests growing opposition to Tudjman's regime: Istria is trying to revive what little is left of its Italian heritage, and to resume relations across the Adriatic with Venice.

The consequences of 1989 on Italian internal politics: the emergence of new autonomist movements in Italy's northern regions

The sudden collapse of Communism in eastern Europe had seismic consequences in Italian internal politics. The Italian Communist Party (with about 30 per cent of the vote the largest Communist party in western Europe) finally repudiated Communist ideology, changed its name to Democratic Party of the Left, and ceased to appear as a threat to the liberal-democratic-capitalist system. In turn, the parties which based their strategy on the opposition to Communism lost one of their main functions. In conjunction with many other factors, this led to the emergence, in Italy's most developed northern regions, of new political formations whose main goal was the acquisition of much greater regional autonomy, and the transformation of Italy from a centralist-unitary state to a federal republic. Such movements had already existed for some time at the margin of the established party system, in the regions of Friuli (*movimento Friuli*) and Veneto (*Liga Veneta*). At the beginning of the 1980s, the *Legha Lombarda* was born, and at the end of the decade it benefited enormously from the collapse of Communism. After 1991, it also benefited from the exposing of the widespread corruption of the old party system ('Operation Clean Hands'). Within a few years, all regions north of the Po river were affected by the autonomist-federalist movements, eventually brought together into the 'Northern League'. Almost one-third of the moderate, centrist electorate abandoned the old parties and switched their allegiance to the League. The level of support for this movement was directly and strongly correlated to latitude – northern location – and proximity to the Alpine border.²⁵ The April 1996 elections showed that the phenomenon had established solid, stable roots, especially in the north-eastern regions of Veneto and Friuli.

The factors explaining the rise of the League are numerous and complex. Some of them undoubtedly originate in the external political environment. The League can be seen partly as a response to the stresses and opportunities of the European integration process: the developed Northern regions, already

well integrated economically into Europe, fear that the backward South would hold Italy back and make it drift into the Mediterranean. African world – they see 'separate development' as their opportunity to avoid that fate. The League has also profited in many ways from the dissolution of the Communist bloc: not only, as already mentioned, from the disappearance of the internal 'Communist threat', but also from the emergence of 'new-old' nations from the old state shells. The example of Bosnia was, of course, a deterrent; but the Baltic countries, Slovenia, Croatia and, eventually, Slovakia showed that intangibility of boundaries and State self-preservation were no longer sacrosanct, and (sub-)national self-determination no longer just a dream. This progressively moved the League's ideology from regional autonomism to federalism to mini-nationalism (the 'Northern Nation') and, eventually, to demands for independence, separation and secession.

This shift is mostly tactics and rhetoric; but it seems that the drive to a greater degree of self-government in the northern – and especially in the north-eastern – regions is gaining momentum. This can be explained by their geography and cultural history. Autonomist aspirations are strongest along the borders because the people living there have a long history of contacts and exchanges across these borders. Lombards are familiar with the Swiss federal system and see its advantages. South Tyroleans, of course, identify much more with the North Tyrolean than with their fellow-Italians; people in Trentino, too, since the province had been part of the Habsburg Empire, seem to be culturally orientated more towards the North than to the rest of Italy. Veneto's case is different: its autonomist feelings seem to be nurtured more by economic factors – fiscal revolt, complaints about deficiencies in the State's infrastructure, a regional economy strongly export-oriented – and by ethnic prejudice against Southerners than by cultural-political reference to the old, glorious Venetian Republic. In addition, the 'border' character of Veneto is in fact negligible.

Federalism and autonomism in Friuli-Venezia Giulia

By contrast, Friuli-Venezia Giulia is decisively marked by its location on the border. From the beginning of time, the region has been moulded by that fact. Ethnically, it is the result of a complex web of relationships between the three main peoples which meet in this corner of Europe – the Latins, the Germans and the Slavs. Economically, it has lived, in the non-agricultural sectors, mostly from trade with Central Europe. Culturally and politically, its history has been patterned by the presence of a military frontier between the Italian (formerly Venetian) and the Central European powers, over which many wars, some of them major, have been fought.

In recent decades, history seems to have been diverted from its bloody

course, Friuli-Venezia Giulia has begun to see itself not as a bulwark nor a battlefield, but as a busy bridge between Italy and its northern and eastern neighbours, as active part of a network of peaceful relations between the upper Adriatic and the Danube basin. To develop this role, Friuli-Venezia Giulia claims more freedom of action and a greater degree of self-government. The long experience of co-operation in the Alpe Adria context, with partners belonging to federal states, has exposed the regional political class to the advantages of such systems. Older, marginal autonomist movements, based mainly on ethnic-regional, inward-looking, local concerns, have merged into the largest political power in the region: about 25 per cent of the vote has recently gone to the Northern League. The regional government of Friuli-Venezia Giulia has been, since 1994, the only Italian region headed by the League. Following Mr Bossi's federalist strategies – but showing some caution about his recent demagogic utterances about independence and secession – the Friulian League has developed plans for more regional autonomy, including authority over international, inter-regional and cross-border relations. Other political groupings have done the same. Almost everyone – even the right-wing parties – demands more autonomy, a stronger regional identity and increasing integration into Europe; almost everyone in democratic politics points to the Swiss, German and Austrian federal experience as positive models which Friulians are able and well-qualified to follow.

It is difficult, even impossible, to predict future developments. The Italian political system is undergoing a deep transformation, and is still far from having reached a new equilibrium. Events in Friuli-Venezia Giulia continue to depend, above all, on what happens in the rest of the Italian state system. However, the drive for decentralization and federalism in the rich north-eastern regions seems unstoppable, and all Italian political forces agree that this political claim must be in some way satisfied. One question is whether Friuli-Venezia Giulia will be able to maintain a separate identity and autonomy, or whether it will merge with the larger 'Padania' or 'Triveneto' macro-regions – as envisaged in the plans of the Northern League. Its peculiarities as a border region will probably be impossible to suppress. The domination of Milan, Mantova or Venice will not be more acceptable than Rome's.

But this prognosis applies mainly to Friuli itself. Venezia Giulia and Trieste's tiny territory are different in history, character, interests and political orientation. Trieste is still characterized by century-old anti-Slav feelings, heightened by the events of 1944–7, and thus has always been a stronghold of right-wing nationalist parties. The population of Venezia Giulia is less keen on regional autonomy; its interest lies in privileged relationship with Rome (before 1918, with Vienna). Trieste is traditionally

interested not so much in border relations and good neighbourliness, but in what the Germans call *Grossraumbeziehungen*, in spatially broad and long-range relations. Although the administrative capital of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trieste's nationalist and refugee lobby was the main force behind the recent difficulties in the relationship between Italy and Slovenia. The regional government, traditionally headed by Friulians, and its policies towards the eastern neighbours are often criticized by Triestino nationalists as too soft, too forgetful of the 'Slavic threat'. Thus, future developments of cross-border relations between Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Slovenia and Croatia will depend to a great extent on the internal balance between Friuli and Trieste.

Conclusion

There are perhaps two general lessons to be learnt from this account of the border-related experiences in the Alpe Adria area. The first concerns the presence of multiple factors – geographical, historical, military, political, cultural, economic and social. The historical factors should be placed both in the *longue durée* and in more short-term *événementiel* history; the political factors should be analysed at different levels – international and inter-regional. All these levels and factors interplay in a complex fashion, which makes an orderly, consistent, theory-driven analysis very difficult. Complexity implies the intricacy, if not the impossibility, of forecasting the future. After 1989, social and political scientists have grown painfully aware of the limitations of their predictive abilities. I, at least, would be very hesitant in answering questions concerning the future of cross-border co-operation in the Alpe Adria region. And yet, an enduring faith in human rationality and goodwill makes me believe that co-operation will prosper, and that this area will become a model of transformation from a 'one-time genocide area' into an area of peaceful development, involving widely different ethnic and national groups.

The second lesson concerns the extreme difficulty of defining the concept of 'frontier region', and of assessing the role of borders and boundaries in affecting social, political and economic events in their vicinity. Almost all 'regions' in the Alpine-Danubian area – in Central Europe – are border regions, bounded by state frontiers; but the relevance of this factor seems to vary widely and there is no established social-science formula to measure this relevance. Borders affect not only the physical flow of goods and persons, which can be measured; much more important, they affect the culture and consciousness of people, which is much more difficult to assess. Moreover, they have functioned thus for centuries and even millennia, in different ways, and have left complex mental imprints.

The regions of Alpe Adria may have felt the need to build some form of

common institutional arrangement because they physically touch each other, because they have common geographical borders, or because they have perceived common economic interests in interchanges and infrastructures, or because they felt the moral need to overcome ancient hatred, or because the memory of common membership in former political systems – for example, the Habsburg Empire – has prevailed, or because they share a common destiny within the new European Union. Or is it for some other reason? Or for all of the above? We do not know.

Many more technical questions concerning borders are raised by the Alpe Adria experience. One, for instance, has to do with the weakening or 'softening', or even 'withering away' or 'dysfunctionalization' of the internal frontiers of the European Union and its effects on the economy of the borderlands. Although certainly beneficial for the system as a whole, the weakening of frontiers may condemn border towns – whose main livelihood came from border controls and defence, and from the price difference in goods, wages, etc., on different sides of the frontier. Border economies are penalized by both extremes – complete opening and total closure of frontiers; they thrive when the differences and the degree of openness are 'just right'. Such adverse effects are already felt by some towns along the Austrian-Italian border, and compensatory measures are duly demanded.

Another problem derives from the fact that greater autonomy necessarily implies harder borders: when a political community dissolves in a plurality of sovereign states, new state boundaries arise. The hardening of the boundary between Slovenia and Croatia is a case in point. Although one may sympathize with the newly independent nations, the massive border structures built almost overnight between them cast a sombre shadow.

A final remark concerns the hiatus between political and economic integration and socio-cultural commonality. The internal frontiers of Europe may well have been weakened to the point of disappearing, but the differences in language, organization, attitudes, mores, values, information sources and outlook, remain important. The hardest frontiers are not those drawn on the ground, but those imprinted in the minds of people; and in this domain much remains to be done to bring about a real union of Europe.

Notes

1. See, for example, Regione Autonoma Trentino-Alto Adige (1981) *Regionalismus in Europa*. Munich: INTERREG.
2. See, for example, Regione Autonoma Trentino-Alto Adige (1992) 'Globalism and Localism: Theoretical Reflections and Some Evidence', in Z. Milnar (ed.) *Globalisation and Territorial Identities*. Aldershot: Avebury; also A. Fedrigotti and G. Lerner (1993) *Alpe Adria: Identità e ruolo*. Trento: Regione Autonoma Trentino-Alto Adige.

3. See F. Gross (1978) *Ethics in a Borderland: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ethnicity and the Reduction of Tensions in a One-Time Genocide Area*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood.
4. R. Strassoldo (1980) *From Barrier to Junction: Toward a Sociological Theory of Boundaries*. Gorizia: ISIG (mimeo).
5. C. Sambri (1970) *Una Frontiera Aperta: Indagini sui valichi Italo-Jugoslavi*. Bologna: Forini.
6. L. Buratti (1971) *La Frontiera Italiana: Introduzione e Testi*. Bologna: Forini.
7. G. Valussi (1972) *Il Confine Nord-Orientale d'Italia*. Trieste: Lint.
8. R. Gubert (1972) *La Situazione Confinaria*. Trieste: Lint.
9. R. Strassoldo (1972) *Sviluppo Regionale e Difesa Nazionale*. Trieste: Lint.
10. R. Strassoldo (ed.) (1973) *Confini e Regioni: Il Potenziale di Sviluppo e di Pace delle Periferie (Boundaries and Regions: Explorations in the Growth- and Peace-Potential of the Peripheries)*. Trieste: Lint.
11. R. Strassoldo (1973) *Frontier Regions: An Analytical Study*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe (mimeo).
12. R. Strassoldo (1976) 'The Study of Boundaries: A Systems-Oriented, Multi-disciplinary. Bibliographical Essay', in *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, 2, 3: R. Strassoldo (1979) 'La Teoria del Confine', in R. Strassoldo (ed.) *Temi di Sociologia delle Relazioni Internazionali*. Gorizia: ISIG; R. Strassoldo (1981) 'Friuli-Venezia Giulia: a Border Region', in *Regionalismus in Europa*; and R. Strassoldo (1983) 'European Frontier Regions: Future Collaboration or Conflict', in M. Anderson (ed.) *Frontier Regions in Western Europe*. London: Frank Cass.
13. R. Strassoldo (1981); G. Delli Zotti (1983) *Relazioni Transnazionali e Cooperazione Transfrontaliera: Il Caso del Friuli-Venezia Giulia*. Milano: Angeli; G. Delli Zotti and B. De Marchi (1985) *Cooperazione Regionale nell'Area Alpina*. Milano: Angeli.
14. A. M. Boileau and E. Susi (1981) *Dominanza e Minoranze: Immagini e Rapporti Interetnici al Confine Nord-Orientale*. Udine: Grillo.
15. R. Gubert (1976) *L'Identificazione Etnica: Indagine Sociologica in un'Area Plurilingue del Friuli-Venezia Giulia*. Udine: Del Bianco.
16. A. M. Boileau, R. Strassoldo and E. Susi (1975) *Temi di Sociologia delle Relazioni Etniche*. Gorizia: ISIG.
17. F. Gross (1978).
18. R. Strassoldo and G. Delli Zotti (eds) (1981) *Co-operation and Conflict in Border Areas*. Milano: Angeli.
19. A. M. Boileau and B. De Marchi (eds) (1981) *Boundaries and Minorities in Western Europe*. Milano: Angeli.
20. See B. De Marchi (ed.) (1991) *La Comunità Etnica Slovena Residente nelle Province di Gorizia e di Trieste*. Trieste: Regione Autonoma Friuli-Venezia Giulia; G. Delli Zotti and A. Rupel (1992) *Etnia e Sviluppo: Ruolo della Presenza Slovena nell'area Goriziana*. Gorizia: ISIG; and L. Bergnac and G. Delli Zotti (eds) (1994) *Etnie, Confini, Europa*. Milano: Angeli.
21. A detailed analysis of such activities can be found in Delli Zotti (1983).
22. See G. Delli Zotti (1994) *Dentro il Triangolo di Visegrad*. Gorizia: ISIG.
23. A. Sema (1994) 'Estate 1991: Gli amici Italiani di Lubiana', *Limes*, 1.
24. See L. Bogliun-Debelj (1994) 'Come Faremo la Nostra Euregione Istria', *Limes*, 1, pp. 263–70.