

## INTERCULTURAL ISSUES IN BORDER REGIONS: THE CASE OF AUSTRIA AND SLOVAKIA

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*The objective of the present paper is twofold. Firstly, we attempt to examine the existence of possible intercultural problems and conflicts in the Austrian-Slovak border region, and to subsequently propose feasible solutions. Secondly, the research is aimed at ongoing and planned projects of cross-border cooperation. The research is conducted predominantly by the method of key informant interview, which is, by definition, supposed to provide relevant data from people possessing knowledge concerning certain phenomena, or from influential people. Overall, five interviews with the mayors of the municipalities located in the border area were conducted. The research was supported by an extensive literature review of domestic as well as foreign sources and a critical discourse analysis. The interviews did not reveal existence of intercultural disputes, but they did prove the premise of the intention to intensify cross-border cooperation.*

**Key words:** Austria; Slovakia; border region; intercultural issues; cross-border cooperation.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The intensifying globalisation and internationalisation have resulted in growing prominence of intercultural communication as theory and praxis. Intercultural competence, intercultural conflicts, or intercultural education represent only a fragment of phenomena being more and more frequently covered in academic as well as public discourse and governance. Considering the societal developments of the last decades, the frequency of intercultural encounters and intensifying mobility is expected to continue growing in the future (Čiefová 2016a, 28).

The aim of the current paper is to examine the occurrence of problems and conflicts resulting from differences between the Slovak and Austrian national

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culture in the border area, whereby these can be empirically observed (e.g. an open argument) or even perceived. The principal thought behind the research is that cultural differences may lead to problems and disputes between or among the involved cultures.

One of the motives for selection of the two countries is a previous project proposal, the result of which should have been construction of a bridge connecting two municipalities in the region – Záhorská Ves and Angern. Eventually, the project was cancelled. Our goal concerning this is to investigate whether the reason for failure of the project could have reposed in intercultural problems or misunderstandings. Another incentive for conducting the research is general belief that intercultural problems are possible to eliminate or prevent from happening. Should such issues occur, suitable instruments can be applied to improve the situation.

Due to the fact that Slovakia and Austria are relatively small countries both in terms of their population and the area, we do not consider regional differences in cultures, but rather look at the countries as culturally unified. The countries represent an appropriate model for comparison, as they are characterised by shared historical experience, (labour) migration tendencies (Čiefová and Raneta 2018, 65), as well as by current bilateral cooperation with economic, political, or scientific objectives.

The border between Austria and Slovakia is 106.7 km long. Several municipalities are located in the area on both sides of the border. Moreover, the capital of Bratislava also lies only a few km from the border. As for Vienna, the distance from the border is longer, however, we believe its cultural influence may reach out to the border region, due to the people commuting to work or school in the capital. Despite its closeness to the border, Bratislava as a whole does not represent an ideal model for our research, because of its size and population structure. It is much more reasonable to rather focus on smaller municipalities or individual town districts. Lower Austria (Niederösterreich) consists of 25 districts (Bezirk), however only two thereof border on Slovakia – Bruck an der Leitha and Gänserndorf. Besides, a part of the border is located in Burgenland. As for Slovakia, two districts border on Austria, namely Bratislava and Malacky.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Across cultures, the meaning of conflict varies. Cultures are usually described as having several layers, with cultural values being located deeper in the structure. Cultural values largely influence the way people behave and react to certain stimuli. Following this logic, also intercultural conflicts reflect distinct cultural values (Barrios 2016, 252–253).

The notion of conflict usually evokes negative feelings and ideas in the society, which has its roots in the original Latin expression *confligere*, meaning a collision of two opposite forces (Morgensternová and Šulová 2007, 124). We talk about conflicts “*when there is a real or perceived threat or interference in us performing a particular activity,*” (Fisher-Yoshida 2005, 5). Despite the prevailing attitude to conflict as being a destructive, ultimately negative phenomenon, some scholars point out its benefits. Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001, 3) assert, effective management of a conflict situation may positively impact the relationship of the involved individuals and illuminate their common interests. This idea is also

promoted by Morgensternová and Šulová (2007, 124), as they believe conflicts may support creativity, help solve problems, stimulate competitiveness and willingness to cooperate. Fisher-Yoshida (2005, 1) views conflict as a transformation opportunity. Nadler, Nadler and Broome (1985, 93–94) distinguish three culture-dependent ways how conflicts can be approached. Firstly, conflicts represent negative events. Secondly, they are positive and common situations. Thirdly, conflicts are common phenomena that can have a positive, negative as well as neutral character.

Cultures and values are undoubtedly reflected in communication processes. We suppose, the more significant the differences between (or among) involved cultures are, the more serious the conflict can be. Hence, the two variables can be considered directly proportional, even though their quantification would be rather difficult to assess. According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001, 1), cultural values and norms largely influence our expectations concerning how a conflict situation should look like and how it should be resolved. We can further elaborate on that thought, stating our culture-dependent perception and behaviour may even motivate us not to engage in the problem-solving process at all, and rather ignore the existence of the issue.

For the purpose of our paper, the notion of conflict is extended by an intercultural context. Hence, intercultural conflict is quite a complex circumstance (Čiefová 2017a, 72) that can be defined as a state of emotional frustration, accompanied by a perceived disharmony of norms, values or objectives, which involves representatives of at least two distinct cultures (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001, 17). This means, value systems and norms an individual pertains to may considerably impact the interaction. The parties concerned can be individuals or groups. However, not every dispute between (or among) representatives of different cultures is an intercultural one. It is then, when the reason of the conflict can be clearly attributed to cultural differences and diverse cultural systems (Morgensternová and Šulová 2007, 126). Intercultural conflicts and difficulties to achieve communication goals can emerge due to a failure to comprehend the prerequisites and the basic principles of a successful intercultural communication process (Čiefová 2016a, 27). An important tool for effective management of intercultural conflicts is critical thinking (Martincová and Lukešová 2015), as well as other characteristics falling under the construct of intercultural competence. Furthermore, it is often forgotten that intercultural communication does not necessarily occur between (or among) representatives of different national cultures, but also professions, generations, or regions (Čiefová 2016a, 28).

Austrian and Slovak national culture are obviously not identical, even though they are much more similar than for instance European and East Asian cultures, which is a result of their shared historical experience and co-existence in the Central European area. On the other hand, the common geographical space does not necessarily guarantee adherence to exactly the same values (Čiefová and Seresová 2018, 216, 221). As for the mutual perception, Slovaks usually regard Austrians in a positive way, associating Austria with pleasant, positive objects and realities (Čiefová 2016b, 189). Similarly, Austrians generally do not tend to engage in intercultural conflicts with Slovaks (Čiefová 2017b, 94). However, Central and Eastern Europeans do frequently compare themselves with the citizens of the richer countries of Western Europe in terms of their well-being. Even if the perception of well-being may be far from the reality, it can exacerbate feelings of injustice and social tensions (Matejova 2018, 74). Such states of mind

and dissatisfaction in the society can easily provoke intercultural conflicts.

In contact with Austrians, German language command may appear as a valuable asset. In Bratislava and the region, German certainly is a great advantage, as also many Austrian (or German) enterprises have their offices in the town (Čiefová and Seresová 2017, 33). Citing Newerkla (2011, 9), the meeting point of the Slavic and Germanic world has belonged to the most significant zones of language contacts in Europe for centuries.

Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) assumes that people's perception creates the experience of reality. Intercultural events we are participating in are influenced by our drawing a line between "self" and "other". Moreover, one's own empirical experience may crucially influence their attitude towards others. For instance, previous experience with working abroad and being exposed to dissimilar cultures can be even a more prominent factor impacting attitude towards others (e.g. migrants) than encountering them at home (Puškárová and Dancáková 2018).

Intercultural disputes are sometimes handled by means of mediation (Salmon et al. 2013), with the aim to solve the problem in a cooperative way (Barrios 2016, 259). According to Fisher-Yoshida (2005, 14), in order to become more flexible in communication with others and more understanding of them, it is necessary to extend our *frames of reference*. This should allow us to view the world from a broader perspective. Mandáková (2019, 73) asserts that co-existence with representatives of other cultures and nations may be beneficial for all sides involved. According to Némethová (2019, 79), cultural differences may be marked as *compelling challenges* people from all around the globe are currently facing, and, as Helmová (2018, 17) points out, they need to be regarded in a sensitive manner. Certain challenges also need to be handled by municipalities and respective communities (Heinisch, Lehner and Mühlböck 2019, 31). These include, in our opinion, also the need to participate in diverse projects, e.g. those of cross-border cooperation.

The topic of cross-border cooperation can be considered a dynamic, constantly developing area. Numerous projects involving both Slovakia and Austria have already been implemented; other projects are currently ongoing. Their focus varies, ranging from the infrastructure, the environment, educational or cultural activities to business development. Moreover, they operate on various levels, such as regional or the level of municipalities.

Perhaps the most complex and well-known project scheme is Interreg, joining Slovak regions of Bratislava and Trnava, and Austrian federal states of Vienna, Lower Austria, and Burgenland. The framework 2014-2020 consists of five priority axes, which are as follows:

- contribution to a smart cross-border region;
- protection of natural and cultural heritage and biodiversity;
- support of sustainable traffic solutions;
- enforcement of cross-border administration and institutional collaboration;
- technical support (Interreg 2018).

We can state, the priority axes of the project indeed reflect the multidimensional focus of activities and goals of cross-border cooperation. Hence, individual projects falling under the Interreg framework are diverse, which is one of its advantages, as several areas can be improved simultaneously.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The research presented here is mostly qualitative. The hypothesis that cultural differences can produce conflicts or disputes was tested by means of key informant interviews supplemented by an extensive literature review, followed by a synthesis of the gathered data.

The method of key informant interviews was the primary research method utilised herein. This method was selected due to the presupposed expertise of the respondents, or their competence and responsibilities resulting from their position. Hence, key informants are expected to have more information about a certain subject. The key informant interview method is discussed by Marshall (1996) very thoroughly. He marks the concept as *expert source of information*. Key informant interviews are preferably applied in social sciences and the individuals interviewed are usually in a position of power, responsibility, or influence. The technique allows to gather a fair amount of data in a relatively short period of time. Moreover, key informant interviews may be used separately, or as a complement to other qualitative research methods, which makes them an ideal choice for our research.

The interview questions were compiled with the aim of their reflecting objective realities, not subjective standpoints of the respondents. The interviewees were instructed to provide as thorough responses as possible, enabling formulation of valid results. The interviews were conducted in Slovak and German, respectively. Overall, three interviews with representatives of the Slovak side and two interviews with Austrian counterparts were conducted, whereby the research can be divided into two stages.

Within the first phase, interviews with mayors of two villages with immediate geographical proximity were undergone, namely Záhorská Ves in Slovakia and Angern an der March in Austria. The municipalities create an interesting model for research, as they are only divided by a river, however, without the existence of a bridge. On the other hand, a ferry operates rather frequently, hence intercultural encounters may be expected to happen daily. Furthermore, the two municipalities are comparable with regard to their total population. According to the Statistical office of the Slovak Republic (2020), the population of Záhorská Ves amounted to 1870 at the end of the year 2019. The population of Angern was slightly above 1400 at the beginning of 2018, as stated on the portal [Bevölkerung.at](http://Bevölkerung.at) (2020).

The second round of interviews took place in April and May 2019 and contained three additional interviews, allowing for a wider geographical area to be explored. One interview thereof was conducted with the mayor of Berg in Austria; two interviews with the mayors of Bratislava districts of Jarovce and Rusovce. The reason for extending the research basis was twofold. Firstly, the results of the first round of interviews were to be verified; secondly, the empirical basis concerning the research subject was to be enlarged.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Due to the research having been conducted in two stages, the results presented in this section will also be categorized accordingly, and consequently synthesised.

The first stage of research includes interviews with the mayors of two villages, namely Angern and Záhorská Ves. As presupposed, the interviews confirmed the similarity of the population structure in Angern and Záhorská Ves, as 2% of inhabitants of Záhorská Ves are of Austrian nationality, and 2-3% of Angern's population represent Slovaks. Based on the interview in Záhorská Ves, the imminent proximity of the other nation (or national culture) is perceived absolutely normally and automatically from the Slovak side. The citizens are used to living next to each other; however, this is currently being mildly disrupted by the presence of Turkish immigrants. According to the Slovak mayor, interactions and concrete communication situations happen daily, for instance due to Slovaks shopping in Austria or trips. According to the mayor of Angern, the occurrence of communication situations is less frequent; it probably happens only 2-3 times a month. We believe the distinct answers result from different comprehension of the concept interaction and / or communication situation.

Concerning conflicts and disputes between representatives of the two national cultures residing in the municipalities and surrounding areas, neither of the representatives has witnessed such an event during their terms in the office. The mayor of Záhorská Ves said that an agreement had always been achieved. Besides, they both claim that the two cultures as well as customs demonstrate similarities. In relation to intercultural conflicts and problems, we were interested in the experience of the mayors with such situations in general, not exclusively within the neighbouring municipalities. Neither this has been experienced. Both mayors expressed their opinion that mutual relations were highly satisfactory, positive, and collaborative.

The next part of the interviews was dedicated to the language competence of the citizens. The objective was to find out whether and to what extent the proximity of the foreign language influences the language competence of the citizens, and thus simplifies the communication. According to the mayor of Záhorská Ves, the presence of German language considerably impacts the development of the children, the citizens. The knowledge of German in the municipality is on increase; the children are provided with intensive language education, hence the communications is positive. Slovaks are supposed to speak German more frequently than Austrians Slovak. On the contrary, the mayor of Angern is not fully convinced that the presence of the foreign language improves the language competence. Another goal was to find out whether language competence could prevent intercultural conflicts from happening. According to the mayor of Záhorská Ves, conflicts occur on the basis of insufficient knowledge. Therefore, the ability to communicate lowers the probability of a conflict. The mayor of Angern believes, language competence represents an advantage for those speaking the language of the other country.

The final part of the interviews was targeted at bilateral cooperation, planning and communication processes linked to that. Based on the interviews, bilateral cooperation is established both on the level of citizens as well as municipal offices, for instance on European Union projects. Intercultural encounters occur also at various cultural and sports events.

As mentioned above, Angern and Záhorská Ves are divided only by a river presenting a natural border. The non-existence of a bridge seems to be peculiar. Therefore, also the previous plan to build a bridge connecting both municipalities was discussed. According to the official statements, the reason for the construction being a failure is the insufficient infrastructure in the area. The final decision about not initiating the construction was made on the Austrian side, when the majority of Angern's citizen expressed their disagreement with the bridge in a referendum. The mayor of Záhorská Ves stated there could have been also other reasons for that, such as growing criminality rate in the Austrian border region. In contrast to that, the mayor of Angern claimed that the reason truly was the infrastructure, as the non-existence of a bypass road would be a cause of traffic overload in Angern. Currently, no such bridge is being planned. However, according to the mayor of Angern, a bridge will have to be constructed in the future, but preferably not through the residential areas. Apart from the bridge construction, a new project focused on a biking-bridge near Zwerndorf was mentioned.

In connection to the interviews in Záhorská Ves and Angern, three complementary interviews were conducted. The first interview took place with the mayor of Jarovce, Slovakia; the second one with the mayor of Berg, Austria; and the last one with the mayor of Rusovce on the Slovak side. The questions as well as the objectives of the second round of the interviews were almost identical compared to the first round.

The interview with the mayor of Jarovce supported the premise that Slovak-Austrian intercultural relations in the region are on a good level, with friendly atmosphere and no conflicts or problems, and the cultures are similar. According to him, the borders have ceased to exist, even though many families were split during the totalitarian regime. What is more, Slovaks are perceived by Austrians as a civilised nation. The mayor of Berg believes certain cultural differences resulting from the distinct historical development do exist. This is mostly linked to the Iron Curtain, which has caused different worldviews among generations. He further reports no conflicts between the two cultures. On the contrary, the inhabitants coexist harmoniously; Slovaks living in Berg are well integrated, attend cultural events, Slovak children and the youth are members of a volunteer fire brigade. A Slovak lady is even employed at the municipal office and her work performance is said to be extraordinary. Slovaks in Berg represent approximately 23% of the population; the number is supposed to be even higher in the villages nearby. Slovaks residing there frequently apply for Austrian citizenship, which is in most cases also granted. The mayor of Jarovce asserts, shopping in Austria has become a daily reality for many Slovaks as well as commuting to Austria to work. In Rusovce, mixed marriages have become a common reality; the village has become an attractive life location, which has resulted in its cultural diversity. As for intercultural disputes in Rusovce and its surroundings, no such events have been reported, despite the coexistence of several cultures. According to the mayor of Rusovce, it can be also due to the proximity of the capital and the border.

Language barriers in Jarovce are supposed to be negligible, as many Slovaks speak German, and similarly, Slovak language knowledge is common in the border area. Language competence of the inhabitants of Rusovce is influenced by historical developments and connections, hence more people speak Hungarian than German. According to the mayor, German is spoken predominantly by the elderly generation. As for Austrians, these historically incline to English. The

mayor of Berg thinks this has also to do with the mentality. In Berg, a tandem Slovak – German course used to be offered, meaning the enrolled citizens would learn the other language in a reciprocal way.

Regarding cross-border cooperation in Jarovce, several regular festivals and various events are organized by joint cooperation of both sides (for example *Festival podunajskej kultúry* organized with cooperation of Austrian villages Pama and Neudorf). Moreover, football tournaments are popular. In the context of such occasions, the intercultural factor is sometimes intensified by the presence of representatives of Croatian and Hungarian culture. As far as projects are concerned, particularly BAUM was mentioned, which is oriented on urban planning. The mayor of Jarovce believes that the town of Bratislava aims to reinforce cross-border cooperation, for instance by development of cycle routes within the framework of Interreg, such as a route to Austrian Kittsee. The project BAUM 2020 was also referred to by the mayor of Berg, who stated that municipalities regularly submit project proposals, however, the collaboration with the Capital of Bratislava is sometimes complicated by the fact that many pieces of land are owned by private persons. As for Rusovce, the cross-border cooperation is said to be more frequent with the Hungarian side, even though also cooperation with Austrian municipalities occurs. Cooperation with Austrian municipalities is mostly linked to the historical background, namely the presence of Roman camps remains, and there are attempts to intensify it even more. In Rusovce, associations are rather important as their aim is to facilitate joint activities. So far, the firemen and cultural (dance) associations have joined; certain collaboration exists also between police forces of the countries. Previous projects of cross-border cooperation include, for example, cycle routes extension. The objective is to foster future cooperation also in the field of elementary education, as the mayor of Rusovce stated. The idea is to facilitate mobilities of pupils as well as teachers, with a special focus on language learning by representatives of both countries. Such projects, however, would have to be coordinated by the Austrian partners. In case of cooperation with Hungary, Rusovce is the partner creating strategic plans. The mayor believes, this largely depends on negotiations and willingness to cooperate. Currently, pupils in Rusovce are provided with English and Russian classes, it is therefore the ambition of the mayor to reinforce German and Hungarian as languages being spoken in the border area. This is supposed to be accomplished at least in the form of voluntarily classes, ideally on a reciprocal basis.

With regards to international projects – or rather cross-border projects - it is to note that our goal was not to assess the success of ongoing and previous projects (or possibly their failure as a result of insufficient intercultural competence), but to underline their existence and interest in their intensification for the future.

Analysing the interviews, we can conclude, intercultural conflicts between the representatives of Slovak and Austrian national culture do not occur. Even if they do, their extent and gravity are negligible. In order to sustain the positive situation, or to improve the situation in areas where mutual intercultural relations are not that flawless, certain measures can be taken. Firstly, intercultural education and training may help prevent intercultural problems from happening, while at the same time increasing the level of intercultural competence. Secondly, diverse activities of cross-border cooperation should be supported in the future as well. Bilateral or multilateral exchanges of teachers and lecturers can significantly enhance intercultural sensitivity, and simultaneously promote language and culture-related knowledge, increasing the

level of cognitive component of intercultural competence. Based on the interview in Rusovce, the interest in mobilities of both pupils and teachers aimed at foreign language education is mutual.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Slovakia and Austria are countries characterised not only by their shared geographical area, but predominantly by their historical linkages, intensive economic cooperation, and mutual cultural and language influences. The historical experience has, however, resulted in distinct behavioural patterns and cultural values.

The main objective of our research was to examine occurrence of conflicts and problems resulting from cultural differences. The interviews as the main research method applied herein did not reveal existence of open intercultural disputes or conflicts. On the contrary, the co-existence of the representatives of the two national cultures is assessed as positive, with both sides attempting to intensify bilateral cooperation. Several projects of cross-border cooperation are currently being implemented; others are being negotiated. Notable is the presence of Hungarian and Croatian culture, which often results in intercultural communication situations encompassing not two, but three or even four cultures. In our opinion, such intercultural communication processes are much more complex, hence representing an area for further research.

We are convinced that the approach presented in this paper may be equally applied to studies dealing with other regions. Besides, the occurrence of intercultural conflicts can be examined not only between or among national cultures, but national cultures and subcultures, or solely subcultures as well. In this manner, communication between representatives of various cultures can be facilitated and potential tension mitigated or even eliminated. To ensure smooth and mutually favourable long-term cooperation and coexistence, it is necessary to adhere to the principles of tolerance, respect, and ethics (Rak 2017, 53).

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## **MEDKULTURNA VPRAŠANJA V OBMEJNIH REGIJAH: PRIMER AVSTRIJE IN SLOVAŠKE**

*Cilj pričujočega prispevka je dvojen. Najprej poskušamo preučiti obstoj morebitnih medkulturnih problemov in sporov v avstrijsko-slovaški obmejni regiji ter nato predlagati smiselne rešitve; raziskava pa je namenjena tudi tekočim in načrtovanim projektom čezmejnega sodelovanja. Raziskava poteka pretežno po metodi pogovora s ključnimi informatorji, ki naj bi po definiciji zagotavljali ustrezne podatke od ljudi, ki imajo znanje o določenih pojavih ali vplivnih ljudi. Opravljenih je bilo pet intervjujev z župani občin, ki županujejo v obmejni regiji. Raziskavo smo podkrepili z obsežnim pregledom literature ter s kritično analizo diskurza. Intervjuji niso razkrili obstoja medkulturnih sporov, temveč so dokazali predpostavko namere za okrepitev čezmejnega sodelovanja.*

**Ključne besede:** Avstrija; Slovaška; obmejna regija; medkulturna vprašanja; čezmejno sodelovanje.