

## Exploring the Meaning of Borders in an Interconnected World

by Amanda Ribichini

The word “border” carries much complexity. It encompasses many facets of the human condition, from purely geographical locations to intangible beliefs and personal or individual traits. Yet, today, the term border is often manipulated, coupled with verbs or adjectives that aim to emphasise its importance or demonise its significance; the border has increasingly become a stigma, used indiscriminately by all political forces, with some calling for its demolition and others its strengthening.

Frequently, borders tend to be considered as vestiges of a now deceased past or as a sort of chimera, a utopia whose return is preached as a solution to many everyday challenges. Yet, the term border is not just a word: the border exists, it is there, and there are people who inhabit it. By examining the case of the Italian-Slovenian border crossing in the Italian town of Gorizia, one can understand if the border itself

has actually lost value in today’s world, or if it still retains traces of its past significance.

The history of Gorizia as a divided city starts in 1947, during the post-World War II treaties to regulate European borders after the conflict. At that time, the border between Italy and the newly formed Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was established, running through the city, separating the old town – which remained in Italy – from the Transalpine railway station and the suburbs, acquired by Yugoslavia.

In order to divide the two countries, the “Wall of Gorizia” was erected, a sort of predecessor of the more famous Berlin wall.

In following years, Josip Broz Tito, the leader of Yugoslavia, sought to build a Slavic city in the areas surrounding the Transalpine, a city that based on his projects was supposed to become

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a counterbalance to Gorizia on the Italian side, and was thereby named Nova Gorica. The idea was to lay the foundations for the birth of a sort of "garden city".<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, so-called Soviet brutalist architecture took possession of the majestic boulevards, creating a multifaceted city but one that remained strongly reminiscent of the East, as it largely remains today.

The border area between the two cities would remain sealed for more than a decade, with one significant exception: Sunday 13 August 1950, a day that would retain notoriety as "Broom Sunday" or the "march of the brooms".<sup>2</sup> On that day, Tito decided to allow the inhabitants of Nova Gorica to meet their loved ones in Gorizia. A flood of people found themselves in Casa Rossa (Red House), a historic border crossing, to reunite with their relatives. The crowds then proceeded to storm the border, and hundreds of people flocked to Gorizia to make purchases, deposit their savings or even to attend Mass.

Come evening, most if not all returned to their homes on the other side of the border wall, but that day has remained for years in the memory of citizens on both sides, a testimony to the closeness between the two peoples despite the fact that for geopolitical reasons they found themselves living in two separate blocs.

<sup>1</sup> Jure Ramšak, "Modernity Anchored in the Past: Making a New Socialist Town on the Yugoslav-Italian Border (1947-1955)", in *Qualestoria*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (December 2019), p. 149-161, <http://hdl.handle.net/10077/31830>.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Maria Crasti, "Gorizia, 13 agosto 1950: la domenica delle scope", in ANVGD website, 12 August 2021, <https://www.anvgd.it/?p=50163>.

The territorial opening took place gradually, starting from 1962, with the conclusion of the Udine Agreements, which allowed citizens to cross the border for a maximum of four times a month within a range of 10km. With the Osimo Treaties of 1975, the official beginning of a collaboration between Italy and Yugoslavia was established.

Today, Gorizia and Nova Gorica have not only been formally reunited, making it possible for people to move freely across the border, but the towns and surrounding areas are also closely linked by numerous projects carried out by both sides under the aegis of the European Union.

The first example of administrative integration dates back to 1964 although the collaboration gained momentum in 1991, when Slovenia gained independence. Consequently, it led to the signing of the so-called "Collaboration Protocol" of 1998 (also named as "Cross-Border Pact" after the recognition of the respective governments). One year later, in 1999, the administration of the municipality of Šempeter-Vrtojba, separated from Nova Gorica, was added to the protocol.

In 2002 the relationship between the three municipalities was strengthened further with the creation of the "Three Councils", which meet periodically to discuss development in the three towns and to promote projects involving the respective countries.<sup>3</sup> The point

<sup>3</sup> See Guido Germano Pettarin, *From the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation to the Macro-Regional Strategies*, 29 November 2011, <http://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvig/export/sites/default/RAFVG/fondi-europei-fvg->

of contact between the three juntas is the "Liaison and Reference Office", also called the "Cross-Border Office", established to facilitate cooperation work especially with regard to linguistic and legislative dyscrasia.

Relations between Italy and Slovenia witnessed a strong turning point in 2004, when Slovenia joined the European Union, and then again in 2007, when it joined the Schengen area: for the first time, the Red House crossing point was no longer needed. In the presence of the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, the fence separating the Transalpine square was torn down.

From now on, community-funded projects multiplied, bringing economic resources and innovative projects to both sides of the old border.

One example is the Interreg V-A Italy-Slovenia programme, financed by the European Fund for the Development of the Regions with 90 million euro between 2014 and 2020. This programme involves five Italian and five Slovenian regions, and has set itself four pillars as strategic objectives with the ultimate aim of "Promoting innovation, sustainability and cross-border governance to create a more competitive, cohesive and liveable area".<sup>4</sup>

In 2011, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was born, seeking to promote economic

[internazionale/euroregione/allegati/1Gorizia\\_EGTC\\_final\\_english.doc](#).

<sup>4</sup> See the official website: <https://www.ita-slo.eu/en>.

growth and improve quality life. Among all the other 70 European EGTCs, that of Gorizia is unique, because it is composed by an Italian municipality, Gorizia, and the Slovenian municipalities of Nova Gorica and Šempeter-Vrtojba. Moreover, this institution has been delegated by the three municipalities to decide which legislation to apply for the implementation of contracts, thereby overcoming the historical problem of bureaucratic discrepancies affecting cross-border cooperation between the sides.<sup>5</sup>

Cross-border collaboration and, more in general, relations between Italy and Slovenia, have proliferated a result. Yet, the relationship has not been devoid of tensions and criticism. This was particularly the case since 2018, when the so-called "Balkan Route" for irregular migration flows into the EU became an imposing phenomenon. In this context, the Gorizia border turned out to be one of the arrival points, and for this reason protests against migrants took place.

Against this backdrop, one may ask what if the border came back today?

We could answer this question by creating an ideal scenario, but it is not necessary: in February 2020 the border was closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the fence returned to Piazza Transalpina.

This returning division underlined once again how the physical boundary

<sup>5</sup> See EGTC GO website: *What is EGTC GO and How It Operates*, <https://euro-go.eu/en/chiamo/cosa-è-gect-go-e-come-funziona>.

is now completely anachronistic, especially for new generations who inhabit these areas and who have always lived without physical barriers. At the same time, however, the returning border did result in an acknowledgement of the cultural differences that still separate these two nations: from language, to history and everyday habits.

The above demonstrates how much remains to be done to create a social and not only administrative bridge connecting the two people and nations. Today, one can say with confidence that Italian and Slovenian citizens living in the vicinity of the Isonzo river have indeed learned to live side by side, but living in vicinity is by no means the same as living together.

To take further steps forward, Gorizia and Nova Gorica have another important opportunity: Nova Gorica has been named European Capital of Culture for 2025 and will receive funds to create new projects of European integration with its sister city Gorizia, including a cross-border cycling path, sharing the Capital for Culture nomination.<sup>6</sup> In applying for the candidacy, cross-border collaboration was highlighted as key, with the two cities adopting the slogan of "GO! 2025-Go Borderless".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> European Commission-Futurium, *Nova Gorica and Gorizia to Share the Title of European Capital of Culture 2025*, 5 February 2021, <https://futurium.ec.europa.eu/node/3718>.

<sup>7</sup> EGTC GO, *GO! 2025 - GO! Borderless*, 10 May 2019, <https://euro-go.eu/en/notizie-ed-eventi/news/go-borderless>.

To conclude, it is possible to say that the reunification of these two territories under the aegis of the European Union has not erased the cultural differences between the two nations, but it has certainly put them in contact, creating positive momentum for collaboration and cooperation.

In this context, the EU's motto, "United in diversity", perfectly encapsulates much of the meaning that borders retain today in Europe: no longer a physical barrier, borders persist in the minds of citizens as an abstract concept indicating different ways of life. The survival of this notion does not take place in a context of conflict, but rather follows a logic of integration and interaction, indicating that one day also cultural frontiers may lose part of their relevance.

The idea of borders and boundaries in Europe – with the exception of those resulting from mere political ideologies – is destined to become increasingly blurred, in a process that continues to develop over time. Yet, if this process still persists, it cannot be defined as outdated; its extinction will happen only when a push from below decides that borders have become inconsistent and thereby unnecessary construct. Until then overcoming borders has to become our personal fight; obviously it is not necessary to throw down walls on the other side of Europe. It is more a path of acknowledging and interiorising our differences, and, gradually, overcoming them.

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