

Small Historic Towns and their landscapes along the *European Green Belt*, that follows the former Iron Curtain

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Landscape and transfrontier cooperation,

The landscape knows no boundary

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1. Introduction

ECOVAST International with its Austrian Section focus on landscapes in the sense of the ELC and Historic Small Towns, for which the Austria Section developed special criterias.

Landscape border lines mostly are not the border lines as drawn by authorities; by it states, provinces or regions. This fact at least concerns the natural factors of a landscape (e.g. surface geology, landform and climate). But if the human landscape elements change (e.g. the language, the house forms or agricultural techniques) – which by the way still are the fundament of our (cultural) landscapes – also the landscapes, to the experience of the people, are different from each other.

One of the best examples to proof this fact is the **Green Belt, Central European Section**. The Austrian stretch, 1218 km - extending 1218 km, connects 14 clearly different landscapes. (at the European scale of 1:500.000.)

- All of them are transborder landscapes.
- All of them have common natural factors over the state border line, but the languages differ (e.g. German to the Czech Republik, to Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Italy).
- And there exists cross border co-operation in many different ways.

The Green Belt with Specific Reference to the Austrian Section

1. What is the Green Belt?

The Green Belt is very well defined with its length but concerning at its width there are open discussions going on; we understand its width extending to some 25 km on each side of the border line.

Today it is a green ribbon along the former “Iron Curtain” across 24 countries. The Austrian Section alone covers fourteen different landscapes and more than twice as many Historic Small Towns including some Market Towns. The Central European stretch starts and ends at zero elevation, from the German coast of the Baltic Sea, ending near Trieste on the Adriatic Sea, whilst its highest part exceeds 2,500 m in the High Julian Alps (at the Italian/Slovenian border). **The GrB itself, of course, is not a landscape but connects a great variety and number of cultural landscapes with many natural parks and their characteristic features and also a lot of cultural elements.**

2. The variety of landscapes

The variety of fourteen different landscapes along the Austrian stretch is characteristic for the variety and density of landscapes in Middle Europe, due to geology, geomorphology and climate, and enriched by the human cultural impact and diversity. It is a real mosaic of areas, and travelling some 50 km brings you

into a different landscape.

3. Historic Small Towns, a cultural variety

Along the Austrian section one finds six different languages, representing at least as many different cultures and their regional modification.

Under Historic Small Towns we understand settlements up to some 50,000 inhabitants that meet the requirements of five main historic criteria and five criteria of functions that a Historic Small Town also today offers to its region (see below). Typical Historic Small Towns for example are: Cesky Krumlov (CZ), Retz (AT), Hainburg (AT), Kőszeg (HU), Radkersburg (AT) and Bled (Sl.)

Historic criteria

1. Lively Town centre marked by its historic architecture
2. Prominent historic public place
3. Prominent historic facades in the centre
4. Prominent (big) religious and/or public buildings (cathedral, historic town hall)
5. Castle, ruin (remains of) fortifications

Functional criteria (for the region)

1. Centre of higher schools
2. Centre of medical care
3. Location of regional authority
4. Centre of commerce (e.g. industry, shopping centre)
5. Greater number of places of work, higher professions

4. The peripheral situation at the Green Belt

The peripheral situation has grave consequences: economic and social decline, decreasing population, and landscape change. This is obvious from one example: A small or middle-sized farmer ceases to maintain the fields. Either fallow and scattered trees, or woodland is cultivated by somebody else. Either way, the eye is not free to and the countryside is spoiled. We have the impression that the landscape has darkened. If, on the other hand, the fields are bought or leased by other, bigger farmers, former hedges, lynchets or other features are abandoned and the landscape becomes poorer in its view and ecology. Also, monocultures with corn or even foreign grass to feed big biomass plants are increasingly found today. In order to maintain the value of the land, a certain number of farmers and rural population are required. This is a basic necessity in addition to other economic and social improvements. Many “modern ruins” – single houses, churches, even small villages – along the Green Belt show what we call “desertification”, meaning decay.

5. Paths towards a sustainable regional development

- *What is sustainable regional development?* The basic definition of sustainability must also be applied to lively, dynamic, mixed systems of nature and culture.
- *Preservation (e.g. of landscapes) in this context means:* changes can take place but the essence of landscapes values must be maintained. Therefore we need “dynamic preservation”. Not allowing changes in the sense of a museum, or the preservation of a monument. Carrying out the process of “dynamic preservation” needs energy. In this case it requires the energy of mind and action (to understand, to plan, to develop).
- “*Good governance*”; meaning the optimal cooperation between people and on the local, regional, federal and European level of authority/administration.
- *The people and the representatives of the region* must be well aware of the environmental risks and the assessment. (Landscape identification or the assessing of Small Historic Towns are key points in this regard).
- *Instances of trans-border cooperation on the local and regional level open up further options* (e.g. Best practice of regional trans-border cooperation can be found today).
- *Development of a new brand*, that of the Green Belt.
- *Creation of a platform of cooperation between Small Historic Towns* along the Green Belt.

- *Creation of a network of “Green Belt Heritage Trails”.*
- *There are a lot of good and proven examples of cooperation – even contracts – between farmers and hotels and other touristic enterprises.*
- *Implementation of “Regional Managements” (well known in Austria) to support the population along the Green Belt.*
- *Identification of the relevant local “stake holders” and also NGOs, to foster the process of “good governance” and “dynamic preservation” and harnessing them.*

6. The Green Belt, a World Heritage Site?

This might be an option for the future. What are the values, the assets of the Green Belt to be nominated as World Heritage Site?

- Its prominent role in European contemporary history. The transformation from a zone of death to the green ribbon of life, a unique process.
- It is a part of the most important agenda of European identity.
- The richness and diversity of nature, landscape and culture. Some places of unique character and beauty.

Would the Heritage Site be a hindrance or a help for the right, sustainable and appropriate development?

Resumee: The Green Belt with its varietie of landscapes, Small Historic Towns and other human factors, is worth while to be recognised, looked after and maintained in the sense of the ELC and sustainable rural development.