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## **CHANGING CHARACTER OF TRANSFRONTIER LANDSCAPES**

**Case studies: Hungary-Austria, Hungary-Slovenia, Germany-France**

### **Introduction**

Two studies about European transfrontier landscapes will be briefly presented in this paper. Their focus is the perception of the landscape character and its changes. The TransEcoNet, a Central European Research project (Interreg Central 2008-2012) assessed the state and the changes of the transnational ecological networks. The topic was inserted into a larger landscape context. Thus the 19-20<sup>th</sup> century landscape history of the study areas was first revealed by GIS assessment of the historical records, mainly cartographic documents and then by the oral history based on inquiries of local people in border areas of Austria-Hungary and Hungary-Slovenia. The second project (financed by DAAD at the University of Freiburg) was carried out in a transboundary area of Germany and France in the Upper-Rhine region from the Black Forest till the Vosges Mountains.

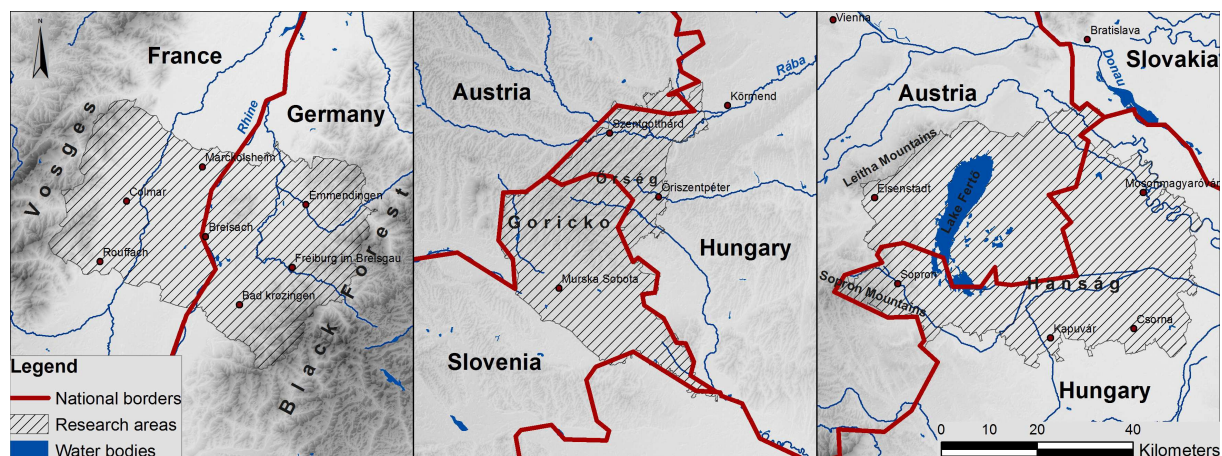


Figure 1. Transfrontier research areas

### **Research questions and method**

- How do local people and stakeholders, experts and non-experts perceive the character and the changes of the landscape?
- What is important, what are the values and the threats to the landscape for locals?
- How do people consider the differences between the neighbouring countries and the transformations with regard to the ecological network?
- How do they value the changes; what is positive or negative; what is ideal for them?

The survey was based on interviews done by a semi-structured questionnaire. In Hungary, Austria and Slovenia 200 interviews were done in 2010-11 with both experts and non-experts,

mainly with elderly people over 50 years of age who had a long term overview of the landscape transformation of the particular study areas. In Germany and France, 30 interviews with experts were carried out in 2014-15.

## **Some highlights from the results**

### **Where are the boundaries of people's own landscapes?**

This question emerged predominantly in the Austro-Hungarian study area, the Fertő-Hanság Basin, which encompasses the Lake Fertő/Neusiedlersee World Heritage cultural landscape. Mainly two types of answers were given. The first is related to landscape management. Interviewees landscape ranges as far as one's activities extend: "*practically the area of our life and of our influence*". It coincides with "*my garden*" or more widely seen with "*my region*". These delimitations clearly overwrite geographical boundaries of the landscapes. The second is a visual delimitation. People's own landscape extends within the eyeshot from the places of one's everyday life. "*For me, all what I can see with my eyes if I'm standing on the top of Kogelberg, belongs to it.*" It is important to note here that diversity is considered as a characteristic of a larger area and not as a difference between landscape types. It means that the deep lying lake basin and the middle ranges are part of that particular area, which can be overseen and is considered as "their landscape".

### **Major characteristics of the landscape on the two side of the border**

Even non-experts are aware of the important unifying factors and the major differences between Austria and Hungary. Obviously the similarities are based on the natural geographical factors and the dissimilarities of their different political situations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their national land-use claims. The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after the First World War meant that this eastern part of Austria is the only region that is suitable for agricultural production in the Alpine country. It is also a unique Pannonian landscape, the only lowland with a lake (Neusiedlersee) that is also called as the "See of the Viennese". Therefore it is highly valued and used as far as possible. During the last hundred years it became a finely structured, well-kept and intensively used agricultural and recreational landscape. Therefore only smaller patches of the wetlands and pastures with a high value for nature remained compared with Hungary, where large semi-natural protected areas can be found. This can be explained by the existence of the Iron Curtain that divided Europe for fifty years after the Second World War. Hungary belonged to the zone of influence of the Soviet Union, so its western border was closed and remained a "sleeping landscape" that escaped the forced development of the communist era. Therefore large semi-natural areas have been preserved.

### **Landscape as homeland and the different driving forces of landscape transformation**

The consideration of the landscape as a homeland is very strong in the Hungarian – Slovenian borderland "Órség"<sup>1</sup> People have strong emotional attachment to "their" landscape on both sides of the border. The following statements prove that: "*hilly, wonderful world slashed by meadows and fields*"... *Órség is totally different... houses are more distant, the structure is more spacious....even the green is different – more intense*"...*people here live in harmony*

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<sup>1</sup> „Gards region” on the western borderland of the medieval Hungary, where a specific settlement structure had evolved. There have been hamlets on the top of hills in order to be able to give fire sign in case the enemy approached. This structure has been partly preserved till the present days.

*with nature*". However the differences between Hungary and Slovenia (former Yugoslavia) are considerable and the landscape changes do not have the same magnitude. On the Hungarian side a significant transformation can be detected due to the abandonment of agriculture and the expansion of forests, while in Slovenia the a well-managed open landscape has been kept. The reason is partly similar to the Austro-Hungarian area. Slovenia is a mountainous country with limited agricultural land while in Hungary there is a lot more lowland, suitable for intensive production, and after the Versailles Peace Treaty Hungary's forest cover was reduced to 11% , so Hungary was interested in afforestation. Órség, the subalpine hilly landscape is amongst the few areas that are highly suitable for forest stands like beech and spruce. The driving forces shaping the landscapes on the two side of the border are thus clear. As a result, the landscape in Hungary is becoming closed and former ploughed land is almost entirely disappearing (Figure 2). The National Park of Órség seeks to preserve grasslands and promote sylviculture which respects nature.

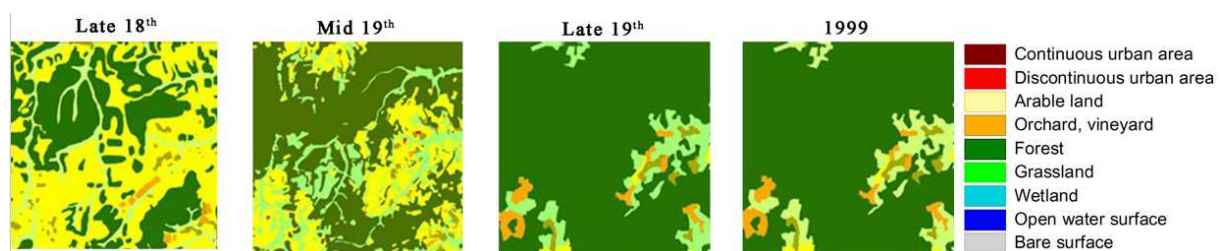


Figure 2. Land cover change on the Hungarian Órség between 1790 – 1999

### **How is landscape understood and how far does environmental awareness play a role in Germany and France?**

The majority of the German respondents talked about nature, natural biotopes and landscape scenery. According to this concept, landscape is a construction of the natural elements impacted by man. In France however, interviewees mainly talked about unity, on inseparable connection between man and nature. Landscape is obviously formed by man. Although nature is the "materia" (the precondition of everything), still the human idea is in the centre! Both Germans and French are aware and acknowledge that environmental awareness is higher in Germany!

### **How are human impacts considered?**

Human influence in the landscape was considered positive till the industrialisation and mainly negative recently when the "corn deserts" have been extensively spreading on the Rhine Plain and large scale intensive agriculture became dominant on the Hungarian lowlands. Another negative impact, widely present and perceived in many regions in Europe, is the closing of the open landscape due to afforestation on the hills and mountains. Only few areas have been able to preserve the arable land and grassland-forest combination: e.g. the Slovenian side of Órség or the forest-grassland mosaic and the Münstertal in the Southern Black Forest in Germany. This latter area experienced its initial human impact, when the monks settled during the 6-7<sup>th</sup> centuries and started to humanise the wilderness of the Black Forest and this is still a good example of the fabulous open landscape in the southern Black Forest.

### **Conceptual differences in answers concerning landscape changes**

There is a clear difference in the responses concerning the factual changes or the underlying causes and the goals. Hungarian and German answers are predominantly factual describing what is there and what has been changed. The causes are mainly factual too. The approach is clearly quantitative – oriented to natural science. It can be mostly measured with GIS or with

numerical economic indicators that were mentioned. The main concern of the French respondents and a majority of Austrians is what has been done and what is being done now? What are the driving forces? From where do we start and where do we go? Who are the actors? How can we communicate, represent processes. The approach is more qualitative, more oriented to social science.

### **What are the driving forces and the consequences?**

According to the answers, it is obvious that the driving forces are mainly economic implemented often through policies. Market demands and recently CAP subsidies as well as related policies have an absolute priority in the landscape transformation. In some cases, environmental policy itself can result in degradation. The corn deserts of the Rhine Plain expanded in place of a diversified agriculture because of the subsidies for biogas production. Consequently underground water was seriously endangered and small ecotones gradually disappeared. However the homogenisation of the arable land is different in Germany and France due to the fact that a minimum wage was introduced in Germany only in 2015. Thus cheap East-European workers were employed that helped to continue the cultivation of asparagus and strawberries etc. on the German side of the Rhine.

The location of the main European traffic corridors has a strong impact as well. The motorways attract industry which facilitates urban development and continuous agglomeration. Thus more and more barriers for wildlife appear. Furthermore the demands of tourism and recreation results in expansion of built up areas and also to giving up of animal husbandry in the mountains, so forest cover increases and the landscape closes.

There are also some environmental driving forces. Amongst them there is the so called “Florida effect” in South-Western Germany, where the most pleasant climate in the country attracts elderly people and it results in significant growth of new residents and the need for built up areas.

### **Favourite places**

There are two types of places favoured by interviewees. One is the homeland, or landscapes similar to the places where they grew up. Amongst them the river Rhine has a particular significance because for Germans, that is a legendary water course, the so called “Vater Rhein”. Although we can hardly find any real natural riparian forests along the river, for several respondents that forest band is representative of “nature” which always played an important role in their lives. French respondents talked about the “infinity” and on the “Ried” (prairies) of the Rhine Plain, which is also an image originating from their childhoods.

The second type of answers relates to the unique features of the landscapes, coming mainly from the cultural heritage: e.g. the Wine Route of Elsass, Breisach with the view of the cathedral and Neuf-Brissach with the intact fortification of Vauban. Respondents also frequently mentioned the combination of the nature and culture: e.g. Kaiserstuhl, or the scenery along with the natural diversity: e.g. the forest-grassland mosaic of the Black Forest.

### **Common themes in the three project regions**

The statements about ideal landscape are highly similar. They are either factual or conceptual. Factual answers mention the diversity, the water richness or in a larger consideration the whole transect of the region from the deep river or lake basin till the high mountains where a multitude of landscape types can be found. Conceptual answers refer to the harmony between man and nature, where the land use is adequate to its potentials.

Beyond patrimony, respondent also perceive the threats: e.g. the abandonment and depopulation, the increased traffic load from transit and tourism, spreading urbanisation and the disappearance of traditional building styles.

### **Transboundary cooperation**

The hidden, but still existing sensibility caused by the historical traumas cannot be disregarded. There are new language obstacles which were not the case one hundred years ago, neither in the Hungarian transboundary area nor in the German-French border zone in the land of Allemans. Therefore today, despite all European endeavours and projects, communication and cooperation is limited. Official committees have regular meetings, but their effectiveness is questioned. The EU facilitates transboundary research, but the embeddedness and acceptance of the results is still not satisfying. Economic competition exists, eventually causing hard difficulties for local economy e.g. differences in incomes between Austria and Hungary distorts significantly the labour market. Still there is a couple of promising local initiatives e.g. GERPLAN or regional projects founded by EU: e.g. PANANET.

### **Conclusions and outlook**

Interviewees, both experts and non-experts, are aware of the major landscape change processes and the threats that are mainly environmental conflicts and degradations. They know that landscape is the result of the natural processes and socio-economic activities but their estimation of the role of local initiatives is different! The absolute decisive role of the economy is obvious – politics impacts through subsidies. "Heritage: e.g traditional building styles and open landscapes are kept if they can bring in money or if maintenance contributes to the well-being.

Ecological network and green infrastructure seem to be the new magic instruments of balancing the infrastructural and residential land use as well as intensive agriculture, but the opinions of experts about it is far not just positive

It might not be an exaggeration to say that either we change the system toward sustainability (considering environmental, economic and social problems as parts of one integral system) including cooperation and communication instead of competition or we run after the speedy changes and the divide opens between conservation of selected areas, economic wealth, well-being of the privileged and growing environmental and social degradation on a large scale!

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