

## **NATURE-RELATED AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF TRANS-BORDER COOPERATION BETWEEN POLISH AND SLOVAK SPISZ**

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**Abstract:** This work is an attempt to show the socio-economic and nature-related conditions, which may prove the significance of the development of trans-border co-operation between Polish and Slovak Spisz, particularly in that part of it, which is crossed by the state border, i.e. Zagurze Spiskie.

**Key words:** trans-border cooperation, socio-economic conditions, nature-related conditions.

Even a brief glance at the newspapers' front page's headlines reveals beyond any doubt the goal pursued by the politicians and nations of Europe at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This goal is to change the functions of political borders separating states and nations. State borders have now lost their strategic importance and the regions neighbouring with them are no longer the once sparsely populated and economically backward areas. Simultaneously, the number of problems, which can be solved only on the supra-national level, keeps growing. We can mention here such issues as the shaping and protection of the natural environment, miscellaneous social problems, security and the like. There seems to be more and more justice and significance in the words so frequently used by politicians who speak of "the United States of Europe" and "Europe - Our Common Home".

Yet not long ago, the inhabitants of Central and East Europe were watching with jealousy the processes taking part in the western part of the continent, where the role of political borders was decreasing. The Europe with open borders was a symbol of freedom. When the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1990, it seemed to herald the opening of borders throughout Europe... However, following years witnessed the emergence of new

borders, often not without bloodshed, as it was in the case of the former Yugoslavia. A new network of political borders appeared also in the territory of the former USSR. A border was drawn between the Czech Republic and Slovakia - a development still incomprehensible to a lot of people. Poland, which had until recently three neighbours, now has as many as seven. These developments do not in any way confirm the vision of Charles de Gaulle who spoke about a "Europe extending from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains, which will decide about the future of the world". The liquidation of political borders in Europe now seems a grossly over-optimistic, if not unrealistic vision, even when viewed against the active integration processes such as the activity of the European Union and the efforts made by numerous countries to accede to this organisation. Apart from this international integration pushed forward by state leaders, there is regional trans-border co-operation, which seems to be gaining ever greater importance in the process of European integration. The emerging Euroregions can be called laboratories of European integration of their own kind.

Trans-border cooperation between Poland and Slovakia can be a significant contribution to the integration processes taking place on the European continent. This cooperation has recently enjoyed favourable climate while the intensity and effectiveness of the processes have depended on local socio-economic conditions. The latter are highly diversified when we compare individual sections of our common border. The situation looks different in the Bieszczady region, in the Tatra Mountains, in Spisz and in Orawa.

Trans-border cooperation in the Spisz region is probably most poorly developed when seen against the situation in the remaining regions. Evaluating the social conditions of trans-border cooperation, we may even come to a conclusion that there is no other region along the whole Polish-Slovak border with greater national antagonisms than Spisz. Vast literature on the subject can be found among Polish as well as Slovak publications. However, authors of many of them fail to base their evaluations on confirmed facts and reliable sources. Much too frequently emotions dominate over fact and reason. Even if we assume that the publications are objective, we should bear in mind that the sources of the conflicts mentioned were very, very far away from the Spisz Region - in Warsaw and Prague, Cracow and Bratislava. When the need to draw a political border in Spisz arose after the First World War, none of the two countries was properly prepared for this task. When a plebiscite was to be conducted in the controversial territory, both parties organised fighting squads to paralyse the propaganda campaign of the other. There were victims on both sides. After 1 Sept. 1939, Polish Spisz became part of Slovakia. In order to arouse among the population of Polish Spisz confidence in and appreciation of the new political authorities, the latter allowed Poles to exchange the Polish currency into the Slovak currency at a very good exchange rate. That act, independent of the will of the inhabitants of Spisz, was a gesture made by the Nazi Germany towards Slovakia, which remained under its domination.

After the World War Two, the Slovak population inhabiting Polish Spisz could see lack of any interest in its plight on the part of the authorities of the Polish People's Republic. However, those actions were not aimed against the Slovak minority in Poland. Directly after the end of the war, it was essential for political propaganda to strive to

make the Polish society accept the territorial changes in the country. It was claimed that owing to those positive changes Poland had become an uni-national country without problems with national minorities so outstanding in the inter-war period. Another negative impression felt by the Slovak minority of Polish Spisz was the conviction that the region was on purpose neglected in terms of infrastructure. Numerous villages of the region had no bus connection, no health care centre and the like. Electricity reached some of them only at the beginning of the 60s. That, however, resulted from the policy pursued by the authorities in those days with respect to the country as a whole. Investments in infrastructure were made in the first place in the villages in which state farms were created.

Local conflicts, which are often unnecessarily given great publicity, are another problem of Polish Spisz. In the 60s, there was a conflict in Nowa Bia a over the language in which masses are to be celebrated in the local church. The hot temper of Spisz mountaineers led to a fight in the church. As a result of the incident, the authorities of the archdiocese of Cracow closed the church in the village for as long as 11 years. The decision, which seems too severe, contributed even further to mutual animosities between Poles and Slovaks.

To give yet another example, we can mention the incident with former Slovak premier Ján Čarnogurský, who came to a meeting with Spisz Slovaks in Czarna Góra in Polish Spisz in 1991. In order to gain the favours of the honourable guest the organisers removed the Polish national emblem from the wall of the fire station in which the meeting was held. It was not the initiative of the local population but of people from outside the region who were thus trying to attract the attention of the guest. Once again, mass media gave much publicity to the incident.

Social relations between Polish and Slovak inhabitants of Spisz seem to develop in a different way when it is the local community that initiates actions.

Being chronological as in the case of the conflict situations referred to above, we can mention the little known cooperation between Poles and Slovaks on the courier routes from the occupied Poland to Hungary. One of the most important points on the Spisz courier route was the "Wichrówka" villa near Dursztyn. The echoes of that cooperation can still be heard in folk songs such as the one I heard from an old man pasturing cows on a hill near "Wichrówka", and took down:

*"Winds are blowing over Wichrówka and various miracles take place.  
People gather here at night. Poles and Slovaks."*

We may only regret that such facts have escaped the attention of many historians.

The noble gesture of the Karkoszka family from Czarna Góra can be given as another positive example of a friendly attitude towards the inhabitants of Spisz irrespective of the declared nationality. The Karkoszka family emigrated to Slovakia in the 50s. At present, they live in Kieżmark (Slov. Kežmarok) and the younger generation in Bratislava. They left their farmhouses to the State Treasury so that a museum of Spisz

culture could be organised there. It is now a branch of the Tatrzańskie Museum in Zakopane. The museum shows furnishings and objects typical of a Spisz farm in the inter-war period. Again, it is a pity that none of the recently so frequently published tourist guides informs about the history of the museum though, on the other hand, they never fail to inform about national conflicts in Spisz. Another positive example was provided by "Magura", a regional group from Kieżmark, which visited Poland in 1989 to attend one of the folk events organised in Niedzica. Much to the poorly hidden, unpleasant surprise of the Socio-Cultural Society of Czechs and Slovaks in Poland, the group presented songs in the Spisz dialect, hardly different from the dialect used in the Polish part of Spisz, instead of the expected performance in the Slovak language.

Tombs in the Polish Spisz bear inscriptions in both the Polish and the Slovak language. On the Day of the Dead, the same persons can be seen lighting candles on tombs with inscriptions in different languages. No acts of vandalism have been reported.

Masses in the churches of Polish Spisz are still celebrated in the Polish and the Slovak language, and songs in both languages (or rather in the Spisz dialect) are sung by the same persons. In schools, children can learn the Slovak language if only such a need arises.

If there is no external interference on the part of those who are ready to ignite conflicts to build their own political position or draw undocumented, pseudo-scientific conclusions, the social situation in Spisz can be evaluated as favourable for the development of trans-border cooperation. There seem to be no obstacles to making events such as Zamagurski Folk Festival held annually in Czerwony Klasztor and other events organised in the castle of Niedzica, manifestations of the cultural unity of Spisz. The sanctuary devoted to the cult of the Holy Virgin in Lewocza is becoming the place of cult and pilgrimages of the inhabitants of both parts of Spisz and of Poles, in particular, after the visit to the temple by John Paul II in 1995.

Polish and Slovak Spisz are also regions of specific natural conditions which can be of essential influence on the development and character of trans-border links. On the one hand, we can speak of relatively insignificant degradation of the natural environment and, on the other, of very limited scope of environmental protection. The Spisz border region is among the very few in which no territorial nature protection units such as national or landscape parks have been established. We should, however, warn possible promoters of Spisz integration against uncritical adoption of integration models, which have proved successful in other parts of Europe. As a rule, the first stage is to create basic infrastructure such as border crossings, transportation systems, and the like. In the case of Spisz, it is necessary to begin integration actions with excluding areas of greatest value in terms of nature from economic activity. Such areas can often be joined to form trans-border nature-protection units. It seems advisable that such a trans-border nature reserve be created to cover the forest complex of northeast Polish Spisz and the area of Slovak Ostrunia. On the Polish side there is a nature reserve here called "the Blue Valley", which is a fragment of primeval Carpatian forest with over 100 beeches with a circumference of over 3 metres. The age of the oldest trees exceeds 200 years. In the vicinity of Slovak Ostrunia there are a few lakes surrounded by rare species of swamp plants. The forest between these nature reserves is a lair of wild animals. We can meet

here deer, boars, wolves and even wildcats and lynx. The lair is safe where it is because the forest is crossed here by the state border. Poachers avoid such border areas fearing they may come across border guards.

Zamagurze Spiskie is another region crossed by the state border, which seems perfect for the creation of a trans-border landscape park. This region of clearly marked natural boundaries formed by the Rivers Dunajec and Bia ka, and the ridge of Magura Spiska, is an area of beautiful landscapes, unspoiled nature and numerous monuments of regional building traditions.

It is not enough to take steps to protect nature in territorial units. It is absolutely essential to co-ordinate actions in the field of water and forest economy. For instance, it is necessary to determine the course of forest fire glades, study the migration of animals and the like.

The above mentioned actions aimed at protecting nature within territorial units do not directly affect the forms and intensity of trans-border cooperation. It is the indirect influence of the natural environment on the development of trans-border integration processes that is more diversified. Agriculture has been and still is the traditional occupation of the population of Spisz. Over the past few years, the region has noted a lot of unfavourable social changes related with the poor effectiveness in agriculture. The most outstanding are migration in search of a job and impoverishment of part of the society. Development of tourism seems to be a chance for the economic improvement of the region. Until now, both Polish and Slovak Spisz have remained far behind the Tatra Mountains and the Pieniny Mountains. The competition of these two areas, as well as transportation difficulties, they have not favoured the development of tourism. At present, there are two factors, which can increase interest in the region. In the first place, we can speak about a definite change in the evaluation of tourist attractions by part of the population. The latter no longer seek recognised tourist attractions luring crowds of tourist but dream of calm, silence, clear waters and air. Facilities in the tourist traffic in border regions can be another stimulating factor. They include border crossings on pedestrian and skiing routes, good tourist information, and the like. We should perhaps underline that Spisz and, in particular, Zamagurze is perfect for the development of these forms of tourism which do not contribute to the degradation of the natural environment. The region is particularly attractive for the development of cross-country skiing - an inexpensive and safe form of winter recreation. The persistence of the snow cover, easy mountain slopes and the beauty of landscape should be a sufficient encouragement for people interested in active recreation. International ski routes can be an additional attraction. Both parts of Spisz are also a wonderful place for organising special forms of recreation such as, for instance, schools of survival, photo-safari, open-air painting events, and the like. A tourist-recreation complex is now being developed around the newly created artificial lake by the Dunajec dam. Together with the section of the River Dunajec - the route of raft trips and the Red Cloister, it could become an attractive trans-border tourist region. The joint concept of the tourist development of the Spisz border region allowed to avoid the mistakes made, for instance, on the Polish-Czech border where the same tourist facilities were built on both sides of the border distorting the landscape and doubling costs.

The examples of possibilities of trans-border cooperation presented above do not require extensive administration, signature of ministerial or international agreements, and the like. Polish and Slovak Spisz lie in the territory of the Tatra Euroregion. So far, this has not contributed to any noticeable extent on the effectiveness of trans-border co-operation in Spisz. The reasons of such a situation can be sought in the specific character and regional peculiarities of individual parts of the Euroregion. Different problems can be found in the Tatras, in the Pieniny and in Spisz. Therefore, following the example of many Alps region or Scandinavian countries any attempts connected with the development of trans-border links should refer to the features of the natural environment of these border regions.

Concluding this brief presentation of questions related with the development of trans-border cooperation in Spisz, I would like to quote a remark made by Abba Eban: "History teaches us that people and nations come to behave in a reasonable way as soon as they exhaust all other possibilities". It seems that in Spisz all possible mistakes, misunderstandings and negligence have already been tested. Thus, the vision of the future of this beautiful region should inspire optimism.

## **Resume**

### **Prírodné a spoločensko-ekonomické podmienky cezhraničnej spolupráce medzi poľským a slovenským Spišom**

Jedným zo základných cieľov politikov a národov Európy na konci dvadsiateho storočia je snaha zmeniť funkciu politických hraníc. Ich úplná likvidácia je v súčasnosti nemožná. Napriek tomu je však možné redukovať ich funkciu bariér v priestore. Pokrok v tejto súvislosti závisí od politických vzťahov medzi susediacimi krajinami ako aj od spoločenských, ekonomických a prírodných podmienok.

Vhodné podmienky spolupráce existujúce pozdĺž hranice medzi poľským a slovenským Spišom vytvárajú dobré predpoklady pre rozvoj cezhraničných vzťahov. Sú tu veľmi dobré predpoklady najmä pre spoluprácu v oblasti tvorby a ochrany prírodného prostredia ako aj koordinácie činností v rozvoji turizmu v tomto regióne.

Minulé národnostné konflikty sú už dnes časťou histórie a koordinované plány a iniciatívy môžu prispievať k spoločenskému a ekonomickému pozdvihnutiu regiónu.