

VILLAGE RENEWAL WITHOUT BORDERS: CZECH-AUSTRIAN CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT AS A RESPONSE TO SHARED REGIONAL CHALLENGES

KATEŘINA VNOUČKOVÁ
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Received April 15, 2025; Revised August 26, 2025; Accepted September 3, 2025.

Abstract

This paper examines how the interconnected environment and rural traditions of South Moravia and Lower Austria facilitated cross-border cooperation during the 1980s and 1990s, focusing particularly on village renewal programs. Despite the physical transformations of the socialist era, the formerly entangled regions retained their inherent similarities and faced similar challenges, such as peripheral position, demographic changes, and loss of attachment to the locale due to population change and modernization processes. The paper argues that their interconnected environment served as a linking platform that enabled a common response to these challenges. The case study of village renewal programs demonstrates how Lower Austrian expertise found fertile ground in South Moravia and subsequently became a source of inspiration at the central level. However, the paper also shows the decline in cross-border cooperation in the late 1990s, partly due to the shift of rural policy coordination from regional settings to the European level.

Kateřina Vnoučková holds a PhD in Modern History from Charles University Prague. E-mail: katerina.vnouckova@amo.cz.

This paper is based on the Chapter “Přeshraniční spolupráce v obnově venkova” from the author’s doctoral dissertation titled “Okno příležitosti. Přeshraniční výměna v oblasti životního prostředí na jihomoravsko-dolnorakouské hranici v letech 1984–1995” defended in 2022. The doctoral research was supported by the Charles University Grant Agency, project no. 668218 and by the Bavarian-Czech Academic Agency within the research consortium “Grenze/n in nationalen und transnationalen Erinnerungskulturen zwischen Tschechien und Bayern.”

Keywords: village renewal; borderlands; cross-border cooperation; Czech-Austrian relations; interconnected environment

DOI: 10.14712/23363231.2025.9

Introduction

When looking at aerial photographs from the mid-twentieth century, one would hardly discern the border between South Moravia and Lower Austria.¹ In the context of the Czech borderlands, this territory is exceptional in that it lacks mountain ranges creating a physical border. On the contrary, lowland landscape extends on both sides of the border, with the only visible barrier being partially formed by the Thaya River. As a natural element, this river simultaneously separates and connects the Austrian and Moravian parts of the area. Due to this physical landscape continuity, the border regions developed in continuous interaction over past centuries. Their geographically similar character and common rural tradition formed an interconnected environment that offers prerequisites for intensive cross-border ties – from the perspective of natural conditions and forms of human-nature relationships, these regions have long constituted a shared space. Although the socialist transformation of the South Moravian landscape in the second half of the twentieth century significantly affected the unity and interdependence of these regions (with state borders being particularly evident on current aerial photographs due to the different size of the fields), the environment in both regions remained largely similar and interconnected. Thus, even during the period of closed borders, it could act as a connecting element, fostering cross-border cooperation and allowing these separated regions to partially converge, mutually influence, and inspire each other.²

The paper seeks to examine the ways and mechanisms through which the interconnected environment between these regions and interpersonal networks across the border facilitated common response to shared challenges and successful cross-border cooperation even before the formal opening of the border.

¹ Orthophotographic maps from the years 1952 and 1953 are accessible on the Czech National Geoportal INSPIRE. They also depict small parts of the Austrian territory. See <https://geoportal.gov.cz/web/guest/map>.

² On the border as a dividing as well as connecting element see Thomas Lindenberger, “Divided but not Disconnected. Germany as a Border Region of the Cold War,” in *Divided but not Disconnected. German Experiences of the Cold War*, ed. Tobias Hochscherf, Christoph Laucht, and Andrew Plowman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 11–33; Hans-Jürgen Karp, “Grenzen – Ein Gegenstand wissenschaftlicher Forschung,” in *Grenzen in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Aktuelle Forschungsprobleme*, ed. Hans Lemberg (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 2000), 9–18.

The paper also follows and seeks to explain the processes by which those initially regional initiatives transcended local conditions to influence national policy frameworks, by bringing the specific village renewal agenda to the central level. The research draws upon the concepts of borderlands history, entangled history, and environmental history, expanding existing knowledge about the specific historical period of late socialism and early transformation by incorporating regional and cross-border perspectives. The first part of the paper will introduce the conceptual approaches, followed by a closer look at the South Moravian – Lower Austrian border regions, focusing on their interconnected environment, shared historical traditions, and the challenges they faced in the second half of the twentieth century. Subsequently, the study will focus on the inter-regional contacts of these regions from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. Finally, the case study of cross-border cooperation in village renewal will illustrate the opportunities that regional cooperation and interconnected environment offered for building mutual relationships and connecting regions across closed borders, as well as after their opening.

Entangled Histories Across Borders

For the examination of cross-border relations and mutual dependencies, the concept of entangled history [*Verflechtungsgeschichte, histoire croisée*] is used in this paper.³ This concept originates from comparative history and the research on transfers between two (or more) entities, extending these approaches to an additional level – not merely comparing the observed phenomena, but investigating the direct and indirect influences on them, as well as their mutual impact and potential dependencies. As such, this concept enables to examine to which extent life in a border region is influenced by the neighboring area. Such influence may be direct, exemplified by cooperation in nature conservation that benefits both regions, or indirect, such as the emergence of competitive relationships resulting from differing living standards on either side of the border. Thus, entangled history transcends the examination of relationships and reciprocal

³ Jörn Leonhard, “Comparison, Transfer and Entanglement, or: How to Write Modern European History Today?” *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 149–163, doi: 10.17104/1611-8944-2016-2-149; Michel Espagne, Jonas Kreienbaum, Frederic Cooper, Christoph Conrad, and Philipp Ther, “How to Write Modern European History Today? Statements to Jörn Leonhard’s JMEH-Forum,” *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 4 (2016): 465–491, doi: 10.1177/1611-89442016014004002; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der Histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28, no. 4 (2002): 607–636.

exchanges between comparable units. This approach allows for the exploration of regional histories in dialogue with transnational developments, thereby contributing to a broader, global understanding.⁴

While focusing on the entangled histories of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, the Central European neighbors, Czechoslovakia and Austria, play a unique role due to their position on the border between East and West. In the case of Austria, this is articulated through its ambitions to act as a bridge between the antagonistic blocs.⁵ Nevertheless, the number of existing historical works dealing with their mutual contacts remains relatively modest. An interesting contribution, also in terms of the topic of rural life, is the publication by a team of Czech and Austrian historians titled *So nah, so fern. Menschen in Waldviertel und Südböhmen 1945–1989* [So close and yet so far away. People in Waldviertel and in South Bohemia]. With oral history interviews, the book focuses on comparing everyday life in border villages during the Cold War, when the common border was closed with military-guarded Iron Curtain, yet it does not address cross-border influences and transfers between the border regions.⁶ A comprehensive view of the history of mutual coexistence between Czechs and Austrians over the past two centuries, including contemporary history, is provided by the collaborative work *Nachbarn* [Neighbors].⁷ However, due to the nature of a broad-based book, it does not delve deeply into the specific developments in border regions, particularly the limits and possibilities of interregional cooperation during the period of closed borders, and its subsequent development after the opening of the borders.

⁴ Espagne, Krienbaum, Cooper, Conrad, and Ther, “How to Write Modern European History,” 488.

⁵ Ota Konrád et al., *Ztráta starých jistot. Rakousko 1986–2000* (Praha: NLN, 2020), 40, 41.

⁶ Hanns Haas, David Kovařík, Leoš Nikrmajer, Niklas Perzi, eds., *So nah, so fern. Menschen im Waldviertel und in Südböhmen 1945–1989* (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 2013).

⁷ Niklas Perzi, Hildegard Schmoller, Ota Konrád and Václav Šmidrkal, eds., *Nachbarn. Ein österreichisch-tschechisches Geschichtsbuch* (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 2019). See also Armin Laussegger, Reinhard Linke, and Niklas Perzi, Österreich. Tschechien: Unser 20. Jahrhundert. Begleitband zum wissenschaftlichen Rahmenprogramm der Niederösterreichischen Landesausstellung 2009 (Wien: LIT Verlag, 2009); Stefan Karner and Michal Stehlík, eds., *Česko. Rakousko. Rozdělení – odloučení – spojení: Sborník a katalog Dolnorakouské zemské výstavy 2009* (Jihlava: Muzeum Vysočiny, 2009); Tomáš Knoz, ed., *Tschechen und Österreicher. Gemeinsame Geschichte, gemeinsame Zukunft* (Wien: Janineum / Brno: Matices moravská, 2006); Andrea Brait and Michael Gehler, eds., *Grenzöffnung 1989. Innen- und Außenperspektiven und die Folgen für Österreich* (Wien: Böhlau, 2014), doi: 10.7767/boehlau.9783205793236; Andrea Komlosy, Václav Bůžek, and František Svátek, eds., *Kultury na hranici: Jižní Čechy, jižní Morava – Waldviertel – Weinviertel* (Wien: Promedia, 1995).

Although historiographical research on the mutual influences of border regions during this specific period has been on the rise in the past decade, it remains limited, even in other areas across Europe. Recent publications demonstrate the effectiveness of observing mutual influences in relation to environmental connections – for instance, in the monograph by German historian Astrid Eckert *West Germany and the Iron Curtain. Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands*, which deals with environmental, social, and economic ties along the German-German border and (like this paper) links the post-war period with the era following reunification.⁸ The environment constitutes, per se, a cross-border and transnational phenomenon; its influence transcends nation-states and necessitates collaborative action and coordination – whether in addressing challenges or, conversely, in exploiting opportunities presented by environmental interdependence.⁹

While academic attention to the interplay of geopolitical borders and the environment has increased significantly in the past decades, investigations into the interconnectedness and transcendence of natural processes across the systemic boundary between East and West remain predominantly focused on the Cold War period and high-level interstate politics.¹⁰ Continuities between the late socialist era and early transformation period (in accordance with the concept of

⁸ Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). See also Astrid M. Eckert, “Geteilt, aber nicht unverbunden. Grenzgewässer als deutsch-deutsches Umweltproblem,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 62, no. 1 (2014): 321–351; Astrid M. Eckert, “Transboundary Natures. From the Iron Curtain to the Green Belt,” in *Military Landscapes*, eds. Anatole Tchikine and John Dean Davis (Cambridge, MA: Dumbarton Oaks, 2021), 123–149; Astrid M. Eckert and Pavla Šimková, “Transcending the Cold War: Borders, Nature, and the European Green Belt Conservation Project along the Former Iron Curtain,” in *Greening Europe: Environmental Protection in the Long Twentieth Century – A Handbook*, ed. Patrick Kupper and Anna-Katharina Wöbse (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2022), 129–155, doi: 10.1515/9783110669213-007.

⁹ Hilary Cunningham: “Permeabilities, Ecology and Geopolitical Boundaries,” in *A Companion to Border Studies*, ed. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (London: Blackwell, 2012), 371–386, doi: 10.1002/9781118255223; Peter Coates, “Borderlands, No-Man’s Land, Nature’s Wonderland,” *Environment and History* 20, no. 4 (November 2014): 500–516.

¹⁰ Astrid Mignon Kirchhoff and John Robert McNeill, *Nature and the Iron Curtain: Environmental Policy and Social Movements in Communist and Capitalist Countries, 1945–1990* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019); John Robert McNeill and Corinna R. Unger, *Environmental Histories of the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Tobias Huff, *Natur und Industrie im Sozialismus. Eine Umweltgeschichte der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015). For Central Europe see Horst Förster, Julia Herzberg, and Martin Zückert, eds., *Umweltgeschichte(n). Ostmitteleuropa von der Industrialisierung bis zum Postsozialismus* (München: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Roman Holec and Martin Zückert, eds., *Umweltgeschichte in mitteleuropäischen Kontexten* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2024).

the *long transition*),¹¹ as well as examinations of the interdependence of border regions and the influence of local initiatives on central governance, constitute themes that deserve greater scholarly attention.¹² It is precisely this research gap that this paper addresses.

Shared Landscape, Shared History: The South Moravian – Lower Austrian Borderland

“What is common strikes the eye: the profile of the landscape, rivers, highlands, beautifully arranged towns – more sprawling in the (once) wealthier north, more modest in the south – as well as the splendor of noble culture, but also the charm of rustic farmhouses and streets with little wine cellars.”¹³ Wolfgang Müller-Funk, an Austrian cultural theorist and long-time advocate of Czech-Austrian cooperation, described with those words the similarities between the regions on the Lower Austrian – South Moravian Border. This quote originates from the foreword to the cultural guide of this area, that was published only a few years after the opening of the common border. The focus of this paper covers the same territory – border regions of South Moravia (specifically the districts of Znojmo and Břeclav) and Lower Austria (districts Mistelbach and Hollabrunn).

Unlike other parts of the Czech borderlands, which are separated from neighboring countries by mountain ranges, the South Moravian landscape has long merged seamlessly into Lower Austria, with no discernible border at first glance. The borders of geomorphological areas in this region run approximately along the north(east)-south axis, unlike the state border which runs along the

¹¹ This concept relativizes the significance of the 1989 events as a groundbreaking rupture in global history and instead views the period of the last third of the twentieth century (approximately from the 1970s) as a long transition, focusing on modernization, transformation, and globalization processes leading to the establishment of (neo)liberal dominance. See Philipp Ther, *Europe since 1989: A history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Konrad H. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes. A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Hartmut Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C. H. Beck, 2007); James Mark et al., 1989. *A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). For the revision of the interpretation regarding “the inevitable collapse of the undemocratic system,” see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, PA: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹² On the influence of local cross-border environmental activities on the central level, see Daniela Apaydin, *Stop Nagymaros! Die Geschichte einer Grenzüberschreitung* (Wien: V&R unipress, Vienna University Press, 2023).

¹³ Wolfgang Müller-Funk, “Vorwort,” in *Kulturführer Waldviertel, Weinviertel, Südmähren*, ed. Antonín Bartoněk (Wien: Deuticke, 1993), 8.



Figure 1: Border Regions of South Moravia and Lower Austria. Source: Kateřina Vnoučková, based on © d-maps.com.

east-west axis.¹⁴ The natural border was partially formed by the Thaya River [Dyje], which also shaped the character of the lowland region, with a similar landscape on both its banks. The fertile soil in this interconnected region predestined its settlement since prehistoric times. Even in later periods, this area was a significant crossroads of communication routes between the civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean and Northern Europe, as well as between the Black Sea region and Western Europe. Settlement by different ethnic groups (Germans in the south and Slavs in the north) and subsequent affiliation with different dominions, however, led to the establishment of a border between the southern

¹⁴ Jaromír Demek and Peter Mackovčín, eds., *Zeměpisný lexikon ČR. Hory a nížiny* (Brno: MŽP ČR, 2006); Godfrid Wessely, *Niederösterreich – Geologie der österreichischen Bundesländer* (Wien: Geologische Bundesanstalt Wien, 2006).

and northern parts of this region.¹⁵ The separation, however, was never complete; the territories on both sides of the border were influenced by cross-border contacts, faced similar challenges and problems, and in many respects, remained interconnected up to the present day.

Due to favorable natural conditions, agriculture developed in both parts of the territory, particularly cereal cultivation, fruit farming, and viticulture. In fact, wine gave its name to the Austrian part of the border region: Weinviertel is one of the four historical territories – Viertels – of the federal state of Lower Austria.¹⁶ In addition to growing wine grapes, vintners on both sides of the border focused on wine production (primarily white varieties). The wine cellar streets that consequently emerged thus represent another shared regional feature, as they contribute to a similar appearance of village settlements scattered throughout the region. This characteristic also predestines a relatively low population density on both sides of the border.

This historically interconnected region underwent dramatic transformations in the twentieth century. After the First World War, only minor territorial adjustments were made, and despite the dissolution of the monarchy, the border between the newly established states remained relatively permeable. However, the Second World War brought significant (albeit temporary) changes to the borders as well as a dramatic transformation of the population. As a consequence of the occupation of the borderlands by Nazi Germany, the substantial Jewish community was expelled from the South Moravian Region. On the other hand, numerous German officials relocated to the newly established German administrative offices. After the Second World War, the violent expulsion of Germans occurred, with approximately 100,000 individuals leaving the region – most continuing through Austria to Germany, while only about 15,000 remained in the Lower Austrian border areas. New inhabitants replaced them in the South Moravian borderlands; however, these new settlers lacked attachment to the locale and frequently possessed insufficient experience with agricultural activities, which were essential in this area.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jaromír Kovárník, “Svědectví z dávných časů. Jižní Morava a Dolní Rakousy v pravěku a v rané době dějinné,” in *Kultury na hranici*, ed. Komlosy, Bůžek, and Svátek (Wien: Promedia, 1995), 37.

¹⁶ Erich Landsteiner, “Vino a hranice. Vinařství a obchod s vínem v moravsko-dolnorakouském pohraničí,” in *Kultury na hranici*, ed. Komlosy, Bůžek, and Svátek (Wien: Promedia, 1995), 143–148; Ernst Bruckmüller and Josef Redl, “Land der Äcker, Landwirtschaft in Niederösterreich 1918–2008,” in *Niederösterreich im 20. Jahrhundert*, Band 2: *Wirtschaft*, ed. Peter Melichar, Ernst Langthaler, and Stefan Eminger (Wien: Böhlau, 2008), 165–218.

¹⁷ Perzi, Schmoller, Konrád and Šmidrkal, eds., *Nachbarn* – see chapters “Zwischen den Kriegen. Österreich und die Tschechoslowakei 1918–1938”; “Die österreichischen und böhmischen Länder

The building of the Iron Curtain then predetermined a challenging period for mutual relations in the years that followed. The purpose of the barbed wire and the forbidden border zone was to prevent interactions between local inhabitants, separating the East from the West, as well as isolating the authoritarian regime from democratic ideals. To a large extent, they were successful in this endeavor – regions that were once interconnected developed under different circumstances and political systems after the Second World War, and most of the ties between local populations were broken. The presence of a military-guarded border further pushed both parts of the region to the periphery of their respective countries. In the border areas of Lower Austria, this peripheral status, combined with the loss of employment opportunities in the agricultural sector due to modernization, resulted in a massive exodus of the population (most often to Vienna for work-related reasons) within the three decades after the Second World War. In both Lower Austrian border districts, this amounted to nearly 20,000 people.¹⁸ Conversely, on the South Moravian side, the border regions were rapidly resettled with new inhabitants following the expulsion of the German population after the Second World War, leading to only a slight decline or stagnation in population numbers.¹⁹ Both regions, however, struggled in the second half of the twentieth century with a lack of prospects for living in the border region for the local inhabitants.

The agricultural landscape of the region also underwent dramatic transformations in the second half of the twentieth century. The South Moravian

unter NS-Herrschaft 1938–1945,” “Am Scheideweg zwischen ‘Ost’ und ‘West’”; pages 87–109, 167–221. See also Hanns Haas, “Die Zerstörung der Lebenseinheit ‘Grenze’ im 20. Jahrhundert,” in *Kontakte und Konflikte, Böhmen, Mähren und Österreich. Aspekte eines Jahrtausends gemeinsamer Geschichte*, ed. Thomas Winkelbauer (Waidhofen an der Thaya: Waldviertel Heimatbund, 1993), 363–386; Michal Frankl, “No Man’s Land: Refugees, Moving Borders, and Shifting Citizenship in 1938 East-Central Europe,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 16 (2019): 247–266; Niklas Perzi, “Aufnahme und Abschub. Die Sudetendeutschen in Niederösterreich 1945/46,” *Jahrbuch für Landeskunde von Niederösterreich* 82 (2016): 135–234; Matěj Spurný, “Reliability and the Border: The Discourse of the Czech Borderlands, 1945–49,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, no. 2 (2013): 83–94, doi: 10.15203/ozp.60.vol42iss1; On the transformation of the population in environmental context see Eagle Glassheim, *Cleansing the Czechoslovak Borderlands: Migration, Environment, and Health in the Former Sudetenland* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

¹⁸ “Wohnbevölkerung nach Politischen Bezirken mit der Bevölkerungsentwicklung seit 1869,” in *Volkszählung 2001. Hauptergebnisse I – Niederösterreich* (Wien: Statistik Austria, 2001), 32, 33.

¹⁹ Martin Markel, *Vysídlení Němců z jižní Moravy 1945–1949* (Brno: Vojenská akademie, 2002), 39; Perzi, *Aufnahme und Abschub*, 175. On the population numbers in the South Moravian border regions see “Vývoj počtu obyvatel,” in *Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů 2001. Okres Břeclav* (Praha: Český statistický úřad, 2003), 18; “Vývoj počtu obyvatel,” in *Sčítání lidu, domů a bytů 2001. Okres Znojmo* (Praha: Český statistický úřad, 2003), 18.

borderlands experienced forced collectivization, similar to the rest of Czechoslovakia. During the 1950s, the establishment of collective farms led to the consolidation of fields, the removal of field margins and secondary field paths, and an increase in the use of chemical plant protection. In the early 1970s, comprehensive land reforms were implemented, resulting in the current size of fields.²⁰ In the Lower Austrian border regions, the original agricultural landscape was largely preserved during the same period. While fields and vineyards were also consolidated into larger units, agriculture largely retained its private character.

Geographical research demonstrated that the structural use of land resources remained similar in both regions, primarily focused on intensive land cultivation. However, a significant difference exists in the size of individual arable land areas. In the South Moravian borderland, only 10 percent of individual arable fields are smaller than 2 hectares, whereas on the Lower Austrian side, nearly 60 percent of these fields are smaller than 2 hectares.²¹ Watercourse regulation also had a significant impact on the landscape and environment. Agricultural drainage of the fields and straightening and channeling of streams and rivers occurred on both sides of the border, but in South Moravia to a significantly greater extent. Especially the Thaya River basin underwent dramatic changes. The Vranov Reservoir, constructed in the 1930s, was complemented by the Znojmo Reservoir in 1966, and in the 1970s and 1980s by the extensive Nové Mlýny reservoirs in the vicinity of Pálava Protected Landscape Area.

The centuries-long similarities between both regions, as described above, underwent significant transformation within a relatively brief period, resulting in a once indistinguishable border now apparent between small family farms and large agricultural fields. Nevertheless, even today, one can find landscapes significantly influenced by agricultural activities on both sides of the border. The shared challenges arising from the peripheral position of these regions and other difficulties of living in a changing borderland managed to bring the regions closer together again, as these issues became subjects of cross-border cooperation towards the end of the 1980s.

²⁰ Ivan Dejmal, "Co s evropskou kulturní krajinou na konci 20. století?" in *Kulturní krajina aneb proč ji chránit? Téma pro 21. století*, ed. Tomáš Hájek a Karel Jech (Praha: Ministerstvo životního prostředí, 2000), 14.

²¹ Robin Rašín, "Krajina česko-rakouského pohraničí: vývoj a dědictví" (Doctoral Dissertation, Charles University, 2000), 105, 137; Jiří Janáč, Leoš Jeleček, and Pavel Chromý, "LUCC in East Central and Southeast Europe post-communist countries from 1960s to the end of the 20th century and its historic-geographical roots," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Geographica* 45, no. 2 (2010): 19–30, <https://doi.org/10.14712/23361980.2015.45>.

Interregional Relations in the Late 1980s

The second half of the 1980s represented an era of détente and endeavors toward constructive cooperation in Czech-Austrian bilateral relations, mirroring developments at the global level. The driving force behind regional rapprochement was particularly the political representation of Lower Austria, which anticipated that cross-border cooperation would revitalize the declining border region. Federal states in Austria possess the competence to conclude interstate treaties in matters of their independent sphere of action, thereby enabling them to initiate cross-border activities autonomously.²² At the same time, the leading political positions in the federal state were held by representatives with close ties to South Moravia who incorporated personal dimension into cross-border contacts. The then Governor [*Landeshauptmann*] of the federal state of Lower Austria, Siegfried Ludwig, was born in South Moravian Vlasatice in 1926 and attended secondary school in Znojmo. Following the Second World War, his family was expelled from South Moravia. Ludwig did not, however, renounce his birthplace, and in his capacity as Provincial Governor, he endeavored to foster good neighborly relations with the South Moravian Region and Czechoslovakia in general.²³

Conversely, Ludwig's deputy, Erwin Pröll, developed his relationship with South Moravia primarily on a pragmatic basis. In relations with the northern neighbor, he perceived an opportunity to accumulate political capital through the improvement of mutual relations and through new impulses for the problematic peripheral region of the Lower Austrian borderlands. Unlike Governor Ludwig, who participated in official negotiations and interstate political visits, Pröll's approach to neighboring territories constituted an individual initiative. Beginning in 1985, he conducted annual pre-Christmas visits to Czechoslovak border guards each December. Regional press reports regarding these visits demonstrate a progressive relaxation of atmosphere and increasing optimism toward neighborly rapprochement. In 1987, for instance, the regional weekly *Niederösterreichische Nachrichten* (NÖN) reported: "The atmosphere was friendly and

²² *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Außenpolitik: Außenpolitischer Bericht 1988* (Wien: BMAA, 1989), 139, https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XVII/III/109/imfname_550592.pdf.

²³ Niklas Perzi, "Život ve stínu železné opony. Rakousko-československá hranice v letech 1945–1989," in *Železná opona 1948–1989. Odborný katalog k výstavě 30. výročí pádu železné opony*, ed. Pavel Vaněk et al. (Brno: Technické muzeum v Brně, 2019), 105, 106; Peter de Martin, "Ein Land macht Europapolitik. Visionen für die Regionen," in *Die Ära Ludwig-Höger. Fundamente für die Zukunft*, ed. Charles Bohatsch (Wien: Dr. Karl Kummer-Institut, 2011), 178.

relaxed as never before; the ice has been broken!”²⁴ Simultaneously, Pröll served in the Lower Austrian government as the Environmental Affairs Representative and introduced this theme into mutual Czech-Austrian relations. He advocated, among other things, for the transfer of Austrian technologies and know-how concerning air pollution issues and, particularly, for the cross-border transfer of inspiration in village renewal initiative, of which he was a strong supporter.²⁵

Interstate Czech-Austrian rapprochement and the interest of Lower Austrian politicians in cross-border cooperation converged in the late 1980s, manifesting in the first official visit of the Governor of Lower Austria to South Moravia in mid-June 1987. The discussions between the Lower Austrian governmental delegation and the delegation of the South Moravian Region (consisting of representatives from the South Moravian Regional National Committee and from the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) primarily addressed economic and cultural cooperation. The establishment of intensive cross-border contacts was to be formalized through an official cooperation program (a similar program had already been concluded in May between the federal state of Upper Austria and the South Bohemian Region, with another planned between the federal state of Burgenland and the West Slovak region).²⁶ The Framework Program for Cooperation between the Federal State of Lower Austria and the South Moravian Region in the Fields of Science and Research, Education and Sport, Culture and Economy was subsequently signed during a reciprocal visit of the South Moravian delegation to Vienna on October 1, 1987.²⁷

In November of the same year, this Framework Program was supplemented by a practical two-year Working Program for the period 1988–1989, which incorporated specific collaboration proposals. The program also emphasized

²⁴ “Prölls dritter Adventsbesuch in ČSSR: Das Eis gebrochen,” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, December 17, 1987; “Pröll: Auf gute Nachbarschaft mit den CSSR Nachbarn,” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, December 12, 1985; “Pröll zündete ein Hoffnungslicht am ČSSR-Grenzbalken an. Es leuchtet,” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, December 18, 1986; Helmut Schneider (journalist who accompanied Erwin Pröll on his visits in Czechoslovakia), interview with the author, May 17, 2019.

²⁵ “Pröll konferiert und schafft gutes Klima zum CSSR- Nachbarn!” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, February 12, 1987.

²⁶ Přehľad bilaterálnych stykov ČSSR – Rakúsko v období od 87.01.01 do 87.06.30, coll. Teritoriální odbory – Tajné, sig. TO-T 1980–1989 Rakousko, inv. no. 036/413, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Prague.

²⁷ “Rahmenprogramm über die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Bundesland Niederösterreich und dem Südmährischen Kreis auf den Gebieten Wissenschaft und Forschung, Erziehung und Sport, Kultur und Wirtschaft,” October 1, 1987, document provided to the author by Regina Stierschneider from the Department for International and European Affairs of the Office of the State Government of Lower Austria.

environmental issues of the border regions, addressing “waste processing facilities, exchange of experiences and cooperation on recycling projects, water quality in rivers, and forest damage issues in the border area.”²⁸ The cultural domain focused on the exchange of information regarding the preservation of the traditional appearance and the renewal of villages. As early as 1988, initial meetings based on the framework program took place, including participation in cultural and sporting events in the neighboring borderlands and school exchanges aimed at the instruction of the neighboring language.²⁹

Cross-border contacts intensified further in the following year. Cultural cooperation continued to predominate, exemplified by South Moravian participation in the Hollabrunn Wine Fair.³⁰ Educational and tourism contacts also expanded, with planned support for cross-border tourism in the Podyjí/Thaytal region and the Danube-March-Thaya floodplains. Another significant topic was the establishment of cross-border transportation links, such as special train rides between Retz and Znojmo.³¹ Environmental collaboration progressed as planned, with joint expert seminars focusing on the exchange of experiences.

Despite this significant easing of relations, Czech-Austrian interregional cooperation in the late 1980s faced several challenges that persisted even after the border opened. According to Peter de Martin, who was at that time in charge of coordinating the Lower Austrian foreign policy, joint projects were already encountering limited and uneven financial capabilities in both countries.³² Asymmetric conditions for business in different political systems also restricted prioritized economic cooperation. Consequently, the subsequent Working Program for the cooperation, negotiated between the regions in 1989, was intended to focus even more intensively on this field. Conversely, in the spheres of culture, tourism, environmental protection, and rural renewal, planned program activities could already build upon numerous implemented projects, as cross-border

²⁸ Rámcový program o spolupráci mezi spolkovou zemí Dolní Rakousko a Jihomoravským krajem. Pracovní program na léta 1988 a 1989, Archives of the CHKO Pálava (protected landscape area), document provided to the author by the former Head of Administration of the CHKO Pálava, Jiří Matuška; “CZ – Chronik der Abkommen und Arbeitsprogramme,” September 5, 2019, Documents of the Office of the State Government of Lower Austria.

²⁹ “Die CSSR-Grenze wird endlich durchlässiger,” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, January 4, 1989; Peter de Martin (Office of the State Government of Lower Austria), interview with the author, May 20, 2020.

³⁰ “Messe erstmals mit Gästen aus Südmähren in der CSSR-Halle,” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, August 3, 1989.

³¹ “Kontakt mit der CSSR verstärken,” *NÖN Mistelbach*, October 27, 1989; “Sonderfahrt Retz – Znaim – Retz,” *NÖN Hollabrunn*, August 31, 1989.

³² Peter de Martin, interview with the author, May 20, 2020.

cooperation was more developed in these areas. The working program for 1990 and 1991 was signed on November 21, 1989, in Brno.³³

The institutionalization of cross-border cooperation through the framework program and associated working programs facilitated not only official regional contacts but also the establishment of personal connections among local officials, experts, and other stakeholders. These activities developed beyond the scope of partnership agreements in subsequent years and proved crucial for the long-term effectiveness of cross-border projects. For instance, the individual actions of local nature conservationists played a significant role in spreading revolutionary ideas from Prague to the border regions after the demonstrations of November 17, 1989. Although the South Moravian borderlands did not suffer from air pollution to the same extent as the industrial areas of Northwestern Bohemia and thus were not sites of ecological protests during 1989, the demonstrations of the Velvet Revolution here were similarly associated with environmental issues, and representatives of local nature conservation institutions participated in the democratization process.³⁴ The following case study of cross-border cooperation in village renewal will demonstrate how other individual activities – enabled by an interconnected environment – intersected with official interregional cooperation and with the central level of interstate relations.

Cross-border Cooperation in Village Renewal

As demonstrated above, the regions on both sides of the border underwent significant transformations during the second half of the twentieth century, that affected predominantly the landscape and population in the borderlands. Although rural tradition remained persistent, modernizing agricultural processes, such as intensification and standardization of production and centralization of land and labor affected – albeit to varying degrees – both sides of the border. They brought not only increased production but also generated numerous problems for the local landscape and population in both regions. The Lower Austrian part of the region, in particular, struggled with population decline due to the

³³ “Rahmenprogramm über die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Bundesland Niederösterreich und dem Südmährischen Kreis. Arbeitsprogramm für die Jahre 1990 und 1991,” November 21, 1989, Documents of the Office of the State Government of Lower Austria.

³⁴ Jan Zerbst, “Proč tak snadno? Analýza činnosti OV KSČ Znojmo druhé poloviny roku 1989,” in *Sborník Státního okresního archivu Znojmo: historický a vlastivědný sborník Znojemska a Moravskokrumlovská*, vol. 34 (Znojmo: Moravský zemský archiv v Brně, 2019), 26–38; “Kronika města Mikulov 1985–1990,” 363, State District Archives Břeclav; Jan Zerbst, *Znojmo zahalené do sametového hávu* (Znojmo 2019), 48.

loss of employment opportunities in agriculture and the migration of residents to larger cities, or to the regional center of Vienna. By the 1980s, some border settlements had lost up to half of their mid-century population.³⁵ In response, Lower Austria attempted to address all related issues of this peripheral region through rural support – in the form of a village renewal program. Its objective was to make life in the countryside more attractive, prevent the departure of residents and generally revitalize and develop the region. The program also responded to previous administrative reform from 1965, that involved merging local settlements into larger self-governing units. Within a few years, the number of municipalities in Lower Austria had fallen to almost a third.³⁶ However, this top-down approach often only deepened the feeling of loss of autonomy of the respective villages and their inhabitants.

In contrast, the Lower Austrian village renewal program focused on supporting the internal potential of rural regions, personal attachments of local inhabitants to their settlements, and the restoration of tradition. Its inspiration derived from the Bavarian village renewal program, initiated at the end of the 1950s.³⁷ By encouraging local people to actively participate in enhancing their surroundings, it strengthened their sense of belonging to their village and, by extension, to the broader region. As stated in the program guidelines: “The objective of village renewal in Lower Austria is to encourage rural area inhabitants to take co-responsibility for their immediate living environment (village, small region) and actively participate in its shaping and development; relevant skills of the people should be fostered, developed and utilized.”³⁸ At the beginning of the 1980s, the then Deputy Governor and simultaneously Regional Planning Representative, Erwin Pröll, took charge of the village renewal program in Lower Austria, establishing it as his key initiative. Owing in part to the convergence of his roles as Regional Planning Representative and Environmental Affairs Representative, the Lower Austrian rural renewal program was, from its inception, firmly associated with

³⁵ Andreas Weigl, “Von der Stagnation zu neuer Dynamik: Die demographische Entwicklung,” in *Niederösterreich im 20. Jahrhundert*, Band 2: *Wirtschaft*, ed. Peter Melichar, Ernst Langthaler, and Stefan Eminger (Wien: Böhlau, 2008), 50.

³⁶ NÖ Kommunalstrukturverbesserungsgesetz, December 13, 1971, *Landesgesetzblatt*, no. 264/1971; Dieter Klammer, *Kommunalpolitiker und Ortsparteien in Österreich: eine empirische Untersuchung der lokalen Positionseliten in Österreichs Gemeinden* (Linz: Rudolf Trauner, 2000), 34.

³⁷ Holger Magel, “Dorferneuerung,” *Historisches Lexikon Bayerns*, December 3, 2012, <https://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Dorferneuerung>; Gerhard Henkel, *Das Dorf, Landleben in Deutschland damals und heute* (Stuttgart: WGB Theiss, 2015).

³⁸ “Richtlinien für die Erhaltung, Erneuerung und Entwicklung von Orten im ländlichen Raum” (Dorferneuerungsrichtlinien 1998), Amt der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung, 1998.

environmental protection and emphasis on living in harmony with nature.³⁹ The program was very comprehensive; measures included land consolidation, reconstructions of buildings, restoration of previously channelized streams, creation of green spaces, and community life development. To some extent, the focus on the bottom-up approach and the resident participation in the development of their village was more important than the achieved results.⁴⁰

Border regions, most affected by population outmigration, held particular significance in the Lower Austrian rural renewal program. One of the pilot municipalities in the program, initiated in 1984, was the town of Schrattenthal in northern Hollabrunn district, situated approximately 10 kilometers from the Czechoslovak border.⁴¹ It was also one of the places affected by the aforementioned administrative reform – in 1969, it was merged with two neighboring villages. This was one of the reasons why the municipal leadership wanted to strengthen the sense of belonging and active participation. The then-mayor of the municipality, Werner Grolly, subsequently became a key supporter of the transfer of inspiration across the South Moravian – Lower Austrian border. In other municipalities, there was also great interest in the program, and the term *Dorferneuerung* became firmly established in the Lower Austrian public discourse. The program's success in Lower Austria served as inspiration for its expansion into other Austrian federal states and, owing to established interregional cooperation and Erwin Pröll's targeted initiative, across the closed border into then-Czechoslovakia.

Initial conditions in South Moravian rural areas, however, were substantially different from those of their southern neighbors. Due to the centrally planned socialist economy, there were notable transformations in the natural landscape, as well as in the functions of rural settlements. Through emphasis on production potential, rural areas were to approximate urban areas, and with the loss of ownership relation to land, the personal attachment to locale (already weakened in the region) was frequently diminished as well. Efforts to industrialize agricultural production were reflected in the concentration of production and services into larger units (local centers). This process relied on the so-called central

³⁹ Gerhard Silberbauer, "Raumordnung und Regionalpolitik," in *Niederösterreich und seine Kulturen*, ed. Manfred Wagner (Wien: Böhlau, 2006), 81.

⁴⁰ "Niederösterreich schön erhalten, schöner gestalten," Amt der Niederösterreichischen Regierung, 1981; Karl Trischler (former Head of the Land Office for Village Renewal), interview with the author, August 4, 2020.

⁴¹ Schrattenthal was exceptional even within the Lower Austrian context, as the very first village renewal association in Lower Austria was established there in 1983. "Über uns," Club Schrattenthal, <https://www.clubschrattenthal.at/%C3%BCber-uns/>.

settlement system from 1971, which deprived municipalities of economic independence and administrative autonomy. Formerly autonomous municipalities became components of a centrally planned settlement structure.⁴² Within the framework of the central settlement system, the development of central municipalities with large-scale agricultural production units was preferred. Public amenities such as medical care, education, and cultural facilities were likewise concentrated in these centers. On the other hand, non-central settlements languished due to the absence of these services and were designated for eventual dissolution.

Although the transformation of rural settlements was a more prolonged process than the landscape alteration and was far from complete in the second half of the 1980s, central planning significantly impacted all settlements along the border. Given that many border villages were designated as central settlements (e.g., Vrbovec, Jaroslavice), the immediate border area did not experience a significant population decline comparable to Lower Austria. Central planning also symbolically involved residents in municipal development – maintenance and infrastructure projects were often carried out through so-called “Action Z” initiatives. Although these initiatives were formally voluntary, the measures implemented were centrally planned and public participation was expected. Due to top-down management, however, these measures were conceptually inadequate and unresponsive to the current needs of municipalities and their inhabitants.⁴³ As a result, many local actors viewed the Lower Austrian idea of village renewal, which reflected local needs and actively involved residents from the outset, with great interest.

Moreover, the idea of rural renewal was not confined solely to Bavaria and Lower Austria but resonated at the transnational level during the latter half of the 1980s as well. One of the initiatives at that time was the Council of Europe’s Campaign for the Countryside, conducted in 1986–1987. With the

⁴² Ulrike Sailer-Fliege, “Characteristics of post-socialist urban transformation in East Central Europe,” *GeoJournal* 49, no. 1 (1999): 7–16, doi: 10.1023/A:1006905405818; Jiří-Jakub Zévl and Petra Špačková, “‘My Sweet Little Village’: Central Settlement System in Socialist Central Bohemia,” *Journal of Maps* 21, no. 1 (2005), doi: 10.1080/17445647.2025.2451302; Jan Dobeš, “A tobě se nelíbí ta naše obec krásná, středisková? Vznik a prosazování soustavy střediskových obcí před rokem 1990,” in *Dlouhý volební rok 1990 ve střední Evropě. Očekávání, koncepty, praxe*, ed. Adéla Gjuríčová and Tomáš Zahradníček (Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, 2021), 173–200; Jiří Musil, “Vývoj a plánování měst ve střední Evropě v období komunistických režimů,” *Sociologický časopis* 37, no. 3 (2001): 275–296.

⁴³ Jiří Knapík, Martin Franc et al., *Průvodce kulturním děním a životním stylem v českých zemích 1948–1967* (Praha: Academia, 2011), 122–124.

slogan “Let’s make the most of our countryside” and simple logo that connected a human figure, a tree, and a house, the campaign aimed at improving conditions of living in the countryside and protecting the environment together with the natural, architectural and cultural heritage: “This project is intended to ward off the dangers at present threatening the future of the countryside: the desertion of declining regions, the tendency for urban sprawl to invade the surrounding countryside and, generally, the growing imbalance between man and nature.”⁴⁴ The Council of Europe had 21 member countries at that time, and even non-member Yugoslavia joined the campaign. At the same time, the campaign was also targeted at the European Community: “It is also hoped to explore possibilities of co-operating with other intergovernmental organisations, above all the European Community, which has declared 1987 as European Environmental Year.”⁴⁵ Moreover, members of the pan-European network ECOVAST (European Council for the Village and Small Town), founded in 1984, strongly contributed to this campaign. Austria was one of the most active participating countries in this campaign, with Lower Austria being explicitly mentioned as an example worth following.⁴⁶

The Council of Europe’s campaign played a significant initiatory role in South Moravian – Lower Austrian cross-border cooperation as well. It was the then Austrian representative to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (simultaneously member of the Austrian National Council) Sixtus Laner, who prompted Erwin Pröll to extend the Lower Austrian village renewal program to the neighboring region.⁴⁷ In this idea, Pröll combined his key themes – rural development, environmental protection, and overcoming the closed border – from which he anticipated revitalization of the declining region. He thus used the opportunity of the newly developing regional cooperation and advocated for the incorporation of village renewal into the South Moravian – Lower Austrian framework cooperation program. Given the similar living conditions and challenges of peripheral existence, the topic of village renewal emerged as a logical connecting area in cross-border relations.

⁴⁴ “European campaign for the countryside,” Council of Europe, Directorate of Press and Information, December 16, 1985, Reference B(85)49, <https://search.coe.int/archives/i=09000016809a815d>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “European Campaign for the Countryside. Results of the Campaign at National Level,” Secretariat memorandum prepared by the Directorate of Environment and Local Authorities, Council of Europe, October 18, 1989, <https://rm.coe.int/09000016809b5430>.

⁴⁷ Karl Trischler, interview with the author, August 4, 2020.

The first meeting between South Moravian and Lower Austrian mayors, based on the framework program and in conjunction with the Council of Europe's campaign, took place in June 1988. During the two-day event called "Village Renewal Without Borders," Austrian and Czechoslovak participants first convened at a professional seminar in the Geras Abbey in Lower Austria. Presentations on Austrian experiences with village renewal were subsequently supplemented by practical demonstrations during visits to border municipalities – the Lower Austrian towns of Weitersfeld, Schrattenthal and Pulkau. On the South Moravian side of the border, the joint delegation visited the district town of Znojmo, the villages of Jaroslavice and Vranov nad Dyjí, and the windmill in Lesná.⁴⁸

During the meeting, both parties had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the neighboring region and sense the ongoing similar aspects of rural life, but also divergent approaches to tradition and village development. Unlike previous cross-border events, no senior political representatives from the South Moravian Regional National Committee were delegated. On the contrary, the participants were professional officials from this governing body – the director of the Center of Heritage Preservation and Nature Protection (which also oversaw environmental care and rural renewal) and staff members from the Departments of Culture and Spatial Planning, among them Jan Florian, who later became a significant advocate of Czech rural renewal. The officials were accompanied by 18 mayors from South Moravian municipalities.⁴⁹

The Lower Austrian delegation, on the other hand, was led by Erwin Pröll, who was the principal political advocate for village renewal, and Sixtus Laner, the originator of the idea to extend village renewal across the border, was also present.⁵⁰ This two-day joint excursion laid the foundation for further development of cooperation and for regular meetings both at the administrative level and among individual mayors. These meetings were mainly organized by Florian's colleague from the Department of Spatial Planning, Běla Vlčková, whose proficiency in German allowed her to be present at all significant events of cross-border cooperation. On the Lower Austrian side, her key

⁴⁸ "Kronika města Znojma (1988)," 46, State District Archives Znojmo; Karl Trischler, "Grenzüberschreitende Dorfbegegnung Südmähren – Niederösterreich," *Raumordnung aktuell*, no. 3 (1988): 16–17.

⁴⁹ Jan Florian (Department of Spatial Planning, South Moravian Regional National Committee), interview with the author, August 12, 2019; Documents and photos related to Lower Austrian village renewal, Personal Archive of Karl Trischler.

⁵⁰ Trischler, "Grenzüberschreitende Dorfbegegnung," 16.

professional counterparts were the Head of the Land Office for Village Renewal, Karl Trischler, and the Chairman of the regional network of associations involved in village renewal [*Dorfwerkstatt Region*] and mayor of the pilot town of Schrattenthal, Werner Grolly.

Since the very beginning, cross-border cooperation between South Moravia and Lower Austria has encountered several challenges stemming from asymmetries and differences between the regions. One significant issue was the language barrier. Although South Moravian officials and organizers possessed adequate knowledge of German language, obstacles existed primarily at the level of mayoral contacts. Communication through interpreters was sufficient for exchanging information and experiences but hindered the establishment of long-term relationships. Another problematic aspect was the disparity between the competencies of the Lower Austrian government and the South Moravian Regional National Committee. While the federal state could independently implement and carry out the village renewal program, in Czechoslovakia, this authority resided at the central level. This proved problematic even later in the 1990s when economic transformation was prioritized over rural development. Finally, mutual contacts were influenced by historical legacies. In the Lower Austrian border region, regional rapprochement with northern neighbors was critically viewed, particularly by associations of forcibly displaced persons. In the context of village renewal cooperation, many former inhabitants of South Moravian border regions looked unfavorably on the aid provided to South Moravian villages they were forced to abandon after the Second World War.⁵¹

Despite these challenges, the enthusiasm for collaboration on the joint renewal of a previously connected and subsequently forcibly separated region prevailed on both sides of the border at the end of the 1980s. The Velvet Revolution and the opening of the border in 1989 introduced new dynamism into cross-border contacts. The values of the Lower Austrian village renewal – return to tradition, autonomy of municipalities, and personal responsibility of citizens – resonated with the prevailing mood in the society, which was based on newly acquired freedom and a sense of solidarity stemming from the revolutionary

⁵¹ Karl Trischler, interview with the author, August 4, 2020; Jan Florian, interview with the author, August 12, 2019; See also Peter de Martin, “Ein Land macht Europapolitik. Visionen für die Regionen,” in *Die Ära Ludwig-Höger. Fundamente für die Zukunft*, ed. Charles Bohatsch (Wien, Dr. Karl Kummer-Institut, 2011), 178; Hans Ströbitzer, *Unser Niederösterreich: gestern, heute, morgen* (St. Pölten: Residenz-Verlag, 2008), 97.

experience.⁵² Existing cross-border contacts intensified in 1990, and experienced South Moravian experts began working on adapting the Lower Austrian program to Czech conditions – not only for the South Moravian Region but also at the national level.

In April 1990, translations of both Lower Austrian and Bavarian guidelines for village renewal were published.⁵³ These principles and ideals could spread among other interested parties and the wider public thanks to these translations. In the new conditions, professional exchanges deepened through seminars and conferences. As early as January 1990, Austrian officials presented projects and implementation results in village renewal at a seminar in Brno, and in June 1990, Jan Florian and Běla Vlčková, along with other representatives of the South Moravian Regional National Committee, participated in the Ortsbildsmesse fair in Hainburg, Lower Austria. Here they met not only with the Chairman of the regional village renewal network Werner Grolly, but also with the Deputy Governor Erwin Pröll, whom they asked to participate in a planned seminar where Lower Austrian experts could share their experiences with more mayors and rural development stakeholders. Pröll not only accepted this invitation but also took patronage over the seminar.⁵⁴

The seminar took place on October 19, 1990, in Brno and aimed to provide inspiration from the successes and lessons from the mistakes of Austrian municipalities while also deepening the existing interregional cooperation between the South Moravian Region and the state of Lower Austria. Erwin Pröll delivered the keynote address, emphasizing the philosophy of village renewal with a focus on rural life traditions and residents' personal connection to their place of living. He also highlighted the key component of rural landscape protection and the importance of ecological measures.⁵⁵ During the discussion following

⁵² James Krapfl describes this solidarity and shared enthusiasm as “collective effervescence.” James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 40.

⁵³ Bavaria also sought to inspire its neighbors with the village renewal program in the late 1980s; Holger Magel, “Evropské hnutí obnovy venkova přináší důvěru v budoucnost venkovskému prostoru,” *Deník veřejné správy*, September 30, 2011, <https://www.dvs.cz/clanek.asp?id=6506970>; The Bavarian program provided municipalities with substantial financial support that Lower Austria could not match. The Lower Austrian approach was therefore more oriented toward the willingness and active effort of the municipality to contribute to renewal through its own resources. For this reason as well, the Lower Austrian program was more aligned with South Moravian realities.

⁵⁴ Jan Kruml, ed., *Sborník ze semináře Obnova vesnice v Dolním Rakousku, konaného dne 19. října v Brně* (Praha: MŽP ČR, 1990), 9.

⁵⁵ Keynote address by Erwin Pröll, in *Sborník ze semináře Obnova vesnice v Dolním Rakousku*, ed. Jan Kruml (Praha: MŽP ČR, 1990), 4.

the expert presentations, specific environmental issues requiring solutions in both countries were addressed, including waste management, landscape transformation resulting from agricultural modernization, and the protection and restoration of the original landscape. As Peter Schawerda, Head of the Agricultural Department at the Lower Austrian government office, stated in one of the lectures: "Landscape restoration must not be merely a cosmetic matter; it cannot be just an extension of greenery out from the forest. This concerns essential landscape elements that must not be mere backdrops – just as it is not only about facades in the village but about the entire life within. Therefore, it is about the whole concept of agriculture, its production methods, its management of the landscape, as well as the management of agricultural facilities in the municipality."⁵⁶ A brochure was published from the seminar which allowed other interested parties outside the region to become familiar with the village renewal program.

Drawing upon the experiences and information obtained from seminars and guidelines, the Czech variant of the village renewal program was established as early as 1990.⁵⁷ Given the absence of competencies in the South Moravian Region (in contrast to Austrian federal states), proponents of village renewal sought to implement the program at the national level. Credit for the implementation of the program largely goes to Jan Florian, who became the Director of the Department of Spatial Development at the newly formed Ministry of Environment, which oversaw village renewal. Florian was able to draw upon his extensive experience with Czech-Austrian cooperation in village renewal, in which he had participated from its inception. The Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry for Economic Policy and Development also contributed to the final form of the Czech village renewal program, which was subsequently presented to the government by the then Minister of Environment, Ivan Dejmál. The government adopted the program on May 29, 1991, and within the first two years, more than 1200 municipalities joined the initiative.⁵⁸ This swift adoption of a functional village renewal program contrasted with developments in Slovakia, where although a government resolution promoting village renewal

⁵⁶ Lecture by Peter Schawerda, in *Sborník ze semináře Obnova vesnice v Dolním Rakousku*, ed. Jan Kruml (Praha: MŽP ČR, 1990), 11.

⁵⁷ The Czechoslovak village renewal, to a certain extent, also referenced historical tradition. Jan Kruml, "Naše tradice," in *Obnova vesnice. Publikace Evropské pracovní společnosti pro rozvoj venkova a obnovu vesnice* (Praha: MŽP ČR, 1993), 55–59.

⁵⁸ Jan Černý, "Program obnovy vesnice v České republice," in *Obnova vesnice mezinárodně. Publikace Evropské pracovní společnosti pro rozvoj venkova a obnovu vesnice* (Praha: MŽP, 1994), 1–2.

was passed as early as 1991, financial support for villages did not materialize until 1998.⁵⁹ Similarly, in Poland, the village renewal program was only officially initiated in 1997.⁶⁰

The Czech program was fundamentally very similar to its Lower Austrian model. The basic prerequisite for participation was the development of a municipal spatial plan with a clear long-term development concept. The Czech program also aimed to support active and communal rural life, including an emphasis on nature conservation and environmental improvement. The first point of the program states: “The goal is to stimulate and support village residents and their local governments to strive, as much as possible through their own efforts, for the development of a healthy living environment and environmentally sound economy.”⁶¹ The Lower Austrian and Czech programs differed primarily in the scope of measures that could be included in village renewal. The Lower Austrian program declaratively focused on comprehensive village development; however, in reality, “softer” measures predominated – beautifying green spaces, renovating the most dilapidated buildings, and creating a uniform traditional village appearance with similar facade colors. For the most significant infrastructural initiatives (such as the construction or repair of water pipelines), municipalities typically requested other types of resources from the federal state. In contrast, the Czech countryside urgently required substantial and complete renewal; therefore, projects implemented under the village renewal program also targeted improvements in civic amenities and infrastructure development (roads, grounding of power lines and gas supply).⁶²

The Lower Austrian program was able to utilize relatively modest resources for less costly measures. Due to their visibility in everyday life, they helped increase public awareness of the program. In contrast, in the Czech program, expensive infrastructure investments absorbed most financial resources, leaving little room for measures noticeable to the general population. Partly for this reason, the program did not achieve the same widespread impact as in Lower

⁵⁹ Karl Trischler, “Im Osten viel Neues. Auch unsere östlichen Nachbarn versuchen den dörflichen Lebensraum lebenswert zu erhalten,” *Raumordnung aktuell* no. 3 (1998): 15–17.

⁶⁰ Ryszard Wilczyński, “25 lat odnowy wsi w Polsce – koniec misji czy zaczyn odnowy wsi 2.0?” *Więś i Rolnictwo* 200, no. 3 (2023): 35–71, doi: 10.53098/wir032023/01.

⁶¹ “Program obnovy vesnice,” in *Obnova vesnice. Publikace Evropské pracovní společnosti pro rozvoj venkova a obnovu vesnice*, ed. Atelier obnovy vesnice (Praha: MŽP, ČR, 1992), 59.

⁶² Ibid., 59–60.

Austria, and support for regions and rural areas did not become a priority during the transformation period.⁶³

At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the idea of village renewal still enjoyed popularity. Czechoslovakia became a member of the European Working Group on Rural Development and Village Renewal [*ARGE Landentwicklung und Dorferneuerung*]⁶⁴ in 1991 and has regularly participated in the European Village Renewal Award competition since 1994. The first contestant in this competition was the South Moravian border municipality of Hnanice. Similarly to nearby Schrattenthal, this village played a pioneering role in Czechoslovak rural renewal and served as an example of good practice for other municipalities.⁶⁵ Hnanice drew inspiration directly from Schrattenthal, where local mayor Werner Grolly willingly hosted South Moravian municipal representatives and shared his experiences – highlighting the aforementioned initiative of the municipal leadership and its citizens as key. Architect Jan Kruml, who possessed his own personal experience from cross-border contacts with Lower Austria, participated in the development of the local Rural Renewal Program. The first implemented measures of the Hnanice rural renewal program included the completion of the water supply system and reconstruction of sewerage systems, while the most visible was the reconstruction of the dilapidated pilgrimage church of St. Wolfgang. The reopening of the border crossing, which occurred at the end of 1989, was also important for facilitating cooperation with the neighboring region.⁶⁶

In the early 1990s, other experienced actors continued to engage in cross-border cooperation in rural renewal. Běla Vlčková, now representing the Brno office of the Ministry for Economic Policy and Development, organized well-attended meetings between Lower Austrian experts (such as Karl Trischler

⁶³ Decades later, European Union funding programs contend with similar challenges: despite providing substantial financial resources, they are often undervalued by the public due to insufficient efforts to foster public identification with the initiatives and their outcomes.

⁶⁴ This working group was established in 1989 through the cooperation of Bavarian, Lower Austrian, and Styrian village renewal initiators, with Erwin Pröll becoming its long-term chairman. The Lower Austrian engagement only confirmed the interest in the European and cross-border dimension of the village renewal program. The main goal of the European Working Group was to disseminate awareness and experiences with village renewal, as well as to recognize examples of good practice. See “Portrait,” ARGE Landentwicklung und Dorferneuerung, <https://www.landentwicklung.org/leitbild/kurzportrait/>.

⁶⁵ Jan Kruml, “Program obnovy venkova – pohled zakladatele,” *Deník veřejné správy*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.dvs.cz/clanek.asp?id=6710711>; Jan Kruml, “Evropská cena Hnanicím”, in *Obnova vesnice mezinárodně*, 58–61.

⁶⁶ “1945–1989,” Obec Hnanice, <https://www.obechnanice.cz/obec/historie-obce/1945-1989/>; “Kostel sv. Wolfganga,” Obec Hnanice, <https://www.obechnanice.cz/obec/kostel-sv-wolfganga/>.

from the Land Office for Village Renewal) and mayors in Moravian towns, while mayors of Lower Austrian municipalities hosted their counterparts on excursions.⁶⁷ Over the years, however, the initiative gradually weakened due to disinterest and problems with the Czech program at both central and regional levels.

The political changes following the 1992 elections in Czechoslovakia predestined that long-term support for village renewal would struggle to find advocacy at the highest political levels. The shift away from supporting sustainable rural life was symbolized, among other things, by the administrative transfer of the Spatial Planning Department from the Ministry of Environment to the newly established Ministry of Economy (that replaced the former Ministry for Economic Policy and Development). Supporters of village renewal thus resorted to creating a civic association to help advance these interests in politics. The Association for Rural Renewal [*Spolek pro obnovu venkova*] was established on June 1, 1993, with former Minister of Environment Ivan Dejmál becoming its chairman. Although the association succeeded in securing permanent budgetary support for the village renewal program, the financial resources provided remained relatively modest and were primarily directed toward major investments.⁶⁸ The program thus failed to attract the attention of the broader public as it had in neighboring Austria.

Moreover, the core principles of the Lower Austrian village renewal program – emphasis on self-initiative and environmental protection – collided with the specific conditions of a former communist country undergoing rapid transformation. Some people viewed voluntary engagement and personal involvement negatively due to the unfavorable experiences associated with the “mandatory voluntary” community projects known as “Action Z.” Additionally, unresolved restitution issues posed challenges in relation to spatial planning.⁶⁹ However, the most significant obstacle was the absence of political and public support. The attention to environmental concerns, protection, and restoration of the rural landscape that had been endorsed by a large segment of society in the late 1980s quickly yielded to economic development imperatives following the fall of the communist regime. The country’s economic transformation primarily

⁶⁷ Werner Grolly (mayor of Schrattenthal), interview with the author, August 5, 2020; Lecture by Werner Grolly, in *Sborník ze semináře Obnova vesnice v Dolním Rakousku*, ed. Jan Kruml (Praha: MŽP ČR, 1990), 18–25.

⁶⁸ Karolína Novotná, “Státní podpora programu obnovy vesnice v roce 1994 a v roce 1995,” in *Obnova vesnice mezinárodně*, 54–57.

⁶⁹ Václav Průcha et al., *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa. 1918–1992*, 2. díl: *Období 1945–1992* (Brno: Doplněk, 2009), 970–980.

focused on financially profitable projects, while “soft” measures to improve the quality of life remained unfunded.⁷⁰

In the mid-1990s, Lower Austria also faced a changing interest in village renewal, particularly in connection with the country’s accession to the European Union. Rural development received financial resources from major EU subsidy programs that overshadowed the regional program. However, unlike the federal state initiative, these EU programs lacked the identity-forming aspect and did not emphasize strengthening local residents’ connections to their villages.

The problems of village renewal initiatives in both countries were subsequently manifested in interregional and interstate exchange. After the initial crucial inspiration and application of only slightly adapted Lower Austrian guidelines to the Czechoslovak reality, cooperation in village renewal diminished in the mid-1990s. This was also negatively affected by the abolition of Regions [*kraje*] as administrative units in Czechoslovakia in 1990, resulting in the loss of an institutional partner for Lower Austrian officials at the interregional level. The Committee for Cooperation with Lower Austria [*Výbor pro spolupráci s Dolním Rakouskem*], established as a substitute for the regional entity in cross-border cooperation, operated on a voluntary basis and could not fulfill its role without institutional support.⁷¹

As late as 1995, Czech experts and mayors participated in significant numbers in the major Lower Austrian village renewal congress; however, in subsequent years, cross-border contacts were limited to individual actors – original initiators and mayors of local municipalities.⁷² In many cases, these contacts continue to this day. More intensive exchange at the interregional level occurred again after the re-establishment of Regions in the Czech Republic in 2000 and the formal initiation of cooperation between the South Moravian Region and the state of Lower Austria two years later.⁷³

⁷⁰ On the uneven development in the transition period see Martin Sokol, “Central and Eastern Europe a Decade After the Fall of State-socialism: Regional Dimensions of Transition Processes,” *Regional Studies* 35, no. 7 (2001): 645–655, doi: 10.1080/00343400120075911.

⁷¹ Jiří Matuška, “Podkladová zpráva k hodnocení Rámcového programu spolupráce /kap. č. 1 – Ekologie a životní prostředí/,” November 31, 1996, Documents of the The Committee for Cooperation with Lower Austria, Archives of the CHKO Pálava.

⁷² “Seznam účastníků, Kongres obnovy vesnice 11.–13. května 1995, Krems,” Personal Archive of Karl Trischler.

⁷³ “CZ – Chronik der Abkommen und Arbeitsprogramme,” September 5, 2019, Documents of the Office of the State Government of Lower Austria; “Nový program přeshraniční spolupráce s Rakouskem odstartoval. Připraveno je téměř 98 milionů EUR,” website of the South Moravian region, <https://www.kr-jihomoravsky.cz/Default.aspx?ID=288308&TypeID=2>.

Conclusion

The transfer of experience in village renewal was the flagship of South Moravian – Lower Austrian interregional cooperation in the late 1980s. Due to the interconnected environment between regions on both sides of the border, the similar traditions of their rural settlements, and the shared challenges arising from their peripheral positions, the inspiration from Lower Austria found fertile ground for implementation. Consequently, the principles of Lower Austrian village renewal could be applied with minimal modifications in the South Moravian border region. The personal initiative of local actors played a key role in establishing contacts. Initially, it was the Lower Austrian political representation, in the person of Deputy Provincial Governor Erwin Pröll – motivated by the desire to revitalize a declining region – who initiated the exchange of experiences in village renewal. However, officials, experts, and mayors from both sides of the border who enthusiastically embraced this opportunity also played a crucial role. After the opening of the border, cooperation in village renewal could thus draw not only from these initial experiences but also from existing personal relationships. That resulted in the swift adoption of a functional village renewal program in the Czech Republic (unlike Slovakia, where the village renewal received financial support only in 1998) and in certain attention for locally initiated rural development. Yet it was economic transformation at the end that primarily shaped the change in rural areas in the 1990s. Simultaneously, this presented case demonstrates continuity in cross-border transfer of expertise that had begun before 1989, aligning with the concept of long transition.

However, due to central developments and declining interest in the environment, and the shift of the topic of rural renewal to the European level, cooperation between regions diminished in the mid-1990s. Lower Austrian inspiration was crucial for the development of the Czech village renewal program during the initiation period; nevertheless, further deepening of cooperation was hindered by differing program parameters resulting from different competencies and financial capabilities. The transfer of experience and inspiration from the Lower Austrian side was also predominantly one-sided; apart from remnants of regional tradition, South Moravian municipalities could offer little inspiration to their neighbors. Cross-border cooperation was also hindered by a language barrier and by persistent historical issues – the legacy of the expulsion of the German population fostered reluctance towards collaboration and unresolved property restitution claims in South Moravia hampered rural development in this region. To some extent, due to limited financial resources for promoting

the supported measures, the Czech program also lacked the ability to attract the attention of the local inhabitants and broader public.

Those problems resulted in the unfavorable development of the cross-border cooperation in village renewal – by the mid-1990s, it lost the momentum of the initial progress and became limited to individual activities of local mayors and associations. Their ability to make use of financial resources from pre-accession programs and later from the European Union was important for initiating further cooperation. On the other hand, substantial EU funding was directed toward the region without adequate consideration of local needs, thereby diverging from the foundational principle of autonomous village renewal and lacking the ability to support the own initiative of the inhabitants of the border regions. Encouragingly, the current Interreg funding program acknowledges the significance of the bottom-up dimension, which constitutes a critical factor in the selection process of supported projects.⁷⁴

The presented case of South Moravian – Lower Austrian cooperation in village renewal demonstrated that the interconnected environment served as a viable basis for cross-border collaboration in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the similar nature of the rural landscape predisposing the regions towards cooperation on its renewal. This process also highlighted the interdependence of different relationship levels – from local and regional up to national and transnational. The idea of village renewal transitioned from a pan-European initiative, through regional cooperation, down to the local level, involving local experts and mayors. At the same time, however, due to the activism of local actors and supporters of village renewal, the issue also advanced into central policy, enabling its nationwide dissemination. This development also demonstrated that regional cooperation during this specific period of late socialism and early transformation could be more progressive than official bilateral relations and could introduce its own themes onto the central agenda.

Ultimately, however, central political development in both countries overshadowed even these promising regional relations. By the mid-1990s, asymmetries between regions and problems stemming from the long-term separation of previously interconnected regions became fully apparent. The diminishing popularity of rural agenda in the Czech Republic and Austria's orientation toward multilateral structures rather than bilateral relations contributed from the central level to the cooling of interregional cooperation. Consequently, this cooperation remained primarily the domain of actors on both sides of the border

⁷⁴ “What is Interreg?” Interreg, <https://interreg.eu/about/what-is-interreg/>.

who had initiated it at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. In summary, the analysis above showed that while a shared environmental context is an important prerequisite for cross-border exchange, it cannot succeed without the personal initiative of local actors.

The importance of the human factor and the key role of interpersonal networks across borders corresponds with the current research on cooperation of European border regions, particularly in the deeply rooted Franco-German cross-border cooperation.⁷⁵ However, to achieve long-term effective cooperation, this bottom-up approach must be supported by a legal and financial background. In the South Moravian – Lower Austrian border region, an important step towards the interplay of local initiatives and central support programs was the resumption of activities within the trinational Euroregion Pomoraví in 2021.⁷⁶

Establishing cooperation on an environmentally important topic despite a closed border can also serve as an inspiration today, as the climate crisis and European plans to address it offer new opportunities for central support of regional environmental activities and rural development. Learning from this case, for these measures to be successfully implemented in the border regions, the policies promoted should not forget the bottom-up dimension and local impulses and should also include the necessary identity work. Ultimately, the preservation, renewal, and development of rural life remains a challenge that – even three and a half decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain – deserves joint cross-border solutions.

⁷⁵ Nora Crossey, *Borderlands of Governance Municipal Perspectives on Cooperation in the Saarland-Moselle Region* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2025); Karina Pallagst, Andrea Hartz, and Beate Caesar, eds., *Border Futures – Zukunft Grenze – Avenir Frontière. The future viability of cross-border cooperation* (Hannover: ARL, 2022).

⁷⁶ “Historie,” Euroregion Pomoraví, <https://www.euroregion-pomoravi.cz/historie>; Michal Šindelář and Milan Jeřábek, “Přeshraniční spolupráce s oblastí Weinviertel,” *Geografické rozhledy* 31, no. 5 (2021–2022): 38–41.