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ÁGNES, ERŐSS

‘Searching for Neighbours’: summary of an EU research project

The three-member research group of the Geographical Research Institute Hungarian Academy of Sciences (GRI HAS) participated in an EU FP 6 project called ‘SefoNe – Searching for Neighbours: Dynamics of Physical and Mental Borders in the New Europe’. The three-years long research (March 2007–February 2010) was designated to explore and compare models of ‘translocal’ neighbourhood within the enlarged European Union, where these relations are periodically challenged by „nationalised” political conflicts. The main aims of the project were to understand the interdependency of state borders and mental borders in the creation of good neighbourhood relations, and to try to emphasize what ‘good-neighbourhood’ means for people in culturally diverse border regions. A special attention was laid on bottom-up activities, initiatives, such as those embodied in cultural events, that aimed to strengthen cultural tolerance and neighbouring in culturally diverse communities.

The research consortium investigated three different borders, from which the GRI HAS carried out research in the first strand that was dedicated to ‘Transnational and translocal neighbourhoods across state borders’. In this strand on the one hand the Greek-Turkish Cypriot border (studied by the University of Nicosia) on the other hand the borders of different grades of permeability in Hungary were in focus. In both cases the borders are marked by long-standing political conflicts and separate formerly multicultural settlements, regions, populations.

In the frame of the second strand three multicultural provincial regions were investigated: Saxony (Chemnitz), Upper Franconia (Bayreuth) and Sicily (Catania). All these regions marked by more recent forms of cultural diversity. In these sites the studies were mainly focused on those mental borders which exist among migrants and local communities. The researches were carried out by colleagues from Chemnitz University of Technology, University of Southampton and University of Catania. The third strand was dedicated to the virtual neighbourhoods of black African migrants mainly in Germany and Austria.

In case of Hungarian border regions the team of GRI HAS performed field work in two selected research sites: Berehove/Beregszász in Transcarpathia, Ukraine and in Oradea/Nagyvárad, Romania. The Slovak-Hungarian border region was represented by Komárom/Komárno, while from the Austrian-Hungarian-Slovenian border area Szentgotthárd-Heiligenkreutz formed the research sites, investigated by colleagues from University of Bern. During the three-year long project intensive co-operation has developed between these research groups, which manifested for instance in common field works and shared tasks in event and conference organising activities as well.

The aspects of the research carried out by the GRI HAS were twofold: on the one hand to map the changes in cross-border activities both on personal and institutional level, on the other hand to explore shifts and patterns in local interethnic neighbourhoods. It can be said in a nutshell that in these sites interethnic relations are basically peaceful, but not without tensions, while the cross-border relations are strongly influenced by the different permeability of the border. From this point of view in Oradea/Nagyvárad the EU accession generates increasing co-operation, while in Berehove/Beregszász the Schengen border has become a barrier.

The research findings were announced in several conferences and workshops, for instance in Debrecen at the 'Neighbours and Partners on the two sides of the border', at the 'IXth Conference of PhD students in Geography' in Szeged, at 'Descriptio Transylvaniae' in Cluj/Kolozsvár, at the GEMMA workshop in Budapest and were presented in Brussels as well. Next to this the GRI HAS has organised two consortium meetings in different research sites (Budapest, Oradea, Komárom), and an international conference in co-operation with the University of Bern and Selye János University in Komárno. Organizing of a cultural event carried out in the frame of the traditional local festival, called 'Days of Komárom' meant a real challenge and presented for all of the participants a vivid experience.

One of the primary objectives of the SefoNe project was the better understanding of culturally diverse neighbourhoods and it can be stated that during the meetings, workshops or conferences the consortium members also managed to put neighbouring into practice.

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