

THE COUNTRYSIDE OF SVEČINSKE GORICE – WHO MAKES THE LANDSCAPE AND IN WHAT WAY?

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Abstract

The purpose of this text is the geographical presentation of Svečinske gorice hills. We selected six thematic sections: natural disasters in the area, socio-demographic characteristics of population, changes in cultural landscape, economic structure of the area, quality of living environment and phenomenon of nearby border. Several actors that built such regional characteristics have been recognised and also several kinds of cooperation between them.

Keywords: *rural landscape, regional development, Svečinske gorice, Slovenia*

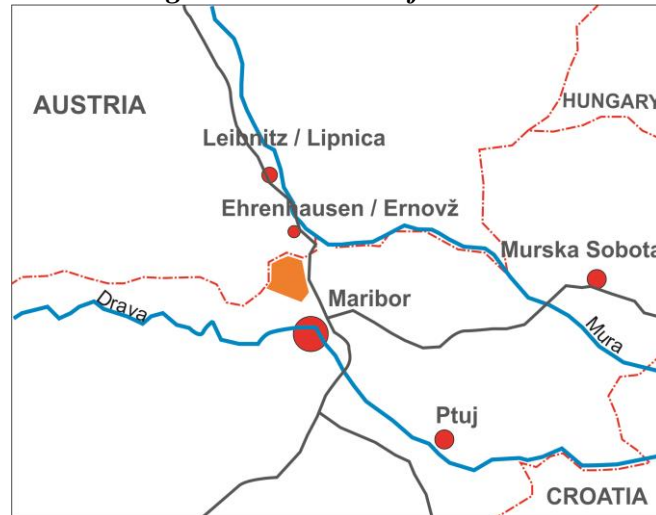
Introduction

The paper presents some of the characteristics of today's rural areas and the actors who create such an image. The area discussed in the paper comprises the western part of Slovenske gorice, on the border with the Republic of Austria. In administrative terms it coincides with the boundaries of the Kungota municipality. The area is small, it measures only 49 km², and there live about 4700 inhabitants.

MARIJAN M. KLEMENČIČ described today's countryside as "*a hybrid space*, as a region of different entities that coexist in a common space; one group represents the remains of former agrarian structures, others are the product of the urban industrial period" (KLEMENČIČ 2006, 162). This description illustrates in a concise manner the key characteristic of today's rural area: it is an area that is differentiated, functionally and socially heterogeneous, where agrarian and urban structures meet, where numerous non-agrarian activities occur that have not been present in the countryside so far. Rurality is just a pale remnant of the past.

The development of today's countryside as much as it shows self-initiative, and can be seen as organic, is based on triggers from the outside. Cooperation between regional development actors is of great importance. Below we present some forms of cooperation, the consequences of which are evident in the structure and the image of the landscape.

Figure 1: Location of the area



1. Landscape characteristics of Svečinske gorice hills

As the key characteristics of Svečinske gorice hills, we have selected those that illustrate the current economic, social, ecological and cultural conditions in the area. The methodological question on how to define them remains on the side.

1.1. Exposure to natural disasters

The threat to the area due to natural disasters is due to climate change and changes in the environment and has become an increasingly important regional element. There are several types of natural threats in the area of Svečinske gorice: flood threats, landslides, droughts and hail.

Due to the specific lithological composition of the bottom of the valleys, the flood risk is very high. The valley around river Pesnica, the central watercourse in the area, is a potential flood zone due to impermeable soil, a high drainage ratio on the surrounding slopes and a relatively shallow riverbed. Because of a high population density in the Pesnica valley, the threat of flooding is even greater; especially the threat of raising ground water.

Due to lithological composition, avalanches are common in the area. Most avalanches occur near new buildings, new roads in the slopes, in areas where vegetation has been removed (for example, forests or vineyards) or on abandoned agricultural land. Due to the dispersed settlements, it is very likely that the number of landslides and the associated damage and threat to humans will increase further. As in the case of exposure to floods – disregard of natural limitations and excessive environmental damage are the cause of the risk of human and community property. The landslides are not large; mostly only a small part of the slopes slips away, which threatens the house or two or the local road.

Figure 2: The landslide endangered the houses in the near.



Among natural disasters one can find weather damages – hail and drought. Both are probably the result of the climate change we have witnessed in recent decades. Data show that the number of days without rain is increasing. The number of days without precipitation increases, so does the number of days with abundant precipitation. The area is exposed to frequent hailstorms.

1.2. New economic activities

We can follow the changes in the economic structure of the area. There are two directions in this regard: increased number of jobs in non-agrarian activities where the domestic population is employed. The number of business entities has increased from 248 to 338 since the year 2008. The most heavily represented are business activities (26%), most of which were independent sole proprietors involved in accounting, insurance and consulting; there are also many cultural activities (17%), among them cultural and sports associations; and construction (15%). Most of these activities have nothing in common with the countryside and agriculture, but with the urban way of life. They are intended not only for the local population, but for the users living in the region of Maribor. The eastern part of Svečinske gorice is the suburban area of Maribor. There is a rehabilitation centre for people with disabilities in the area, which exploits the idyllic rural landscape and is very close to the regional centre. In spite of the increasing number of jobs, the area is still strongly linked to the regional centre in the economic sense. There are not enough jobs, only about 450 (data for 2002), and about 1100 people go to work in the neighbouring towns, mostly to Maribor.

On the other hand, there is a growing market orientation of agriculture. The number of farms is decreasing; in 2000, there were 302 farms in the municipality, in 2010 only 284. Those that remain are directed to the cultivation of special crops and to supplementary farming activities. Viticulture and fruit growing are becoming increasingly important activities, both related to tourism as a complementary activity. There are 132 wine producers in the area, most vine growers not only grow vines but have their own wine production (cultivation of wine). There are also farms oriented towards the cultivation of flowers and vegetables, breeding horses and associated riding as a form of recreation and tourism, as well as organic farms.

1.3. Supplementary activities on farms

Farming is no longer the only activity on farms, but the basis for new activities. Higher revenue is provided by products or activities with higher added value; supplementary activities are key to the survival of farms. Supplementary activities are dominated by catering, and the production and processing of food and beverages (meat production, processing of apple and grape juices, production and processing of fruits and vegetables). This is related to the development of tourism in the border area and the marketing of local products. Ecological production of vegetables and winegrowers, which reaffirm and develop the brand of wines from this area, should be pointed out. Some farms supplement the primary activity with the production of flowers and plants (5%), harvest (10%), cleaning of roads (14%) and breeding of horses and related riding sports.

1.4. Making of idyllic landscape

By increasing the number of wine-growing and fruit-growing farms and tourism development, the preservation of the former cultural landscape, which is called the making of an idyllic countryside, has become topical. This is reflected by the increasing number of renovated old farm houses and commercial buildings, as well as the reconstruction of newer houses in a way that they are becoming more like autochthonous buildings. Even in the scenery of the landscape, there is an increasing number of decorations, ornamental flower plants, information boards with a touch of rural, use of autochthonous construction materials. The traditional landscape, religious monuments and autochthonous architecture stand out in the medial image of Svečinske gorice. An idyllic countryside also includes the protection of the intangible cultural heritage and the awakening of traditional customs, such as the blessing of horses, the feast of wine, the ethnological museum in Svečina.

Figure 3: Idyllic landscape of vineyards



1.5. Residential area for migrants from the city

The part of Svečinske gorice, which is closer to the regional centre, is the area of immigration for the inhabitants of Maribor. Housing construction is very intense there, the area is gaining importance in the urban landscape. The process of suburbanisation includes only the growth of the number of dwellings and the larger area of settlements, while the development of supply and service activities is lagging behind the intensity of housing construction. As a result, the quality of the living environment in residential neighbourhoods is still inadequate.

Figure 4: Residential area in the small village



Figure 5: Residential area in suburban part of the area



1.6. The new meaning of the border area

Until 1918, the area of Svečinske gorice belonged to the Austrian Empire of the Monarchy. After the birth of Yugoslavia, the state border was put exactly in the middle of the previously economically and culturally single area. To date, the regime has changed on the border two times. During the period of the socialist social system, the state border was closed, but there were many forms and ways for cross-border cooperation between both private individuals and societies. Today's border with the Republic of Austria is open, without border crossings. After 1991, economic and cultural cooperation between people on both sides of the border has been restored. The link is tourism and wine roads, as well as the possibilities of employment of locals on the Austrian side. The border area, which has been on the edge of economic areas for four decades, is becoming part of a new emerging economic region along the Austrian–Slovenian wine road. This is related to several topics: wine growing farms, which as a supplementary activity develop catering services and wine making, walking and cycling routes through the wine-growing region, the tendency to create an "idyllic" countryside, which is reflected in the preservation of autochthonous architecture and cultural heritage, new tourist offer, joint advertising in the media and thus creation of the brand "Svečinske gorice". According to the operators of tourist farms, among visitors are at least one-third of foreigners.

In the past, the border was largely conceived in a negative sense. ŠILIH cites four aspects of the border: demographic changes, abandonment of land cultivation, bureaucracy and seasonal cross-border employment (ŠILIH 1980, 141). Comparing the demographic data of border settlements with other settlements in the area, we can identify the same and equally intense demographic processes. One notices a decrease in the number of inhabitants, aging population and an increase in the educational level everywhere. The abandonment of land treatment would also be difficult to attribute to the border, but to the negative demographic processes and the economic co-existence of the population. An important aspect of the border is the ownership situation of both Slovenians and Austrians. After 1950, the number of Slovenian owners decreased, and since 2004, more and more vineyards and lands suitable for vineyards have been transferred to Austrian vineyard owners. This reduces the potential for tourism development in rural areas on the one side of the border, while the situation strengthens on the other. Surely the settlements in the border area were deprived of the development of tourism and tourist infrastructure, which in Slovenia began 20 years later than on the other side of the border. An important aspect of the border is the labour migration of Slovenes to the neighbouring Austria. There are no precise data on this, but we estimate that this is primarily seasonal employment during the most intensive work in vineyards and orchards and at the peak of the tourist season.

1.7. Inadequate quality of the living environment

The area has predominantly non-urban population living the urban way of life. However, the range of supply and service activities in Svečinske gorice is modest. In two settlements, only basic needs are met (small market, elementary school, kindergarten, amateur culture), and all other needs are to be met by residents in nearby Maribor. The area offers only housing conditions but is inadequate for living. The public bus transport network is adapted to daily commuters, schoolchildren and employees, which is insufficient for many residents and visitors. Also, the bus stop network is too scarce for the majority of the inhabitants due

to dispersed settlement outside the radius of affordable accessibility. Most of the places in Svečinske gorice are therefore accessible only with a personal vehicle, and most of the local population depends on a daily car usage.

2. Who makes the landscape and in what way?

In the previous chapter, we showed the characteristics of Svečinske gorice which are visible in the landscape, in statistical data and seen from discussions with locals in the administrative services. The question is who makes such a situation in the said area and on the landscape, and in what way? The statistics do not speak about this; this cannot be seen from the landscape as such. Today's countryside is made by a multitude of actors; we want to mention just some most important ones:

- *Farmers as business owners.* One of the visible consequences of their activities is the use of land for individual cultures and related changes in recent decades. Two ways show: 1. extensive exploitation of agricultural land and abandonment of processing. 50 years ago, there was much less agricultural land in overgrazing, much less grassland. Small farms are becoming self-sufficient, and therefore they reduce the extent of arable land. 2. intensification of agricultural land. This shows by increase in orchards and vineyards, partly also the growth of meadows, which is associated with intensive livestock farming. Many permanent crops are protected against hail with protective nets. The market orientation of agriculture is also evident in the growing areas of monocultures.

Figure 6: Vineyards covered with nets against the summer storms



- *Non-native population* that lives or has migrated to the countryside. Mostly they are young families, retired persons and middle age families of higher economic status. This is related to the construction of housing and accompanying infrastructure. New residential neighbourhoods, as well as individual housing units, are being created. Due to the increasing number of immigrant populations, service activities are also increasing, which are intended to meet their needs. Both contribute to the transformation of the countryside towards greater urbanity.

- *Entrepreneurs.* Especially those who are regional oriented, not just local. The number of private entrepreneurs is increasing in the area. Their work brings greater visibility of the area, new jobs, increased demand for goods and economic development. For this purpose, zone for crafts and small business has been created in the settlement of Zgornja Kungota. Many production facilities are due to their size and image changing the image of rural landscape to urban.
- *Governmental institutions and local (self) administration.* Although the consequences of the functioning of administrative institutions are not directly evident in the landscape, their share is of key importance. They act as initiators in most projects; they are coordinators and funders of spatial documents. The formation of the Kungota municipality in 1994 was a new impetus for the area in the management of local conditions, which were often ignored in the former large municipality of Maribor.

Co-operation among individual spatial development actors has led to the regional features, as we presented in the first chapter. However, which activities have led to these spatial and landscape characteristics? In addition to the tendency to rationalise the activities that originate in the initiatives of individuals, various forms of cooperation among spatial development actors are important as well. We will only list some of them:

Projects and programmes resulting from cooperation between municipalities

The rural development programme, under which a tourism development project was set up along the Slovenian–Austrian border, was prepared by neighbouring municipalities in 2013. It is a plan whose implementation has been partly financed by the European Union and has already been implemented in large part. On the basis of the joint project, numerous cycling and walking routes, information boards, renovated ethnological museum and thematic learning path (fossils and rocks) were arranged. Based on this project, individual farms have obtained financial resources to start supplementary activities; among other things, a horse breeding and horseback riding centre, a viewing tower on Plač hill, a unified media image of Svečinske gorice and a zone for crafts and small business in the settlement of Zgornja Kungota were created.

Another project of this type is defence against hail. At the initiative of the winegrowers, municipalities where summer storms and hail frequently damage the harvest have agreed on co-financing defence against hail by airplanes. It is a project that has been going on with shorter interruptions for many years and is apparently quite successful.

At the level of municipalities, there is also cooperation between local communities and societies on both sides of the state border, which refers primarily to participation in cultural events related to local customs and tourist offer. As a rule, Austrian winegrowers and cultural societies from Gomilica (in German: Gamlitz) and Ernovž (in German: Ehrenhausen) participate in tourist events in Slovenia.

Projects that are the result of cooperation among individuals

Seventeen winegrowers joined in a cooperative union, the purpose of which is the joint possession of a machine for filling bottles of wine. The machine is jointly owned, and the use is determined by a special protocol. This form of cooperation has been in place for the seventh year.

Winemakers from the area of Svečinske gorice organise an annual event on young wine with the intention to create a brand. Each wine-maker is obliged to raise some young wine and offer it at the event.

Projects resulting from cooperation between the state and the municipality

To reduce flood risk, a flood protection plan was prepared with a buffer in which the water level will be collected if/when the Pesnica river reaches a critical water level. The initiative for this measure came from the side of the municipality, and the state institutions funded and implemented the proposal.

Summary

The countryside of Svečinske gorice – who makes the landscape and in what way?

The hills of Svečinske gorice, once a typical agrarian area, are today heterogeneous and spatially different. In the southeastern part of the region, which is closer to Maribor, the concentration of inhabitants is greater, housing construction is more intense, and there are also several primarily service activities. The western and northern parts of Svečinske gorice are more agrarian, but agriculture is intensively dominated by viticulture and fruit growing, and farms are engaged in supplementary activities, especially those intended for tourism. Such conditions are found predominantly in the area along the Slovenian–Austrian border. In the central part of Svečinske gorice agriculture is less intensive, and there are fewer urban elements in this area. It is a transitional area between a more urban and more agrarian part. The bearers of these changes come from the area, but also from the outside, we are talking about the growing economic and social integration in the space. In forms of cooperation whose consequences are evident in the province, individuals, mostly entrepreneurs and farmers, the administration (municipality and state) and civil society institutions are involved.

Conclusion

Today's countryside has more and more features of urban areas; the agrarian landscape is only a pale reflection of the former times. There are obvious changes in the land use and hence the landscape, the economic orientation, the many non-agrarian activities and the new functions of the countryside related to housing, tourism and recreation. The bearers of these changes come from the area, but also from the outside, we are talking about the growing economic and social integration in the space. New forms of cooperation are evident in the countryside, caused by the involvement of individuals, mostly entrepreneurs and farmers, the administration (municipality and state) and civil society institutions.

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