

The Making of Historical Knowledge and Public History

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Open Borders in the Alps-Adriatic Region during the Cold War and Beyond: An ERC Project, an Exhibition, and a Twin European Capital of Culture

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Abstract: In this article, the authors present the ERC project Open Borders, conducted between 2023 and 2027 at the Science and Research Centre (ZRS) in Koper, Slovenia. The project redefines Cold War history through multidisciplinary research on people, places, and cross-border practices. It examines transnational interactions in the social, cultural, and political context of the Cold War, and beyond, in the border region between Austria, Italy, and Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). The authors provide an assessment of the project's results at its midpoint, outlining its methodology and framework; its recent conference “Places of Cross-Border Interaction in History: The Alps-Adriatic Region”; and the exhibition “Never Mind the Borders. People, Places, and Cross-Border Practices between the Alps and the Adriatic”, which the research group created in both a physical and online version. The two events make a valuable contribution to the programme of the first twin European Capital of Culture, Nova Gorica/Gorizia.



Keywords: ERC Project Open Borders; Nova Gorica/Gorizia; Cold War; border studies; public history

Rethinking the Iron Curtain: The ERC Project Open Borders in the Context of Cold War Studies

The Cold War profoundly shaped European identities. Certain elements of this confrontation have persisted beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and

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the dissolution of the Soviet Union as well as the other two European federative states – Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia – in the early 1990s. In recent years, scholars have critically reassessed the divisions of the Cold War, both on a European and a global level, across multiple dimensions. Research has addressed, for example, soft power and artistic exchanges (Mikkonen, Scott-Smith, and Parkkinen 2019; Chuni-khin 2025); peace activism (Koivunen 2022); international economic cooperation (Bernhardt, Butter, and Motylinska 2023); labour mobility (Lemmen forthcoming); and transnational flows in the domains of scientific production (Solovey and Dayé 2021) and electronic communication (Mihelj and Huxtable 2021).

Borderland studies, be they about the German, Habsburg, Russian, or Ottoman imperial borderlands (Bartov and Weitz 2013) or present cross-border collaborations in Europe (Wassenberg and Beck 2011), have emerged as a productive field of inquiry. Scholars have shown how past borderlines can continue to have social meaning and effects in the present (von Hirschhausen, Grandits, Kraft, Müller, and Serrier 2015; Laczó and Lisjak Gabrijelčič 2020). Within this prolific field of research, the shared borderlands of states belonging to either side of the Cold War ideological divides have been neglected. This lacuna is filled by the ERC project “Open Borders. Cold War Europe Beyond Borders. A Transnational History of Cross-Border Practices in the Alps-Adriatic Area from World War II to the Present”, running from 2023 to 2027 and directed by Borut Klabjan at the *Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče Koper* (Science and Research Centre Koper, ZRS), Slovenia. The project is dedicated to the dynamics of interaction across bloc boundaries during the Cold War.¹

At the centre of the project is the Alps-Adriatic region, which stretches across the state borders shared by Austria, Italy, and Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). These borderlands are connected by a complex and layered past that included frequent realignments of political rule and borders, in particular during the twentieth century. During the Cold War era, not only was the region positioned at the southernmost reach of what Churchill famously termed the Iron Curtain, but it also served as a textbook example of a “shatterzone” where ideological divisions and territorial disputes continued to collide over an extended period of time (Bartov and Weitz 2013; Cattaruzza 2017; Tenca Montini 2020). When approached from a bottom-up perspective, the case of the Alps-Adriatic in the twentieth century calls for an analysis of the mobility of states and its borders. This heritage of mobile political borders and its effects on the ground are examined drawing on interrelated cases involving bottom-up everyday cross-border practices and institutional frameworks, such as the Alps-Adriatic Working Community. This regional cooperation initiative

1 See the project's website, “Open Borders. Cold War Europe Beyond Borders. A Transnational History of Cross-Border Practices in the Alps-Adriatic Area from World War II to the Present.” <https://erc-openborders.eu> (accessed 25 June 2025).

was institutionalised in 1978, becoming the first example of European cooperation involving regions belonging to states with different ideological, economic, political, and military systems in the Cold War. The idea of crossing borders was not a regional peculiarity, but something that prevailed throughout both the “East” and the “West”. However, the Alps-Adriatic region was the first example of people regularly transcending physical borders between countries with different political, military and economic systems in Cold War Europe. To explore these places and practices of cross-border interactions, the project adopts a bottom-up perspective on local people and institutions, thereby providing a methodological blueprint with which to study broader European patterns of border shifts and cross-border interconnections during the Cold War.

The ZRS Koper offers the ideal institutional setting, being located just a few kilometres from the state borders of both Italy and Croatia and embodying the very themes that shape the project.² The ZRS has always been home to scholars focused on the history of these borderlands, on overlapping identities, contested sovereignties, regimes of mobility, and connected areas of research. The international team of researchers working on the ERC project mirrors and substantially enhances this long-standing expertise.

Methodologically, the scholars affiliated with the ERC project structure their research around three pillars: people, places, and cross-border practices (work packages 3–5). The *people* strand focuses on how individuals lived with the borders, among them ordinary citizens, business leaders, mayors, regional political leaders and party cadres, consular staff, customs officers, border agents, media personalities and professionals, fishermen, hunters, mountaineers, medical staff, tourists, and employees in the tourism and gastronomical sectors. The *places* strand is concerned with the spatial dimensions of the borders, that is with how socio-politically and economically defined spaces shaped lives and practices. Lastly, the *cross-border practices* strand examines cross-border interactions: How did the border citizens handle political regulations? How and why did they cross the borders in their everyday life? While providing the project with its methodological structure, *places*, *people*, and *cross-border practices* make for a meaningful whole in each of the individual projects, which we will summarise in the following paragraphs.

Marco Abram explores cross-border cooperation among Italian and Yugoslav mountaineers and mountaineers’ organisations from the 1960s to the 1980s. His research emphasises mountaineers’ values and modes of operation in the Alps at a time when they were divided by ideologically divisive state borders. After the Second World War, the borders running along mountain peaks were closed, militarised, and

² See the centre’s website, “Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče Koper.” <https://www.zrs-kp.si/en/> (accessed 25 June 2025).

strictly controlled. Mountaineers and hikers, however, contributed to the process of debordering. The spatial dimension of cross-border interaction is central to this project, in particular when it came to constructing places of cross-border friendship in the mountains. Through initiatives such as the *Cime dell'amicizia/Pot prijateljstva/Wege der Freundschaft* (Friendship Trails), inaugurated in 1972 with 30 peaks in the Italian–Yugoslav–Austrian border region, the materiality of the mountainscapes was promoted, presenting the peaks as locations of a borderless Alps experience.

Nina Hofmann focuses on the political and everyday practical and symbolic dimensions of border river bridges. She investigates the history of three different types of bridge between 1974 and 2013. Along the border between Slovenia and Croatia, the project looks at the pedestrian bridge over the Kolpa near Slavski Laz (Slovenia) and Čedanĳ (Croatia), built informally in 1957 by local residents, and the official border crossing over the same river in Petrina/Brod na Kupi, which played a significant role in everyday mobility, tourism, and as a military post during Slovenia's independence efforts. Here, the river Kolpa went from serving as an administrative inner-Yugoslav border to a state border between Slovenia and Croatia, to an EU and then Schengen border, and finally, with Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, it became an inner-EU state border. When the Kolpa became a state border in 1991, crossing the informal footbridge established during the Yugoslav era was prohibited. The bridge was left to decay until recently, when the structure was restored, again by citizens. On the border between Slovenia and Austria, the project looks at the bridge over the Mura/Mur in Gornja Radgona/Bad Radkersburg. This border river went from delineating the Cold War ideological border between Yugoslavia and Austria to becoming the inner-EU border between Slovenia and Austria. Significantly, Gornja Radgona and Bad Radkersburg had been one town until the end of the First World War, when both belonged to the Habsburg Empire.

Borut Klabjan focuses on the *lasciapassare/prepustnica/propusnica (laissez-passer)* introduced with the Udine Agreements of 1955. The continuous redefining and realigning of state sovereignties in the Italian–Yugoslav borderland created the need for specific identification documents. The *laissez-passer* was a travel document that allowed the local population to cross the Italian–Yugoslav border using specific preordained border crossings. Being able to cross the border included relief from foreign exchange service tax and customs duties, and thus the possibility of cross-border shopping and transfer of small goods. The checkpoints became microcosms of daily border-crossing life, encapsulating a myriad of motives and legal as well as illegal practices as people crossed the border in both directions. This increased mobility favoured the integration of territories that extended far beyond the narrow border strip. Klabjan investigates the nature of these practices related to a specific form of passport. He shows how individual and collective experiences of mobility regulation contributed to the history of everyday geopolitics.

Situating his research at the interface between diplomatic and business history, Jure Ramšak studies the investment programme in Carinthia, Austria, that was launched by the Slovenian authorities in the 1970s with the aim of counteracting ethnic assimilation as well as modernising the social fabric of the Carinthian Slovenian minority. The two main coordinators of this semi-confidential programme were the bodies dealing with international relations in the Slovenian Socialist Republic and the Chamber of Commerce. Ramšak's main focus is on the interplay between what were initially politically motivated incentives and economic motives that came to the fore in the 1980s, when Carinthian mixed enterprises became an important instrument for the internationalisation efforts of export-oriented Slovenian companies. The central research question looks at the transnational and trans-systemic nature of the more than 20 mixed-economy companies with upwards of 800 employees that had been established in Carinthia by the end of the 1980s. Connected to this are the policies of the late socialist establishment in Slovenia, which proposed a series of measures intended to harmonise Slovenian legislation and standards with the 1986 Single European Act of the European Economic Community. This essentially technocratic programme, cloaked in a narrative of Europeanisation, soon became one of the points of divergence in a disintegrating Yugoslavia (Ramšak 2024).

Mateja Režek focuses on the interplay between interregional cooperation and nationalist tensions in Slovenian–Carinthian cross-border relations during the 1960s and 1970s. She examines how the two regions, divided by the Austrian–Yugoslav border, opposing political systems, and competing national discourses, nonetheless engaged in collaborative efforts when it came to infrastructure, economic exchange, and cultural initiatives. Režek offers novel insights into the early stages of trans-systemic integration in Cold War Europe and traces the foundational developments that led to the establishment of the Alps-Adriatic Working Community in 1978. Methodologically, she adopts a dual perspective: a top-down approach rooted in diplomatic and political history, based on archival research into state policies and institutional frameworks; and a bottom-up approach that foregrounds the agency of individuals and local actors. She thereby provides a comprehensive understanding of both systemic influences and grassroots initiatives in cross-border interactions (Režek and Burz 2025).

Sabine Rutar takes a microhistorical look into extractive labour on the Adriatic seashore. Her case study is the Sečovlje/Sicciolo coal mine in northwestern Istria (Slovenia). During the barely four short decades of its existence between the late 1930s and the early 1970s, the mine was defined both by the volatile political borders of the time and the environmental border between the land and the sea. The decision to extract coal right on the seashore threatened the adjacent, centuries-old salt pans. The mine's sociospatialities make for a very peculiar case of Cold War cross-border industrial practices. When it came to economic decision-making, the continuous

redefining and realigning of state sovereignties was as important as the shifting geopolitics of the Cold War. The mine was located in Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste. Yugoslavia began to extract coal here even before Zone B became a de facto part of Yugoslavia in 1954. Given that the mine's origins lay in 1930s fascist Italy, industries in northern Italy had been equipped with the technology to burn coal from Istria. The project focuses on the continuities and ruptures of this coal connection. What happens when the main fossil resource needed to pursue industrial production suddenly ends up in another country, and an ideologically hostile one at that?

Karlo Ruzicic-Kessler examines Carinthian policies in the Alps-Adriatic region in the years 1978–1992. Carinthia's provincial governors were among the key driving forces behind the creation of the Alps-Adriatic Working Community. In the 1980s, a series of scandals shook the socialists' absolute majority in the provincial parliament and contributed to the rise of right-wing populist and leader of the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) Jörg Haider. As a result, the Slovenian minority in the province of Carinthia was targeted with increasingly harsh policies and rhetoric. The province's governors across political parties, however, were committed to cooperation in the Alps-Adriatic Working Community and supportive of Slovenia's and Croatia's independence aspirations at both the national and the supraregional levels. Ruzicic-Kessler examines this history of Carinthia between nationalist attacks on Austria's Slovenian minority by the German-speaking Austrians and an active cross-border policy in the Alps-Adriatic region that advanced to uncompromising advocacy for the country's southern neighbours.

Urška Strle adds wildlife spaces to the field of border studies, specifically hunting and fishing. She explores the cross-border cooperation between Italy and Austria, on the one hand, and Yugoslavia, on the other, through a prism of wildlife-related activities. During the Cold War, hunting and fishing activities for international tourists as well as a series of professional collaborations were legalised in as early as 1955 by a Yugoslav federal law. Strle also considers earlier decades, however, to highlight continuities in professional networks that were related not only to hunting and fishing as leisure activities, but included aspects such as environmental long-term planning and zoological research. Such international cooperation acknowledges that flora and fauna know nothing of the political borders set up by humans. The project supports claims that the Iron Curtain "became particularly porous when it came to the environmental issues" (Mignon Kirchhof and McNeill 2019, 3).

Federico Tenca Montini researches the history of *TV Koper-Capodistria*, a Yugoslav television station founded in 1971 that broadcast in Italian and Slovene. From the outset it aired in colour using the PAL system, then already standard in Western Europe. The study reconstructs the motivations behind the creation and

subsequent 20-year operation of the TV station, situated at the crossroads between the expectations of the Italian minority in Yugoslavia and the Slovene minority in Italy. The station fulfilled political propaganda needs, while pursuing economic profit through advertising revenues. At the heart of the research project is the border – permeable to television signal frequencies, to Slovene minority employees who commuted from Italy to Capodistria to work at the station, and to consumers hunting for the products advertised on TV.

Taking a diplomatic history approach, Benedetto Zaccaria explores the Alps-Adriatic Working Community as a pioneering initiative in Cold War interregional cooperation. The organisation was established in Venice in 1978 and included Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italy), Carinthia, Upper Austria, and Styria (Austria), as well as Croatia and Slovenia (Yugoslavia). Bavaria (West Germany) and Salzburg (Austria) participated as active observers. The participating regional governments gathered requests for transborder cooperation from local entrepreneurs, chambers of commerce, and intellectuals, transforming them into political initiatives in six major sectors: territorial planning and environmental protection; transport and traffic; culture, information, science and youth; economy; agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and mountain economy; as well as health and hygiene. The study focuses on how this interregional cooperation contributed to surmounting the barriers of the Cold War.

In 2026, Marta Verginella will join the ERC project team and add an important dimension to the history of Cold War open borders in the Alps-Adriatic region: the practice of crossing the border to receive medical treatment. Besides the cross-border movements of both the doctors and patients studied, Verginella focuses on specific hospitals and outpatient clinics that became focal points of cross-border mobility and care. Along with testimony interviews, she looks at documentation from local Chambers of Commerce, school offices, business associations, as well as ministries of trade, education, and the interior to understand how the constant health-related interaction that transcended state frameworks was facilitated.

Also beginning in 2026, Tina Filipović will join the research team to investigate how holiday encounters between Italian tourists and Yugoslav hosts in Istria evolved into lasting mutual relationships that transcended state borders as barriers to social exchange. Her research focuses on tourist locations and small businesses such as cafés, taverns, camping sites, holiday apartments, and local wineries, frequented by Italians, who were widely recognized in socialist Istria as economically valuable consumers. In addition to conducting testimonial interviews, Filipović draws on archival materials from government tourism committees, hospitality and tourism publications, promotional brochures, and newspaper articles. She reconstructs the

Istrian tourism landscape to highlight the significance of informal holiday encounters in softening political boundaries and fostering regional cohesion.

As the diversity of approaches and the wide range of cross-border practices under examination show, the Open Borders research team is using a joint methodology to shed new light on the complex web of personal desires and needs, social networks, economic interests, and political imperatives that saw the Cold War border between Italy and Austria, on the one hand, and Yugoslavia, on the other, become increasingly porous.

A Twin Towns Border Setting: European Capital of Culture Nova Gorica/Gorizia

Marking the mid-term of the ERC project Open Borders, the team organised an international conference as well as a project-related exhibition to enhance the rich cultural programme of “GO! 2025” in Nova Gorica, Slovenia, this year’s European Capital of Culture together with its cross-border counterpart in Italy, Gorizia. This is actually the first time that a city was nominated that transcends a state border: a European Capital of *Borderless Culture*.³

The city of Nova Gorica literally exists because of the region’s postwar conflicts and the ensuing Cold War. The 1947 Peace Treaty between Italy and Yugoslavia assigned Gorizia/Gorica to Italy. Immediately after this, Yugoslavia started to build Nova Gorica, *new Gorica*, a socialist city, on the other side of the border. The construction was carried out in record time and relied heavily on voluntary labour brigades, composed, in particular, of Yugoslav youth. The founding of Nova Gorica marked a moment of both rupture and regeneration – a socialist response to geopolitical loss and an assertion of territorial sovereignty through urban planning (Ramšak 2015).

In the early years, the strict border regime caused intense hardship, often separating family members and disrupting social and economic life. Over time, Yugoslavia’s more open stance and bilateral agreements – chief among them the 1955 Udine Accords – began to ease movement across the border. These agreements regulated crossings for work and shopping and gave rise to a vibrant cross-border economy. Italians, attracted by lower prices, travelled to Yugoslavia for basic goods, while Yugoslav citizens crossed in the opposite direction in search of products they could not find at home. These practices soon became embedded in

3 See the website, “GO! 2025. Nova Gorica – Gorizia European Capital of Culture.” <https://www.go2025.eu/en> (accessed 26 June 2025).

everyday routines. In 1975, the Osimo Agreements resolved the remaining political disputes over the Italian–Yugoslav border, paving the way for a new phase of intense cross-border cooperation, including, for example, regular cross-border sporting and cultural events. When Slovenia declared independence in 1991, border posts – such as the notorious Casa Rossa crossing – briefly became strategic sites of manoeuvre,⁴ then becoming sites where people could cross with just their ID card. Both the symbolic and practical significance of the border was further reduced (Cattunar 2024).

The most dramatic transformation came with Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004 and to the Schengen Area in 2007. To mark the occasion, in Nova Gorica and Gorizia, the physical barrier at the Casa Rossa crossing was ceremonially removed by the mayors of the two cities, in the presence of citizens from both sides of the border. The gesture was emblematic of a new era. The introduction of the euro in Slovenia that same year further simplified interactions, erasing yet another distinction between the two urban centres. These developments were the fruit of decades of local, national, and transnational negotiation and provided the essential backdrop for Nova Gorica and Gorizia's successful joint candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2025.⁵

The bid was led by a group of intellectuals from Nova Gorica and Gorizia and was strengthened by its explicitly binational framework. The proposal designated Trg Evrope/Piazza della Transalpina in front of the Nova Gorica train station as a central symbol of the project. Once divided by a physical barrier the square now functions as a shared civic space, even though the border between Italy and Slovenia continues to run right through it. It is near this site that the new EPICenter Museum is being developed, entrusted to curators Kaja Širok, Anja Medved, and Alessandro Cattunar. Designed as a participatory, cross-border cultural institution, the museum will serve as a platform for dialogue, memory, and reflection on twentieth-century history. Its permanent exhibition will draw on personal testimonies from people in the region, encouraging community involvement and critical engagement with themes of identity, borders, and shared heritage.⁶

⁴ For a brief introduction to this crossing, see “Casa Rossa Border.” Let's Go Gorizia. <https://lets.go.gorizia.it/en/punti-di-interesse/il-valico-di-casa-rossa/> (accessed 26 June 2025).

⁵ For details, see the candidacy booklet, “European Capital of Culture Candidacy. GO! Borderless.” Nova Gorica/Gorizia 2025. https://www.go2025.eu/03.documenti/bidbook/GO_KNJIGA_ENG_WEB.pdf (accessed 26 June 2025).

⁶ See the museum's website, “European Platform for Interpretation of 20th Century.” <https://www.go-epic.eu/en/> (accessed 26 June 2025).

The ERC Mid-term Conference “Places of Cross-Border Interaction in History: The Alps-Adriatic Region”

The European Capital of Culture Nova Gorica/Gorizia thus offered a symbolically potent setting for reflecting on the progress of the Open Borders project – within the team, with members of the advisory committee, as well as with other experts in border studies invited to Nova Gorica for the occasion. The mid-term conference, organised under the guidance of Marco Abram and Borut Klabjan and held on 22–23 May 2025, focused on *places* as one of the project’s three methodological pillars described above: “Places of Cross-Border Interaction in History: The Alps-Adriatic Region”.⁷ For the second half of the project, conferences are planned that focus on *people* and *cross-border practices*, respectively, the latter being reserved for the project’s concluding event. An overview of the places that received analytical attention during the conference gives an impression of the comprehensive versatility that the approach promoted by the ERC project is bringing forth, within the project and beyond.

Border checkpoints, often considered as non-places, were microcosms of socioeconomic activities centred on informal border-crossings (Borut Klabjan, Koper). *Hospitals and doctors’ offices* in Yugoslavia provided medical services to Slovene women living in Italy – an initiative linked to their involvement in the antifascist resistance during the war, which granted them cross-border access to healthcare (Marta Verginella, Ljubljana). *Punk and hardcore music venues* were locations of a vibrant subculture in the late 1980s, which transcended national boundaries and fostered a shared sense of identity, albeit acquiring different meanings for music fans of different national backgrounds, ages, and at different moments in time (Federico Tenca Montini, Koper).

Beginning in the 1950s, *alpine clubs* in Italy, Austria, and Slovenia manifested a lively cooperative spirit when it came to conquering the mountain peaks of the region, resulting in transborder initiatives such as the 30 Peaks of Friendship (Marco Abram, Koper). *Beaches*, which had transformed into locations of mass tourism by the 1960s, with those in Yugoslavia hosting an increasing number of foreign tourists, mostly from Western countries, served as informal diplomatic zones that enabled relaxed yet meaningful encounters across borders (Jacqueline Nießer, Regensburg). A *bridge* was built informally by local citizens over the river Kolpa/Kupa in 1957, linking the villages Slavski Laz and Čedanĵ (in the Socialist Republics of Slovenia

⁷ The conference programme is available on the project website, “Places of Cross-Border Interaction in History: The Alps-Adriatic Region.” <https://erc-openborders.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Places-of-Cross-Border-Interaction-in-History-3.pdf> (accessed 26 June 2025).

and Croatia respectively) and enabling people to connect and use each others' infrastructures (Nina Hofmann, Koper). *Hunting and fishing grounds* shaped border policies because the unregulated movement of wildlife animals compelled states to coordinate strategies of environmental management and economic response, which included transborder access for leisure hunters and fishermen (Urška Strle, Koper).

The *coal mine* on the seashore in the Istrian village of Sečovlje/Sicciole in the early Cold War was defined in more than one way by Yugoslavia's changing economic policies vis-à-vis the Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste, while at the same time struggling, technically and geologically, with the border between the land and the sea (Sabine Rutar, Regensburg/Koper). The *Alpe-Adria Fair* in Ljubljana was established in 1958 as a platform for East–West commercial dialogue (Alessandro Ambrosino, Geneva). *Ships*, specifically the Yugoslav merchant marine, were liminal spaces for border-crossing maritime encounters and labour networks, transcending the ideological divisions of the Cold War (Brigitte Le Normand, Maastricht).

The *Alpe-Adria Rectors' Conference*, founded in 1979, was a place of transregional university cooperation that played a key role in promoting a particular vision of *Mitteleuropa*, which gained considerable traction that persisted beyond the Cold War (Benedetto Zaccaria, Padova/Koper). The *Pula Film Festival*, founded in 1955, served, like other Yugoslav film festivals, as a tool of cultural diplomacy and international projection, while recontextualising the Pula Arena, where many of the films were shown in an open-air format, from a symbolic space of the city's Italian identity into an emblem of Istria – first Yugoslav, now Croatian (Dunja Jelenković, Venice/Montreal). The *city of Trieste*, as the emblematic contested space of this Cold War borderland, produced dense British press coverage during the Anglo-American administration of the first postwar decade, revealing how external narratives contributed to shaping the perceptions of Trieste's contested urban space (Katia Pizzi, London).

All these *places* explored during the conference resonated with the overarching question that Birte Wassenberg (Strasbourg) had posed in her keynote: How should we study places of cross-border interaction? Her case study was the Upper Rhine region since 1963, that is the German–French–Swiss borderlands after the German–French friendship treaty had been signed. Drawing from her research on European integration, Wassenberg illustrated how sustained regional initiatives produced durable forms of transnational governance and identity, countering divisive lines created by the Second World War and enmities of longer durée. Her talk resonated with the themes of the ERC project, possibly highlighting, most of all, the idiosyncracies of the Cold War borders in the northern Adriatic as opposed to a European borderland that was seeking to heal the wounds of the war, but did not have to contend with the ideological divide posed by the “Iron Curtain” as well. Critical comments to the four conference panels were provided by Pamela Ballinger (Ann Arbor/MI), Pieter Judson (Florence), Gruia Bădescu (Konstanz), and Maura

Hametz (Harrisonburg/VA), who each gave the participants ample grounds for further reflection on the polysemic nature of border places.

The twin European Capital of Culture Nova Gorica/Gorizia was incorporated into the conference programme through three events. At the close of the first day, the conference participants joined a detailed guided tour of the architecture and modernist history of Nova Gorica led by Blaž Kosovel, member of the editorial board of the journal of the Gorica Humanists' Association (*Društvo humanistov Goriške*), *Razpotja* (Crossroads), which is published as part of the *Eurozine* network.⁸ An expert on Nova Gorica and other newly built cities, Kosovel developed, as part of the GO! 2025 programme, the "Ab Initio – An Urban Utopia" project, which is creating a comprehensive digital archive of the histories of newly built cities, including Nova Gorica.⁹

The second conference day featured the screening and discussion of "GO-VID Kot vidiš spet mejo/Quando riappare il confine" (When the Border Reappears), an impressive documentary short film directed by Carlo Ghio and written by Sara Terpin in 2020, both of whom were present for the occasion.¹⁰ Their film documents the reactions and creativity of Nova Gorica's and Gorizia's citizens when the border between Italy and Slovenia in Piazza della Transalpina/Trg Evrope was closed with a high fence during the Covid-19 pandemic. It vividly illustrates how the sudden reactivation of the border as part of the emergency measures implemented during the pandemic underscored the degree to which Gorizia and Nova Gorica have become socially and economically integrated. It also triggered many memories among those who had experienced the border during the Cold War. The dismantling of the fence was met with palpable relief on both sides. The resurrection of the closed border happened during the last phase of Nova Gorica's and Gorizia's application to become a borderless twin European City of Culture.¹¹

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion that asked "Does Europe live on the borders?", with Martin Klatt (Odense), Giustina Selvelli (Ljubljana), and Mateja Sedmak (Koper) engaging in a lively debate moderated by historian, journalist, and editor Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič. Their conversation linked the conference's topics to the present condition of both the external and the internal borders

⁸ See *Razpotja*'s website, <https://razpotja.si/about/> (accessed 27 June 2025).

⁹ "Ab Initio – An Urban Utopia." GO! 2025 Nova Gorica Gorizia – European Capital of Culture. <https://www.go2025.eu/en/projects/ab-initio-urban-utopia> (accessed 27 June 2025).

¹⁰ "GO-VID Ko vidiš spet mejo." Slovenian Film Database. <https://bsf.si/en/movie/go-vid-ko-vidis-spet-mejo/> (accessed 27 June 2025). For the trailer see "GO-VID – Quando riappare il confine – Ko vidiš spet mejo – Trailer." *slovely.eu*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNQnoefcAvs> (accessed 27 June 2025).

¹¹ Stefano Lusa, "Heroes without Borders." Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa. 28 May 2021. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Slovenia/Heroes-without-borders-210892> (accessed 27 June 2025).

of the European Union and Europe as a whole. The discussants highlighted, among other things, how core–periphery dynamics can shape integration and how local experiences can challenge dominant narratives about sovereignty and mobility. The roundtable created a space for critical dialogue about the meaning of borders in contemporary Europe.

The Exhibition “Never Mind the Borders. People, Places and Cross-Border Practices between the Alps and the Adriatic”

In the evening of 23 May, as the last highlight of the ERC project’s participation in the European Capital of Culture programme, the exhibition “Never Mind the Borders. People, Places and Cross-Border Practices between the Alps and the Adriatic” was inaugurated in the newly built underpass of the Nova Gorica railway station. The location of the exhibition is highly symbolic: The station is one of the few Austro-Hungarian buildings remaining in Yugoslavia after the war and thus predates the founding of Nova Gorica. As mentioned above, it is located directly adjacent to the border with Italy that runs across Trg Evrope/Piazza della Transalpina. The new Vrtača underpass was designed and built as part of the European Capital of Culture programme to enhance pedestrian and urban connectivity between Nova Gorica and Gorizia. It features two sunken plazas (*vrtače*) and a 36.6-metre corridor with spiral ramps – a physical and metaphorical passage connecting two cities once divided by ideology and surveillance.¹²

The “Never Mind the Borders” exhibition represents the main public-facing outcome of the Open Borders project. Its planning began alongside the launch of the research project, under the guidance of a coordinating committee composed of Nina Hofmann, Borut Klabjan, Urška Strle, and Benedetto Zaccaria. The exhibition’s conceptual structure mirrors the ERC project and focuses, in a total of 14 panels, on cross-border interactions under the headers *People*, *Places*, and *Practices*. The exhibition’s title was chosen as a playful nod to the iconic Sex Pistols album “Never mind the Bollocks” (1977) – an idea that resonated well with the audience during the exhibition’s launch event (Figure 1).

Inauguration speeches were held by Borut Klabjan and Urška Strle from the ERC team; Deputy Director of the Science and Research Centre in Koper, Tilen Glavina; and the mayor of Nova Gorica, Samo Turel. All underscored the importance of both

¹² “Nova Gorica železniški podhod Vrtača.” Odrpte hiše Slovenije. <https://odprtehisjeslovenije.org/objekt/nova-gorica-zelezniski-podhod-vrtaca/> (accessed 27 June 2025).

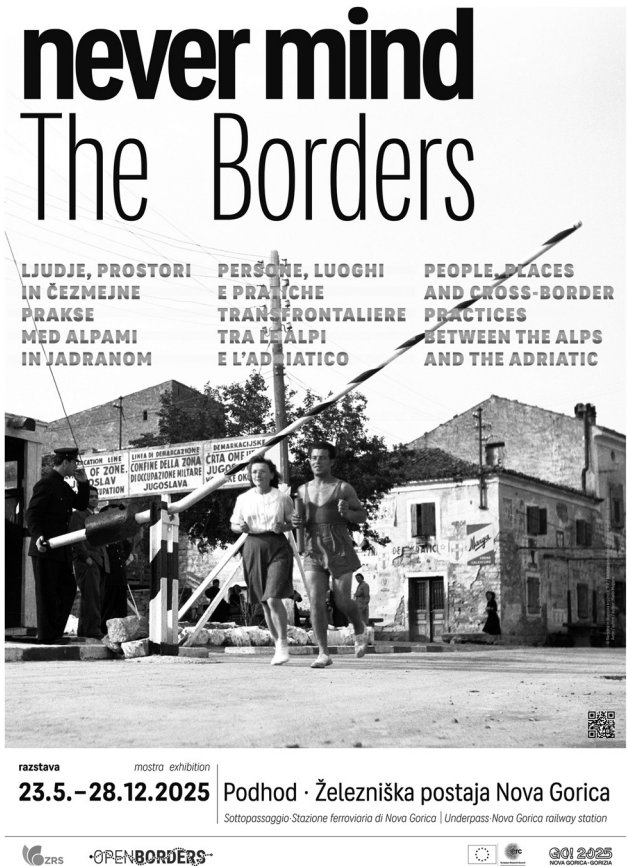


Figure 1: Poster of the “Never Mind the Borders” Exhibition. Source: Courtesy of ZRS Koper.



Figure 2: QR Code for the “Never Mind the Borders” Online Exhibition. Source: Courtesy of ZRS Koper

academic and civic engagement with the heritage of the borders in Nova Gorica/Gorizia and the wider region. The exhibition will be shown in Nova Gorica until the end of the European Capital of Culture programme.

At the same time as the physical exhibition – with texts in Slovenian, Italian, and English translation – an even more elaborate online version was launched, featuring a timeline, a map, and three more languages: Croatian, Friulian, and German. Apart from the Friulian version, the translations were provided by the ERC team. The English version was copy-edited by Kerry Close. For the Friulian version, the voluntary help of Pauli Cantarut of *Radio Onde Furlane* proved invaluable. Thanks to these six languages, the exhibition does indeed present cross-border interactions in all the languages in which they took place (Figure 2).¹³

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¹³ For a detailed review of the exhibition, see Alessandro Cattunar. “Oltre la linea. Storie di confine tra separazione e incontro.” Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa. 30 June 2025. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Slovenia/Oltre-la-linea.-Storie-di-confine-tra-separazione-e-incontro-238576>. An English translation will be available under this same link soon.

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