14 CONTESTED SLOVENE ISTRIA: A SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED REGION STRUGGLING FOR ITS OWN REGIONAL IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents regional identity as a social process and above all as a significant component in the formation of a region. Understanding the mechanisms that shape regional identity and the problems attached to its shaping helps us gain an insight into the nature of a region as a viable entity. Regions are a core concept in the idea of a "United Europe" that recognizes their pivotal role in the breaking down of nation-states and in consolidating a level of supranational organization. By no means can regions be separated from regional identity, a key concept in the making of regions that has been described by many geographers and other researchers (Cosgrove, 1998; Sörlin, 1999; Roca, 2000; Harner, 2001; Keating, 2001; Paasi, 2003).

Slovene Istria is a fairly new region, since less than sixty years ago it was a part of the larger region of Istria that shared the same political, cultural, and economic history. However, although it is very small and has many common characteristics, it should not be regarded as homogeneous due to its dual ethnic character and the duality of its natural geographical features. We believe regional identity has gone through very distinct stages and through a variety of manifestations due to the political changes in this part of Europe. We view the frequent border changes and alteration in the Italian influence as the key factors in understanding identity changes and modifications. Because some elements by which regional identity is normally defined (shared history, culture, and ethnicity) were ignored or even banned by government policies, the shaping of identity was focused on those geographical characteristics that were unaffected by political ideologies. Before 1991, regional identity was not considered important because during the Yugoslav period the locals were denied the right to influence events both in administration and in technology. Slovene geography was unaffected by the humanistic approaches that had prevailed in Anglo-American geography and concentrated more on physical aspects than on the perceptions of local people of their environment. One reason for neglecting local perceptions was, of course, the Communist ideology and another was nationalist feeling. The nationalist view had to be covert since it clashed with the Communist overview.

THE IDENTITY PROCESS: TIME AND COMPETITION

Identity is a broad concept expressing a harmonious relationship between a region and its inhabitants (Paasi, 2003). To fully comprehend this, we not only must consider the characteristics of a particular region and its inhabitants but also comprehend the interactions between them in the context of passing time. The concept of a region is conveyed through various expressions of art and literature as well as through various elements of material or symbolic landscapes. We find the landscape concept highly appropriate for studying regional identity because the landscape functions as a link between people and their environment. It provides physical support (means) and offers intangible rewards (meaning), as well as reveals the processes between them (Marsch, 1987).

Taking into account the human dimension, regional identity is a dialectic system that combines two perspectives: "us" and "them." This dichotomy is two-dimensional. The horizontal level of the distinction between the "insiders" and "outsiders" perspective deriving from different narratives intersects with the vertical struggle based on power. The latter, which is an interweaving of two concepts, namely from "below" and from "above," is embedded in ideology, the driving force that makes a clear distinction between people from "below" and from "above." (Paasi, 2003). To comprehend the concept of regions, it is important to understand the interaction between the two positions and how they have materialized within a landscape (Paasi, 2003). This dichotomy is emphasized by the spatial aspect identified by Terkenli (2001): coastal and interior. The gap or imbalance between the two positions is rooted not only in a central/peripheral variation but also in different backgrounds. This is where ethnic issues have an impact. As pointed out by Cvijić (1991) and Matvejević (2000), Istria lies precisely on the boundary between East and West, resulting in a special Mediterranean character based on interconnectedness and interchanges of ideas and people.

Van 'T Klooster, van Asselt & Koenis (2002), and Paasi (2003) have described identity as a social process of interaction and representation that implies a cultural-historical as well as a political-economic context. The latter does not affect identification directly but rather indirectly through culture and history, which are reflections of ideology. It is thus ideology that can promote or prevent the shaping of identity, first on the material level and then on the symbolic level. No ideology sets out to cause distortion, but distortion is a side effect of its frequent changes. In our case, if borders are understood as the most obvious manifestation of political identity, the physical setting of the region was changed considerably over time with consequent multiple changes and transformations of identity. Extrapolating from Cosgrove's (1984) theories, we can describe how every ideology attempts to give a landscape a particular character by eradicating the influences of previous ideologies and replacing them with its own. Landscape is like a container of all possible relevant images, meanings, and influences determined by ideology and thus, unless many landscape elements are assigned new values, they tend

to disappear (Urbanc, Printsmann, Palang, Skowronek, Woloszyn & Konkoly Gyuró, 2004).

Two things are very important for understanding the shaping of identity: time in embedding identity and the competition of overlapping identities (Head, 2000). Time as a dimension of regional identity is by its nature a subject that draws from historical memories and present impacts. People do not have a conception of time *per se* but rather of the changes or events in time. Later, it is not only the events that are perceived but also their temporal relations (Le Poidevin, 2004). The perception of time and time-related changes in the social history of Istria is somewhat different from that in other, more stable parts of the Balkans and the Northern Mediterranean, and much different from that in Central and Western Europe. The changes were so frequent that every generation experienced several. Considering the political and border changes within the timescales, it is easily seen that regional identity is a nexus of layers competing among themselves for recognition. The competition arises from the gap between the nexus of pre-existing objects that have changed their meaning and new objects that bear meanings symbolic of a new ideology. The result is many layers, both physical and psychological, one on top of another. Some are obvious, some unseen, and some are even concealed or prohibited.

Considering regional identity as a complex and highly sophisticated phenomenon and as a process, we can assume that the result of this process, a region, is a multifaceted and ambiguous phenomenon. A region becomes institutionalized by a regional identity, specifically through a process that produces territorial boundaries, symbols, and institutions (Paasi, 2003). We have already shown the first two steps with the underlying factors that promote or prevent them. The last stage of this process is to establish economic and administrative institutions as well as spatial units (called *ad hoc* by Paasi, 2003) to enable governments to rule effectively. This involves formal organizational units dealing with education, law, and the media as well as with political, economic, and administrative issues. This process is complete when a given name supports "in" and "down" perspectives as well as when organizations and institutions provide an effective means of reproducing the physical and conceptual existence of a given territory (Paasi, 1991). At this stage, an established region enables numerous practices and discussions that evoke new symbols, spatial imagination, and new power/knowledge relationships that cause the process to begin all over again.

We have already demonstrated that regional identity is associated with boundaries, both physical and conceptual. Here we would like to consider another dimension of boundary relationship, that is, where and how a region fits into the context of the larger community. This is where the idea of "place marketing" comes into play. Place marketing, if it is to be effective, is not merely a question of economic impact and influence but more a question of the image projected by a region. In some cases, the images projected by the ruling elites are not reflected, or perhaps even understood, by the general population. These intended images are likely to change along with regime

change, but again, the reality "on the ground" may differ markedly from the image the regime wishes to convey. In reality, the *modus vivendi* and attitudes of the population are more likely to transcend the region's boundaries and create an image of the region in the outside world, especially via attitudes to, along with practices in, agriculture and tourism.

SLOVENE ISTRIA: A PENINSULA AFFLICTED BY CONSTANT CHANGES

Describing this region as a physical entity must involve some vital facts. Extending over the coastal zone (46 km) and the low hills in the immediate vicinity, the Slovene part of Istria is the only indisputable Mediterranean part of Slovenia and covers slightly more than 300 km^2, only ten percent of the whole peninsula. Among the natural features of Slovene Istria, the relief and the climate are the most distinct. The relief is a result of the close intertwining of flysch and limestone bedrock and the low altitude (up to 400 m) in the immediate vicinity of the sea (Repolusk, 2001). The climate is Mediterranean, smoothing the way for a variety of Mediterranean crops (grapes, olives, figs).

Figure 1: Istrian peninsula lies at northeastern part of the Adriatic Sea at the junction of the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Central Europe.

Although it is a physically clearly defined and confined peninsula, its geographical position deserves discussion. It lies at the junction of the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Central Europe. Outlining a regional, cultural, and historical portrait is therefore a real challenge. Throughout its history, various ethnic, economic, and social realms met and intertwined here, as did three distinct languages: the ruling class spoke German and Italian while the general population spoke Slovene and Croatian. It was divided between the Republic of Venice and the Habsburg Empire until 1797, after which it became part of the Habsburg Empire (1797–1866). After a short French interregnum, it was divided between the Habsburg Empire (from 1867 Austria-Hungary) and the Kingdom of Italy (1866–1914). Between the World Wars it was part of Italy, and after World War II (1945–1954) it was divided into Zone A (the Anglo-American occupation zone) and Zone B (the Yugoslav zone); the former was eventually ceded to Italy and the latter to Yugoslavia. Within Yugoslavia the peninsula was divided between the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Croatia, and in 1991 the former administrative border became the state border dividing Slovenia and Croatia.

Before World War II

Before World War II, ethnic division not only meant a power-dependence relationship but also a spatial distinction. The ruling class, which was Italian-speaking (and in Trieste partly German-speaking), lived in the coastal cities while small-scale farmers mostly of Slovene origin populated the hilly hinterland. The boundary between them was drawn by social, economic, and intellectual ranking, and between the World Wars by nationalist concepts driven by Fascist ideologies. Despite these differences, there was a strong connection between the farmers in the hilly hinterland and the townspeople in the coastal cities. It was these cities, Trieste in particular, which allowed the rural people to make a living. Agriculture was oriented toward supplying Trieste, which also offered jobs outside agriculture, and the issue of agricultural decline was therefore not so pressing. A class of part-time farmers began to develop who produced wine and vegetables for Trieste and simultaneously sought part-time seasonal work there. In this period the region that today is Slovene Istria functioned as a link between today's Croatian Istria and Trieste. This link was established by women peddlers called *Jajčarice* ("Eggwomen"). They were peasant women who in order to support their families travelled regularly to Croatian Istria and bought eggs there, paying for them in kind. They carried the eggs in rush baskets on their heads to sell in Trieste. For Croatian Istria these women were the only link to the modern world in Trieste. They were, in effect, a travelling shop, and their industriousness enabled their families to survive.

The initial restoration of cultural, economic, and political life after World War I, enhanced by the fact that it was the only time Istria was not on the periphery of a state such as Italy, extending deep into Slovene ethnic territory, ended with the Fascist takeover in 1922. The period that followed was marked by ethnic, economic, ideological, and linguistic pressures that resulted in economic stagnation, the collapse of farms, and emigration. The most evident landscape result of the official measures was

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the decline of viniculture. Wines that had been very much appreciated (and therefore sold well) during Habsburg times were confronted with competition from Italian wines. Subsequently, the authorities endeavoured to force the farmers to grow grains instead. Olive growers suffered the same fate. Other important changes included the linguistic sphere: place names, personal names, and the official language all had to be Italian.

After World War II

The lengthy war and post-war period ended in 1954 when the border between the two occupation zones became the state border. This new border resulted in profound changes in administrative regulation and in the population structure. Trieste, the region's former centre, fell on the Italian side of the closed border, and Koper/Capodistria assumed the role of a new regional centre. This fact changed everyday life since it broke centuries-long ties. The Iron Curtain forced a new definition of spatial, economic, and social flows that only began returning to the old tracks in the 1960's with the loosening of border restrictions. The local people who had never reconciled themselves to being cut off from Trieste forced the establishment of the so-called "Green Border" in the Trieste hinterland. In 1947 a group of women who were prevented from taking eggs into Italy threatened to commit suicide in front of the custom officials (Verginella, 1998). Istria was the only part of Slovenia where Communist ideas were not carried out as they were conceived. The authorities attempting to destroy old relationships and establish new ones were forced to reach a compromise with the local reality.

The population structure changed dramatically due to the mass emigration of Italians from the coastal cities, which was exacerbated by massive anti-communist propaganda from the Italian side and by repression from the Yugoslav side. Official policy sought to achieve the rapid colonization of three coastal cities with people from other parts of Slovenia and immigrants from other Yugoslav republics. This impacted on the social and population structures of these cities. Confiscated houses and mansions in old medieval quarters were converted to national or social property and occupied by financially weak newcomers. In the long run, this resulted in many of them being poorly managed and maintained. New neighbourhoods were built on the outskirts. Analyzing this top-down process, it is obvious that the traditional lifestyle was not considered in the urban planning policies. On the contrary, with the construction of blocks of flats the new settlers were forced to adopt a new universal lifestyle that disregarded regional traditions based on having an intimate, strong attachment to vegetable and fruit gardens (Mlinar, Kos, Hočevar & Trček, 2000).

The differences between the coastal cities and the hinterland remained, although on new foundations. Cities experienced intensive population and economic development with the stimulation of industry, freight traffic, and tourism; industry, in particular, was seen as the driving force guaranteeing rapid progress. On the other hand, the hilly hinterland faced a different destiny. In spite of an almost unchanged ethnic structure, the

traditional activities were in rapid decline. Farmers were attracted to the factories that appeared to guarantee a better life, not to mention the negative perception of agriculture, which was considered an ideological enemy of socialism. The result was obvious in the empty villages and abandoned agricultural land, especially in the more remote areas.

New names were given to the region. The old historical name "Istria" was no longer in favour. It was used when talking about the Croatian part of the peninsula, but even this use was limited to the coastline. Instead, a series of new artificial names was invented or some old ones were revived, but in a new context. The majority of these names were used by outsiders or by newcomers living in the coastal cities or imposed by urban planners. The name "Slovene Istria" began to appear during World War II but later was relegated to the background; firstly because official Yugoslav policy sought a national cohesion and secondly to obliterate the idea of Italian Irredentism. Deep down there was still an Istria, a name used by locals who in many cases publicly rejected certain constructed names such as *Obala* (Coast) or *Koprsko primorje* (Koper Littoral). The latter directly resembled the Habsburg naming tradition, e.g.,, *Küstenland* (Baskar, 2002). Relative to the naming activity, the entire region seemed to consist only of forty-six kilometres of narrow coastline, and the hilly hinterland was totally ignored.

After the independence of Slovenia

The new period started in 1991 when the administrative border with Croatia became the national border, which again caused the interruption of old and well-established flows. On a national and supranational level, it is important to note that this border emerged when other national borders were in the process of dissolving. On the local level, a variety of problems arose connected to social and spatial interlinking. The most affected included ethnically mixed marriages because of the problems of their national (un)affiliation, landowners with property in both countries, those with relatives across the border, employees working in a foreign country, etc. (Klemenčič, 2001). The tangible result was that people emigrated from the area, and arable land was left uncultivated. However, the physical boundary was minor compared with the mental one constructed by decision-makers that provoked constant tension between the two countries, not to mention the lack of certainty over the exact course of the border (Klemenčič, 2001).

Independence was soon followed by economic changes. Industry lost its alluring strength and unique character due to the economic decline. Increased unemployment and the improving status of farming in society stimulated people to resume traditional agricultural practices. This trend was emphasized by a modern lifestyle that included settlement patterns, food habits, and leisure activities. The first element is linked to suburbanization, that is, people moving from cities to the countryside in the immediate vicinity; the second is based on the attractive power of the Mediterranean; and the last is linked to universally sought-after activities, traditions, homeliness, and pristine heterogeneity. Istria has become a very popular area for day and weekend visits from

other parts of Slovenia as well as from Italy and for buying old stone house and transforming them into weekend retreats. The direct impact of this is the renovation of old houses and the spreading of vineyards and olive groves and a new differentiation of space based on proximity to the coastline or to major traffic routes and convenient access roads. The hilly hinterland is acquiring a twofold character: the areas closest to the coast are vital and flourishing while the more remote areas continue their trend of social and economic decline.

A REGION OF CONTESTED IDENTITY

The process of regional identity development in Slovene Istria was distorted several times in both time and spatial dimensions. The political changes and the border changes associated with them were so frequent in Slovene Istria that people did not have time to understand them, let alone comprehend them as part of their own personal and social world. Physical borders resulting from the political situation transformed the physical setting several times and each time caused the development of a wide variety of social and mental boundaries. Given the frequency of changes and the deeply embedded Mediterranean mentality, they never had time to, nor could, develop a national identity or a strong affiliation to only one country. This is also a reason why despite all the political changes, Istria as a whole remains a quite homogenous historical and cultural space (Bufon, 2001) within which the distinct identity of Slovene Istria has been developing.

The Yugoslav distortion

The Mediterranean landscape was the core around which the shaping of regional identity was focused, since other elements embodied in identity (historical, cultural, linguistic) have been contested or even denied in one way or another. When asked about nationality in Tito's Yugoslavia, the majority of elderly people answered they were "Istrians" as they could not decide whether they were Slovenes, Croatians, or Italians (Brumen, 2000). The language they spoke depended on the situation, that is, to whom and where they were speaking. Inhabitants emphasized being different from other Slovenes by conceptions linked to their perception of the national territory. When elderly people went to the hospital in Nova Gorica, a city built after World War II in the northern part of an area that used to be part of Italy, they only said they had been to Nova Gorica; however, when they went to Ljubljana, they added the additional comment that they had been in Yugoslavia. They did not perceive Ljubljana as being in "their own" country, considering it too different and too remote. On the other hand, they felt connected with Italy by economic, social, cultural, and historical ties.

The "above" concept, which in the case of Istria was very much in accordance with the "outsiders" concept, was overloaded with elements that reflected discredit on socialist Yugoslavia (e.g.,, the exodus of Italians) and were burdened with historical memories. For this reason, the use of the region's traditional name was discouraged and new names

concealing the "soul" of the region were invented. Slovene Istria is an excellent example of the narratives of identity contexts that derive from above (regimes of power) and their difference from the narratives that draw from below. But even the view from below was not uniform. Being newcomers, many coastal city dwellers were susceptible to official measures that blurred the Italian layer in the landscape and strove for the eradication of the traditional regional identity and the development of a new national identity. The hilly hinterland, on the other hand, retained a strongly manifested identity based on social and spatial Mediterranean elements and on historical narratives.

Figure 2: Eloquent graffiti in the centre of Ljubljana: originally the message mentioned Dinamo, one of the most popular Croatian football clubs, and implied that Istria is Croatian. The graffiti was soon revised: Istria is Slovene, and the name of the club was crossed out (photo: Mimi Urbanc).

The Slovene layer

The year 1991 was not just a political turnaround. It enabled local groups and communities to make their own choices and thus become active actors in shaping their own physical and mental environment. The affirmation and valorisation of locality are manifest in a variety of journals, reviews, and books bearing the name "Slovene Istria" in their titles, not to mention numerous books dealing with local cuisine, wines, traditions, and history. The region is gaining a positive image based on multi-ethnicity, multiculturalism, authenticity, openness, and other such fashionable broad-minded terms voiced across all spheres of life as a counterbalance to accelerated globalization. Backward and peripheral, mostly rural, landscapes with well-preserved enduring elements such as terraced vineyards, small olive groves, densely built villages that give

an impression of strongholds, stone houses constructed without mortar, and cobbled courtyards dominated by a mulberry tree have fulfilled the desire for a pristine and romantic lifestyle. The embedded identity of this Mediterranean landscape has been given a fresh impetus by modern trends in lifestyle as the result of an outside perspective of a regional identity that coincided with the tourism industry marketing not only seaside resorts but also romantic images of rural life.

Economic development has been accompanied by repopulation, which has produced a new type of foreigner: people from other parts of Slovenia who invest or spend money here. Given their historical experience, the locals have been highly suspicious of outsiders, irrespective of their nationality. It was foreigners who in most cases did not understand the essence of Istria and thus caused a distorted image of Slovene Istria. In spite of this, the region-or at least its parts in the vicinity of the coastline—is experiencing a social and economic regeneration, creating a new dimension in the identity of Slovene Istria (Kerma, Plesec, 2001). Bearing in mind the basic paradigm of identity, namely the distinction between "us" and "others," it is evident there has been a shift in the factors that distort the shaping of identity.

Unfortunately, the construction of a region has not reached the final stage of its shaping. According to Paasi (2000), the last point following territorial and symbolic shaping is institutional shaping to maintain territoriality and the attached symbolism. Slovene Istria has reached the third level, but not in every spectrum as there is a gap in the institutional and administrative organization. The region did not find its way as a unique and coherent region bearing the name "Slovene Istria" into regional development policies and programs. Social and cultural boundaries do not match the administrative, statistical, ecclesiastical, and constituency boundaries.

## DISCUSSION: HOW TO OVERCOME DISPARITIES IN SHAPING A VIABLE REGION

To sum up the various observations from the case study, it is borders that have distorted the process of shaping regional identity. Politically induced changes forced border changes and created a variety of boundaries, including mental sets. The most obvious example of this is the Slovene-Croatian border. After the fall of Communism, the only logical path for Slovenia was toward the West to bring the country back into Central Europe where in the opinion of most it has always truly belonged. Thus, the new border was assigned the status of a border between Europe and the Balkans, where the ideas of accentuating local diversity, the autonomy of regions, cross-border cooperation, and other pan-European concepts did not take root.

In the case of Slovene Istria, mental boundaries are constructed mostly by fear and mistrust of "others." Again, the situation is complicated because of relationships with "others" in which some "others" are seen as "us" and some of "us" are seen as "others," thus blurring the boundary. The result is that material, symbolic, and power relations become fused. What complicates the situation even more is the "above" political

policies based on ideology. Modern politics in Slovenia has not yet overcome some old fears. The most obvious is a persecution complex against the name "Istria." Even "Slovene Istria" is not distinctive enough. The local ideas have not yet found their way into the national consciousness.

Roca (2000) maintains that identity reflects the nature of the global-local interface. How to make this relationship harmonious in order to retain the character of a region is an oft-repeated question. One of the possible solutions to the dilemma is offered by regional identity itself, as Osborne (2001) put it, the nexus of traditional wisdom, cultural practices, forms of communication, and conventions for imagining the past. The things of value must be emphasized, strengthened, and preserved and thus made central to the modern comprehension of "place." A discussion of values opens a broad topic that is far beyond this paper, but in a highly simplified way we could define them as elements that are attractive enough for people to identify with them. Only elements that can be socially reproduced can form a basis for a well-balanced relationship between people and their environment.

Tuan (2003) maintains that place does not fix to any scale but rather relates to human inter-subjective experience. According to human geography concepts, space is seen as a set of social relations branching in open horizons (Massey, 1994). Istria as a whole can be understood as an open space with an overall identity. Within it, several sub-identities could materialize, one of which might be "Slovene Istria." In this case, landscape is highly appropriate for defining identity since it is free from all disputed ideas and comprehensions. In order to make regions functionally viable and cognitive, it is therefore necessary that the inhabitants knit a vibrant network of attachments to the landscape that is likely to be followed by feasible land management plans. Fears and prejudices are then likely to start disappearing.
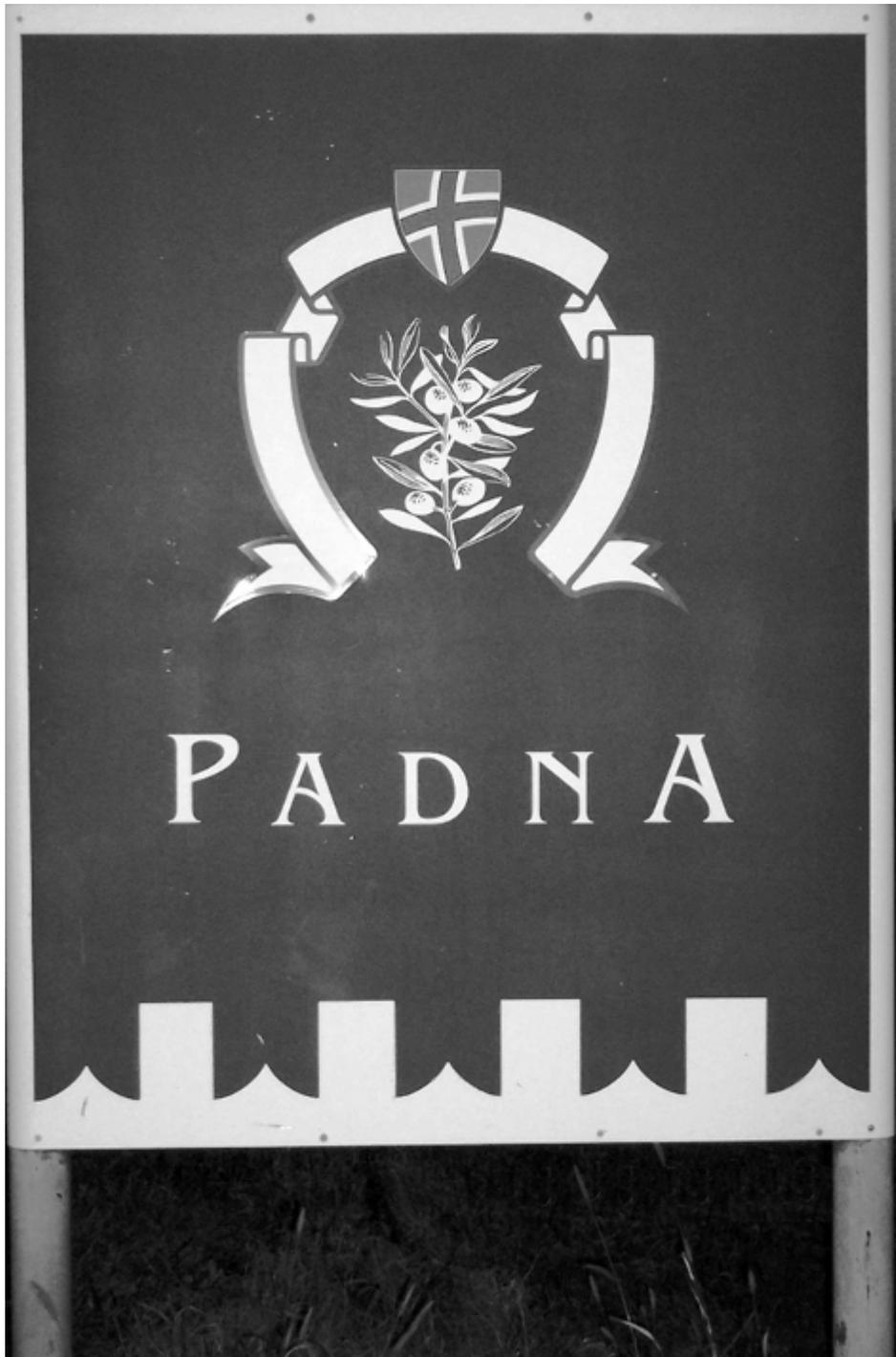
Figure 3: Along with the grapevine, the olive tree is one of the strongest and often seen symbols of Slovene Istria and olive oil is a popular and valued product for sale (photo: Denis Goja).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the process through which regional identity in Slovenia Istria has been shaped and reshaped many times, analyzing the relationship between changing political powers, changing a material region, meanings in the landscape, and the multilayered regional identity of Slovene Istria, which Brumen (1997) vividly described as "a supermarket of identities." There are some elements of regional identity that are well pronounced, especially physical, cultural, and historical elements. What distorts the image of the region is that, due to political shifts, conceptions of place did not keep pace with border changes.

The most important thing is to strengthen the meaning of place, which will help to overcome disparities in shaping a viable region: place names, affiliation and self-perception. One way to promote a sense of being "Istrian" is to further develop a positive image deriving from the well-preserved cultural landscapes and from a widespread desire for the Mediterranean lifestyle. The next step is to give border changes a positive connotation, to present this historical development as an element that undoubtedly played an important role in shaping Istria as a very special European region. In order to achieve this, the existing borders must be seen as an element that connects rather than delineates. Once Istria is placed within its population's mental space, the possibility will exist for it to be recognized on the formal level. Only then will management plans include prudent and long-term measures for preserving and developing its natural, cultural, and historical values. Only measures that consider the region's special features and qualities will allow the region to develop toward stabilization.

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