

## Young People – Women – Border Regions

The annual Euregio conference in Poysdorf has developed into an important meeting point for the central European border regions. This mutual exchange of experience is organised by the EUREGIOforum, a combination of Lower Austrian regional managements with their partner organisations from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Different topics each year deal with the most diverse aspects of “living together” and thus provide perspectives for the future of the border region.

The motto of this year’s conference was the subject of “young people – women – border regions”. Here it was primarily a case of utilising the thus far undiscovered opportunities together: Women may indeed already play an important role in interdisciplinary cooperation, however, they are still not sufficiently involved in the decision-making structures. Although the issue of “EU enlargement” is highly rated among young people, in the border regions at the moment they, too, have too few opportunities for involvement. This is even more unfortunate, as it is their future that is being shaped. However, one thing does seem clear to the young people: the growth of Europe means of greater opportunities above all economically, although only highly qualified workers will be able to take advantage of these. In the sphere of education and training, the Austrian border regions will thus have to work particularly hard if they are not to fall behind.

More educational projects and institutions will have to be located in the border regions.

As the deputy provincial governor Liese Prokop emphasised at the opening of the Euregio con-

ference, enlargement is currently one of the most important issues facing Europe. Prokop, since 1999 president of the Assembly of European Regions (AER), emphasised that regional particularities are one of the strengths of a many-sided and colourful Europe. On the one hand it is a question of a united but not a uniform Europe. With regard to creating the preconditions for enlargement, the work of the Euregio forum could not be too highly estimated, said Prokop.

In relation to the conference’s general theme, “young people – women – border regions”, Prokop said that international meetings of young people are a must for openness, tolerance, natural working together and overcoming weaknesses. In the Mistelbach district, 44 per cent of the young people are already of the opinion that the proximity to the border is absolutely an advantage. In order not to spoil this positive attitude through a negative employment situation, a total of Euro 25m is available in Lower Austria for the apprentices’ safety net and the special programme for unemployed youth. In the context of the “gender mainstreaming” decision of the Lower Austrian provincial assembly agreed unanimously on 3 October 2002, particular hopes are invested in the Interreg project “GEKO – gender-sensitive cooperation in cross-border regional development”.

The journalist and speaker for the Austrian-Czech Dialogue Forum, Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi, analysed the difficult Austro-Czech relationship and went into the causes of the differing perceptions of their common history.

It will take time before two groups with such different views as the Czechs and the Austrians

will be able to bring their history to a common denominator. One could therefore not praise Euregio's work highly enough, where there are people on both sides endeavouring to understand the other and to work on a new neighbourhood together.

In the high-calibre panel discussion, experts such as Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi, Markus Hess (Potsdam University), Alfred Kager (Lower Austria provincial youth councillor) and Ondrej Liska (Youth for Intercultural Understanding, Brno), together with representatives of women's associations and youth organisations, exchanged information and discussed the strengthening of intercultural understanding in order to improve cooperation in the border region with regard to promoting EU enlargement.

In the afternoon, workshops were held on the subject of "Gender man's dreaming – women in cross-border cooperation", and "stay-at-homes and birds of passage – youth in border regions". Best-practice projects were presented, such as a networking project by the women's initiatives in the Bodensee area, the "open your eyes" school students and teacher training project between Styria and Slovenia, and the situation report on youth work in the new German Länder on the border with Poland.

The workshops primarily discussed the current situation of women and young people. There are already many initiatives and projects, and the starting situation on both sides of the border is very similar. Past attempts had already been made to improve the situation in the border region, however not enough was done. In the course of the workshops, women and young people had the opportunity to present their standpoint to a broad audience. The workshops' conclusion was that still more needs to be done for those concerned and that there is an acute need for action.

The cultural conclusion of the conference was a film evening in the Herrbaumgarten cinema: Süd-nord-west describes a film journey by Mathias Ilg and Daniela Cermaková through the Weinviertel [part of Lower Austria], western Slovakia and southern Moravia.

With the subject of "young people – women – border regions", the 2002 Euregio conference with approximately 200 participants from the Czech republic, Slovakia and Austria provided an important fresh impetus.

Women are important players in cross-border cooperation. Their particular communication ability means that they are primarily the ones who do the often difficult everyday work in the border regions. Although they manage the majority of the cross-border projects, they still play a subsidiary role in the decision-making structures.

Young people in the border regions face specific challenges. These rural and often infrastructurally disadvantaged areas with thinly spread jobs and places in education, offer hardly any perspectives for the future. The route to the city is often the only way out.

Young people and women make a considerable contribution to regional development. At the moment, however, this work is often invisible and is not sufficiently reflected in the development strategies of the regions. What is important here is the consideration of the different requirements, changes in circumstances and structures in favour of women and young people, and the participation and right to a voice in decision-making structures.

"Young people – women – border regions" is also the subject of the 2003 Euregio Innovation Prize. With the Euregio prize, the Euregio forum and the sponsors, Casinos Austria and the Kommunalkredit Austria AG, would like to support particularly innovative and successful cross-border projects. The prize is awarded in two categories, on the one hand for project ideas, and on the other hand for projects that have already been implemented. Particular weight will be attached to cooperation with partners from the neighbouring countries. The target groups of project applicants are essentially municipalities, associations, regional initiatives etc. Projects can be submitted to the Lower Austrian regional management until 16 May 2003.