

# To the East, Schengen Has Mixed Results

The enlargement of the Schengen area in 2007 opened Western Europe to former Soviet bloc states. • Gone are the Cold War-era border crossings that divided the continent for more than half-a-century. • Unchecked frontiers and easy passage has revolutionized both travel and traffic flow. • The openings have produced cases of remarkable rapprochement, with ties between Austria and Slovakia as a good example. • But cordiality is not always a constant. In some cases, historical animosities endure. •

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**W**e're at the Austrian-Slovak border. On the Austrian side, fields extend as far as the eye can see. On Slovak lands, Bratislava's buildings loom close at hand. Meanwhile, hundreds of cars and trucks from all over Europe zip across the border. Gone are backlogs, customs booths, and the daunting presence of police and soldiers. Austrian vehicles now pour freely into Slovakia (which was Czechoslovakia until 1993) just as Slovak cars head the other way into Austria.

Such easy transit is far cry from the situation that existed 20 years ago, when Cold War was still a day-to-day reality and Europe's rigidly demarcated East-West presented daunting challenges. Few Westerners crossed into Czechoslovakia, and when they did, watchful authorities examined their every move. Austrian border officials had an easier time, since Czechs and Eastern European nationals, locked in their Soviet-managed prison, rarely even made it to the border.

Then the Berlin Wall came down.

Within years, the barbed wire fences and lookout towers that had dominated the East-West borders fell by the wayside. Travel and traffic in both directions picked up. At the same time, the border crossings remained intact. Cars and trucks still waited for hours to gain entry into their neighboring states.

The revolution had to wait until Dec. 21, 2007. That was the day the Schengen area was enlarged to include the eight former communist countries that had joined the European Union in 2004 (including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia). For the first time, freedom of movement, already established in the "old" West, returned to Europe's east. It was at that moment that the last vestiges of the Iron Curtain came down. Finally, Bratislava and the Baltic States were destinations that all could reach without infinite paperwork. A bureaucratic era ended.

**B**ratislava is a stone's throw from the Austrian border. First up is the Petržalka district, a lethal mass of *panelaks*, the concrete housing vestiges of the Soviet era, in which some 115,000 people live, about a quarter of the city's population. Austrians called the area the "Wall of Bratislava" during the Cold War.

The 2004 eastward expansion of the Schengen area dramatically changed the Austrian view of Slovakia. For years, Austrians saw their neighbors as geographically close but culturally remote. Under communism, Bratislava was near and far at once. Now, Slovakia is close in every respect. Vienna and Bratislava are separated by only 60



The border city of Znojmo in the Czech Republic is a haven for Austrian tourism. Families come to shop. There are theme parks for children. Sex tourism also thrives.

kilometers, less than an hour's drive. Both cities have the Danube in common, and the river has acted as a unifier in the joint development of economic, cultural and infrastructure projects. Behind this is the more ambitious idea of creating large and dynamic greater metropolitan area that would include both hubs. Bratislava has a free magazine appropriately called "Twin City Journal," which is distributed in travel agencies and tourist offices to help promote the idea of a greater city.

The disappearance of border restrictions has reinvigorated the entire Austria-Slovakia border area, opening the door to wholesale changes in demographics. The Austrian border town of Wolfsthal, population 600, is a case in point. The picturesque town, with eleventh century origins, has a Romanesque-era church, a pond, a town band, and an inn. More important, it also has a growing Slovak contingent. Some 80 people have moved here from Bratislava. Most have fled rising housing costs, which have surged since Slovakia entered the EU (par-

ticularly the cost of brick buildings). Purchasing a home or pay rent has become prohibitively expensive for some Bratislava families. A number have quit the city altogether and sought refuge in Wolfsthal, where housing costs and rents are markedly lower.

The Wolfsthal-Bratislava commute is simple, making the new village residents into suburbanites. Still, they must work in Slovakia, since Austria was among a number of EU countries that negotiated restrictions to protect their labor markets from the incursion of cheap labor. This doesn't faze the new residents. They drive to Bratislava in the morning and come home to their homes in Wolfsthal after work. It's a 12-minute drive into the city through an efficient network of roads, most of which avoid major bottlenecks. There's also the 901 bus, which shuttles between the Slovak capital and Wolfsthal and also takes about 15 minutes.

Wolfsthal's popularity among Slovaks is due in large measure to Mayor Gerhard Schrödinger's popularity. A former border guard who married a Slovak policewoman, he's an apostle of European unity and social integration. He consciously goes out of his way to greet each new resident with a handshake and makes sure that his townspeople treat all new residents with cordial respect. "If

you say — we don't want you here, well, they will still come. And then what?," he told the BBC in 2008. "They have the right to live here. It's better to welcome them."

When I met him last year, Schrödinger told me that the extent of the rapprochement between Austria and Slovakia had gone beyond his wildest dreams. Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he never imagined the countries could become so close, so quickly. "Even in the 1990s, there was still considerable diffidence between the two sides," he says. "The amount of economic and cultural contact was limited. Now, the border is an open corridor. Vienna and Bratislava are twinned. We have the same currency [Slovakia joined the eurozone in 2009] and Slovaks have begun to move around, including moving here, to Wolfsthal. Every time I think about it I still see it as amazing." True the *panalak* Wall of Bratislava continues to exist as a social problem and an eyesore. But getting beyond it no longer represents impossibility. People have started dreaming again.

**B**ut the Europeanism represented by the Wolfsthal's social integration isn't a constant. In some places, history weighs a ton. Take the Sudetenland, the Czech lands located on the border with Germany. The territory once had a German majority, which Hitler used as a pretext for his invasion of Czechoslovakia and as an excuse at the Munich conference. After World War II, the Communist Czech government, on orders from Moscow, ordered the expulsion of three million Sudeten Germans under the "collective guilt" principle. All were accused of having participated in supporting the Nazi regime. This produced civil strife and an exodus that led to near-total depopulation. The economy collapsed and the region became a kind of a no man's land.

Little has changed since then. Traveling through what was once fertile territory is like navigating a wasteland.

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COUNTERCLOCK WISE FROM LEFT In Szczecin, Poland many buildings are in ruins, while in barbed wire outside Fertorakos on the Austro-Hungarian border recalls Cold War days. Bratislava, upper right, still has many Communist-era high-rise "panelaks," the popular housing of the day. The checks and inspections that went with all traffic between Austria and Slovakia (then Czechoslovakia) are now a thing of the past.



Wherever you drive, there's little trace of any productive activity. Most villages are deserted and roads are in bad shape. Cross over into the German side, into Bavaria, and little changes. It's as if the Czechs and Germans, mindful of Hitler's aggression and the later expulsions, had decided to create a dead zone by default, a withered memory lane, a buffer from unconscionable memories. Driven by an intensification of the pan-European spirit, Berlin and Prague have reconciled. Both have apologized for historical events that kept them at arm's length for decades. But all along the border, the weight of 20<sup>th</sup> century events is still deeply felt. You can feel it in the great territorial nothing that, apologies aside, still divides the two nations.

**W**herever there are large shifts in populations, the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emerges like clockwork. This holds true not only in terms of traditional Cold War borders, which divided the West from Soviet-run East Bloc, but also for domestic borders between former East Bloc nations. Another no man's land, for example, arises between the border of the former East German and Poland, plunges us into another no man's land, the Baltic seaport of Szczecin.

Traditionally a German city (Stettin), the Red Army occupied it in March 1945. Soon after, the city's majority German population was expelled or imprisoned (often by Soviet forces) and the city turned over to Communist Poland. It was renamed Szczecin and repopulated in part by Polish refugees who had fled lands annexed by the Soviets as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Though Szczecin became a major Polish industrial center and an important seaport in later decades, it has struggled to build an identity. Even today, the city of 400,000 seems atonal, decadent, all but left to its own devices. A gray city.

In truth, most of the exiles decamped here never felt at home. Most nursed the memory of their former homelands and impressing a cult of nostalgia on their local descendants, including those born in the city. This perpetuated and reinforced a sense of disorientation, alienation, and mistrust — directed at the Germans, seen as potential revanchists, and the Russians, perceived as looters of the lands of others.

The resentment is reciprocated on the German side. German exiles and their descendants see the Poles as hostile occupiers of a city that by historical right is German



to the core. Moral of the story: The Sudetenland is far from being alone. Just as the borderlands between the Czech Republic and Germany have the feel of a hollowed-out core, so does Szczecin. The Baltic region has historical cavities that have yet to be filled. On the border between Germany and Poland, giant wind turbines fill in for trees. Though Berlin and Warsaw celebrate the strength of their diplomatic ties, certainly stronger than those between Germany and the Czech Republic, there's little sign that the relationship is helping the region mature.

**T**he Czech city of Znojmo is near the border with Lower Austria, slightly more than an hour by train from Vienna. It's another example of a wide-open border city, frequented by Austrians and Germans on a daily basis. But Znojmo changed its stripes after 1989. The reason was its burgeoning sex industry. On outskirts are rows of nightclubs, small hotels, and brothels, which are legal in the Czech Republic.

Znojmo's transformation into a seedy border town reflects the social upheavals that followed the end of communism the irresistible advance of a free market system that offered quick cash. Communism's fall battered the citizens of sheltered Czechoslovakia. Women were espe-

cially hard hit. Many turned to prostitution in border towns, trying to lure German and Austrian traffic across the border. It has become a thriving if squalid business.

Some 25,000 Czech women are legal prostitutes. The human traffic in and out of Znojmo is ceaseless and growing. Casinos have also sprouted up, supplementing sex money with gambling proceeds. "As far as the prices of sexual services are concerned, the costs here are very reasonable for clients from the west," Czech police official Jitka Gjuricova said in 2006. Little has changed.

Znojmo has a surreal dimension. Nearby the sex-strip nightclubs and neon-lit casinos is Excalibur City, a shopping-mall complex composed of outlet stores, restaurants, cafés, and even a children's theme park in the form of a medieval castle. "The World is Yours," says a promotional poster, the words of Tony Montana, the Cuban mobster played by Al Pacino Martin Scorsese's famous film "Scarface." There's also the flea market called Chinatown. Some four million people visit the mall annually. If the economics of the Czech border depend on the sex trade, the Hungarian corridor offers... dentists. Sopron, near the border between Austria and Hungary has acquired a reputation as a dental care center. The city boasts countless clinics and hospitals dedicated to dentistry and oral surgery.

LEFT TO RIGHT Many consider Fertorakos the town that helped generate the end of the Cold War, simply by hosting a picnic. Meanwhile, Sopron, also in Hungary, has become a hub for low-cost dentistry. Workers relaxing in Szczecin, Poland (Stetin), a city with deep German roots. Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, while vibrant, has lost some workers to nearby Austrian cities.

Signs offering new cures and oral repair methods dot the city center. Most important, costs are low. Some local citizens have become rich by developing new ways to fill cavities, implant oral prostheses, and develop new kinds of dentures. The Web has helped the dental industry, with Hungarian oral surgeons working tirelessly to advertise their services online by creating multilingual websites and playing on the rising costs of dental care in Western Europe. An Italian woman told the Italian daily "Corriere della Sera" that paid Sopron doctors €5,000 for extensive and effective dental work, including surgery. The best price quote she could find in Italy for similar work was €20,000. Meanwhile, Hungarians are already working to undercut all competitors in another major industry, plastic surgery. Sopron hopes to become the European capital for low-cost liposuction, breast reconstruction, and nose jobs.

If the Cold War ended in Berlin it got a head start at Fertorakos, a few kilometers from Sopron. On Aug. 19, 1989, Austrian and Hungarian officials decided to reopen the border so that citizens on both sides could attend a joint picnic. It represented a first step by a new and more tolerant generation of Hungarian Communist authorities. But the picnic set a series of unscripted events in motion.

By chance, the Fertorakos picnic attracted a group of East Germans on holiday in Hungary (Hungary was a popular East German tourist destination). Seeing a golden opportunity, the East Germans defected to Austria, with Hungarian police offering no resistance. In the weeks that followed, other East German began migrating toward Fertorakos, also hoping to cross the border unhindered. The exodus generated demands by the East German opposition that all East Germans be given the right to immigrate. Their demands eventually led to mass demonstrations. A chain reaction was born that culminated with the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989.

Fertorakos today has monuments commemorating its role in the historical events of that year. They include a granite door sculpted by local stonemasons and a Japanese-style pagoda donated by the Japanese-Hungarian Friendship Association. On the slivers of land that once divided ideological empires you can now bike, hike, or just take a walk. You can also stop for a picnic. ●