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The Breadbasket of Slovenia: The Genealogy of a Metonym and Its Role in Nation-Building

IZVLEČEK

ŽITNICA SLOVENIJE: GENEALOGIJA METONIMIJE IN NJEN POMEN V PROCESU GRADNJE NACIJE

Članek obravnava genealogijo in vlogo, ki jo je imela in jo še zmeraj ima pri gradnji naroda metonimija »žitnica Slovenije«. Prekmurje, ki leži na severovzhodu Slovenije, so politiki, znanstveniki in novinarji pogosto opisovali kot žitnico države – deželo agrarnega izobilja, ki zagotavlja najpomembnejša žita in živila. Ta naziv, utemeljen na rodovitni prsti, ugodnem podnebjju in obsežni pridelavi pšenice, koruze in krompirja, se je uveljavil po vključitvi regije v jugoslovansko državo po prvi svetovni vojni.

Pred letom 1919 se je izraz žitnica v slovenski tiskani kulturi pojavljal v splošnem prenesenem pomenu, specifična povezava s Prekmurjem pa se je pojavila šele v povezavi z razpadom Avstro-Ogrske in teritorialno reorganizacijo, ki je sledila. Raba metonimije je imela dvojno vlogo: služila je kot gospodarski opis in kot simbolni instrument nacionalne integracije. Slovenski uradniki in intelektualci, ki v glavnem niso bili seznanjeni s prekmursko realnostjo, so poudarjali kmetijsko bogastvo pokrajine, da bi upravičili njeno vključitev kot del slovenskega ozemlja v okviru novonastale Kraljevine Srbov, Hrvatov in Slovencev.

Medvojna publicistika je popularizirala podobo Prekmurja kot »naše žitnice« in jo vtisnila v slovensko nacionalno imaginacijo, in to kljub trdovratni revščini, prekomerni naseljenosti in pomanjkanju hrane v tej regiji. Ta paradoks – med pripovedjo o izobilju in izkušnjo pomanjkanja – ponazarja, kako je metonimija služila kot orodje nacionalne integracije.

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Obenem z zamegljevanjem strukturnih šibkosti regije je spodbujala njeno simbolno apropiacijo in pripadnost, povezujoč Prekmurje s slovensko nacijo. Metonimija je še zmeraj v rabi. Zasledimo jo v političnih in akademskih kontekstih, kar odraža njeno aktualnost.

Ključne besede: Prekmurje (Slovenija), žitnica, narodotvorni diskurzi, postimperialne tranzicije, obmejna območja

ABSTRACT

This article traces the genealogy and nation-building role of the phrase “breadbasket of Slovenia” as a metonym for the Prekmurje region. Located in northeastern Slovenia, Prekmurje has often been portrayed by politicians, scientists, and journalists as the country’s breadbasket: a land of agricultural abundance that provides essential grain and foodstuffs. This designation—grounded in fertile soil, a favorable climate, and its significant production of wheat, corn, and potatoes—became prominent after the region’s incorporation into the Yugoslav state following the First World War.

Before 1919, the term žitnica (“breadbasket” and “granary” in English) appeared in Slovenian print culture in a broader figurative sense, but its specific association with Prekmurje emerged in the context of Austria-Hungary’s collapse and the territorial reorganization that followed. That metonymy fulfilled a dual purpose: it served as an economic descriptor and as a symbolic instrument of national integration. Slovenian officials and intellectuals, largely unfamiliar with Prekmurje’s realities, emphasized its agricultural wealth to justify its incorporation into the Slovenian territory of the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

Interwar journalism popularized the image of Prekmurje as “our breadbasket,” embedding it in the Slovenian national imagination despite the region’s persistent poverty, overpopulation, and food insecurity. This paradox—between the narrative of abundance and the lived experience of deprivation—illustrates how the breadbasket trope functioned as a tool of national integration. While obscuring structural fragilities, it fostered symbolic ownership and belonging, binding Prekmurje to the Slovenian nation. Persisting into the present, the metonym is still invoked across political and academic contexts, attesting to its ongoing significance.

Keywords: Prekmurje (Slovenia), breadbasket, nation-building discourses, post-imperial transitions, borderlands

Introduction

Prekmurje, a region in the northeasternmost part of Slovenia, is “our breadbasket.” Slovenian parliamentarians have left no doubt about this during the recent debates. Positioned at the crossroads of Hungary, Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia this territory has been recently cast in the National Assembly as the area of Slovenia that provides bread “for us.” Prekmurje is much more than just a region of opportunity, observed MP Nataša Sukič in November 2021: “After all, this is our country’s breadbasket.”¹

Similarly, a year earlier, an MP representing the Hungarian national minority residing in Prekmurje emphasized that the proposed document was “important for the further development of Prekmurje as a breadbasket.”² In March 2018, following six hours of debate over Slovenia’s future at the plenary session, the Minister for the Environment and Spatial Planning, Irena Majcen, spoke as a guest and pointedly referred to Slovenia’s breadbasket. Climate change would require investments in Prekmurje’s irrigation if we wanted the region’s rich soil to keep generating abundant yields, she argued.³ Lastly, Franc Breznik, a member of the Slovenian Democratic Party, also stated at a meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on Economic Affairs in September 2021 that the plains of Prekmurje are an outstanding agricultural area—the breadbasket of Slovenia.⁴

Admittedly, these statements amount only to anecdotal evidence. Nevertheless, they represent a body of assertions voiced by Slovenian parliamentarians across a wide spectrum of worldviews and political convictions. Judging from available sources, at least in the last decade, there have been no voices in parliament questioning the economic role and symbolic significance of Prekmurje as Slovenia’s breadbasket.⁵

Slovenian experts and scientists also occasionally use the phrase “breadbasket of Slovenia” or “Slovenian breadbasket” to denote Prekmurje. It is somewhat unexpected to come across *antonomasia*—a change of a proper name with the phrase—in texts where clarity and unambiguity are required.⁶ Yet in a Slovene-speaking academic context, in contrast to parliamentary dialogues, such usage is often grounded in solid agromonic and statistical facts. As a result, the phrase functions not merely as a rhetorical

1 “27. redna seja Državnega zbora (25.11.2021),” <https://www.dz-rs.si/wps/portal/Home/seje/izbranaSeja?seja=sEUEepT0199ZjKc4uJB30g&uid=F712F2333CEF8BC3C125878B003A9B78&mandat=VIII>.

2 “Sejni zapisi Državnega zbora. 15. seja (27., 28. in 29. januar 2020),” https://fotogalerija.dz-rs.si/datoteke/Publikacije/Sejni_zapisi_Drzavnega_zbora/2018-2022/2020_01_27_S_15.pdf.

3 “Sejni zapisi državnega zbora. 55. izredna seja (16. marec 2018),” https://fotogalerija.dz-rs.si/datoteke/Publikacije/Sejni_zapisi_Drzavnega_zbora/2014-2018/2018_03_16_IS_55.pdf.

4 “Odbor za gospodarstvo. 15. redna seja (9. september 2021),” https://www.dz-rs.si/wps/portal/Home/seje/izbranaSejaDt/!ut/p/z/1/04_Sj9CPykssy0xPLMnMz0vMAfIjo8zivSy9Hb283Q0N_L0NzA0CQ0xMQy28LA3c3U30w1EVuBsFmRoEuhg5-QYbGBsEBxvpRxGj3wAHcDQgTj8eBVH4jS_IDQ0NdVRUBAAe3pcS/dz/dS/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEH/?seja=pjXJQDtOFA4g4-bXoV7DyQ&uid=33667F925DEC984DC125871B001E512F&mandat=VIII.

5 See Andrej Pančur, Katja Meden, Tomaž Erjavec, Mihael Ojsteršek, Mojca Šorn, and Neja Blaj Hribar, *Slovenian Parliamentary Corpus (1990–2022) siParl 4.0* (Ljubljana: Institute of Contemporary History, 2024), <http://hdl.handle.net/11356/1936> (accessed online).

6 On cases of *antonomasia* in the Croatian language see Ana Grgić and Davor Nikolić, “‘Ovaj grad zovu još i...’ – o *antonomazijama* za toponime,” *Folia onomastica Croatica* 23 (2014): 77–94.

device, but also as an implicit analytical category that shapes scholarly interpretations.⁷ As highlighted by the authors of the “first regional geographical monograph of Slovenia,” the lowland area of Prekmurje along the Mura/Mur River (together with a narrow strip of flat land on the other, Styrian bank) “is rightly considered the breadbasket of Slovenia, as in 1993 it produced a good third of all wheat, slightly less corn, and a tenth of all potatoes in Slovenia.”⁸

Since at least the late 1980s, the notion of Prekmurje as the breadbasket of Slovenia has rested on convincing empirical evidence. Due to fertile soil, a favorable continental climate, and a landscape with substantial flat areas, conditions here are well suited for agriculture. Already before 1919, the landed estates had concentrated on intensive grain production, while in the socialist era after 1945, systematic reclamation of swampy areas and the introduction of heavy mechanization further intensified agricultural production.⁹ Even the transitional period from the late socialist to the post-socialist economy did not diminish the importance of agriculture in Prekmurje. On the contrary, unlike other parts of Slovenia, which experienced a significant decline in farming, the area of arable land cultivated here increased by 14%.¹⁰ The statistical region of Pomurje—which roughly overlaps with Prekmurje—is still Slovenia’s principal agricultural zone. Although it covers only 6.6% of the country’s territory, it accounts for more than a fifth of all arable land, on which almost half of all wheat and almost a third of all corn in Slovenia is grown today.¹¹

Representations of Prekmurje, however, are marked by a paradox. Although the region is frequently portrayed as the “breadbasket of Slovenia,” it is also closely associated with socio-economic fragility characteristic of geographically remote and underdeveloped areas. Underneath the solid statistical certainties and picturesque views of

7 Maks Wraber, “Gozdna vegetacijska slika in gozdnogojitveni problemi Prekmurja,” *Geografski vestnik* 23 (1951): 179. Etelka Korpič-Horvat, *Zaposlovanje in deagrarizacija pomurskega prebivalstva* (Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba, 1992), 190. Oto Luthar, ed., *Prekmurje za radovedneže in ljubitelje* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2010), 15, 16. Marijan M. Klemenčič et al., *Življenjska (ne)moč obrobnihih podeželskih območij v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2018), 13. Stanka Dešnik, “Barve trideželnega parka,” in Darja Senčur Peček, ed., *Vanekovo stoletje: Ob stoletnici rojstva dr. Vaneka Šiftarja* (Murska Sobota: Univerzitetna založba Univerze, 2019), 225. Božo Repe, “Vsakdo mora imeti priliko, da udejstvi vse svoje telesne in duševne moči.”: Milko Brezigar in prvi slovenski program narodnega gospodarstva (Ljubljana: Založba Univerze, 2023), 52, 63.

8 Drago Perko and Milan Orožen Adamič, eds., *Slovenia: Landscapes and People*, 3rd ed. (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2001), 575.

9 On the pre-1919 aristocratic estates in Prekmurje and the interwar land reform, see Miroslav Kokolj, *Prekmurjski Slovenci: od narodne osvoboditve do nacistične okupacije, 1919–1941* (Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba, 1984), 483–591. For an overview of the developments in the region’s agriculture after 1945, see Korpič-Horvat, *Zaposlovanje in deagrarizacija pomurskega prebivalstva*, 153–73. For a vivid description of the survival strategies of the rural population during the socialist era, drawing in part on the testimonies of farmers from Prekmurje see Polona Sitar, “Agrikulturna modernizacija in življenjski svet podjetnih polkmetov. Integrirana kmečka ekonomija v socialistični Sloveniji,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 61, No. 2 (2021): 142–68. Lev Centrih and Polona Sitar, *Pol kmet, pol proletarec: integrirana kmečka ekonomija v socialistični Sloveniji, 1945–1991* (Koper: Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2023), 151–228.

10 Tomaž Cunder, “Kmetijstvo v Pomurju danes in jutri,” in Tatjana Kikec, ed., *Pomurje [Elektronski vir]: trajnostni regionalni razvoj ob reki Muri: zbornik / 20. zborovanje slovenskih geografov, Ljutomer – Murska Sobota, 26.–28. marec 2009* (Ljubljana: Zveza geografov Slovenije; Društvo geografov Pomurja, 2009), 146, https://www.drustvo-geografov-pomurja.si/projekti/zborovanje/Zbornik_geografov_POMURJE_2009.pdf.

11 *Regionalni razvojni program Pomurske regije 2021–2027* (Murska Sobota: Razvojni center Murska Sobota, 13 June 2022), 5, https://www.rcms.si/upload/files/RRP_Pomurje_2021-2027_13-6-2022.pdf.

grain fields on fertile plains, conveying an image of stability, security, and abundance, lies a long-standing and empirically well-documented reality of social vulnerability and economic fragility. The region was already overpopulated at the end of the nineteenth century, forcing landless farmers and members of smallholding families to seasonal and permanent migrations.¹² Similar conditions continued in interwar Yugoslavia: the land reform only accelerated the fragmentation of landholdings and the emergence of dwarf farms.¹³ The miserable living conditions began very slowly to improve only after 1945. In the communist era, Prekmurje underwent gradual industrialization and deagrarianization, even though (hidden) rural overpopulation was still present. Until the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, Prekmurje remained among the least developed regions of Slovenia, marked by high levels of unemployment and population decline.¹⁴ Economic underdevelopment extended into the post-socialist transition. In 2003, the Pomurje region achieved only two-thirds of the average Slovenian GDP per capita. What is more, the global financial and economic crisis of 2008 hit the region, with its predominantly traditional labor-intensive industrial production, with full force.¹⁵

This article examines how the narrative of regional abundance has persisted in Prekmurje despite the region's long history of socio-economic vulnerability. The aim of the study is to trace the genealogy of Prekmurje's construction as the "breadbasket of Slovenia" and to explore what the origins of this phrase reveal about national(ist) visions and aspirations projected onto the region. It demonstrates that the metonymy crystallized in the immediate aftermath of the region's incorporation into the Yugoslav state in 1919 arose initially from the fascination of Slovenian officials from less fertile Cisleithanian lands. The term gained wider popularity because it served as a means of symbolically integrating a contested borderland into the imagined Slovenian national space. By analyzing references to Prekmurje as a Slovenian breadbasket in official documents and the press after the Yugoslav occupation and throughout the interwar decades, the study shows how the metonym functioned both as an economic designation grounded in fertile land and as a tool of nation-building in the context of post-imperial territorial and political reconfigurations.

12 Janez Malačič, "Demografski razvoj v Prekmurju 1919–2019: upadanje prebivalstva ter modernizacija razvoja," in Peter Štih et al., eds., *"Mi vsi živeti ščemo": Prekmurje 1919: okoliščine, dogajanje, posledice* (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 2020), 353–55. Kokolj, *Prekmurjski Slovenci*, 608–25.

13 Kokolj, *Prekmurjski Slovenci*, 589–91.

14 Korpič-Horvat, *Zaposlovanje in deagrarnizacija pomurskega prebivalstva*, 117–32.

15 Aleksander Lorenčič, *Prelom s starim in začetek novega: Tranzicija slovenskega gospodarstva iz socializma v kapitalizem (1990–2004)* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012), 341, 451, <http://hdl.handle.net/11686/38023>. After restructuring in the last decade, however, the regional economy is stable, export-oriented, technologically advanced, and marked by record revenues, low unemployment, and rising productivity. See *Regionalni razvojni program pomurske regije 2021–2027* (Murska Sobota: Razvojni center Murska Sobota, 2022), 14.

Žitnica as a 'Breadbasket': Nineteenth-century Beginnings

The Slovenian equivalent of the word 'breadbasket' is 'žitnica', a term that, much like its English counterpart, carries multiple meanings in both modern and historical lexicographical sources and dictionaries. In its literal sense, it refers to a place for storing grain, a granary. As a granary, the word 'žitnica' is embedded in the vocabulary of material culture, storage management, and architectural features of warehouse spaces. Historically, the term also denoted a form of feudal tax, while since the nineteenth century it has been employed as a metonym.¹⁶ In a figurative meaning, *žitnica* is what is referred to in Merriam Webster as a breadbasket: "a major cereal-producing region."¹⁷ Dictionary evidence suggests that the figurative use of the word entered Slovenian language relatively late. While 'žitnica' already denoted both a warehouse and a feudal tax in printed texts from the late eighteenth century, its figurative sense was still missing more than a century later from Pleteršnik's Slovenian–German dictionary.¹⁸

In contrast to Pleteršnik's dictionary, Slovenian newspapers and periodicals from the *Corpus of Slovenian Periodicals (1771–1914)* attest that by the second half of the nineteenth century the word 'žitnica' was already employed as a figure of speech.¹⁹ Nevertheless, many Slovenian authors continued to employ the term primarily in its literal sense, denoting enclosed structures on farms and landed estates where various types of grain were stored after the harvest.²⁰ The prevalence of this type of usage is not surprising due to the socioeconomic structure of present-day Slovenian territory, which was predominantly linked to agricultural production at least until the mid-twentieth century.

One defining feature of nineteenth-century Slovenian print culture was the strong focus of many authors on the world of agriculture and peasant society. Within this framework, Slovenian newspapers and journals up to the outbreak of the First World War mentioned 'žitnica' in numerous pedagogical articles that gave normative descriptions of granaries: dry, airy, cool, clean spaces built from durable materials to prevent the grain from spoiling. Authors aimed at a rural readership further

16 See the entry for "žitnica" in *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika*, 2nd ed., supplemented and partly revised edition, www.fran.si, accessed 4 September 2025. For historical usage of the word, see entry "žitnica" in Maks Pleteršnik, *Slovensko-nemški slovar*, www.fran.si, accessed 20 September 2025.

17 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "breadbasket," accessed 20 September 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breadbasket>.

18 For usage in the late eighteenth century, see entry "žitnica" in Marko Snoj, *Slovar Pohlinovega jezika*, www.fran.si, accessed 20 September 2025.

19 For the corpus, see Filip Dobranič, Bojan Evkoski in Nikola Ljubešić, »Corpus of Slovenian periodicals (1771–1914) sPeriodika 1.0« (2023), *Slovenian language resource repository CLARIN.SI*, <http://hdl.handle.net/11356/1881>.

20 See for instance: "Grozen požar v Mokronogu," *Slovenec*, 21 Augusta 1911, 3. "Dražbeni oklic," 14 February 1914, 7. "Poučno potovanje učencev kmetijske šole na Grmu," *Narodni gospodar*, 10 August 1908, 244. "Spodnje Libuče," *Naš dom*, 27 July 1905, 4. "Setev je pred durmi," *Kmetovalec*, 15 January 1891, 2. "Gospodarske stavbe," *Novice*, 30 December 1898, 516. "Požarna kronika," *Ljubljanski list*, 16 June 1884, 4.

offered practical advice on pest control and on safeguarding stored grain from theft.²¹ Yet the word 'žitnica' was not confined exclusively to farm-level storage buildings. It also designated larger supply infrastructures—feudal, provincial, and municipal storage—activated by the administrative apparatus as mechanisms of collective support in times of food crisis.²²

Beside predominant usage in agricultural contexts, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the term 'žitnica' also appeared in the public sphere in a figurative sense as breadbasket. Numerous geographical locations around the world have been referred to as breadbaskets. Unsurprisingly, the first chronological mention from the mid-nineteenth century refers to a region of global historical relevance. In 1850, an author writing in a magazine for Slovenian schoolchildren described Egypt as "the breadbasket for many countries with scarce vegetation."²³ During this period, the term "breadbasket" often referred to Tsarist Russia.²⁴ Given the Habsburg context, Hungary was also described as a breadbasket in Slovenian newspapers, as was the Hungarian province of the Banat.²⁵ Sicily, Eastern Rumelia, the Kosovo Plain, and Skadar were also portrayed as breadbaskets supplying wider regions or political entities.²⁶

Yet, the term's usage in journalistic reports and descriptions was not neutral. The expression "breadbasket" was not employed merely as an objective marker of a region's agricultural potential to produce more grain than the local population could consume. Rather, regions were described as breadbaskets "for someone" or "from someone." This usage underscored the relational dynamics of food production and distribution, situating agricultural regions within wider political, economic, and imperial frameworks. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia was more than just a breadbasket: it was the "breadbasket of Europe." Meanwhile, Hungary was considered the "breadbasket of Austria" or the "breadbasket of our Empire," a label that some authors also associated with the Banat. The Kosovo Plain was dubbed "the breadbasket of European Turkey," while Skadar had a similar function for Montenegro and Albania.

21 See for instance "Vprašanja in odgovori," *Narodni gospodar*, 10 October 1903, 297. "Žužek," *Gospodarski glasnik za Štajersko*, 1 January 1912, 137. "Vprašanja in odgovori," *Narodni gospodar*, 25 August 1901, 248. "Vprašanja in odgovori," *Kmetovalec*, 31 December 1894, 191. "Gospodarska skušnja," *Novice*, 17 June 1874, 189. "Kako shranjujemo žito?," *Novice*, 28 February 1902, 84. "Srenja pod lipo," *Besednik. Kratkočasen in podučen list za slovensko ljudstvo*, 25 October 1870, 158.

22 "Iz Ljubljane," *Novice*, 21 February 1866, 68. "Henrik I., ptičar," *Vertec*, 1 June 1882, 91. "Iz Glamoča v Bosni," *Slovenski narod*, 18 April 1879, 4. "Zadnji Sorgo umrl," *Slovenski narod*, 5 December 1912, 2. "Vincencij Vovk," *Zgodnja danica*, 4 October 1872, 320. "Od hranjenja žita," *Pravi Slovenec*, listi za podučenje naroda, 6 August 1849, 169–71.

23 "Božja roka ali nevarno kopanje v Nilu," *Vedež: časopis za šolsko mladost*, 3 January 1850, 1.

24 "Podraženje kruha," *Edinost*, 25 September 1907, 1. "Rusko žito," *Slovenec*, 3 June 1912, 6.

25 For Hungary: "Gospodarske stvari," *Slovenski gospodar*, 25 September 1873, 316. "Razmera obrtništva do kmetijstva," *Novice gospodarske, obrtniške in narode*, 5 October 1864, 1. "Zveza obrtništva in kmetijstva," *Novice gospodarske, obrtniške in narode*, 23 November 1881, 1. "Pšenične cene po dobrih letinah," *Glasnik Avstrijske kršćanske tobačne delavske zveze*, 14 January 1911, 7. For the Banat "Iz Gradca do Sarajeva," *Slovenski gospodar*, 26 December 1878, 422. "Železnica nam je treba," *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice*, 9 November 1864, 364.

26 For Sicily, "Slavia italiana," *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1 December 1884, 766. "Nekdaj in sedaj," *Dolenjske novice*, 15 May 1885, 76. "Na mestih strašnega potresa," *Slovenec*, 16 January 1909, 1. "Kmetijstvo," *Narodni gospodar*, 10 November 1900, 343. For Rumelia, "O balkanskih zadevah," *Slovenski narod*, 14 October 1885, 2. For the Kosovo Plain, "Donavsko-adrijska železnica," *Slovenski narod*, 17 March 1908, 1. "Iz gospodarskega življenja v Makedoniji," *Edinost*, 16 February 1913, 5. For Skadar, "Pismo s Cetinja," *Slovenec*, 9 December 1912, 1.

At the same time, writers could have invested their own beliefs, expectations, and visions regarding the production, circulation, and consumption of food in their use of the term breadbasket. In spring 1912, an author writing in the Slovenian liberal paper *Slovenski narod* argued that the marsh south of Ljubljana should be drained so that it could become the breadbasket of the capital of Carniola.²⁷ On the other hand, agriculture in the Italian region of Apulia—“once the breadbasket of Italy”—was declining due to high taxes according to a report published in 1889 in the same paper.²⁸ The content of articles in which the term appears could also have been influenced by an awareness of global and regional production asymmetries, as well as fears and hopes linked to the (in)ability of individual states to reach autarky. In 1902, the author of a short article on Russia highlighted the geopolitical importance of Russian agriculture, the cornerstone of the country’s power, since “Russia, along with America, is considered the largest breadbasket, supplying the whole world with food.”²⁹

By the outbreak of the First World War, as evidence from the *Corpus of Slovenian Periodicals (1771–1914)* shows, the term “breadbasket” was already circulating in Slovenian public discourse, mainly in relation to supply, self-sufficiency, and production asymmetries. Yet the figure of speech that would later frame Prekmurje as Slovenia’s “breadbasket” only appeared after the collapse of Austria-Hungary, in the context of Yugoslav occupation and the political transitions of 1918–19. In other words, Prekmurje was invented as the breadbasket of Slovenia as a result of the collapse of the centuries-old Habsburg imperial order in Central Europe.³⁰

Prekmurje Becomes the Slovenian Breadbasket: The Invention of a Figure of Speech

After the beginning of the collapse of the Austria-Hungary, the population of the future Prekmurje region experienced a turbulent acceleration of history.³¹ Ultimately, in the context of the post-imperial land grab and the creation of new state borders, the Yugoslav army occupied the two westernmost parts of the Hungarian counties Zala and Vas in August 1919. The Treaty of Trianon in July 1920 merely formalized

27 “Ljubljanski občni svet,” *Slovenski narod*, 17 May 1912, 2.

28 “Vnanje države,” *Slovenski narod*, 16 April 1889, 3.

29 “Skrb Rusije za kmetijstvo,” *Slovenski gospodar*, 3 June 1902, 2.

30 Illustrative in this regard is the fact that Prekmurje was not included in the first Slovenian national economic program. See Božo Repe, “Vsakdo mora imeti priliko, da udeleži vse svoje telesne in duševne moči.” Milko Brezigar in prvi slovenski program narodnega gospodarstva (Ljubljana: Založba Univerze, 2023).

31 Miroslav Kokolj, “Prekmurje v prevratnih letih 1918–1919,” in Janko Liška, ed., *Revolucionarno vrenje v Pomurju v letih 1918–1920* (Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba, 1981). György Feiszt, “Revolucionarni pokret u Prekmurju od 1918. do 1919.,” in Branimir Bunjac, ed., *Pomurje 1914–1920: zbornik radova = Mura mente 1914–1920*. (Povijesno društvo Međimurske županije, 2011). László Göncz, *A Muravidék útja a délszláv királyságba: a tájegység története az első világháború végétől a jugoszláv megszállásig: (1918 ősze – 1919 augusztusa)* (Magyar Nyugat Könyvkiadó, 2024). László Göncz, “Utrinki iz zgodovine Beltincev v t. i. prevratnem obdobju (od oktobra 1918 do jugoslovanske zasedbe Prekmurja),” in Sonja Novak-Lukanović and Barbara Riman, eds., *Raznolikost v raziskovanju etničnosti: izbrani pogledi III* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, 2023).

the authority of the South Slavic state over this area, predominantly populated by a Slavophone population. Within the Yugoslav state framework, the region received a new official administrative name—Prekmurje—and was subordinated to regional administrative bodies in Ljubljana.³²

Long before Prekmurje was constructed as “Slovenia’s breadbasket,” the region had already been imagined as part of the Slovenian national space. The association of Prekmurje with Slovenia’s breadbasket was thus not only a product of post-imperial political circumstances but was also connected to older ethnolinguistic appropriations traceable to the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1840s onward, Slovenian national activists occasionally referred to the territory as belonging to the broader Slovenian cultural sphere. Their claims rested primarily on linguistic grounds: in the widely accepted classification of languages, the dialects of the area were identified as Slovenian. Guided by the principles of ethnolinguistic nationalism, activists, intellectuals, and at times even state officials therefore categorized the Slavic-speaking population of the region as part of the Slovenian nation. Nevertheless, until the 1920s most of the local Slavophones did not identify themselves culturally or politically with the Slovenian nation.³³ Even so, linguistic assumptions and beliefs formed the core of the ethnographic evidence that Yugoslav diplomats presented at the Paris Peace Conference to justify both the Slovenian character of this area and the legitimacy of the Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje.³⁴

Immediately after the Yugoslav military occupation of Prekmurje in August 1919, numerous Slovenian officials and politicians crossed the former internal border between the Austrian and Hungarian parts of the empire and set foot in the region for the first time. What they encountered was a landscape and population largely unfamiliar to them. As former residents of the Austrian half of the monarchy, they had little understanding of the political, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions that prevailed on the Hungarian side. This was not surprising. In the final decades of Austria-Hungary, the Slovenian speaking society in Cisleithania possessed only rudimentary information about the region, provided by travelers or the few local correspondents for Slovenian newspapers. Yet once confronted with Prekmurje itself, Slovenian politicians and officials found a territory markedly different from most other Slovenian regions: one distinguished by fertile soil and abundant harvests. In the context of post-war shortages, poverty, and recurrent famine, these qualities offered both a justification

32 Kokolj, *Prekmurski Slovenci*, 11–33. See also Peter Štih et al., eds., “*Mi vsi živeti ščemo*”: *Prekmurje 1919: okoliščine, dogajanje, posledice* : zbornik prispevkov mednarodnega in interdisciplinarnega posveta na Slovenski akademiji znanosti in umetnosti, Ljubljana, 29.-30. maj 2019 (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 2020).

33 Jernej Kosi, “‘However, the language here is changing gradually, and in the presence of so many local dialects the Croatian and its kindred Slovenian world cannot be separated very precisely’: drawing the Slovenian-Croatian national border in the territory of the present-day Prekmurje region,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 57, No. 2 (2017): 33–50. Jernej Kosi, “The imagined Slovene nation and local categories of identification: ‘Slovenes’ in the Kingdom of Hungary and Postwar Prekmurje,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 49 (2018): 87–102.

34 The most important contribution in this regard was the work of Matija Slavič, who participated in the Paris Peace Conference as the Yugoslav expert on Prekmurje. See Matija Slavič, *Prekmurje* (Slovenska krščansko-socialna zveza, 1921) and Matija Slavič, “Prekmurske meje v diplomaciji,” in Vilko Novak, ed., *Slovenska krajina: zbornik ob petnajstletnici osvobodjenja* (Ljubljana: Konzorcij, 1935).

and a means of substantiating Prekmurje's place within the broader Slovenian national framework. It was therefore not only possible but, from their perspective, necessary to reimagine Prekmurje as a newly acquired territory of strategic and symbolic value within the emerging South Slavic state.

Two official reports produced shortly after the Yugoslav occupation—one political, the other administrative—played a key role in shaping the vision of Prekmurje's fertile fields as a resource for the Slovenian national community. In October 1919, Albin Prepeluh, Minister of Welfare in the Regional Government for Slovenia, visited Prekmurje. In his report, which he prepared for discussion at a meeting of the Government, he described the situation in Prekmurje in detail. The very first topic he addressed in his report concerned the economic potential of Prekmurje. Prepeluh emphasized that for Slovenia, "Prekmurje is a major acquisition in economic terms. The fertile land there can serve as a regional breadbasket and thus compensate for the loss of many Slovenian villages elsewhere."³⁵ Accordingly, Prepeluh believed that Prekmurje should remain in Slovenian hands and that its food potential should be realized by improving communication links and implementing land reform.³⁶

A month later, in November 1919, the itinerant agricultural teacher Franc Vojsk submitted a parallel report to the Regional Government in Ljubljana, reinforcing Prepeluh's view of Prekmurje as economically underdeveloped but agriculturally rich—an assessment that further anchored the emerging breadbasket narrative. On the one hand, he stressed that the region was almost entirely without industry and severely overpopulated in relation to its economic resources, forcing many inhabitants into emigration or seasonal work. On the other hand, he emphasized the fertility of the lowland soil, the favourable climate, and the region's capacity to produce abundant harvests. According to Vojsk, substantial resources were already available but failed to reach the Slovenian market; with improved agricultural education and railway links, he maintained, output could expand even further. Agriculture, he pointed out, was the region's most significant strength amid general underdevelopment and would enable Prekmurje to assume an important role in Slovenia's economic life, thereby reinforcing the emerging image of the region as the country's breadbasket.³⁷

In their reports, Prepeluh and Vojsk articulated two perceptions of Prekmurje that would remain influential throughout the interwar period and beyond. On the one hand, they stressed the region's geography, fertile land, and evident economic potential; on the other, they emphasized its wider national significance, grounded in the abundance of grain and favourable conditions for farming. These views crystallized in the metonymy of the "breadbasket." By presenting Prekmurje as both agriculturally rich and nationally indispensable, such portrayals helped to legitimize its incorporation into the South Slavic state and to establish the idea of the "breadbasket of Slovenia" as a recurring theme in interwar journalistic and public discourse.

35 SI AS 60, box Prekmurje IV/V, map V (1919–1925), nr. 12943/1919.

36 Peter Ribnikar, ed., *Sejmi zapisniki Narodne vlade Slovencev, Hrvatov in Srbov v Ljubljani in Deželni vlad za Slovenijo: 1918–1921, vol. 2, od 28. feb. 1919 do 5. nov. 1919* (Ljubljana: Arhiv Republike Slovenije, 1999), 386.

37 SI AS 60, box Prekmurje V, No. 13535 (20 November 1919).

Prekmurje as the Slovenian Breadbasket: Explication and Popularization in Interwar Journalistic Discourse

Building on the views articulated by Prepeluh, journalists in Slovenian interwar magazines and newspapers reinforced the metonym of the “breadbasket of Slovenia” to depict Prekmurje as a land of exceptional fertility and agricultural abundance, thereby contributing to the popularization of the trope. Already in the earliest texts, writers claimed that Prekmurje was a “real breadbasket, where the fields yield in abundance.”³⁸ Such depictions centered on the region’s natural resources, believed to provide favorable conditions for extraordinary harvests. Some authors even compared the fertility of Prekmurje’s arable land and its economic potential to that of Banat, long regarded as the gold standard for grain production on both sides of the First World War.³⁹ The flat lowland between the Mura/Mur River in the west and south and the surrounding hills in the north and east was described as “a single large breadbasket with enormous grain reserves” or as “a fertile field—a breadbasket,” both formulations underscoring the exceptional agricultural potential attributed to Prekmurje.⁴⁰

The authors did not justify the use of the term “breadbasket” to describe Prekmurje solely on the basis of general descriptions of agricultural abundance. They often referred to specific impressive quantities of agricultural produce that exceeded regional needs. According to an article published in the newspaper *Slovenski narod* in September 1919, it would be possible to export large quantities of grain from Prekmurje: up to 1,000 wagons of cereals per year.⁴¹ In addition to grain, abundant fruit harvests, especially apples, would also be made available for trade, with more than 1,000 train cars of apples also available for transport.⁴² Fruit was soon to become an “important export item,” claimed the author of an article entitled “On the Economic Situation in Prekmurje” in 1924.⁴³ More than this, Prekmurje was also said to be a “land of poultry,” where “thousands of geese, ducks, and other poultry” grazed in the meadows, while livestock farming was also “very well developed.”⁴⁴ The term “breadbasket” did not have a monolithic meaning, as it could be used to describe very different aspects of Prekmurje’s agricultural and socio-economic reality. It could refer to the entire region, where Prekmurje was described as “our breadbasket with its 100,000 souls,” a term that encompassed not only the abundance of grain but also the broader agricultural wealth, including livestock, fruit growing, and beekeeping.

38 “Naše prekmurje,” *Sokolč. List za sokolski naraščaj*, September 1919 (No. 5-6), 71.

39 “Prekmurje,” *Mladost. Glasilo slovenskih orlov*, July/August/September 1919, 92, 93. “Narodno-gospodarski položaj Slovenskih Goric,” *Trgovski list. Časopis za trgovino, industrijo in obrt*, 12 May 1921, 2.

40 “Zanimivosti iz Prekmurja,” *Male novice*, 21 August 1919, 1. “Orlovski poročevalec,” *Mladost, orlovsko glasilo*, 1920 (No. 6), 93.

41 “Gospodarske, kulturne in politične težnje mурopoljskih Slovencev,” *Slovenski narod*, 4 September 1919, 2–3.

42 “Zanimivosti iz Prekmurja,” 1.

43 “O gospodarskih razmerah v Prekmurju,” *Slovenec*, 26 November 1924, 5.

44 “Zanimivosti iz Prekmurja,” 1.

More often, however, the term was applied specifically to the flat and fertile part of the region, distinguishing it from the hilly, economically less active, poorer, and more forested part of Prekmurje.⁴⁵

In the interwar period, references to the breadbasket went beyond depictions of fertility to affirm Prekmurje's place within the Slovenian national community. The region was portrayed not just as a breadbasket, but as *our* breadbasket—the breadbasket of Slovenia. In the journal piece cited above, Prekmurje was not described only as a “real breadbasket, where the fields yield in abundance.” It was depicted as much more than that:

Prekmurje is a rich land. It is a real breadbasket, where the fields yield in abundance. Until now, these fields were in the hands of Hungarian magnates, and Slovenian farmers worked for foreigners. Now they belong to us, and Slovenian farmers will work here for their own benefit, and their harvest will richly reward their efforts.⁴⁶

Interwar journalism was instrumental in naturalizing the image of Prekmurje as Slovenia's breadbasket, presenting it alternatively as an existing reality or projecting it as a future ideal. With the implementation of the land reform, Prekmurje's lowlands could become “a breadbasket for the less fertile parts of Slovenia.”⁴⁷ This notion appeared repeatedly in the interwar Slovenian press. In September 1919, *Slovenski narod* emphasized that Prekmurje's agrarian resources and wealth were renowned far and wide and that it could “become a true breadbasket for Slovenia.”⁴⁸ The following year, *Slovenec* described the region simply as “the breadbasket for Slovenia,” while in 1921 the *Trgovski list* compared it to the Banat, calling it “a rich breadbasket of Slovenia.”⁴⁹

In the course of the interwar years, the breadbasket metonymy resurfaced periodically in the press, often tied to modernization and visions of Prekmurje's future. *Jugoslavija* stressed in early 1922 that “once Prekmurje gains a railway connection to Slovenia, it will become our breadbasket, and industry will also flourish there.”⁵⁰ By the mid-1920s, the expression was already established: *Slovenec* remarked that “Prekmurje is often called the breadbasket of Slovenia,” while *Narodni dnevnik* described “our fertile Prekmurje, which in due time may become the breadbasket of Slovenia.”⁵¹ The association continued into the late interwar years. *Neodvisnost* in 1937 claimed that “Prekmurje will be Slovenia's breadbasket. Therein lies its solution.”⁵²

45 “O gospodarskih razmerah v Prekmurju,” 5.

46 “Naše Prekmurje,” 71.

47 “Prekmurje,” 92, 93.

48 “Gospodarske, kulturne in politične težnje,” 2, 3.

49 “Izpraznitev Radgone in Prekmurje,” *Slovenec*, 30 July 1920, 2. “Narodno-gospodarski položaj Slovenskih Goric,” 2.

50 “Jugoslovanska kreditna banka,” *Jugoslavija*, 8 January 1922, 3.

51 “O gospodarskih razmerah v Prekmurju,” *Slovenec*, 26 November 1924, 5. “Prekmurska železnica,” *Narodni dnevnik. Neodvisen političen list*, 6 March 1924, 2.

52 “Po Prekmurju,” *Neodvisnost. Tednik za vsa javna vprašanja*, 13 March 1937, 4.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, *Večernik* highlighted the grain-producing districts of Murska Sobota and Lendava, concluding simply: "This is our breadbasket."⁵³

Although not omnipresent, such references show that the metonymy of the breadbasket persisted in interwar discourse, where it served simultaneously as an economic claim, a political argument, and a symbol of national belonging that linked Prekmurje to the Slovenian national community. Its political resonance is evident in the words of Anton Korošec, leader of the Slovene People's Party (*Slovenska ljudska stranka*, SLS), who in July 1923—when his party was in opposition and promoting an autonomist program for Slovenia—stressed Prekmurje's importance for the Slovenian nation. In a speech reported in *Slovenec*, Korošec opposed Croatian politician Stjepan Radić's attempts to incorporate Prekmurje into a Croatian administrative framework, declaring: "We will not give away our Prekmurje, which will be our breadbasket, and which is and will remain Slovenian."⁵⁴ His statement illustrates how the metonymy of the breadbasket could be employed both as a practical and symbolic claim to secure Prekmurje's place within Slovenia.

The representation of Prekmurje as a breadbasket during the interwar period, however, was a symbolic designation with little grounding in the region's actual socio-economic conditions or levels of agricultural productivity. This characterization preceded material realities; only gradually would Prekmurje approach levels of output of national significance, let alone sustained surpluses beyond local consumption. Behind the image of abundance, many inhabitants lived at or below the subsistence threshold. By late 1919, administrative reports depicted acute shortages and hunger in the uplands: prices had spiked, essentials such as salt, sugar, matches, kerosene, and tobacco were scarce, clothing and footwear were in short supply, and many lacked even basic garments and adequate food. In 1920, approximately one-fifth of the population depended on state food relief, even as agricultural surpluses continued to be exported from the region. Even in years of favourable harvests, Prekmurje remained only marginally self-sufficient, with part of its grain production directed elsewhere. The discontinuation of customary seasonal labour arrangements—through which workers had traditionally been remunerated in grain—further exacerbated rural insecurity, pushing many households toward acute subsistence pressure and the risk of hunger. By the mid-1930s, contemporary surveys revealed persistently meagre and nutritionally inadequate diets, with most smallholdings unable to sustain household subsistence. Local accounts pointed to widespread deprivation—entire communities lacking bread for extended periods, children fainting from hunger, and families enduring prolonged shortages of basic foodstuffs—while health data indicated that the region suffered

53 "Raznolikost slovenještajerskega kmetijstva," *Večernik*, 4 August 1940, 11.

54 "Seja vodstva S.L.S. v Celju," *Slovenec*, 10 July 1923, 1.

from the highest overall and infant mortality rates, as well as the greatest prevalence of tuberculosis within the Drava Banovina. The breadbasket image thus masked deep structural vulnerability, transforming scarcity into a narrative of plenty.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Since its invention in the post-imperial context of 1919, the notion of Prekmurje as Slovenia's breadbasket has endured across political, scholarly, and journalistic discourses. Recent parliamentary debates, the writings of Slovenian scientists and experts, and interwar journalistic representations of the region all testify to the lasting appeal of this designation. What began as an improvised figure of speech quickly developed into a recurring trope, invoked by individuals with different political and professional backgrounds, who nonetheless agreed in treating Prekmurje's agricultural wealth as nationally significant.

While grounded in empirical evidence of the region's agricultural abundance and productive potential, the breadbasket designation ultimately served as a symbolic vehicle for national integration. In the aftermath of the collapse of Austria-Hungary, Slovenian officials, experts, and journalists employed the image not only to describe fertile soil but to affirm Prekmurje's place in the newly established South Slavic state. By presenting the region as a source of nourishment "for us," the trope helped legitimize the incorporation of a contested borderland into the Slovenian national space.

The durability of this image is paradoxical, as it overlays Prekmurje's long-standing socio-economic fragility with a narrative of stability and abundance. Beneath depictions of impressive yields lay a persistent reality of scarcity, poverty, and economic underdevelopment that marked the region well into the late twentieth century. The breadbasket trope thus obscured structural vulnerabilities while highlighting agrarian productivity and agricultural abundance, binding Prekmurje to the Slovenian nation through an idealized vision that stood in stark contrast to the lived experience of its inhabitants. The discursive construction of Prekmurje as the Slovenian breadbasket therefore reveals how nationalist imagination endowed the post-imperial landgrab with ideological coherence and moral purpose — a vision that imagined Prekmurje as a breadbasket well before it became a region of genuine national importance in food production, with outputs exceeding local needs.

⁵⁵ For additional discussion and further empirical evidence on food access and deprivation in interwar Prekmurje (including secondary literature), see Jernej Kosi, "Yugoslavia has nothing. Yugoslavia has no bread. But Hungary gives us bread': Access to food and (dis)loyalty in a 'redeemed' Yugoslav borderland," *Austrian History Yearbook* 55 (2024): 283–97.

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ŽITNICA SLOVENIJE: GENEALOGIJA METONIMIJE IN NJEN POMEN V PROCESU GRADNJE NACIJE

POVZETEK

Članek analizira nastanek, utrjevanje in pomensko delovanje označevalca »žitnica Slovenije« za Prekmurje ter pojasnjuje, zakaj se je podoba obilja utrdila navkljub dolgotrajni socioekonomski ranljivosti regije od konca 19. stoletja naprej. Izhodišče predstavlja analiza političnih poročil, administrativne dokumentacije in medvojnega časopisja, dopolnjena z interpretacijo strokovnih besedil, v katerih je termin dobil status implicitne analitične kategorije. V 19. stoletju se je izraz »žitnica« v slovenščini v prvi vrsti nanašal na prostore in postopke skladiščenja žita, preneseni pomen (»območje obilne pridelave žit«) pa je praviloma zadeval »neslovenska« območja (denimo Rusijo kot »žitnico Evrope«, Ogrsko, Banat ipd.). Prekmurje se

kot »slovenska žitnica« pojavi šele po jugoslovanski okupaciji leta 1919, ko je nova politična konfiguracija terjala simbolno utemeljitev vključitve nedavno okupiranega večjezičnega in večkulturnega mejnega območja v slovenski nacionalni imaginarij.

Začetke rabe metonimije strukturirata poročili Albina Prepeluha in Franca Vojska iz jeseni 1919. Še zlasti v Prepeluhovem poročilu, namenjenem upravnim telesom v Ljubljani, je bilo Prekmurje predstavljeno kot gospodarska »pridobitev« z izrazitim agrarnim potencialom, ki naj bi v preskrbovalnem smislu nadomestilo »izgubljene« ali manj rodovitne dele Slovenije. Takšno razumevanje je v dvajsetih in tridesetih letih razširil tudi časopisno-revijalni diskurz: Prekmurje je bilo opisano kot »naša žitnica«, pogosto v primerjavi z Banatom, z navajanjem presežkov žit, sadja, perutnine ter z napovedmi učinkov zemljiške reforme, prometne modernizacije in kmetijskega izobraževanja. Metonimija je delovala v dvojnem smislu: kot opis rodovitne nižinske krajine in kot sredstvo nacionalne integracije v kontekstu postimperialnega preoblikovanja meja.

Besedilo obenem poudarja razkorak med retoriko obilja in materialno realnostjo. Administrativna poročila in javnozdravstveni kazalniki za medvojno obdobje razkrivajo razdrobljeno posest, prikrito agrarno prenaseljenost, prehransko negotovost, sezonske in trajne migracije, skromne in prehransko neustrezne diete ter nadpovprečno umrljivost. Tudi po letu 1945 je regija kljub industrializaciji in deagrarizaciji ostala razvojno šibka, kar se je nadaljevalo v postsocialistični tranziciji; kriza po letu 2008 je dodatno razgalila strukturno ranljivost. Hkrati pa statistika potrjuje nadpovprečni agrarni pomen Pomurja v slovenskem kontekstu, kar je omogočalo vztrajanje diskurza o »slovenski žitnici«.

Prispevek pokaže, da je metonimija »žitnica Slovenije« delovala kot učinkovita simbolna tehnologija, ki je prepletala empirične prvine (rodovitna tla, ravninski relief, kontinentalno podnebje) z nacionalnimi in političnimi projekcijami. Vztrajnost izraza skozi različna politična obdobja – od medvojne Jugoslavije do sodobnih parlamentarnih debat – razkriva njegovo sposobnost prekrivanja odročnosti in socialne zapostavljenosti s predstavo o stabilnosti, samozadostnosti in »našosti«. Podoba Prekmurja kot »žitnice« je v resnici vzniknila še pred tem, ko je bil agrarni potencial Prekmurja, ki bi upravičeval rabo takega označevalca, sploh materializiran. To pa pomeni, da je bil nastanek metonimije »žitnica Slovenije« prej simbolni odgovor na postimperialno preurejanje prostora kakor pa odsev trajno presežnih agrarnih kapacitet. V tem smislu je metonimija ustvarila interpretativno ogrodje za vpis regije v slovenski nacionalni imaginarij.