
Capricious borders – a comparative analysis of regional identity building in post-socialist border regions. A case study of Poland’s Western and Eastern border.

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Abstract

The shaping and re-shaping of borders became a characteristic for the political development in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. While the exchange of population and territory had been the bitter reality, post-war socialist societies were shaped by a tabooing of public debates on the topics. Borders became heavily-guarded and securitised lines, serving as ideological symbols of socialist friendship. With the end of the Cold War and EU accession a re-definition of the understanding of identity and borders became necessary.

Between 1945 and 1947 the German-Polish and the Polish-Ukrainian border regions witnessed the re-settlement of parts of the population. Transnational co-operation stopped and the border regions were alienated, altering regional identities and attitudes. During the post-socialist transition, the borders opened, cross-border co-operation increased and perceptions of neighbours changed. Being aware of the advantages, the border regions started to use the frontier as an engine for regional economic development.

The development paths of both regions diverged after Poland joined the EU. The border with Germany became an internal EU border, facilitating free cross-border mobility and deregulation. The border with Ukraine became part of the heavily-controlled EU external border with a visa regime, endangering the interaction across the border.

The proposed article will analyse through a comparative case study the similarities and differences in the everyday life of borderlanders at both borders. The article will highlight regional identity building and investigate how identities are shaped. In the conclusions the role of the border as a resource for local economic development and transnational co-operation will be discussed.

The paper is based on a PhD research project. The fieldwork was done in the border towns of Frankfurt (Oder) and Slubice and the border city Przemysl at the Polish-Ukrainian border. This article underlines the importance of local perspectives in the narrative of bordering and de-bordering processes, identity building and geopolitical discourses.

Key Words: Transition, regional and transregional identities, Other/s, similarities/differences, economic development, identity building, identity conflicts, borders/border regions/border cities, transnational/international cooperation, EU and European integration.

Keywords: Cross, Border Cooperation, regional development, Germany, Poland, Ukraine

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