

Borders and borderlands as a social, political, and cultural problem

# An Opening or a Separation?



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**To be able to sensibly discuss European unification, we first need to recognize the extant frontiers and divisions. One of the fundamental tasks for sociologists should be to study and understand the essence of these borders and borderlands**

Within the European context at the outset of the 21st century, discussion about Poland's borders is not only of great sig-

nificance for the current political elite and for the day-to-day life of travelers, migrants, and tourists; it also represents an important point of theoretical debate about this new Poland's image within this new Europe. Without giving consideration to the future European frontiers and the borders that exist within this ever-more-united Europe, it is hard to ponder the impact of more stringent border controls or to analyze preferences for citizens from CIS countries. That is chiefly because the EU's external border has now become situated along Poland's eastern frontier, yet it is also due to the fact that various ways of understanding borders in turn influence how Europe's divisions and the principles of its integration are perceived: i.e. whether we

Dorota Awierko/Fotorepapa



**A Polish-Ukrainian meeting in the border village of Korczmin. Pilgrims cross to the village of Stayivka on the Ukrainian side**

are speaking of borders in the political and economic sense, or rather in the religious and cultural sense.

### Social perception of borders

Particular attention should be paid to intellectual and emotional reactions to the changing nature of Poland's borders – the opening of the western borders and closing of the eastern ones – especially among Poles who live in their close proximity. The border perceptions (and their derivatives) developed by people and institutions in the eastern and western borderlands are more exposed than in Poland's central provinces, and more directly so, to the consequences of EU/Polish border policies coming into force. Speaking in the most general terms, people, institutions, and various sorts of communities situated near the country's western borders are reacting to the opening of the borders with Germany and other EU neighbors, whilst residents of the eastern borderland have to cope with more stringent policies and the reinforcement of the eastern border, the EU's eastern frontier.

The "border" notion represents more than just a problem within the context of how the social and cultural heritage of the past influences the principles that govern national divisions – i.e. divisions between one national culture and another, between national minority and majority. It is also a problem of identifying the principles that will govern divisions within the future cultural and civilizational space of Poland, of its region (the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the heritage of real socialism was a common denominator) and of Europe overall – with the European order established by overlapping processes of continent-wide globalization, the emergence and reinforcement of local and regional dimensions, and the voluntary political relinquishment of certain functions of the national state.

As a consequence, it is important to consider the characteristics of the social entities that serve as vehicles for such border perceptions – above all, their fears and concerns regarding both the present and the future. Based on how the people of a given borderland envision their border in the future, we can note the importance of historiosophic underpinnings that stem from a perception

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of the future in terms of great social, cultural, and civilizational processes important for the Grand History of Europe. People who think in such fashion fear the East and respect the West, e.g. fearing an "inundation by an inferior race" from the East or some sort of "invasion of Poland" by the East, bringing with it its own political and civilizational defects.

**Political institutions and states build principles of subjugating borders, and may reinforce their disintegrative functions**

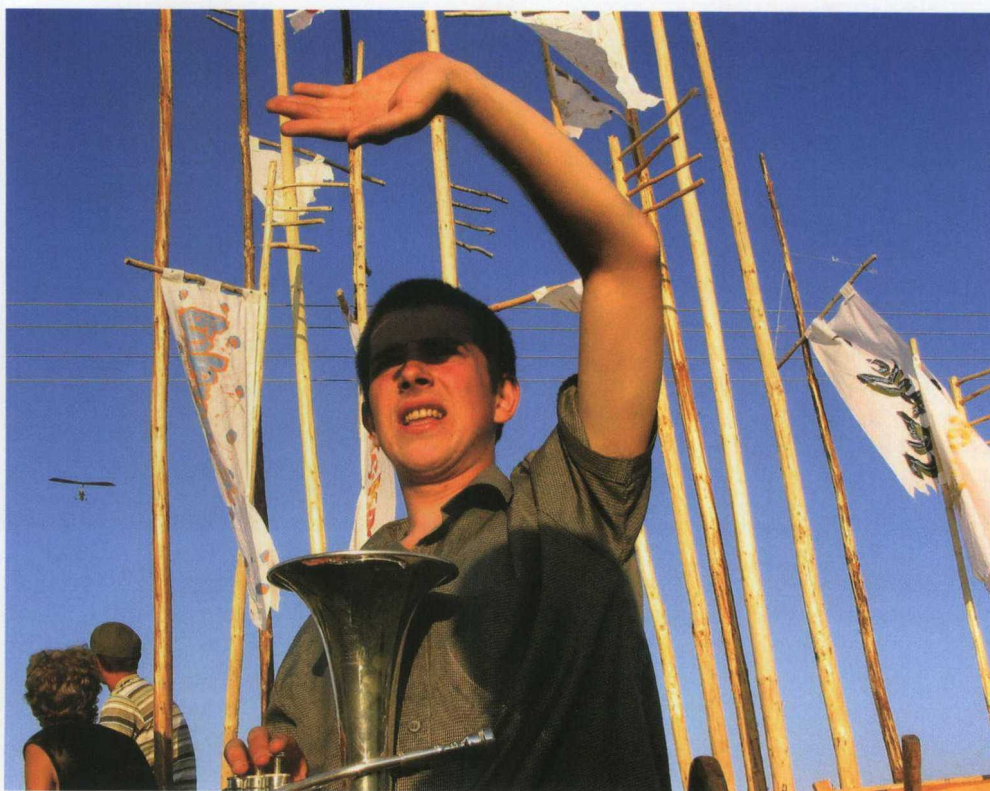
### Between past and future

One of the most important issues involves eliminating, or at least recognizing, perceptions inherited from ancestors. Here we will point out two perceptions that serve as the foundation for many new illusions and standpoints. The first is a perception of the sanctity and spirituality of Poland's borders – something we owe to our history, especially the times of Poland's foreign domination, when its territory was divided up among three large partitions and the social borders between their residents were cultural and religious frontiers, not reinforced by state borders. Apart from such perceptions, the borders of the newly independent Poland following WWI also form part of our national heritage. The borders of this Second Polish Republic arose out of the establishment of new states through the division of formerly extant entities. As a result, and also because of the impact of the idealization of Poland's borders on the Polish mentality, it turns out that not many multinational communities still exist that can presently, under a favorable configuration, be reconstructed under new conditions.

We can say that our impression of our borders, whether they are treated as an ele-

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A workshop for children at the "Borderland of Arts, Cultures, Nations" Center in Sejny, where the idea of the creative coexistence of various religions and nations is practiced



Grzegorz Dąbrowski/Agencja Gazeta

ment of our national heritage of institutions and values, is affected by whether the major national borderlands at present were previously common to their current residents or not. For instance, the Polish-German borderland was never a common borderland for its current residents. Something similar can be said for a considerable portion of the Polish-Czech borderland, as well as for the entire borderland with the Kaliningrad Oblast. The area on the Polish side of the current Polish-German borderland was populated by people uprooted from their former residences from the East and planted, together with all of their heritage and experiences, not only within a different landscape but also within a completely different infrastructure of civilization. The "taming" of the Polish-German border was only made possible by the policy of opening up the border, by building local and regional structures of multicultural and cross-border communities.

### Social bonds revisited

Another type of border/borderland is to be found along the Polish-Ukrainian frontier. On the Polish side, in addition to incoming population from other Polish lands, there remains a population which considers itself indigenous,

yet its counterpart on the Ukrainian side is now gone from the borderland (through forced deportations and repressions).

Yet the Polish-Ukrainian border, as well as those with Belarus, Lithuania, and Slovakia, may still witness the reestablishment of former social bonds. The first reason for this is of a political nature, related to the new eastern EU policy making Poland's borders with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus the EU's new external frontier to the east. Innovative EU decisions in the field of spatial planning could reinforce mechanisms to rebuild former neighborly bonds with our neighbors from Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Slovakia. Other factors that may make the eastern and southern borders encouraging to the reconstruction of former neighborly ties and contribute to the social processes of the opening of those borders may be generated by two superimposed social processes. The first process involves the establishment of strong enclaves of civil society (multinational and multicultural) on both sides of the border, with the aid of supranational civil-society institutions and based on these institutions' accepted principle of equality of social entities and pluralism of views. The other process is greatly

dependent upon state decisions made by our Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Slovak neighbors: on joint efforts to build euro-regions, to create free trade zones, and to bolster economic cooperation prove conducive to the development of new, socially integrated cross-border communities, and also to the "taming" of the borders.

While borders are conventionally thought of as "parts," borderlands are thought of as "wholes," wherein economic efforts, political power, and cultural models are coordinated, serving and supporting one another. Nowadays, in view of two processes – the decentralization of the national state and globalization – we can think about the border as comprising certain whole, made up of variously interlinked social institutions and individual practices. Whether a border indeed constitutes such a social whole composed of institutions and practices depends on highly specialized actions by the central authorities. Yet borderlands – as depicted as old, historic borderlands – are situated at various levels of integration, rarely related to one another. Mutual coordination and adjustment or cooperation on any broader scale do not seem likely here. Borderlands are growing increasingly divided on the basis of both internal and external mechanisms. Their diversification hinges upon a single factor, albeit a complex one: state policy, which in line with EU decisions is meant to build a system of stronger border controls.

### World without borders?

The emergence of the Third Polish Republic in 1989 likewise involved a great separation – the birth of a national state independent of post-Soviet domination, open to the West, with political and economic legitimacy, frequently seeking models in the pre-socialist Second Republic. In connection with these two phenomena, the knit of institutions that comprise the border territory became a domain of interpersonal relations, where previous rules of building distance and cooperation did not function and where there were also institutions capable of giving legal and administrative procedures binding force.

The consequences of spatial emancipation are generally known and are interpreted in various ways by sociologists of politics and culture. That interest may be strengthened

even more by the fact that we are now (in the 21st century) yet again witnessing a great separation in tandem with a great opening. Under different conditions and in a different geopolitical context, we are now above all seeing a great separation chiefly from Russia, but also from autonomous Ukraine and non-autonomous Belarus, while likewise experiencing a great opening to the West.

It is worth considering what the co-occurrence of these two phenomena – a great opening and great separation – will entail. That duality is excellently expressed by Ralf Dahrendorf in his autobiography *Über Grenzen* ("Above Borders"): "...I have never belonged to the camp demanding the lifting of all borders. Borders form an ordering element of structuredness and distinctness. The point is for them to be passable, open to everyone who wants to cross them, to see what is on the other side. A world without borders is a desert; a world of closed borders is a prison; freedom thrives in a world of open borders." ■

#### Further reading:

- Kurczewska J. (2003). *Granica polsko-ukraińska: trzy spojrzenia teoretyczne*. [The Polish-Ukrainian Borderland: Three Theoretical Views]. [In:] Zielińska M. (Ed.). *Transgraniczność w perspektywie socjologicznej. Teorie, studia, interpretacje*. Vol. I, Zielona Góra: LTN.
- Kurczewska J., Bojar H. (2002). *Consequences of Schengen Treaty Implementation on Poland's Eastern Borderland*. Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs.

**The official border crossing point in Terespol lies only 10 km from the natural border on the Bug River, separating Poland from Belarus**



Fred Shen