

Polish Borders, EU Borders

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Poland's eastern border will soon become the European Union's eastern frontier, thereby increasing the distance between cross-border neighbors and hampering the development of mutual contacts

Poland's forthcoming integration with the EU and the resulting change in the nature of its borders – the western border being opened, but the eastern border being tightened up – will provide new research areas for sociologists. One of the important questions gaining renewed relevance is what social and cultural factors encourage people to think and act in terms of the “border principle,” and what factors are conducive to the invalidation of this principle. Is it possible for state borders to be invalidated in Poland? Will they be replaced by other local or regional borders, or will this change perhaps manifest itself in the formation of communities based on principles other than prominent borders?

The changed nature of Poland's eastern frontier will have the most rapid and strongest impact upon the local communities in the country's eastern borderlands. This makes it important for us to diagnose the current state of opinion

among people such as borderland communities, and to identify whether they are ready to accept the coming change in the role and significance of state borders in connection with Poland's accession to European institutions.

A research project entitled “*Borders in the Social Consciousness and Actions of Local Communities in the Eastern Borderlands on the Eve of EU Integration*” was carried out in 2002-2004. Towns characteristic of each border area were chosen for study: Braniewo for the Polish-Russian border, Sejny for the Polish-Lithuanian border, Gródek for the Polish-Belarusian border, Zagórz and Włodawa for the Polish-Ukrainian border. The study was of a qualitative nature, with the primary material being many hours of interviews recorded with members of local elites.

Hopes and fears

When considering the short-term consequences of EU expansion, the residents of Poland's eastern borderlands focus mainly on the future of the EU's eastern border. Poland's entry into EU institutions gives such people, above all, the hope that the process of economic and political changes will continue in accordance with EU standards. This will bring benefits for Poland as a whole: it will bind the country more closely to the west, open up new job markets for Poles, and mobilize external funds to spur economic development. Moreover, it enable illegal flows of goods and immigrants from the east to be reduced or eliminated.

The benefits that integration will bring for local communities are also perceived by those who live there. Here expectations are primarily associated with EU funding for the development of these communities. Borderland inhabitants also hope, in connection with the more stringent treatment of the border, to see an improvement in the condition of local infrastructure and in the work of the border guards – which are currently given very negative reviews, especially in light of people's positive experiences when crossing the borders between EU member states. The increased significance of Poland's eastern border will also have a purely practical impact: it will generate many new jobs in the borderlands.

The inhabitants of the eastern borderlands understand that the entrance of new states into the European Union means that controls have to be toughened up on the EU's new external borders, and they also understand why this is the case. However, due to their current new contacts with Poland's eastern neighbors, which have been developing since the 1980s, such stricter border controls are not perceived exclusively positively. In the short-term



Justyna Straciak

A city name in Polish, to which the name in Belorussian has been added – pointing to an awareness of borders that unite rather than divide people



Krzysztof Wójcik

Poland's eastern borderland

perspective, more stringent controls will not be beneficial to the borderland communities themselves, and, in the opinion of those surveyed, they will be clearly disadvantageous for the residents of neighboring countries remaining outside the EU.

Fears related to the new eastern border approach stem from two fundamental sources. Firstly, people expect to see a collapse of individual economic relations between inhabitants on either side of the eastern border, which usually involve commercial exchange, taking advantage of differences in prices – which, given high unemployment rates, constitutes many borderland inhabitants' sole or main source of income. Secondly, people are afraid that there will be a weakening in ties of a cultural nature, which have been fostered in recent years via cross-border cooperation on the level of local governments, non-governmental organizations, and the renewal of family contacts.

Such fears are absent only among residents of the Polish-Lithuanian borderlands. In their opinion, Poland and Lithuania's integration into the EU will not bring a fundamental change in already extant contacts, and may even spur their development.

In sum: residents of the eastern borderlands believe that seeing Poland's eastern border become the EU's frontier will increase the distance between cross-border neighbors and hamper the development of mutual contacts.

Where will Europe end?

Residents of Poland's eastern borderlands have no doubt that the process of EU expansion will someday proceed to encompass more countries of the former Soviet Union, and that Poland's eastern border will in the future become another of the EU's many internal borders. Although they do not identify any timeframe for this process, they are able to specify what conditions must be met before the inclusion of new countries can proceed: the fundamental prerequisites being a comparable level of civilizational development, well-rooted democratic standards in sociopolitical life, and bolstered state strength in crime control. We should stress that Poland's borderland residents feel that Lithuania,

unlike the other countries to the east, already meets these conditions today.

In the opinion of those residing in Poland's eastern borderlands, the EU ultimately does have a distinct future border in the east, even in the distant future: this will be the border with Russia. Aside from the aforementioned causes, another important reason why the EU cannot be currently expanded beyond the borders of Poland and Lithuania is the permeability of borders between Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. The EU's new, tighter border is thus supposed to constitute a "buffer" against the potential danger coming from Russia, in the form of immigrants from Asia and terrorism. The reasons why the border with Russia is pointed to as the EU's future frontier also stem from the perception of Russia as a zone of civilization that is different from Europe, and as a center of political and economic power that is competitive with the EU.

Europe of "open borders"

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the way inhabitants of Poland's eastern borderlands think about EU borders is their perception of Western Europe as a political and economic whole, within which clear cultural distinctions exist. State borders within the EU are sometimes perceived to be administrative borders, useful for the effective management of a given area. Significantly more frequently, however, residents of the eastern borderlands express the conviction that state borders, although they are of increasingly less significance in the economy and politics, are still important as frames for national cultures: histories, traditions, memories and customs. State borders will therefore stay with us for a long time to come – although, as is already the case within the EU, they should not restrict individuals' freedoms, their right to travel freely, or even their right to choose a place of residence and employment. ■

Further readings:

- Kurczewska J., Bojar H. (2002). *Consequences of Schengen Treaty Implementation on Poland's Eastern Border. A Study of Local Leaders*. ISP, Warszawa.
- P. Kazmierkiewicz (ed.). (2004). *Neighbourhood Across a Divide? Borderland Communities and EU Enlargement*. ISP, Warszawa.