

Borders and Neighbourhood in Eastern and Central Europe. A Study of the Historic Development after World War II with the Case Study of the Oder-Neisse Region

Since the beginning of the European Union a number of scientists and politicians discuss about what the EU in the practice really means. Is it an international regime or either a federal state? In the opinion of some of them the EU is a network of states involving the pooling of sovereignty.¹ The European Union was founded on a series of intergovernmental bargains, bargains which have more recently included the Single European Act (1986), the Maastricht Treaty (1991) and the Amsterdam Treaty (1997). More than any other kind of international organisation, the political process of the EU can be described by the term *supranationality*.

The members states of the European Union are no longer the centres of power within their own borders, they have limited their sovereign rights. The treaty agreed at the Maastricht summit of 1991 seeks not only to extend the scope of economic and monetary union, but also to extend the framework of political integration to other spheres. It affected above all the notion of EU citizenship: every national citizen of a member country of the EU is also a citizen of the Union with the right to travel and reside anywhere within the EU and the right to vote and contest political office in the country of their residence. Freedom of movement and the right to political participation wherever one resides challenges a traditional basis of loyalty to a single state.²

This freedom of movement is just a reality in the members states of the European Union. The disappearance of borders between the countries of the European Union is often taken as the future model for Eastern and Middle Europe, but in Western Europe this process did not come overnight; it has a long history. For more than forty years, the Council of Europe and the European Community encouraged cross-border cooperation as an important condition for European Integration. The early years of the 1950's saw the governments of Austria, Belgium, France, Holland, Luxembourg, Germany, and Switzerland, as well as local authorities of numerous regions in these countries signing agreements for cross-border cooperation. In those years, the idea of institutional bodies of cooperation in border regions--Euroregions--began. In Western Europe the shift from the world of nation-states into the world of supranational integration came earlier than in Eastern and Middle Europe. Extending the process to those countries is a major challenge for the European Union.

¹ See: Keohane, R. O. / Milner, H. V. (eds): *Internationalization and Domestic Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, 10.

The Eastern and Middle European countries are currently transforming from autocracy to democracy, surging past a history of violence and dispute to a future of security and lawful compromise. This transformation is effecting the nature of the border-regions in those countries. The frontiers of the Eastern and Middle European countries, drawn under the Versailles Treaty of 1919, were the scene of hostile confrontation and ethnic conflicts in the inter-war period—1919 through 1939. During World War II, they were the first victims of Nazi German occupation and revisionist annexation by Nazi Germany's allies. After the war, the populations of these countries suffered massive displacements that altered the ethnic map of the continent. This created particularly favorable circumstances for the social and political maneuvering of the Soviet government. Those countries freed from Nazi German occupation by the Soviets after World War II were transformed into socialist regimes under the rule of Soviet controlled parties. For nearly forty-five years, those countries were the parts of a vast socialist bloc with tightly regulated borders. Cooperation on the border-regions was limited; and in some instances, cooperation was relegated to black market activities. Because of the circumstances of the post-war period and the Soviet domination of Eastern and Middle Europe, nationalism became stronger in those countries. That nationalism constructed homogenous societies in the Soviet controlled countries. Nationalism is a major stumbling block to cooperation in the border regions. The collapse of the soviet-bloc in 1989 opened Eastern European borders. The opening of the borders allowed for the first time since 1945 the opportunity for cross-border cooperation analogous to the Western European integration process.

Nowadays, the citizens of the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe are optimistically embracing the future of a united Europe. The fall of the Iron Curtain has not only restored the freedom of movement between the citizens of West and the East Europe, it restored freedom of movement between the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Even there, where in the times of the Soviet empire, the borders could only be crossed with severe limitations, cross border Euroregions have come to life.³ A number of problems in the divided towns of border regions can only be resolved with the help of European Union programs, such as INTERREG and PHARE.

While the European Union grows and extends membership to new candidates, new frontiers are traced becoming another dividing line. For example, this process is occurring on Poland's eastern borders with Russia (Kaliningrad), Ukraine and Belarus. The difficulties

² See: Khan, L. A.: *The Extinction of the Nation-State: A World without Borders*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International.

experienced after World War II in border regions of the socialist bloc need not be repeated on new frontiers. This is a challenge to European Integration: to improve the cooperation with countries that are not members of the European Union. Maybe helpful for this can be the fact that the European region is different from more general processes of increasing global flows and interactions not only by the internal density of political interaction but also on the basis of shared cultural and historical connections. The existence and development of a formal intergovernmental institutional framework enables the further development of these interactions and common histories. But it does not mean that the European region geographically and functionally represents a simple political, social and cultural unity. The European region is made up of a number of subregions and regimes which are very different. The fifteen EU members and their shared institutions provide a core around which the rest of European interaction is increasingly focused. But also within the Union there are clearly differences between the original six members and the later members. Beyond the EU core, EFTA and NATO membership produces a second concentric ring of interaction and institutional forms in the European region: in the case of NATO institutions lock Europe into global military networks, while in the case of the Scandinavian countries institutions and interactions exist which cut across EU regimes. Finally, Eastern and Central Europe, the Balkans and the states of the ex-Soviet Union all maintain a variety of diverse relations and interactions with the European core.⁴ It is important to know this differences to can develop Europe without borders.

Using the example of the Polish-German border region I would like to show how the borders can be overcome and how they can change into the sphere of contact and cooperation. The Polish-German border region is a special case, it may be viewed as an extreme one. Without any doubt it is a most interesting example. This border has not grown historically, rather it was created under a policy of power. It is a result of a decision made at the Potsdam conference of the allied powers. As a result of the manner it was established, the border was hermetically tight. "It had to defend itself so that it kept the neighbours apart"⁵. For a long time, the border was impermeable to persons, goods and information, and as such it resembled the iron curtain.

³ See: Helga Schultz: *Die Grenzen innerhalb der sozialistischen Staatenwelt*, in: Schultz, Helga (eds): *Grenzen im Ostblock und ihre Überwindung*, Berlin: Arno Spitz 2000.

⁴ See: Held, David / McGrew, Anthony / Goldblatt, David / Perraton, Jonathan: *Global Transformations. Politics, Economics and Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1999, 76.

⁵ Helga Schultz/Stefan Kowal: *Neue Grenzen - alte Nachbarn. Deutsche und Polen im Widerstreit von großer Politik und regionaler Kooperation*, in: Wagener, Hans-Jürgen/Fritz, Heiko (eds): *Im Osten was Neues. Aspekte der EU-Osterweiterung*, Dietz 1998.

First contacts were established as late as in the mid fifties; they were mainly initiated by the brotherly parties of both countries. Meetings followed of party delegations, school delegations, workplace teams. Many relations, chiefly in the municipal area, had their origins in the necessities of daily life. Most of the contacts, however, were controlled from the top down, rather than developed by the people themselves. That was not possible because to the "average inhabitant of the border area" the border were hermetically closed, simply impassable. These circumstances were not conducive to proper neighbourly relations or cross border cooperation.

And yet, it was precisely that border that opened up on New Year's day of 1972. This decision was made by the politicians Erich Honecker and Edward Gierek.⁶ The opening of the Polish-German border provided the inhabitants of the border region with the first ever opportunity to establish contact and to start cross-border cooperation. This opportunity was eagerly picked up by the people. Contacts related to cross-border trade and work migration were massive and the order of the day in the seventies. Cultural cooperation took the shape of intense contacts between German and Polish schools, pre-school, musical colleges, community houses, theatres and other cultural institutions. A major contribution to the development of the cultural cooperation was made by the so called activists of Polish-German cooperation, mainly well educated persons in various cultural institutions. Frequently, these official contacts evolved into personal relationships and friendships, which survived the closing of the border in October 1980.

Thus, it may be said that the opening of the borders in the seventies presented a great opportunity to the German-Polish border region and its population. It was then that a *social frontier* was developed, where people who belonged to two different cultures and spoke two different languages met. These nine years of an *open border* have resulted in many neighbourly relationships which seemed almost impossible given the experience of the war, the forceful drawing of the borders, subsequent massive displacement of persons and the many years of a tight, impermeable border. But it really happened and was very aptly named by Helga Schultz "the miracle on the Oder".⁷

These cross-border contacts and activities suffered greatly, or sometimes were totally damaged, after the closing of the border in 1980. Yet, many have survived the grim times of the *closed border* (1980-1991) and have been developing further since the reopening in 1991.

⁶ Zimmermann, Brigitte/Schütt, Hans-Dieter: Ohnmacht. DDR-Funktionäre sagen aus, Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben 1992, 219.

⁷ Helga Schultz/Stefan Kowal: Neue Grenzen - alte Nachbarn. Deutsche und Polen im Widerstreit von großer Politik und regionaler Kooperation, in: Wagener, Hans-Jürgen/Fritz, Heiko (eds): Im Osten was Neues. Aspekte der EU-Osterweiterung, Dietz 1998, 191.

In many cases the cooperation in the times of the *open border* (1972-1980) and today can be determined to be continuous. In the Concert Hall of Frankfurt, German students play music with music students from Slubice as they did before. The activists from the times of the first border opening are today also involved in the development of German-Polish friendship in the border region.