

ŁUKASZ ROGOWSKI,^a MACIEJ FRĄCKOWIAK^b

**COVID-19'S RE-BORDERING IMPACT ON THE
IDENTITY OF THE POLISH–GERMAN BORDERLAND
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLISH RESIDENTS:
THE CASE OF THE TWIN CITIES OF ŚLUBICE
AND GUBIN¹**

**WPLYW PROCESÓW ODTWARZANIA GRANICY
W TRAKCIE PANDEMII COVID-19
NA TOŻSAMOŚĆ POLSKO-NIEMIECKIEGO POGRANICZA
Z PERSPEKTYWY MIESZKAŃCÓW POLSKI:
PRZYPADEK MIAST BLIŹNIACZYCH ŚLUBIC I GUBINA**

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the temporary closure of many state borders and the reintroduction of border controls. This included countries in the Schengen Area, and thus the Polish-German border. These events can be seen as an example of rebordering processes. They significantly impacted the life of Polish-German twin cities, whose functioning is based mainly on cross-border flows, mobility, and exchange. The paper aims to determine how the temporary border closure affected the Polish-German borderland identity. This is based on qualitative empirical research. The research is comparative in nature and juxtaposes statements collected before (in-depth interviews) and during (phone interviews) the pandemic. On this basis, the identity of the borderland is described in four dimensions: othering, sense of belonging, cultural landscape, and border practices and routines. This made it possible to characterize the impact of the border closure on the local community more comprehensively. Negating the border as a place of exchange, and associating it with a threat, resulted in economic decline and a sense of uprooting. This conclusion should translate into more significant consideration of the identity aspect in public policies designed to address border closures in the EU following the pandemic.

Keywords: Polish-German border; rebordering; COVID-19; borderland identity; cross-border exchange

^a Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland /
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Polska
lukasz.rogowski@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6090-8975>.

^b Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland /
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Polska
maciejf@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3802-1184>.

¹ This work was supported by the Polish National Science Centre under Grant UMO-2016/23/G/HS6/04021 (project 'De-Re-Bord. Socio-spatial transformations in German-Polish "in-terstices". Practices of debordering and rebordering').

Jednym ze skutków pandemii COVID-19 było tymczasowe zamknięcie wielu granic państwowych i przywrócenie kontroli granicznych. Objęło to kraje strefy Schengen, w tym granicę polsko-niemiecką. Wydarzenia te można postrzegać jako przykład procesów zacierania granicy (reborderingu). Znacząco wpłynęły one na życie polsko-niemieckich miast partnerskich, których funkcjonowanie opiera się głównie na przepływach transgranicznych, mobilności i wymianie. Celem artykułu jest ustalenie, w jaki sposób tymczasowe zamknięcie granicy wpłynęło na tożsamość polsko-niemieckiego pogranicza. Jest on oparty na wynikach jakościowych badań empirycznych. Mają one charakter porównawczy i zestawiają wypowiedzi zebrane przed (wywiady pogłębione) i w trakcie (wywiady telefoniczne) pandemii. Na tej podstawie tożsamość pogranicza została opisana w czterech wymiarach: inności, poczucia przynależności, krajobrazu kulturowego, praktyk granicznych i rutyn. Umożliwiło to bardziej kompleksowe scharakteryzowanie wpływu zamknięcia granicy na społeczność lokalną. Negowanie granicy jako miejsca wymiany i kojarzenie jej z zagrożeniem spowodowało spadek gospodarczy i poczucie wykorzenienia. Wniosek ten powinien przełożyć się na bardziej znaczące uwzględnienie aspektu tożsamościowego w politykach publicznych mających na celu przeciwdziałanie zamykaniu granic w UE po pandemii.

Słowa kluczowe: granica polsko-niemiecka; rebordering; COVID-19; tożsamość pogranicza; wymiana transgraniczna

I. INTRODUCTION

The Polish-German border was one of the most heavily guarded in Europe between 1945 and 1989. It was not until the collapse of the communist bloc that the rules for cross-border traffic were partially relaxed, and then finally ended with Poland's accession to the Schengen Area in 2007. However, the border still holds great significance in the minds of the people living there, not only in its symbolic dimension.

The closing of borders during the pandemic has been the subject of many research, including global comparative ones.² Studies have also compared the determinants, the consequences in different areas of life, and the effectiveness and social acceptance of the public policies for closing borders within the EU.³ The social consequences of closing the Polish–German border have also been researched. Among other things, Opiłowska⁴ investigated what the constraints meant for the twin cities, regarded as laboratories of European integration prior to the pandemic, when neighbours became potential sources of infection. Opiłowska's findings suggest that border closures only proved how both sides of the border are interconnected.⁵ Hennig investigated the effects of border closures on the Polish-German cross-border region, focusing on the spatial dimension of coronavirus management in the Polish-German twin cities, with a particular emphasis on the role of civic organizations that lobbied

² Brunet-Jailly, Carpenter (2020).

³ Böhm (2021); Peyrony, Rubio, Viaggi (2021); Opiłowska, Böhm (2022).

⁴ Opiłowska (2020): 3.

⁵ Opiłowska (2020): 9.

for a rethinking of regulations.⁶ Dolińska and Makaro⁷ analysed the impact of the pandemic on multiculturalism in the cities divided along the Polish-German border, including Gubin and Słubice. Cities of this kind were of interest to the researchers as 'pluralistic communities, from the Polish perspective atypical (insular) for the whole country'.⁸ Więckowski and Timothy⁹ focused on the effects of Polish-German re-bordering during the pandemic around the island of Usedom and Swinoujście, a tourist region located on the Baltic Sea that in recent years built its brand primarily on the possibility of crossing the border as an everyday experience, a local attraction.

The studies conducted so far, while offering interesting conclusions about the effects of the closure of European borders due to the pandemic, have focused on their socio-economic dimension (effects on the local economy and households), political dimension (is this the end of the idea of Europe as a space free of national borders?), or on the perspective of sustaining cross-border cooperation (between representatives of public and civil institutions). We found several studies on the effects of border closures on residents' identity and the borderlands' spatial specificity. However, missing among them is a study that considers the perspective of residents, one that would thus significantly complement the existing studies based on analyses of media discourse and interviews with representatives of public and civic institutions. An important contribution here is the recently published book by Opilowska et al.,¹⁰ which deals with narratives and imaginaries in the area of interest and covers the pandemic period, providing rich empirical material such as interviews with residents, including group interviews.

This paper aims to fill this gap further and investigates how the pandemic and the border closures affected the identity of the borderlands. We believe that the material elicited by the individual interview technique we used, conducted with the same people both before and during the pandemic, is particularly suitable. The paper seeks to answer three questions: How is the identity of the borderland formed? What impact did the borderland's identity have during the COVID-19 border closure? How was the identity of the borderland maintained/changed during the pandemic? Answering these questions can be important for many reasons, but first, and foremost having such knowledge allows us, as Opilowska¹¹ or Buko¹² highlighted, to observe the possible changes in perceptions of the border and the ideas about 'us' and 'them' held by the border residents (new narratives, identities, and practices in response to the border closure).

⁶ Hennig (2021): 864–867.

⁷ Dolińska, Makaro (2020).

⁸ Dolińska, Makaro (2020): 229.

⁹ Więckowski, Timothy (2021).

¹⁰ Opilowska et al. (2022).

¹¹ Opilowska (2020).

¹² Buko (2020).

II. THE BORDERLAND IDENTITY

If the borderland appears to be a given in the everyday experience of the residents, it is because one of its primary purposes is to ‘reduce the complexity of everyday life’.¹³ However, the effect should not be confused with the cause. There is, of course, nothing obvious or natural about borders, including state borders. Quite the opposite: a border is a social institution that must be maintained and managed.¹⁴ As Schack highlights, this process of institutionalizing a border – or, as we described it earlier, bordering – has several dimensions: social, legal, economic, political, and cultural. In this way, the border reproduces patterns of interaction, ideas, a sense of belonging, and the landscape in the area.¹⁵ On the other hand, the borderland can be defined as a physical and imagined landscape shaped by the presence of the border thus understood.¹⁶ In other words, a borderland is an area whose ‘cultural, social, economic, political and physical development is the result of proximity to a border’.¹⁷

Such a definition may sound all too easy, especially against the backdrop of extensive scholarly discussions on the subject,¹⁸ which address, among other questions, where the borderland ends and begins. Is it possible to calculate this area in meters, does it end with an edge, or rather gradually disappear? Is a borderline enough for a borderland, or does it have to manifest itself in a significant way in the culture of the area? While acknowledging these debates, we adopt in this paper an understanding of the borderland as an area with a distinctive identity. In the following paragraphs, we clarify this understanding, focusing on how the category of identity is linked to the border, and what the dimensions of borderland identity are.

In the classical understanding of borders, their functions include delimitation, separation, interface, distinction, and affirmation.¹⁹ In other words: bordering, ordering, and othering.²⁰ In this way, as Scott and Sohn remind us, border demarcation and everyday border practices shape the local institutional order, the identity of the inhabitants, and the landscape of the border regions.²¹ Moreover, they shape the customs peculiar to the borderlands, which originate from the overlap of various cultural influences. Borderlands are thus often places of hybrid cultures, and this hybridity is manifested in their ‘language, food, family relationships, gender identities, and other cultural elements’.²²

¹³ Scott, Sohn (2019): 297.

¹⁴ Newman (2006): 148.

¹⁵ Schack (2000).

¹⁶ Dell’Agnese, Amilhat Szary (2015); Shimanski (2015).

¹⁷ Timothy, Gelbman (2014): 203.

¹⁸ Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak 2020.

¹⁹ Sohn (2014).

²⁰ Van Houtum, Van Naerssen (2002).

²¹ Scott, Sohn (2019): 2.

²² Timothy, Gelbman (2015): 203.

Let us recall Prokkola's definition of borderland identity: 'borderland identity can be understood as a particular regional identity which is both a narrative outcome and is performed through everyday practices'.²³ It is worth highlighting some additional elements that define the specificity of borderland identities: the presence of differences between hegemonic and resident identities.²⁴ Moreover, 'identity narratives are continuously constructed and renegotiated in ritualized processes, through the repetition of spatial practices and everyday activities';²⁵ and 'borderland identities could not be fully understood separately from their life experience and ambitions, or from the societal and material conditions which enabled them to carry their projects through'.²⁶ These few quotations draw our attention to what we consider most important in Prokkola's concept: the social practices characteristic of the borderland reconstruct the landscape, which, at the same time, offers a framework for their reproduction and change over time, and the identity of the individuals living there is strongly linked to the identity of the region itself, including the availability of life opportunities for the individuals. Therefore, specific to this framing of borderland identities is a combination of constructivist and relational approaches to place, recreated through practices that simultaneously materialize social inequalities.

Here, we can point to four dimensions of borderland identity: othering, the sense of belonging, border practices (routines), and cultural landscape. While these can be understood as the primary contexts in which identity is considered with the borderlands in the literature, adopting Prokkola's above definition, we propose considering them as interrelated dimensions of borderland identity.

The first dimension of borderland identity is the division between *we/they* and the construction of the Other (othering). As Van Houtum and Van Naerssen highlight, the paradox of borders is that separating the familiar and what is ours from the foreign simultaneously brings the Other to life.²⁷ Thus, this dimension of borderland identity would primarily include the mutual ideas and perceptions of people on both sides of the border.²⁸ The production of the Other can also involve people from outside the cross-border region, for example refugee policy in the EU contributes to reconstructing a European identity.²⁹ As Anzaldúa reminds us,³⁰ a part of this process can also be the production of self-identification, which escapes dualisms and even deliberately rejects them. Particularly in the borderlands, the *we/they* division may not necessarily be a division based on nationality but based on identities that are the result of overlapping German, Polish, and regional influences, for example, contrasted

²³ Prokkola (2009): 25.

²⁴ Prokkola (2009): 23–25.

²⁵ Prokkola (2009): 31.

²⁶ Prokkola (2009): 34.

²⁷ Van Houtum, Van Naerssen (2002): 26.

²⁸ Gasparini (2014).

²⁹ Çağatay Tekin (2022).

³⁰ Anzaldúa (1987).

with Others whose identities are less complex, closer to identifications based on belonging to a single state. We must also be aware of research findings, such those of Yuval-Davis, who points out the complex phenomenon of self- and other- perceptions, especially when also considered in the context of differential life chances. Then the state and regional dimensions of identification intersect with, for example, social capital, financial capital, family situation, or gender.³¹

The second dimension of borderland identity is the sense of belonging. As Yuval-Davis points out, 'belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling "at home" and, as Michael Ignatieff points out, about feeling "safe"'.³² The object of the attachment could be the characterization of meanings in cross-border cities. For example, experiencing social inequalities and cultural differences and feeling pleasure from being on historic streets. The borderland also entails a memory of expulsion and migration.³³ A sense of belonging can also be felt towards the project of Europeanization and all its associated values described above. Although the latter dimension would fit more into what Yuval-Davis refers to as the politics of belonging, pointing out that belonging is not only a spontaneous feeling constructed over the course of an individual's life, but also an institutional project or discourse directed at promoting specific ethical and political values. An essential part of belonging policies, especially in border regions, are their grassroots forms of criticism.

The third dimension of borderland identity captures borderland-specific routines or border practices.³⁴ Nationality is rooted not only in discourse but also in habits.³⁵ The daily routines undertaken by those who live and frequent the place are as important as shared ideas, or a sense of belonging associated with specific ideas connected to the identity of the borderland. These routines create the specific movement and rhythm of a place. In the narrowest sense, these would be the practices related to controlling or handling border traffic. Such activities are increasingly referred to in the literature as borderwork to emphasize the complex nature of border management today, especially in European Union countries.³⁶ Borderwork thus points to surveillance practices carried out beyond the borderline, by entities other than the state and increasingly from the bottom up (in this sense, establishing a border is no longer an exclusive state activity). Also practices such as crossing and working on the other side of the border and activities related to relaxation, including prostitution or gambling, are no less important for sustaining the border and the identity of the local landscape.³⁷ Moreover, a border practice with a unique role for borderland identity in many parts of the world is cross-border shopping. As Spiering and Van der Velde, who study this phenomenon, point out, it is dif-

³¹ Yuval-Davis (2015).

³² Ignatieff (2006): 197.

³³ Halicka (2014).

³⁴ Sandberg (2016).

³⁵ Edensor (2002): 7.

³⁶ Rumford (2008).

³⁷ Timothy, Gelbman (2014): 202.

difficult to overestimate their role in social and cultural exchange. Shopping of this kind can be of various varieties: 'recreational shopping', 'purposeful shopping', and 'daily shopping',³⁸ and these are motivated either by differences in prices, a belief in the higher quality of a particular product, or a desire to experience the cultural differences present in the ways of service, the appearance of shop windows, the type of goods, the atmosphere of the place, and many others.³⁹ Thus, in the activity of shopping, often in passing, ideas about places, customs and people from the other side of the border, and their desirable and less desirable peculiarities, are also created and verified.⁴⁰

The fourth dimension of borderland identity is its cultural landscape. In the first place, this dimension refers to the material aspect of the 'biography' of each border,⁴¹ whose establishment, guarding, unsealing and strengthening of the border is a process in which technology and local endeavours involving objects and the physical environment play an essential role. Secondly, consideration is given to the diversity of these measures. Borderlands are distinguished by landscape anomalies.⁴² This can be due to the contrast arising from two countries meeting in one place,⁴³ and, most often, their different iconographic, architectural, and aural cultures. Another type of anomaly is the border infrastructure, and thus the watchtowers of booths and border crossings, and sometimes very spectacular engineering structures.⁴⁴ Characteristics of the border landscape are also spots in which one can observe the 'other side', as well as the attractions divided by the border: beaches, golf courses, the buildings crossed by the border, such as pubs or libraries,⁴⁵ border-themed attractions (museums, memorials, and so on), the unique and symbolic places for cross-border meetings and integration.⁴⁶ Many of these places are heritage elements, tourist attractions, and thus also 'identity markers',⁴⁷ creating site specificity and attracting investors.⁴⁸ Their elements also include – though they are not always legible at first glance and do not necessarily evoke pleasant associations – carriers of the so-called memory of the landscape, such as houses abandoned by displaced people,⁴⁹ or bullet marks at the sites of battles for the control of the borderlands.⁵⁰ Finally, an important element of the cultural landscape of the borderlands can also be spaces of representation in Lefebvre's sense: maps, signs, spatial categories, or the etymology of the

³⁸ Spierings, Van der Velde (2013): 7.

³⁹ Spierings, Van der Velde (2013): 8.

⁴⁰ Spierings, Van der Velde (2008): 501.

⁴¹ Megoran (2012).

⁴² Timothy, Saarinen, Viken (2016).

⁴³ Gelbman, Timothy (2010).

⁴⁴ Więckowski (2021): 296.

⁴⁵ Więckowski (2021).

⁴⁶ Timothy, Saarinen, Viken (2016).

⁴⁷ Gelbman, Timothy (2015); Więckowski (2021): 294–295.

⁴⁸ Więckowski (2021).

⁴⁹ Praczyk (2018).

⁵⁰ Donnan (2006).

names of locations.⁵¹ Bodies can also be an element of the cultural landscape. Kobi⁵² notes that the thermal comfort of bodies in border areas, cognizable by clothing, functions as an extension of state territorialization in China.

Conceptualizing borderland identity as consisting of the four dimensions described above makes it possible to analyse the phenomenon in all its complexity, and systematically. At the same time, it justifies the use of the term 'borderland identity' instead of, for example, 'the sense of place'. The latter places too much emphasis on the individual's sense of space, and too little on the material and interactional conditions and consequences of these sensations, and their embodied and routinized nature.⁵³ At the same time, such a broad definition of identity (which denies identification with one's valued opinions and beliefs about oneself and others) and borderland (wherever the effect of a border is felt) can be questionable. After all, is there anything that is not an identity according to this definition, or an area that is not a borderland today? Thus, it is worth pointing out at the end that this is not necessarily true. In our view, borderland identity involves the characteristics of an area perpetuated in self-identifications and a sense of belonging that refers to the border, border-specific practices, and landscape anomalies.

III. METHODS

The results discussed in the next section result from a Polish-German research project 'De-Re-Bord. Socio-spatial transformations in German-Polish "interstices". Practices of debordering and rebordering' conducted between 2018 and 2022. The project aimed to investigate debordering and re-bordering practices, with a particular focus on materiality and visibility, as well as mobility practices in border regions (specifically, two border regions: Brandenburg and Lubuskie). This research falls within the so-called 'practice turn' tradition in border studies. We thus assumed that bordering processes are reproduced during everyday practices.⁵⁴ So-called 'everyday border workers undertake these practices' – that is, people who handle cross-border traffic, use services on both sides of the border, describe the border, create infrastructure, and so on. To study the borderland as a set of practices, we adopted an everyday life perspective. It showed how border experience is rooted in various micro-practices (talking on the phone, insuring property, and so on, and not merely crossing the border).

Moreover, we assumed that such practices have a narrative dimension.⁵⁵ They can be studied by listening to and engaging in, as Cassidy et al. put it,⁵⁶

⁵¹ Lefebvre (1991).

⁵² Kobi (2020).

⁵³ Cross (2001).

⁵⁴ Sandberg (2016): 4–5.

⁵⁵ Paasi (1999).

⁵⁶ Cassidy, Yuval-Davis, Wemyss (2018).

border talks during border crossing, and by analysing local media discourse. Since an essential part of border practices involves not only conversations but also behaviours, a necessary part of studying those practices entailed observing how specific ideas about the border are performed by the participants.⁵⁷

These methodological assumptions necessitate the combined use of various techniques in the research process. During the De-Re-Bord project, we used photo-driven observation, discourse analysis, and social media content analysis, but in this paper, we rely primarily on the in-depth interviews conducted with the people living on the border. Sixteen people on each side of the border participated in the first stage of the research. They were differentiated by gender (50% male, 50% female), age (under 25, 25–50, and over 50), and place of residence. Concerning the latter variable, respondents came from urban areas (Słubice and Frankfurt), rural areas (Późna and Griessen), as well as Poznań and Berlin – as it was assumed that these cities could be treated as border towns due to their extensive transportation infrastructure. However, we did not consider the Poznań and Berlin residents in the results described here.

The closing of the border during the pandemic occurred during the research. We decided to conduct one additional unplanned research phase to treat this as a highly significant event for life on the border. We thus treated the border closing as a factor which allowed us to capture the changes resulting from this re-bordering and to examine the elements of the residents' daily lives and identity markers that are rarely reflected on. The experimental nature of the existing situation stems from the fact that it disrupts an essential dimension of border life: cross-border exchange.

Between 24 March and 11 May, when the Polish–German border was still closed, we conducted 13 individual interviews with residents of the Polish part of the twin cities of Gubin-Guben and Frankfurt-Słubice and their environs. We had to consider the specific conditions of research implementation, as we wanted to capture the particular moment and the experience of it, which would change if similar interviews were implemented later. For this reason, we opted for telephone interviews⁵⁸ – we called people from the previous stages and spoke to all those whom we could contact and who agreed to give us additional time. Only in this way was it possible to study the pandemic situation in real-time.

A new interview script was created for the 'pandemic research', as there was no need to repeat the same questions from previous interviews. It included several questions about the situation on the border when the pandemic restrictions were introduced. They were grouped into three blocks: (a) What changes in the functioning of the border are perceived by border residents?; (b) How do border residents perceive and adapt to these changes?; and (c) What might be, from the perspective of border residents, the short- and long-term consequences of these changes?

⁵⁷ van Houtum, Kramsch, Zierhofer (2005); Woodward, Jones, Marston (2005).

⁵⁸ Irvine (2011).

Contacting respondents who had already participated in the earlier stages of the research allowed us to collate data from different periods. Categorization analysis was used for the data from both interviews. The interview material was partially transcribed and coded using the MAXQDA programme. We used a categorization key, which was first based on theory (plots from the scenario) and then based on data (open coding).⁵⁹ Using the coding key made it possible to distinguish the different categories of attitudes/practices regarding various dimensions of identity in a comparative perspective: pre/post-pandemic.

The interviews used in the paper were conducted with residents of the Polish side of the border. Nonetheless, these people also often spoke about what life was like on the German side – both from their own experiences and from the stories of others. These accounts also came from contacts with residents of the German side. For this reason, we assume that events from Germany are also partially described in the paper.

It is worth adding that the people interviewed – in addition to the already mentioned differentiation by gender, age, and place of residence – also represented different professions (e.g. employees of local government institutions, students, self-employed people, pensioners). This differentiation of social position provided an opportunity to look at the situation on the border from different perspectives, and thus – bearing in mind all the limitations of sampling in qualitative research – to treat the results obtained as those that also apply to other residents of the researched areas.

IV. RESULTS

We divided the empirical analyses into four parts. Each of them refers to one of the dimensions of borderland identity, and describes its functioning before and during the pandemic.

1. Othering

The identity of the borderland under study was characterized before the pandemic as one of ‘warm indifference’ between the Poles and Germans, indicating consistently transient but still-present prejudice and stereotypical thinking.⁶⁰ Mutual instrumentalization and neocolonialism were also identified.⁶¹ Moreover, real and imagined differences were reproduced, for example, through consumption: according to Asher, Polish salespeople often treat German customers like ‘walking wallets’.

⁵⁹ Gibbs (2011).

⁶⁰ Stokłosa (2014); Galasinski, Meinhof (2002); Dolińska, Niedźwiecka-Iwańczuk (2017).

⁶¹ Asher (2005).

In our research, we detected a gradual shift from negative stereotypes to those of a more neutral nature, as exemplified by the ecological image of Poland discussed below [21].⁶² The reason for this, again, is the everyday practices implemented from the bottom-up, including exchange practices in which the twin city residents '*convince to each other*' [31], which also leads to a blurring of differences. Remaining differences, however, are described by the residents directly as something 'foreign' (e.g. '*foreign aesthetics*' [22] in the bazaars). Similarly, like Dolińska, Makaro and Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak,⁶³ we noticed in the practices and statements of the respondents the symptoms of a 'gradual transformation of frontier towns into border towns, in which relations become more personal, mass, autotelic and also realized in the private sphere'.⁶⁴ However, this process is certainly not over yet.

At the same time, such a situation leads to the collective stamping out of new others, mainly refugees from the Middle East and people from Eastern Europe: '*This German to whom we are accustomed is rather such a decent German, orderly. And here suddenly comes a person who is not at all adapted to life in... European conditions. Her culture is entirely different from ours, Europeans*' [26]. It can thus be assumed that, just as in the past, the residents of both sides of the border treat each non-borderland others as strangers. This is due to deepened integration, of which exchange practices are an element, and a partially shared borderland identity is created. Within its framework, 'we – the people of the borderland' appear together before new strangers.

Health hazards during the pandemic sensitized individuals – at least in the initial period – to observe sanitary rules and grow more attentive to their fellow residents' compliance with these rules. One gets the impression that the twin city residents were more trusting of the people they recognized as existing or potential fellow citizens rather than newcomers. Hence, there was fear of the travellers who made their way through the twin cities with suitcases and other travel gear [31]. Before the pandemic, almost every foreigner walking in public spaces was treated as a manifestation of cherished pluralism and opportunity. In contrast, during the pandemic, the existing residents considered these foreigners as temporary new strangers, and treated them as potential carriers of the virus. Thus, the prediction of Buko, which was made at the beginning of the pandemic, in a slightly different context (in a twin city on the Slovenian-Italian border), was proven true: that lockdown would translate into an increased aversion towards people whom she had hitherto treated as neighbours or attractive visitors.⁶⁵

The pandemic restored awareness of the differences in lifestyles on both sides of the border. The blurring of the differences mentioned earlier was made possible, among other things, by open cross-border exchanges. The clos-

⁶² Numbers in square brackets indicate the codes of respondents participating in the research.

⁶³ Dolińska, Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak (2017).

⁶⁴ Dolińska, Makaro (2020): 229.

⁶⁵ Buko (2020): 54.

ing of these opportunities revealed that many elements of daily life are different among the residents on both sides of the border. Such foreignness was also precisely due to the closure of the exchange of goods and services, reflected, for example, in the previously mentioned problems with selling vegetables, which are not so popular in Polish diets. Moreover, there is a substantial excess of some goods, such as asparagus [12], as there is no market for them among customers coming exclusively from the Polish side of the border.

The interviews we conducted during the pandemic also proved the thesis of the nationalization of borders⁶⁶ to be correct, an essential dimension of which was the attribution of distinct characteristics to people from each country and their characterization by other distinguishing features. Earlier, we mentioned how attempts were made to explain the successes and failures of individual nations by pointing to their different customs, their attitudes towards authority or the effectiveness of state institutions.⁶⁷ It was no different at the Polish-German border, where one participant pointed out the different attitudes towards the virus among Germans and Poles: *‘When the Germans saw me walking into the hall with my gloves on and my jacket on my face, they knocked themselves on the head like I was crazy.... I talked to a guy three weeks ago, and now he will not look straight into my eyes. I told him: “Watch out because everyone thought they would be okay. The Italians, the Chinese... You are still well because you are a rich country and you have better health care than us. Better hospitals, more doctors, but also more people”. They are idiots, believe me. A guy walks through the room singing: “Coronavirus, coronavirus!”’* [35].

2. Sense of belonging

Researchers often refer to the Polish-German cross-border region as an area with specific values, evident from descriptions of charming old towns and the tolerance of culturally pluralistic communities.⁶⁸ When talking about what positively distinguishes the twin cities, it is often said that one can be more tolerant here in getting to know other people.⁶⁹ Moreover, we found that the twin cities are treated and valued by the residents as *‘connected organisms’* [34].

In such a situation, we can speak, following Dolińska and Makaro,⁷⁰ of the existence of cultural pluralism in the borderland: cultures coexisting side by side. This is no longer a clear cultural differentiation, but it is not yet multiculturalism either. At the same time, it is noted that such a profound similarity between the two sides of the border is mainly based on the grassroots practices carried out by their residents, including those related to cross-border exchanges (shopping, cycling, etc.). More formal affiliation related, for exam-

⁶⁶ Böhm (2021): 137.

⁶⁷ Jańczak (2020).

⁶⁸ Sandberg (2016): 5–7.

⁶⁹ Markuszewska, Tanskanen, Subirós (2016): 114–115.

⁷⁰ Dolińska, Makaro (2020).

ple, to the functioning of the Euroregion and the cross-border cooperation of local governments is of little importance [30]. In this sense, our research confirms the results of previous studies. For example, according to Sandberg,⁷¹ the debordering characteristic of the EU, the process of producing cross-border regions with their own symbols, can be considered top-down rebranding. This formal level (e.g. within the Euroregions) has little significance. It often passes directly unnoticed and without affecting the practices engaged in by the residents (manifested, for example, within the visual identity of the twin cities). However, the case is different with the grassroots attachment to the open border, recognized as a value and also valued by the residents of the Polish-German borderland themselves, often treated as something characteristic and testifying to the development of the area.⁷²

The closing of the border made it tangibly clear to many that it existed and that it still exists. At the same time, in place of the recent sense of pride and joy in living near it, the border began to evoke the opposite feelings: disappointment, panic, fear, and shock. Continued attachment to debordering values was confronted with the realities of the new daily life. The long duration of the pandemic situation led to a change in the attitudes and motivations of border residents. Over time, a metaphorical understanding of the border also emerged: the border of life opportunities, the border of to be or not to be. '*Economic rationalism*' [27] began to appear in residents' decisions when it became apparent that the closure would be longer than the initially expected period of two weeks. This attitude aimed, among other things, to restore broken exchange practices. The situation of closing the border also further realized the commonality of the fate of those living on both sides of the border. This was symbolic, such as the protest against the reintroduction of border control when a banner was displayed with the text '*Open the border, we will survive together*' [27].

Meanwhile, in addition to similar acts that attempt to sustain the transnational community – which involved, as mentioned above, primarily 'community advocates' for decisions on where to stay in the absence of the possibility of crossing the border – national affiliation dominated over the place of work or attachment to specific values. Despite many incentives, few Polish cross-border workers chose to take advantage of the hotels and funded allowances offered by German employers to encourage them to stay in Germany, but instead preferred to return to Poland. This was, according to Jańczak, caused by deep uncertainty about further developments during the pandemic.⁷³

At the same time, there were opinions that '*this Słubice-Frankfurt partnership has not passed the test*' [11], that it was geared towards closing the border rather than supporting people who needed help in this situation. The concept of cross-border regions and pluralistic societies proved to be weak in practice. Some researchers have traced its origins to the contractual nature of

⁷¹ Sandberg (2016).

⁷² Markuszewska, Tanskanen, Subirós (2016).

⁷³ Jańczak (2020): 4.

the Polish-German cross-border community, which was a 'community of interests' rather than a 'community of cross-border identity'.⁷⁴ However, it can also be pointed out that the Euroregion organizations were weaker than the state institutions, which unexpectedly and overwhelmingly restrained their efforts (against which both residents and local officials protested, as well as transnational organizations). Whatever the reason, such a diagnosis did not inspire optimism, as might have been expected, especially since the closing of borders could also be seen as a reversal of democratization processes in general, which had enabled the previously observed processes of multiculturalism.⁷⁵

3. Practices and routines

It is useful to describe the identity dimension associated with practices with the term 'regionauts', as used by Varró.⁷⁶ In a broad sense, if we can define them as people carrying out their activities on both sides of the border, thus acquiring specific competences and producing distinctive spatial practices, we will be closer to capturing the situation as it was shortly before the pandemic in the German-Polish border area. An important role in regionauts' daily routines is played by cross-border living, working or acquiring education on the other side of the border (especially for Poles living in Germany).

Consumption, however, turns out to be crucial cross-border practice. In this dimension, the asymmetry of cross-border exchange practices is also most evident: it is the residents of the Polish side who mostly adapt to the expectations of the residents of the German side – hence the extensive offer of cigarette or fuel outlets, and service outlets related mainly to cosmetology, hairdressing, or dental practice. An extreme case is the border bazaars, which are enclosed areas with various offerings that encourage people to spend several hours there. It is not without reason that some locals refer to them as '*ghettos*' [22]. Thus, for the residents on the German side of the border, consumption in Poland is more recreational, being not only a search for attractive commercial offers but also a way to spend leisure time. On the other hand, for the Poles in Germany consumption is directed more purposefully towards purchasing specific products. This is probably due to the higher prices of services (e.g. restaurants) on the German side so that the residents of the Polish side do not take advantage of them. Asymmetries and perceptions of cultural differences on both sides of the border are also reproduced through the type of goods purchased on both sides and their perceived quality. Buying vegetables, meat, and energy drinks on the Polish side, and household chemicals and electronics on the German side, reproduces hierarchy and ethnicity in the 'European city'.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Jańczak (2020): 5.

⁷⁵ Dolińska, Makaro (2020): 230.

⁷⁶ Varró (2016): 173.

⁷⁷ Szytniewski, Spierings (2018).

In the statements of the residents of the Polish side of the border, a specific and often recurring phrase was identified: the implementation of specific activities ‘*under the Germans*’ [25]. Such implementation of everyday practices, mainly those related to cross-border exchange, adapt to the expectations of customers and guests from Germany using goods, services, and infrastructure on the Polish side of the border. Examples of such practices conducted ‘*under the Germans*’ are the ways of managing agro-tourism. However, other exchange situations based on oscillating between similarity and difference can also be highlighted. For example, the differences in the tastes of German and Polish dishes were emphasized by the residents: ‘*For example, she complains all the time about, about, about how Polish bread is not good. So she comes with her bread and says that German bread is known worldwide, that it’s so good*’ [47]. At the same time, these differences are exploited in the creation of food services: Polish restaurateurs refer to the ecological image of Polish dishes while presenting them in such a way as to appeal to the tastes of German customers [21].

An important dimension of cross-border practices is transportation practices. Morning car traffic, including that near the border bridge, is a tangible indicator of the flow of people across the border. The residents mentioned how traffic behaviour changes as people cross the border (e.g. different driving regulations: ‘*For example, it is often seen that Germans who drive to Poland turn on these lights only on the bridge. So somewhere, these regulations are demarcated. The second example is from the highway. The fact that in Germany, there are more and more of these speed limits on the highway. Still, you can see the difference while driving*’ [30]).

The border closure revealed differences in practices that proved crucial on both sides of the border. In the first weeks, the restrictions threatened to quarantine all Poles working in the German border area. Also the extensive cross-border service sector, such as hairdressers, beauticians, and dentists, was deprived of income. The news of the planned border closure caused panic among the border residents. In the evening, immediately before the communicated closure, German customers came to Poland in large numbers and bought the most popular exchange products: cigarettes and alcohol [11]. However, immediately after the reintroduction of border controls, this traffic almost entirely died down. Such a situation among many residents of border towns triggered reflection related to the previous ways of organizing daily life, including exchange practices. Some opined that such stores and service points on the Polish side of the border are rendered completely unnecessary when German customers are not allowed to use them: ‘*The increased number of stores in Stubice in terms of precisely German customers is now proving to be an oversupply for Stubice residents. This number of markets exceeds the demand resulting from the number of people here locally*’ [14].

The collapse of the previous activities resulted in new activities and forms of cooperation. German employers tried to help their Polish employees with temporary housing in the German border area and organized additional border transportation. According to one respondent, in such situations, the pro-

essional benefits outweighed the sense of personal comfort [30]. In the early days of the lockdown, grassroots initiatives to partially – if possible – restore various exchange practices also began to emerge. The border bridge in Słubice served as a place to transfer various things (for example medicines, and cigarettes). Residents recalled how Polish veterinarians donated medicines to German pet owners [11].

The pandemic situation gradually generated more and more problems among residents, producing a growing sense of disorientation and confusion: how one should behave depending on where one currently resided was uncertain (uncertainty was a permanent feature of border life elsewhere in the EU as well⁷⁸). As a result, there were problems in explaining to people on the other side of the border the motives behind the activities undertaken or the inability to undertake them. Among the reasons cited for this was the lack of adequate cooperation between Polish and German local governments, which could not agree on common rules or lobby for their introduction at the state-wide level [11].

4. Cultural landscape

When analysing the landscape as a dimension of the identity of the Polish-German borderland, it is worth noting the remnants of border infrastructure and places of economic activity accumulated nearby,⁷⁹ the shared heritage (pre-war, post-EU),⁸⁰ and, more recently, the shared infrastructure projects, such as the Gubin-Guben sewage treatment plant and the pedestrian bridges, facilitating transnational traffic and operating more on a neighbourhood level. Another interesting finding is the identification of Germans residing in Poland with urbanization *per se*; the residents were found to associate their mere presence, engaging in consumption practices in public space or simply walking through it, with a lively street or square.⁸¹

However, the residents' statements and the observations we made in the border areas also point to significant distinctiveness in the landscape of the areas studied on both sides of the border. On the one hand, these are due to historical circumstances, for example the different architecture on both sides and the clear distinction between pre-war Polish and German buildings: *Generally, in everything, even in the construction of houses. This is what we are laughing about here. Our local villages are such classic German houses. This is the solidity, this is the thoughtfulness. A flood wave will come, but it will not flood the house. On farms there are buildings for animals, this is... attics, where in case of flooding these animals can be put in the attic. The grain is at the top, so it is all so very thoughtful. Well, and this is what I say, this is so old German, this style I also saw in Masuria, so typical German areas. In Po-*

⁷⁸ Unfried (2020): 50.

⁷⁹ Dołzbłasz, Zelek (2019).

⁸⁰ Kurnicki, Sternberg (2016).

⁸¹ Sandberg (2016).

land, the buildings were mainly, let's say, chaos. We'll add a little here, a little there' [21]. Residents of the Polish areas mentioned that, after World War II, post-German remnants were destroyed, such as cemeteries or monuments – actions aimed at blurring such visible differences and the associated memory. The remnants of border infrastructure (e.g. abandoned guard booths) or former life on the border (e.g. buildings of former military barracks), which sometimes change their purpose to accommodate more modern needs (e.g. former barracks become residential buildings), are also a historical element of the border landscape. This confirms the thesis posited by Dołzbłasz and Zelek that former control and border facilities have been left intact, while their functions have changed.⁸²

On the other hand, the landscape differences are more contemporary and are related to a different approach to how space is developed. Attention is drawn, among other things, to German '*solidity*' and Polish '*chaos*' [21, 26]. This is manifested, for example, in the areas along the Oder River – they are unregulated on the Polish side [22]. Moreover, regarding the shaping of domestic space, in Germany it is associated with fencing off; in Poland, with the expansion of greenery [26]. It is worth noting that this chaos is related to the specifics (fragmentation) of trade on the Polish side of the border. As Dołzbłasz and Zelek highlight, on the Polish side, there are many companies and markets (a more significant number of small establishments), owing to the nature of consumption (price differences, orientation to German customers, etc.). One will find hotels and catering places near the border on the German side; on the Polish side: retail.

It can thus be assumed that the Polish side of the border is perceived as more '*natural*' [22], and this perception is exploited in cross-border exchange practices. Eco-friendliness, not only the landscape itself, is becoming a motive for attracting German customers to Poland. This is particularly evident in the Polish agritourism farms that emphasize naturalness and eco-friendliness. At the same time, this is achieved by adapting to German customers' expectations and perceptions: '*There are summer houses, there is a fishery, where Germans can drive up for a weekend getaway. There are vegetables grown organically. Also, in this agritourism, they went entirely into what the Germans want. That is, to sit down, eat something, go fishing, then even buy some organic vegetables and take them home*' [21].

The changes in the landscape were among the key changes linked to the closure of the Polish-German border and were certainly the most noticeable. These changes mainly stemmed from the reintroduction of border control on both sides, the presence at border crossings of the army, border guard tents, and people in protective suits [11, 12, 13, 22]. In the first phase of the lockdown, there were huge traffic jams and long queues at the border, reminiscent of the period before Poland joined the EU.⁸³ In turn, within the twin cities themselves, the prevailing experience was one of extinction: emptiness on the

⁸² Dołzbłasz, Zelek (2019): 505–506.

⁸³ Peyrony, Rubio, Viaggi (2021).

streets, especially on the border bridges that previously bustled with life, and the absence of cars with German registrations [12, 22, 25]. Particularly symbolic was the view of the infrastructure connecting the two sides of the border: *'Well, this is an unimaginable situation. I was walking with my family to see what it looks like, and the empty bridge looks horrifying'* [13]. At the same time, these tangible indicators of the sudden and almost complete disappearance of previous cross-border exchanges allow us to grasp the specifics of the pandemization of borders during this period. Borders became, as Aradau and Tazzioli put it, 'hygienic borders', emphasizing the subordination of the bordering processes during this period to a sanitary regime.⁸⁴ However, in addition to such border-specific dimensions of changes in the cultural landscape, similarities with images from other parts of the country were also seen: *'There were tents standing and men and women in such overalls. Precisely such precautions as they show us on TV'* [25].

It is also worth mentioning that the type of landscape and the natural environment influenced the functioning of the border. The new situations described above mainly concerned infrastructurally developed areas, primarily in larger cities. There, the border crossings were guarded; the traffic through them was strictly controlled. In contrast, in non-urban areas and villages, the border could be approached freely and even crossed. The border services did not explicitly guard such places, and the shallower and narrower border river sometimes facilitated more significant opportunities for movement.

5. Summary of the results: effects of the pandemic on cross-border exchanges

A consequence of the de-bordering processes described above was that, before the pandemic, cross-border exchanges were one of the key, if not the most important, elements of the identity of the residents of the German-Polish border region, a fact confirmed by many of our the respondents (*'we live from trade', 'there must be a flow of goods, otherwise there are problems'* [27]). However, as we mentioned when defining the identity of the borderland, this exchange cannot be reduced to trade practices, especially not to their economic dimension. It also defines other layers of borderland identity: the mutual perceptions of borderland residents, the sense of belonging to the region, and the cultural landscape.

According to pre-pandemic research, the various dimensions of the identity of the borderland are interconnected and influence each other. Some practices – for example, communication or commerce – produce a landscape characteristic of the borderland. Some of its elements, in turn, are described as *'foreign'* by locals. Others, on the other hand, such as the remnants of border infrastructure, evoke specific emotions among residents that co-create a sense of belonging.

⁸⁴ Aradau, Tazzioli (2021): 5.

The exchange was central to the processes in the Polish-German borderland before the pandemic. Characteristically, however, it was the result of many negotiations. We were dealing with a situation emphasizing differences in various areas of borderland life. Such differences produce dynamics in relations on both sides of the border, thus sustaining an exchange realized precisely on the basis of dissimilarity and lack, which becomes possible to satisfy on the other side of the border, as well as an enticing dissimilarity that encourages people to move to the other side.⁸⁵ On the other hand, however, emphasizing differences is a kind of play that adapts to the expectations of those on the other side of the border. Thus, to some extent, the production of differences is intentional, conforming to certain expectations or perceptions of residents on the other side of the border.

At the same time, it is worth noting again the asymmetrical nature of the exchange relationship, and, thus, the differences in the identity of the borderland based on it. It functions differently depending on the context of cross-border relations. The asymmetry is less evident in those cases where there are more institutionalized relations involving public institutions, primarily local governments. There is a noticeable trend towards maintaining bilateral partnerships. However, the situation is different in situations where there is a bottom-up, non-institutional exchange that rather involves private actors. In such cases, one can see activities aimed at deliberately producing and sustaining differences between the two sides of the border. Such a difference – in the offer of goods and services, aesthetics, and lifestyles – reinforces exchange relations, as it indicates that on the other side of the border, one can satisfy those needs that are lacking on one's own side. In this case, however, the asymmetry mentioned above is evident since, as shown earlier, it is more the residents of the Polish side of the border who adapt to the needs and expectations of the residents of the German side.

The closure of the border and the reintroduction of border controls in the twin cities ushered in a complete change in social relations in the border area. The residents indicated that *'the inability to cross the border means the end of the money'* [21] and described the situation as a disaster [12]: *'everything stands still'* [27]. However, the closure of the possibility of conducting the cross-border exchange practices described earlier concerned not only the exchange of goods and services but also the other dimensions of borderland identity. It also required addressing the above-mentioned asymmetrical exchange relations.

The study of the Polish-German twin cities during the pandemic period clarifies how the various dimensions of borderland identity intermingle and interact. The lack of forms of mobility affected the perception and functioning of the landscape – it was characterized by emptiness and silence. In turn, the emptiness and lack of movement changed the sense of belonging and identification.

⁸⁵ Spierings, Van der Velde (2013).

As the interviews we conducted indicate, the closing of the border also made many people realise that the border actually existed and that it exists – that it is not just a theoretical geopolitical construct but a tangible and directly experienced barrier. Such a difference in perception of the border negatively affected their psychological states and caused many negative emotional effects: fear, disappointment, and so on [11, 13, 27]. These effects were mainly related to the disappearance of further exchange, the use of the border as a resource. The consequence of this condition was the limitation of casual relationships with people on the other side of the border. It again evoked the question of one’s own identity and the meaning and purpose of one’s daily activities.

The situation also affected the relations of asymmetry in exchange that existed before the pandemic. The previous situation of maintaining a balance between making both sides of the border similar and producing a difference that encourages crossing the border became challenging. In addition to the similarity in living situations, the vast majority of everyday dimensions of identity highlighted the differences between the residents of the Polish and German sides of the border. However, they were more substantial and more fundamental than those before the pandemic (sometimes deliberately created as an element of encouragement to cross the border).

V. DISCUSSION

The article aimed to answer three questions: how is the identity of the borderland formed? How did the closure of the borders during the COVID-19 pandemic impact the borderland’s identity? How was the identity of the borderland maintained/changed during the pandemic? To answer these questions, we defined borderland identity as a phenomenon comprising four interrelated and interpenetrating dimensions: othering, sense of belonging, routines, and cultural landscape. By conceptualizing it in this way, we were able to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the consequences of closing the border and restricting mobility in the Polish-German borderland.

The closure of the German-Polish border profoundly affected the borderland’s identity, which has been shaping itself for years as a space of variously understood exchange. First, re-bordering during the pandemic halted the processes of moving away from mutual prejudices and stereotypes about the residents of the other side of the border—the lack of daily encounters increased distrust and suspicion. This mechanism is described in psychology (the contact hypothesis), but we experienced its manifestations in conversations with residents – they talked about their German neighbours during the pandemic in a way that resembled their stereotypical image before European integration. These stereotypes hinted at what behaviour could be expected on their part, since they could not be observed on their own (caring only for themselves, seeking to control the decisions of other governments, etc.) More-

over, a new category of strangers was created: people coming from outside the cross-border region.

Second, the sense of belonging to the borderland as a special place in the utopia of open borders was also challenged. This can be seen, among other things, in the discussion of the ambivalence of Euroregions as actors in the transnational institutionalization of borderlands.⁸⁶ Their effectiveness in winning a change in quarantine regulations for Polish-German cross-border workers is highlighted, but, in the end, they proved to be too weak to influence the EU's decisions on closing borders and on adjusting them at least to the specifics of twin city life. Reports now appear to draw lessons for the future: public policies are being designed,⁸⁷ but they focus primarily on seeing the effects of border closures on everyday local trade, institutional cooperation, and cross-border services, leaving out the identity aspect.

Third, the closure of borders brought to light the negative consequences of the asymmetry in the types of practices undertaken on both sides of the border. The inconsistency of the pandemic regulations on the Polish and German sides became apparent and, more broadly, the consequences of the lack of EU regulations on re-bordering. As various studies indicate, closing the borders had no significant effect on stopping the virus transmission⁸⁸ – it only demonstrated the determination with which individual EU countries want to defend their populations.

Fourth, the landscape changed and, with it, the sense of place on the borderland. Empty waterfronts, sealed bridges, and state services at border points reminded us of the governable border,⁸⁹ making it clear that the state's ability to produce borders as boundaries lies not just in recreating them as lines but as an entire complex that regulates flows and produces a discourse of control and surveillance. Even the choice of materials from which ad hoc fences are built, and the volume of sirens from which messages encouraging people to stay indoors, are designed to materialize a particular idea of state power.⁹⁰

Our research has some limitations. The first concerns the impossibility of conducting ethnographic research during the pandemic. Ethnographic research would have facilitated capturing how the experience and consequences of border closure overlapped with the sealing of the other borders that added up to the phenomenon of pandemization. The second limitation is the timing of the research. We found ourselves in the middle of a pandemic, and it would take more months and years to see if, as sceptics claimed, we would indeed have to return to our roots in border research. Or maybe the pandemic will just become yet another 'border lore', repeated in the future and building up the specificity of the place on a similar basis as stories and smuggling did before COVID-19.⁹¹ The

⁸⁶ Jańczak (2020): 5; Peyrony, Rubio, Viaggi (2021): 96.

⁸⁷ Peyrony, Rubio, Viaggi (2021): 134.

⁸⁸ Brunet-Jailly, Carpenter (2020): 8; Peyrony, Rubio, Viaggi (2021): 67.

⁸⁹ Robertson (2008): 449.

⁹⁰ See the visual part of Brunet-Jailly, Carpenter (2020).

⁹¹ Więckowski, Timothy (2021): 3.

findings of some researchers indicate that the situation in the German-Polish border region quickly returned to the pluralistic status quo.⁹²

Therefore, it would not be surprising if we claim that our topic is worth continuing, although perhaps in a slightly different frame. We began our research by treating border closures as a kind of anomaly. Meanwhile, under current conditions, it seems increasingly legitimate to consistently study rebordering processes as a new reality, both preceding and following the period of border closures and openings due to pandemics. Researchers point out that it is not simply a matter of returning to the pre-pandemic world with freedom of movement, but rather of seeing that borders have never been equally open to all.⁹³ Others encourage us to abandon the vision of a world without borders and start discussing a world differentially demarcated.⁹⁴

The rationale behind the change of perspective advocated here would, of course, be global factors – the war in Ukraine, which has intensified the processes of closure and the suspicion of cross-border exchanges worldwide. One can also see more local justifications directly related to the twin cities studied above. The most recent environmental crisis on the Oder (the death of hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of fish) has led to the river being articulated as a health-threatening border and has fed political conflicts between Poland and Germany, as well as concerns about migrants illegally crossing the border.

A bottom-up created ladder to a bridge in Markosice (a village near Gubin) – demolished during World War II and welded on the day Poland entered the Schengen Zone (in 2007), which allowed free passage into the German countryside – was cut down neither in the time of, nor due to, the COVID-19 pandemic. It was only removed by the German authorities, long after the pandemic, in order, according to journalists, to curb the local and aggressive groups of German residents guarding the border at night from the refugees crossing the EU border.⁹⁵

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- Aradau, C., Tazzioli, M. (2021). Covid-19 and rebordering the world. *Radical Philosophy* 210: 3–10. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/covid-19-and-rebordering-the-world>
- Asher, A.D. (2005). A Paradise on the Oder? Ethnicity, Europeanization, and the EU referendum in a Polish-German border city. *City* 17(1): 127–152. <https://doi.org/10.1525/city.2005.17.1.127>
- Böhm, H. (2021). The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on Czech-Polish cross-border cooperation: from debordering to re-bordering? *Moravian Geographical Reports* 29(2): 137–148. <https://doi.org/10.2478/mgr-2021-0007>
- Brunet-Jailly, E. (2020). International boundaries, borders, and the Coronavirus pandemic: a new era in border policy and public administration research? In A. Brousselle, E. Brunet-Jailly, C. Kennedy, S.D. Phillips, K. Quigley, A. Roberts (eds.), *Beyond COVID-19: Five Commem-*

⁹² Dolińska, Makaro (2020): 16.

⁹³ Tazzioli (2021).

⁹⁴ Weber (2020).

⁹⁵ Malinowski (2021).

- taries on Reimagining Governance for Future Crises and Resilience (pp. 385–391). Wiley Online Library.
- Brunet-Jailly, E.; Carpenter, M.J. (eds.) (2020). Borderlands in the Era of COVID-19. Special issue of the *Borders in Globalization Review* 2(1). <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/bigreview/issue/view/1487>
- Buko, S. (2020). Chronicles of the living borders: shared urban space of Goricia (IT) and Nova Gorica (SLO). In Ch. Wille, R. Kanesu (eds.), *Bordering in Pandemic Times. Insights into the COVID-19 Lockdown*, UniGR-CBS series “Borders in Perspective” 4: 53–55. <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-b825-a20b>
- Çağatay Tekin, B. (2022). Bordering through othering: On strategic ambiguity in the making of the EU-Turkey refugee deal. *Political Geography* 98: 102735. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102735>
- Cassidy, K.; Yuval-Davis, N.; Wemyss, G. (2018). Debordering and everyday (re)bordering in and of Dover: Post-borderland borderscapes. *Political Geography* 66: 171–179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.04.005>
- Cross, J.E. (2001). What is sense of place? Conference working paper. <http://hdl.handle.net/10217/180311>
- Dell’Agnese, E., Amilhat Szary, A-L. (2015). Borderscapes: From Border Landscapes to Border Aesthetics. *Geopolitics* 20(1): 4–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1014284>
- Dolińska, K. Makaro, J. (2020). O rodzeniu się wielokulturowości z transgraniczem w tle. Na przykładzie pandemii COVID-19 (i jej skutków) w miastach podzielonych. *Przegląd Zachodni* 4(377): 225–244. <https://www.iz.poznan.pl/publikacje/przegląd-zachodni/wydania/ekologia-partie-zielonych-energia>
- Dolińska, K. Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak, N. (2017). German Neighbours from Across the River – Insiders? Strangers? Others? *Sociální studia / Social Studies* 14(1): 94–116. <https://doi.org/10.5817/SOC2017-1-95>
- Dolińska, K.; Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak, N.; Makaro, J. (2017). Divided towns in the Polish-German borderland in the perspective of the transborder processes (transnational/horizontal Europeanisation?) – opportunities and threats, In Z. Kurcz, E. Opilowska, J. Roose (eds.), *Advances in European Borderlands Studies* (pp. 211–238). Wrocław.
- Dolzbłasz, S., Zelek, K. (2019). Selected features of spatial management and economic activity in the vicinity of border-crossing points on the Polish-German border. *Przegląd Geograficzny* 91(4): 487–510. <https://doi.org/10.7163/PrzG.2019.4.3>
- Donnan, H. (2005). Material Identities: Fixing Ethnicity in the Irish Borderlands. *Identities* 12(1): 69–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890590914320>
- Edensor, T. (2002). *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.
- Galasiński, D., Meinhof, U.H. (2002). Looking across the river: German-Polish border communities and the construction of the Other. *Identity Politics* 1(1): 23–58. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.1.1.05gal>
- Gasparini, A. (2014). Belonging and Identity in the European Border Towns: Self-Centered Borders, Hetero-Centered Borders. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29(2): 165–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2014.916067>
- Gelbman, A., Timothy, D. (2010). From hostile boundaries to tourist attractions. *Current Issues in Tourism* 13(3): 239–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500903033278>
- Gibbs, G.R. (2018). *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Halicka, B. (2014). The Oder–Neisse line as a place of remembrance for Germans and Poles. *Journal of Contemporary History* 49(1): 75–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009413505660>
- Hennig, A. (2021). The spatial dimension of coronavirus crisis management and the role of sub-national actors in the German–Polish border region. *European Societies* 23: 859–871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1846065>
- Irvine, A. (2011). Duration, dominance and depth in telephone and face-to-face interviews: a comparative exploration. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 10(3): 202–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000302>
- Jańczak, J., (2018). Symmetries, asymmetries and cross-border cooperation on the German–Polish border. Towards a new model of (de)bordering. *Documents d’Anàlisi Geogràfica* 64(3): 509–527. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/dag.518>

- Jańczak, J., (2020). The German-Polish border, re-bordering and the pandemic: centers vs. peripheries? In P. Ulrich, N. Cyrus, A. Pilhofer (eds.), *Grenzen und Ordnungen in Bewegung in Zeiten der Corona-Krise. Analysen zu Region und Gesellschaft. Working Paper Series B/ ORDERS IN MOTION* 8: 17–19. <https://doi.org/10.11584/b-orders.8>
- Kobi, M. (2020). Warm bodies in the Chinese borderlands: architecture, thermal infrastructure, and territorialization in the arid continental climate of Ürümchi, Xinjiang. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61(1): 77–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1714461>
- Kurnicki, K., Sternberg, M. (2016). Arrested conflict: transnational place-making in Polish-German border towns. *Space and Polity* 20(3): 263–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2016.1225860>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing.
- Malinowski, P. (2021, 9 Listopada). *Przez Polskę do Niemiec. Czy uchodźcy będą odsyłani nad Wisłę?* [Through Poland to Germany. Will refugees be sent back over the Vistula?]. *Krytyka Polityczna*. <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/swiat/ue/malinowski-przez-polske-do-niemiec-czy-uchodzczy-beda-odsylani-nad-wisle/>
- Markuszczyńska, I., Tanskanen, M., Subirós, J.V. (2016). Boundaries from borders: cross-border relationships in the context of the mental perception of a borderline – experiences from Spanish-French and Polish-German border twin towns. *Quaestiones Geographicae* 35(1): 105–119. <https://doi.org/10.1515/quageo-2016-0010>
- Megoran, N. (2012). Rethinking the study of international boundaries: a biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102(2): 464–481. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.595969>
- Miller, M.A., Astuti, R., Hirsch, P., Marschke, M., Rigg, J., Saksena-Taylor, P., Suhardiman, D., Tan, Z.D., Taylor, D.M., Varkkey, H. (2022). Selective border permeability: governing complex environmental issues through and beyond COVID-19. *Political Geography* 97: 102646. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102646>
- Mirwaldt, K. (2010) Contact, conflict and geography: what factors shape cross-border citizen relations? *Political Geography* 29(8): 434–443. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2010.10.004>
- Newman, D. (2006). The lines that continue to separate us: borders in our 'borderless' world. *Progress in Human Geography* 30(2): 143–161. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132506ph599xx>
- Niedźwiecka-Iwańczuk, N. (2020). *Pogranicze* [Borderland]. In Z. Kurcz, E. Opiłowska, M. Dębicki, K. Dolińska, J. Kajta, J. Makaro, N. Niedźwiecka-Iwańczuk (eds.), *Studia nad granicami i pograniczami: Leksykon* [Border and Cross-Border Studies: Lexicon]. Warsaw: Scholar.
- Opiłowska, E. (2020). The Covid-19 crisis: the end of a borderless Europe? *European Societies* 23: 589–600. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833065>
- Opiłowska, E., Dolińska, K., Kajta, J., Makaro, J., Niedźwiecka-Iwańczuk, N. (2022). *Narracje o miastach podzielonych w Europie Środkowej: Ślubice i Frankfurt nad Odrą oraz Cieszyn i Czeski Cieszyn* [Narratives of Divided Cities in Central Europe: Ślubice and Frankfurt/Oder and Cieszyn and Český Těšín]. Warsaw: Scholar.
- Opiola, W., Böhm, H. (2022). Euroregions as political actors: managing border policies in the time of Covid-19 in Polish borderlands. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 10(6): 896–916. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.2017339>
- Paasi, A. (1999). Boundaries as social practice and discourse: the Finnish-Russian border. *Regional Studies* 33(7): 669–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343409950078701>
- Peyrony, J., Rubio, J., Viaggi, R. (2020). *The effects of COVID-19 induced border closures on cross-border regions*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/092793>
- Praczyk, M. (2018). *Granice przyrody. Natura pogranicza polsko-niemieckiego w perspektywie imagologicznej* [Borders of nature: the nature of the Polish-German border in the perspective of imagology]. *Porównania* 21(2): 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.14746/p.2017.21.13959>
- Prokkoła, E.-K. (2009). Unfixing borderland identity: border performances and narratives in the construction of self. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 24(3): 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2009.9695737>
- Robertson, C. (2008). Locating the border. *Social Identities* 14(4): 447–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630802211894>
- Rumford, C. (2008). Introduction: citizens and borderwork in Europe. *Space and Polity* 12(1): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562570801969333>

- Sandberg, M. (2016). Restructuring locality: practice, identity and place-making on the German-Polish border. *Identities* 23(1): 66–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1016523>
- Schimanski, J. (2015). Border aesthetics and cultural distancing in the Norwegian-Russian borderscape. *Geopolitics* 20(1): 35–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.884562>
- Scott, J.W., Sohn, Ch. (2019). Place-making and the bordering of urban space: Interpreting the emergence of new neighbourhoods in Berlin and Budapest. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 26(3): 297–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776418764577>
- Sohn, Ch. (2014). Modelling cross-border integration: the role of borders as a resource. *Geopolitics* 19(3): 587–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.913029>
- Spierings, B., van der Velde, M. (2008). Shopping, borders and unfamiliarity: consumer mobility in Europe. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 99(4): 497–505. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2008.00484.x>
- Spierings, B., van der Velde, M. (2013). Cross-border differences and unfamiliarity: shopping mobility in the Dutch-German Rhine-Waal Euroregion. *European Planning Studies* 21(1): 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2012.716236>
- Stokłosa, K. (2014). The border in the narratives of the inhabitants of the German-Polish border region. In K. Stokłosa, G. Besier (eds.), *European Border Regions in Comparison* (pp. 257–274). New York, London: Routledge.
- Szytniewski, B.B., Spierings, B. (2018). Place image formation and cross-border shopping: German shoppers in the Polish bazaar in Ślubice. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 109(2): 295–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12283>
- Tazzioli, M.A. (2021). “Passport to freedom”? COVID-19 and the re-bordering of the world. *European Journal of Risk Regulation* 12(2): 355–361. <https://doi.org/10.1017/err.2021.31>
- Timothy, D.J., Gelman, A. (2015). Tourist lodging, spatial relations, and the cultural heritage of borderland. *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 10(2): 202–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2014.985227>
- Timothy, D.J., Saarinen, J., Viken, A. (2016). Editorial: tourism issues and international borders in the Nordic region. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 16(1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2016.1244504>
- Unfried, M. (2020). The closure of the border as a b-solution: non-coordination of measures at the Dutch, Belgian and German border. In Ch. Wille, R. Kanasu (eds.), *Bordering in Pandemic Times: Insights into the COVID-19 Lockdown*. UniGR-CBS series “Borders in Perspective” 4: 49–52. <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-b825-a20b>
- Van Houtum, H., Kramsch, O., Zierhofer, W. (eds.) (2005). *B/ordering space*. Aldershot, UK–Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.
- Van Houtum, H., Van Naerssen, T. (2002). Bordering, ordering and othering. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 93(2): 125–136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9663.00189>
- Varró, K. (2016). Recognising the emerging transnational spaces and subjectivities of cross-border cooperation: towards a research agenda. *Geopolitics* 21(1): 171–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1094462>
- Weber, L. (2020, 9 April). Could the COVID-19 re-bordering of Australia change it for the better? Lens. Monash University. <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/04/09/1380025/will-covid-19-re-border-australia-for-the-better>
- Więckowski, M. (2021). Wykorzystanie turystyczne budynków przeciętych granicami państw – trzy studia przypadków: Wolna Biblioteka i Opera Haskell, Hotel Arbez oraz schronisko Purtschellerhaus [Tourist use of buildings crossed by national borders – three case studies: the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, the Arbez Hotel and the Purtschellerhaus Mountain Hut]. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio B – Geographia, Geologia, Mineralogia et Petrographia* 76: 291–304. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/b.2021.76.0.291-304>
- Więckowski, M., Timothy, D.J. (2021). Tourism and an evolving international boundary: bordering, debordering and rebordering on Usedom Island, Poland-Germany. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 22: 100647. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100647>
- Woodward, K., Jones, J.P. III, Marston, S.A. (2005). The politics of autonomous space. *Progress in Human Geography* 36(2): 204–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132511432083>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice* 40(3): 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2015). Situated intersectionality and social inequality. *Raisons politiques* 58(2): 91–100. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rai.058.0091>

