



Interreg
Grande Région | Großregion
Fonds européen de développement régional | Europäischer Fonds für regionale Entwicklung



UniGR-CBS Working Paper Vol. 14

The resilience of cross-border cooperation in the German-Polish borderland within a European perspective

ELŻBIETA OPIŁOWSKA

Elżbieta Opilowska

University of Wrocław

Institut of Sociology/Center for Regional- und Borderlands Studies

elzbieta.opilowska@uwr.edu.pl

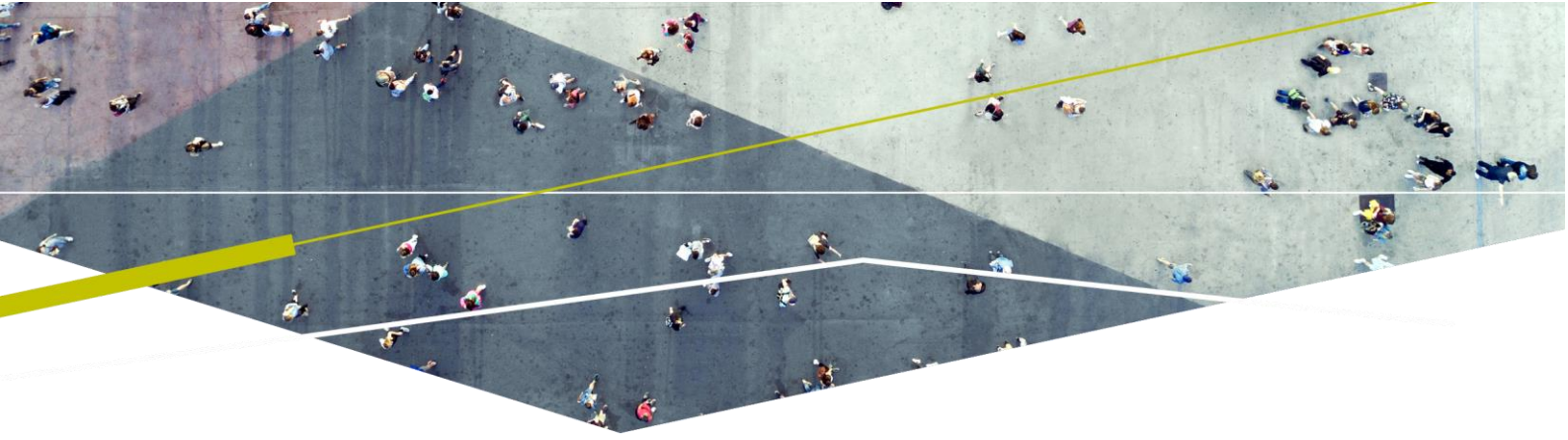
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to UniGR-Center for Border Studies for supporting my two-month research stay at the University of Luxembourg within the framework of the Guest Professorship in Border Studies. It gave me the opportunity to develop my research project on resilience of cross-border cooperation in Europe resulting inter alia in this working paper.

UniGR-CBS (2022)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-44e7-2424>





UniGR-Center for Border Studies

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR BORDER STUDIES

EN The UniGR-CBS is a thematic cross-border network of approximately 80 researchers within the university grouping University of the Greater Region (UniGR) conducting research on borders, their meanings and challenges. Due to its geographical position in the “heart of Europe”, its expertise and disciplinary diversity, the UniGR-CBS has the best prerequisites for becoming a European network of excellence. For the creation of a “European Center for Competence and Knowledge in Border Studies”, the Interreg VA Greater Region program provides the UniGR-CBS network with approximately EUR 2.6 million ERDF funding between 2018 and 2022. Within this project, the UniGR-CBS aims at developing harmonized research tools, embedding Border Studies in teaching, promoting the dialogue on cross-border challenges between academia and institutional actors and supporting the spatial development strategy of the Greater Region.

FR L’UniGR-CBS un réseau transfrontalier et thématique qui réunit environ 80 chercheuses et chercheurs des universités membres de l’Université de la Grande Région (UniGR) spécialistes des études sur les frontières, leurs significations et enjeux. Grâce à sa position géographique au « cœur de l’Europe », à sa capacité d’expertise et à la diversité des disciplines participantes, l’UniGR-CBS revêt tous les atouts d’un réseau d’excellence européen. L’UniGR-CBS bénéficie d’un financement d’environ 2,6 M € FEDER dans le cadre du programme INTERREG VA Grande Région de 2018-2022 pour mettre en place le Centre européen de ressources et de compétences en études sur les frontières. Via ce projet transfrontalier, le réseau scientifique UniGR-CBS créera des outils de recherche harmonisés. Il œuvre en outre à l’ancrage des Border Studies dans l’enseignement, développe le dialogue entre le monde scientifique et les acteurs institutionnels autour d’enjeux transfrontaliers et apporte son expertise à la stratégie de développement territorial de la Grande Région.

DE Das UniGR-CBS ist ein grenzüberschreitendes thematisches Netzwerk von rund 80 Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern der Mitgliedsuniversitäten des Verbunds Universität der Großregion (UniGR), die über Grenzen und ihre Bedeutungen sowie Grenzraumfragen forschen. Dank seiner geographischen Lage „im Herzen Europas“, hoher Fachkompetenz und disziplinärer Vielfalt verfügt das UniGR-CBS über alle Voraussetzungen für ein europäisches Exzellenz-Netzwerk. Für den Aufbau des Europäischen Kompetenz- und Wissenszentrums für Grenzraumforschung wird das Netzwerk UniGR-CBS von 2018-2022 mit knapp 2,6 Mio. Euro EFRE-Mitteln im Rahmen des INTERREG VA Großregion Programms gefördert. Im Laufe des Projekts stellt das UniGR-Netzwerk abgestimmte Forschungswerkzeuge bereit, verankert die Border Studies in der Lehre, entwickelt den Dialog zu grenzüberschreitenden Themen zwischen wissenschaftlichen und institutionellen Akteuren und trägt mit seiner Expertise zur Raumentwicklungsstrategie der Großregion bei.





The resilience of cross-border cooperation in the German-Polish borderland within a European perspective

Elżbieta Opiłowska

The Covid-19 pandemic and the related border restrictions have had numerous social, economic and political consequences for border regions. The temporary border closures impacted not only the lives of borderlanders whose everyday practices are embedded in cross-border spaces, but also the functioning of institutional actors involved in cross-border activities. The aim here is to investigate the communication surrounding the pandemic and the reactions and (new) strategies of cross-border institutional actors in the context of (re)bordering. Applying the concept of resilience, this paper explores coping mechanisms and modes of adaptation as well as strategies developed to adjust to new circumstances. Against this backdrop, factors that enhanced or hindered the adaptation process were identified. The German-Polish borderland serves here as a case study, although it will be situated within a wider European context.

Resilience, cross-border cooperation, German-Polish border, Covid-19

Résilience de la coopération transfrontalière dans la région frontalière germano-polonaise dans une perspective européenne

La pandémie de Covid-19 et les restrictions frontalières qui en découlent ont eu de nombreuses conséquences sociales, économiques et politiques pour les régions frontalières. Les fermetures temporaires des frontières ont eu un impact non seulement sur la vie des frontaliers dont les pratiques quotidiennes sont ancrées dans les espaces transfrontaliers, mais aussi sur le fonctionnement des acteurs institutionnels impliqués dans les activités transfrontalières. L'objectif est ici d'étudier d'une part les communications faites sur le sujet de la pandémie et, d'autre part, les réactions et (nouvelles) stratégies des acteurs institutionnels transfrontaliers adoptées suite aux fermetures temporaires des frontières (rebordering). En s'appuyant sur le concept de résilience, cet article explore les mécanismes et les modes d'adaptation ainsi que les stratégies développées pour s'ajuster à ces nouvelles circonstances. Dans ce contexte, les facteurs qui ont renforcé ou entravé le processus d'adaptation ont pu être identifiés. La zone frontalière germano-polonaise sert ici de cas d'étude mais sera également interrogée de manière plus large dans une perspective européenne.

Résilience, coopération transfrontalière, frontière germano-polonaise, Covid-19

Die Resilienz der grenzüberschreitenden Zusammenarbeit im deutsch-polnischen Grenzgebiet in einer europäischen Perspektive

Die Covid-19-Pandemie und die damit verbundenen Grenzbeschränkungen hatten zahlreiche soziale, wirtschaftliche und politische Folgen für die Grenzregionen. Die vorübergehenden Grenzschießungen wirkten sich nicht nur auf das Leben der Grenzbewohner:innen aus, deren Alltagspraktiken in transnationalen Räumen eingebettet sind, sondern auch auf die Tätigkeit der institutionellen Akteur:innen. Das Ziel des Beitrags ist es, die Kommunikation über die Pandemie sowie die Reaktionen und (neue) Strategien der grenzüberschreitenden institutionellen Akteure im Kontext von *Rebordering* zu erforschen. Unter Anwendung des Konzepts der Resilienz werden Bewältigungs- und Anpassungsmechanismen sowie Strategien untersucht, die entwickelt wurden, um sich an neue Umstände anzupassen. Vor diesem Hintergrund wurden Faktoren identifiziert, die den Anpassungsprozess begünstigten oder behinderten. Das deutsch-polnische Grenzgebiet dient hier als Fallstudie, es wird aber in einen größeren europäischen Kontext gestellt.

Resilienz, grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit, deutsch-polnische Grenzregion, Covid-19

SUGGESTED CITATION

Opłowska, Elżbieta (2022): *The resilience of cross-border cooperation in the German-Polish borderland within a European perspective*. In: UniGR-CBS Working Paper Vol. 14, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-44e7-2424>

Introduction

For many years, it has been possible to observe two parallel processes – debordering and rebordering – as they blur and reveal the significance of borders. As the process of European integration (which began in Western Europe in the 1950s and in Central East European countries only after the fall of communism) has continued apace, state borders seem to have changed in function and become more like transnational spaces of cross-border cooperation, mobility flows and cultural transfer. The Europeanisation of border regions – both as a political idea and as the adoption of common values and norms – is oriented in border regions in two distinct directions: as a vertical process, wherein the EU impacts cross-border cooperation through funding initiatives and the implementation of specific programmes such as Interreg, and as a horizontal transfer between local actors and communities (cf. Opiłowska and Sus, 2015). Beyond this Europeanisation, border functions have also been affected by globalization, which has promoted the notion of a borderless world without territorial barriers, where the flow of capital, information and goods makes borders redundant (Newmann, 2011). However, in addition to this debordering, it is possible to observe a simultaneous rebordering, manifested in securitisation strategies, legal jurisdictions, social rules and norms, and economic regulations: Bordering strategies are applied in the determination of refugee status and the application of citizenship rights. Passports and visas decide who is allowed to enter a state and who is not. Globalisation thus involves not only the liberation of flows, as Mark Salter argues, but also “closure, entrapment and containment” (Shamir, 2005, p. 199, quoted in Salter, 2010, p. 518). Furthermore, borders are becoming increasingly virtual. As Didier Bigo states, “police practice is directed at the surveillance of foreigners or poor ethnic minorities and extends its reach beyond its prior limits of criminal investigation, through pro-active actions that enable the police to pinpoint groups that would be ‘predisposed to criminality’ according to sociological knowledge” (Bigo, 2006, p. 21). Moreover, borders have remained essential for social relations insofar as they participate in the construction of group identities. Marc Salter points out that borders

“are still key institutions within sovereign states, as they bound territory, limit the space of law, political authority, responsibility and regulate economic relations through taxes and duties. Through borders, the global mobility regime is structured by tools such as passports, visas and the ideology of citizenship which is examined at the border” (Salter, 2010, pp. 515-517).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the reintroduction of border controls, as well as temporary border closures, have further reinforced specific rebordering tendencies in Europe and made borders more visible and material. Thus, the myth of a Europe or a world without borders has lost in value, in favour of a new discourse of “global nationalism” (Bieber, 2020), “era of post-globalisation” (Konrad, 2021), “advent of unilateralism” (Böhm, 2021) and “covidfencing” (Medeiros et al., 2021). Indeed, the responses to the health crisis were, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, rather national in their approach. Border closures were seen as an effective tool to reduce the spread of the pandemic; as part of their political rhetoric, many state leaders speculated about the foreign origins of the virus (Kenwick and Simmons 2020, p. E41). These interventions were particularly severe for the inhabitants of the border areas (Opiłowska, 2021b), which was reflected in their protests against border restrictions, acts of solidarity and media discourses – especially in European countries where open Schengen borders are taken as a given.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the potential impact of pandemic-related rebordering on cross-border cooperation in Europe. Will the rise of nationalism and the primacy of the nation-state in combating the pandemic lead to the weakening of cross-border ties? To what extent have border regions proved resilient in the face of the crisis? As we are still in the middle of the pandemic, it is impossible to provide an in-depth evaluation of how the pandemic has shaped cross-border cooperation in Europe. Nevertheless, based on empirical research (cf. Kajta and Opiłowska, 2021; Opiłowska, 2021a) and a literature review, this contribution will provide the first appraisal of the situation in border regions.

Theoretical framework : the concept of resilience

If you enter the term resilience into a search engine, 245 million results pop up. In recent decades, resilience has become increasingly popular among researchers from different disciplines, as well as being adopted by public institutions, such as the United Nations or the European Union, as a normative framework that is good for the economy, society, and our global ecosystem. Markus Brunnermeier, in his recent book *The*

Resilient Society (2021, p. 11) argues that “resilience can serve as the guiding North Star for designing a post-Covid 19 society” that has “the ability to rebound and try again”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘resilience’ comes from the Latin *resiliō* – to leap or spring back, to rebound, recoil, or shrink from – and can be interpreted as the ability to bounce back from a disruptive event. It is not surprising that during the Covid-19 pandemic, a period of extra-ordinary disruption with numerous negative consequences for the economy, the healthcare system and many other spheres of social life, resilience has become a buzzword. It has its roots in ecological and psychological research (Olsson et al., 2015), where it has been defined as the ability of a system to withstand shocks and absorb changes, as well as the dynamic process of positive adaptation during crises, including trauma, tragedy and the like (Olsson et. al., 2015, p. 1). The ambiguity of term – referring to both resistance to a crisis (static) and to any dynamic adaptation in the face of such a crisis (transformability) – is often criticized.

However, in the last two decades, against the backdrop of different crises, the resilience approach has also increasingly been applied in the social sciences, where it has been defined as “the ability of groups, communities and regions to cope with disturbances stemming from environmental and socio-political change” (Prokkola, 2019, p. 1588). Pascariu and Rouet (2019, p. 12) define resilience as “the capacity of a socio-economic system (city, region, country) to be placed on a long-term development path, incorporation a large set of internal and external conditionalities” through the capacity to resist, recover and transform by adopting new development patterns. Furthermore, they plead for a dynamic understanding of resilience that encompasses not only a return to a certain equilibrium, but also the transformation of its structure and functions. Resilience is thus based on four abilities: to resist, to absorb, to adapt and to transform (ibid.). Considering the plethora of consequences wrought by the Covid-19 border closures, the notion of resilience thus becomes a useful approach for borderlands studies. As Prokkola points out:

“Borders are contextual phenomena, however, and the economic and social dynamics of a border region is often highly dependent on the qualities of the border, cross-border institutions and trust relations [...]. An interesting yet neglected question is how border towns and regions cope with and adapt to cross-border mobility shocks and whether they are able to establish new paths for regional development and growth” (Prokkola, 2019, p. 1590).

Resilience is a multidimensional concept that is shaped by many factors: social, natural, cultural, economic, and political (Wilson and Wilson, 2019). Moreover, research on resilience traces not only the process of reaction and change but also focuses on structural conditions and human agency. Structural frameworks are created by institutions that can be understood as both the habitualized behaviours, rules and norms and the formal institutions that govern society (Adger, 2000, p. 348). W. Neil Adger (2000, p. 351) points out that the resilience of institutions is based on their historical evolution and “how effective they are in oiling the wheels of society”. It should be mentioned that “humans design and create institutions but are thus themselves constrained by them” (Peters, 2005, p. 63, cite after Bristow and Healy, 2014, p. 932). As such, cultural norms and values, beliefs and attitudes shape individual behaviour.

From an agency perspective, Bristow and Healy (2014, p. 927) emphasize that agents have the capacity to actively react to crisis situations by reallocating resources or implementing strategic processes. In addition, they differentiate between three types of resilience strategies: one, anticipating risks and vulnerabilities and changing behaviour to mitigate losses; two, reacting or responding to shocks and changing their activities; and three, transforming their behaviour strategically over the longer term by establishing new competencies and strengthening their ability to innovate in order to better control their social and economic environment. The third strategy can be subsumed under the notion of a *learning effect* which allows agents to be better prepared for the next crisis through the establishment of new strategies or agendas. As Magis (2010, p. 406) argues, “communities that learn to live with change and uncertainty and that actively build and engage the capacity to thrive in that context become resilient. [...] Communities can develop resilience strategically via planning, collective action, innovation and learning.”

It should be emphasized that the resilience of individual and collective agents is shaped by various capitals at their disposal: economic, political, social, and cultural capital. In terms of cultural factors, Michele Grossman (2013, n.p.) argues that cultural resilience “considers the role that cultural background plays in determining the ability of individuals and communities to be resilient in the face of adversity” and highlights the impact of cultural values, language, customs, norms, knowledge and worldviews. Porczyński and Wojakowski (2020, p. 795) define resilience capital as individual beliefs, social networks, and collective actions that could support the ability of local and regional communities in the management of particular challenges. As cultural capital is created over time, social memory and historical social bounds must be included in any analysis of the resilience of cross-border ties (cf. Porczyński and Wojakowski, 2020). In the European border regions where a common history is missing, the EU becomes an important factor in the resilience of local communities in the establishment of formal paths to transborder cooperation (ibid., p. 810). In addition to

cultural capital, communication – as both the exchange of knowledge about a crisis, a coping mechanism and an information framework – also seems to be an important factor in shaping community resilience (cf. Bristow and Healy, 2014).

By employing the concept of resilience to explore cross-border cooperation in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the complexity of the phenomenon can be taken into account. First, it is necessary to identify the determinants of resilience – such as environmental factors, economic factors, political factors (the geopolitical situation, the European Union, interstate relationship, existing regional and local (transborder) governance structures and institutions), social factors (social trust, networks, social memory) and cultural factors (values and norms, behavioural habits, language competences, (inter)cultural knowledge) – that provide the resources to resist the crisis but may also hinder the establishment of effective coping mechanisms. In their evaluation of the multidimensional nature of resilience indicators, Wilson and Wilson (2019) also differentiate between objective/universal and subjective/contextual variables. Whereas the former are universally applicable to any geographical and temporal context and can be interpreted objectively, the latter are context-dependent and are generally interpreted subjectively, shaped by the positionality of the observer. In the first group, we find mostly economic (e.g. GDP per capita, infrastructure development, financial capital) and environmental variables (climate change, access to clean water). Conversely, cultural variables, such as rites, language, traditions, taboos, religious practices, and worldview are predominately regarded as contextual. Social and political variables can however fit into both categories – universal and contextual. Universal social variables include education, access to healthcare, happiness quotients, whereas bonding capital (networks, trust) and bridging capital (cooperation, cohesion) are understood as contextual. Within the political domain, legal system and institutional transparency are regarded as universal, and power and governance systems belong to the contextual variables.

If resilience is to be understood here as a dynamic process, the role of human agents (political stakeholders, Euroregions, NGOs, civil society etc.) as agents of resilience must also be explored, including their abilities to resist, adapt and transform (cf. Magis, 2010) – in particular their human (knowledge, health, leadership), financial (financial situation), cultural (values, symbols, beliefs) and social capitals (bonding, bridging and linking capital) (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015). Finally, it should be noted that resilience is based on short-term and long-term practices, requiring an examination of the short-term reactions and coping strategies implemented by diverse actors during the crisis, as well as of the long-term transformations, including new strategies, agendas, plans and new/changed structures/institutions. This paper focuses on the short-term reactions by institutional actors and communities in the German-Polish border region to the border crisis with references to other European borderlands in order to identify the factors supporting and hindering their resilience. Before analysing the resilience of German-Polish cross-border cooperation, the German-Polish border area will be briefly characterized in the next section.

The development of the German-Polish cross-border relationship

Historical legacy (Wittenberg, 2015; Opiłowska, 2021a) is an important factor that can influence resilience. As Porczyński and Wojakowski argue (2020), historical social bounds are crucial elements of cultural capital that shape values, norms, habits and the attitudes of border region residents. In case of the German-Polish borderland, a conflictual history (the trauma of the Second World War, the expulsion of Germans, the disputed border) strained the relationship for many years. The postwar period was characterized by a massive population transfer, a heavily controlled border, and overbearing communist propaganda about peace and the friendship between the GDR and the Polish People's Republic. In contrast to older historical border regions, where cross-border ties and cultural transfer have existed for centuries and cross-border mobility was an everyday experience, the Polish-German border was created in response to a political decision that cut through ethnically and culturally uniform German territory. As a consequence, the newly created borderland encompassed communities that, as of yet, had no experience as neighbours. Furthermore, the Polish borderland was settled by new residents who constituted a real melting pot – re-settlers from the so-called 'Kresy' (the Eastern borderlands that were lost to the Soviet Union), former forced labourers, refugees from the civil war in Greece, camp inmates and other displaced persons (Jajeśniak-Quast and Stokłosa, 2000). Against this backdrop, the bilateral relationship in the German-Polish borderland was dominated by a traumatic social memory, distrust, a negative image of one's neighbour, uncertainty, and a weak identification with the settlement area.

Only with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the official recognition of the border in 1990 and the gradual process of Europeanisation was the foundation for the development of cross-border cooperation laid. As early as the 1990s, cross-border structures were created – including Euroregions and Euro(pa)cities – that can be

regarded as factors ensuring the sustainability and supporting the resilience of the region. In 2011, the twin-town of Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice established a cooperation centre, a joint municipal office responsible for cross-border cooperation. With Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 and to the Schengen Agreement in 2007, the material symbols of national borders – in form of border crossing facilities – disappeared from the border space. However, the process of social integration and the development of positive neighbourly relations did not proceed as quickly as the creation of structures and the signing of treaties. In the beginning, border residents perceived Europeanisation primarily as a project driven by the mayors and other elites; national stereotypes and mental barriers thus prevailed (Opiłowska, 2009). As outlined in a European Commission on the Cross-Border Cooperation in the EU report, cross-border mobility developed rapidly, but Polish-German contacts were dominated by instrumental practices, such as shopping and commercial services (Dolińska et al., 2018), outweighing visiting friends or family (European Commission, 2020). In comparison to other EU border regions, the respondents who perceive language and cultural differences as an impediment to cross-border cooperation were mostly from German-Polish areas. Although the majority of respondents from the German-Polish border regions would feel comfortable about having a citizen from another country covered by an Interreg cross-border cooperation programme as a neighbour (82%), work colleague (79%), family member (78%) or manager (68%), the results are still below the average of other EU border areas (ibidem). Nevertheless, local actors from German-Polish border areas perceive cross-border cooperation as beneficial for both sides. Historical legacies and asymmetries do not hamper the cooperation. EU programmes and funds are important drivers of cross-border projects and create transnational bonds and interdependencies (cf. Opiłowska, 2021a).

Against this backdrop, the decision by Polish state authorities to close the border to Germany as a measure to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus in mid-March 2020 was a shock to both residents and local stakeholders. Moreover, the Polish government suspended passenger train and bus connections with Germany and limited the number of crossing points to six (Jańczak, 2020). Beginning on 27 March 2020, crossing the border required a mandatory 14-day quarantine. Suddenly, borderland communities, as in other EU border regions, were separated from their work places and schools, families were split apart, and everyday activities such as shopping or using services on the other side of the border became impossible. This unexpected situation highlighted both the weak position of local/regional stakeholders vis-à-vis national authorities, as they had been bypassed in the decision-making process, and the different meaning of border for actors at each level. Whereas state actors seem to still regard the border as a line of protection demarcating sovereign territory and national interests, local agents saw cross-border cooperation as a resource (cf. Sohn, 2014), necessary for normal, everyday functioning. The decision to institute border restrictions was taken without assessing the consequences for border regions. In response, certain corrective measures were adopted in order “to remediate adverse effects” (MOT, 2021, p. 59). How have local actors managed the crisis? Which factors were the most supportive or the most hindering? What lessons have been learnt from this experience? The next section will address these questions.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cross-border cooperation

Communication surrounding the border restrictions and performative activities

In view of the importance of communication for community resilience (cf. Bristow and Healy, 2014), this section aims to shed light on the performative activities and discursive reactions to the rebordering that manifested itself in new fences and other physical impediments and transformed bridges into barriers. In the German-Polish borderland, as well as in other border regions, we were able to observe civil society engaging in performative activities that manifested solidarity with the neighbouring community and their trans-border belonging. Banners with slogans such as ‘We belong together’, ‘Stay healthy friends’ or ‘United in heart and strong together. See you again soon’ were displayed in public spaces in Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice (Opiłowska, 2021b). Similar symbolic acts were also performed on the German-French border (Wille, 2020).

Cross-border commuters belong to the group most affected by the border closure, cut off either from their work places or their families; in consequence, they quickly became active in protesting against the restrictions. In the German-Polish borderland, two demonstrations were held on 24 April and 9 May 2020. The

first, which had demanded an end to border restrictions was seemingly successful, as on 4 May 2020, commuters, pupils and students were once again allowed to cross the border without the obligation to quarantine (cf. Cyrus and Ulrich, 2020). The second protest had more a symbolic value, as it occurred on Europe Day, when the border regions usually celebrate EU membership. In Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice, the associations *Słubfurt* and *Unsere Miasto - Nasze Stadt* organized demonstration on the bridge that connects the twin-town under the slogan 'Less fear, more Europe' (Horbacz, 2020). The protesters compared the border closure to the Berlin Wall and foregrounded the everyday transnational life of residents and the unique situation of borderlands:

"We have long been united in Europe, which is particularly evident here on the Polish-German border, where people live and work across divisions and national borders. We consider it very doubtful that closing the borders will actually stop the spread of the coronavirus. In any case, it will have serious consequences for people living in the border regions of Europe" (Horbacz, 2020, n.p.).

At the end of the demonstration, the EU anthem *Ode to Joy* was sung. Similar protests occurred at the German-French border. On 3 May 2020, activists from the Young European Federalists Association removed the barriers at two border crossings in Saarland and sprayed '#DontTouch-MySchengen' onto the asphalt (Wille 2020, p. 15).

Apart from demonstrations and acts of protest, many border regions appealed to central authorities to reopen the border or ease restrictions, at least for families and cross-border commuters by pointing to their transborder integration and the unity of Europe. Luxembourg's Foreign Minister argued that,

"Germans, French and Luxembourgers have all grown up together here on the borders. They are used to seeing bridges, not borders, so when all of a sudden, they see breezeblock barriers installed on the bridges, they just can't understand it. These barriers have to go and soon. [...] Customs officers are not exactly going to stop a virus by doing border checks." (Wörner, 2020, n.p.)

Czesław Fiedorowicz, chairman of the Board of the Federation of Euroregions of the Republic of Poland asked the Polish Prime Minister to allow individuals to cross the border for professional, educational, and health reasons, as well as to maintain close family contacts, emphasizing that border residents live in symbiosis, with substantial daily contact (Wyborcza, 2020).

Within the discursive reactions to rebordering politics in the Polish-German and Polish-Czech twin towns, critiques of the border closures dominated (cf. Kajta and Opiłowska, 2022), with actors invoking both normative and pragmatic arguments. Whereas the former concentrated on the uniqueness of the border regions, where transnational life belongs to the everyday and a Europe without borders constitutes a common achievement, the latter demonstrated the negative economic and social consequences for cross-border commuters and their families due to the unexpected border restrictions.

Nevertheless, as studies have demonstrated (MOT, 2021; IPSOS, 2020), citizens in many countries continued to support border shutdowns. According to the MOT report (2021), Hungarian citizens perceived the border as a protective barrier and did not object to the border closures, as they framed Romanian citizens as the source of possible infection. In the Dutch-Belgian border region, the closing of the border was also initially welcomed by the Belgians. In the French-German and Italian-Swiss borderlands, a number of acts of discrimination were reported. German citizens in border region neighbouring Alsace and Moselle regarded borders as a "bulwark against the spread of the virus" (MOT, 2021, p. 98). As Michael Roth, an official in the German Foreign Office, highlighted:

"What concerned me most was how quickly nationalist and xenophobic resentments emerged in this stressful situation and how aggressively they sometimes manifested themselves. We also experienced resentment between regions within Germany that were more and less affected by the virus. But here [in the German-French borderland], on both sides of the border, evil stereotypes that were thought to have been overcome were suddenly reawakened. This contradicted the image of the border region as a place of reconciliation and overcoming old hostilities" (Roth 2021, p. 40).

This experience clearly caused ambiguity, uncertainty and a loss of trust and confidence. Our study (Kajta and Opiłowska, 2022) also identified lines of argumentation in favour of border closures, including the imaginary of a secure, bounded nation-state and of borders as protective barriers against threats from the outside, as well as a normative orientation that reinforced certain historical German-Polish scars and contested the idea of a transnational twin town.

In light of the above examples, it can be argued that communicative reactions to rebordering were ambiguous in the German-Polish border region, as well as in many other European border region. On the one hand, acts of solidarity, appeals and protests demonstrated the agency of local communities and stakeholders, as they argued for European integration and the uniqueness of border regions where transborder practices belong to the everyday. On the other hand, old historical animosities and nationalist attitudes were also reinforced, and the image of the border as protective line against external threats was strengthened.

Managing the crisis

In so far as resilience includes the capacity to face disruptions (persistence), to reorganize and learn from a crisis (adaptability) and to create new trajectories (transformability) (cf. Walker and Salt, 2006; Wilson and Wilson 2019), the focus here is on the first two aspects: how local actors in the Polish-German border region managed the crisis and what lessons were learnt. This section is based on available reports, a document analysis, and six semi-structured interviews with actors engaged in cross-border cooperation conducted online from December 2020 to January 2021 (cf. Kajta and Opiłowska, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the decision to limit cross-border mobility (a decision made, in most cases, by EU member states at the national level) has demonstrated the weak position of local agents vis-à-vis state actors. Even though cooperative cross-border structures such as Euroregions or Euro(pa)cities have existed on the Polish-German border since the 1990s, they were ignored by state authorities. In addition, despite the fact that the interests of border regions are ostensibly represented at the national level by the Polish-German Intergovernmental Commission for Regional and Cross-Border Cooperation and the coordinators of German-Polish Intersocietal and Cross-Border Cooperation, these institutional structures seem to have more of a symbolic function within the bilateral relationship and proved to be ineffective in adequately facing the challenges created by the crisis.

Against the backdrop of the multiple determinants shaping resilience as outlined above, the Polish-German interstate relations – already on a downward trajectory since 2015 (Opiłowska, 2021a) – functioned as hinderance to resilience. It was the Polish government that unilaterally introduced restrictions on the border to Germany, whereas German regional and local actors came out in support of the borderland communities. The federal states of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony attempted to help the many cross-border Polish workers in Germany by offering them 60 Euros per day and 20 Euros per day for families if they decided to stay in Germany. At the local level, the district of Spree-Neisse offered accommodation to Polish high school and university students in order to allow them to continue their studies (MOT, 2021).

As outlined in the previous section, communication and access to information are crucial factors for resilience. On 12 November 2020, the Frankfurt-Słubice Cooperation Center launched a special Polish-German Covid-19 hotline to answer questions about labour law, border traffic regulations and quarantine obligations on either side of the border in Polish and German. According to the MOT report (2021, p. 84), a network of cross-border structures (Infobest, Frontaliers Grand Est, CEC, MOSA, Maison du Luxembourg, etc.) was also set up in the area around the French-German Grand Est region to inform “consumers, cross-border workers and users of their rights, to identify their difficulties and to pass them on to the respective national authorities.” In addition, a *local contact group* was created to disseminate information and identify needs and expectations at the border crossings. Despite the fact that border restrictions revealed the weakness of local cross-border stakeholders, my interlocutors claimed that this challenge made them aware that they needed to be more active on the level of national and European governance in order to better articulate their interests. Nonetheless, they assumed that their voices had been heard by central authorities, since national authorities lifted border measures after the spring demonstrations.

How did they cope with the challenge of a border shutdown? They moved their consultations and meetings online very quickly. My interview partners emphasize that it was essential to continue to meet regularly in order to discuss the needs and problems of residents. However, in their opinion, this smooth transition to online cooperation was only possible thanks to personal contacts and existing social trust. This example shows that in a crisis, the most supportive factors for resilience are not primarily financial resources, but social factors – networks and trusting relationship between stakeholders.

When considering the agency of resilience in the German-Polish borderland, institutionalized local structures – *Euroregions*, the *Frankfurt-Słubice Cooperation Center* or established associations (Słubfurt) – have proven able to quickly adapt to the new situation and take over leadership in managing the border crisis. My Euroregions interviewees emphasized that they had been working in the borderland since the 1990s and were thus recognized by local institutions and borderlanders as trusted partners, which enabled them to continue carrying out projects during the pandemic.

As highlighted by the German-Polish case, institutionalized cross-border structures have played various roles in facing the crisis. On the strength of the MOT report (2021), we can argue that similar strategies have been employed by other European border region actors as well, including lobbying at the national level, crisis management, providing information, continuing existing cooperation, drafting recovery plans, and conducting surveys. Overall, the existence of cross-border structures has strengthened the resilience of border regions, through their closeness to residents, intercultural competences, and ability to raise awareness about the specific situation of their borderland (cf. MOT, 2021, p. 127). This is also reflected in the case of the *Saar-Moselle Eurodistrict* at the German-French border, where institutional structures were, in case of immediate necessity, able to get up and running faster than possible improvisations concocted during a state of emergency (Weber et al., 2021, p. 15).

Discussion and conclusions

Despite the many negative consequences of Covid-19 rebordering policies for border regions, the crisis may also have provided a wake-up call to deepen and strengthen existing cooperation. The pandemic made both local stakeholders and border regions residents more conscious about the value of open borders and the true interconnectivity of border regions, now unable to function with a closed border:

“It made us realize that we really have a special situation, that we are really very strongly intertwined with each other by now – on all kinds of levels: schools, businesses, also an incredible number of families who simply live on both sides.” (German representative of Frankfurt-Słubice Cooperation Center, 16.12.2020).

Indeed, border regions learnt a vital lesson from the crisis, becoming aware that they must be more active in lobbying for their interests, instead of remaining ‘passive policy takers’. This lesson was crystallized in the Joint Open Appeal of the German-Polish border regions to the Presidents and Prime Ministers of Poland and Germany, issued on 15-16 June 2021. The border regions demanded that future legislations and political decision-making processes take into account the specific situation of the borderland (Wilke et al., 2021). They claimed that the decisions made by state authorities had a negative impact on the daily lives of border region residents and threatened the existing achievements of the European integration process, while also challenging them to raise cross-border cooperation to a new level so as to make it more resistant to future crises. Five key areas were addressed: communication, the cross-border mobility of commuters and students, health care, crisis management and cross-border cooperation. In each area, the authors of the appeal demanded an improvement in the communication between state officials and local actors, and between German and Polish institutions, the introduction of effective legal regulations that expanded the possibilities of cross-border cooperation, the development of joint crisis management strategies for fire, disaster and pandemic protection, the intensification of cooperation, and the creation of new structures (e.g. permanent multilingual advice and information points). This document – signed by more than 90 representatives from the municipalities, cities, districts and Euroregions in the German-Polish border area – demonstrates that the local actors have learnt from the crisis and identified ways to be more resilient in the future. In order to implement their plans however, they need support from state authorities to optimize financial, organisational and legal frameworks for cross-border cooperation.

Similar activities has been engaged in on the German-French border. On 22 September 2020, the *Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly* (DFPV) adopted the joint resolution “Together against the Corona pandemic - Franco-German cooperation in the fight against the pandemic towards a European Health Union”. It appeals to the governments of France and Germany to develop “joint strategies and coordinated mechanisms” (Jung and Arend, 2021, p. 82) in order to prevent future border closures and to maintain the balance between the protection of freedoms and the protection of health (cf. *ibid.*).

Did the German-Polish border region prove to be resilient to the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic? The answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, the decision by central authorities to close the border without consulting regional/local stakeholders demonstrated the latter’s weak position and the wider fragility of cross-border cooperation. On the other hand, thanks to specific factors such as established cross-border networks, social trust and institutionalized structures, local actors quickly adapted to the new challenges by continuing their cooperation online, providing information and supporting residents in meeting their most pressing needs. As both the joint appeal of the German-Polish border regions and the German-French joint resolution exemplify, local actors have learnt their lessons from the first wave of the pandemic and the subsequent border shutdown – the will to deepen cross-border cooperation and strengthen their position

is evident. Nevertheless, whether their demands will be implemented, or whether the third phase of resilience – transformation, here in form of strengthened structures, new strategies and agreements – will be achieved is still a question for the future.

REFERENCES

- Adger, W. N. (2000) 'Social and ecological resilience: Are they related?', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1191%2F030913200701540465>
- Aldrich, D. P. and Meyer, M. A. (2015) 'Social Capital and Community Resilience', *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 59 No. 2, pp. 254–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002764214550299>
- Bieber, F. (2020) 'Global Nationalism in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.35>
- Bigo, D. (2006) 'Security, Exception, Ban and Surveillance', in Lyon, D. (Ed.) *Theorizing Surveillance. The panopticon and beyond*. Willan Publishing, London, pp. 46–68.
- Böhm, H. (2021) 'Five Roles of Cross-border Cooperation Against Re-bordering', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, pp.1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2021.1948900>
- Bristow, G. and Healy, A. (2014) 'Regional Resilience: An Agency Perspective', *Regional Studies*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 923–935. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2013.854879>
- Brunnermeier, M. (2021) *The Resilient Society*. Endeavor Literary Press, Colorado Springs.
- Cyrus, N. and Ulrich, P. (2020) *Shifting b/orders in times of the pandemic*. [online] <https://sfb1265.de/blog/shifting-b-orders-in-times-of-the-pandemic/> (Accessed 15 December 2021).
- Dolińska, K., Makaro, J. and Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak, N. (2018) *Cud pogranicza? Zgorzelczanie, gubinianie, słubiczanie o życiu w miastach podzielonych*. Nomos, Kraków.
- European Commission (2020) CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE EU. Luxembourg.
- Grossman, M. (2013) 'Prognosis Critical: Resilience and Multiculturalism in Contemporary Australia', *M/C Journal: a journal of media and culture*, Vol. 16 No. 5. <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.699>
- Horbacz, A. (2020) 'Pogranicze ponownie protestuje. „Otwórzcie granice!”', *Deutsche Welle*, 10 May. [online] <https://p.dw.com/p/3bziZ> (Accessed 10 January 2022).
- Jajeśniak-Quast, D. and Stokłosa, K. (2000) *Geteilte Städte an Oder und Neiße: Frankfurt (Oder)-Słubice, Guben-Gubin und Görlitz-Zgorzelec, 1945-1995*. Arno-Spitz, Berlin.
- Jańczak, J. (2020) *The German-Polish border, re-bordering and the pandemic: centers vs. peripheries? Blog des Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION*. [online] <https://bordersinmotion-coronablog.com/2020/06/09/the-german-polish-border-re-bordering-and-the-pandemic-centers-vs-peripheries/> (Accessed 7 January 2020).
- Jung, A. and Arend, C. (2021) 'Gemeinsam Grenzen überwinden. Die Deutsch-Französische Parlamentarische Versammlung in der Corona-Krise', in Weber, F., Theis, R., and Terrollion, K. (Eds.) *Grenzerfahrungen | Expériences transfrontalières COVID-19 und die deutsch-französischen Beziehungen | Les relations franco-allemandes à l'heure de la COVID-19*. Springer, Berlin, pp.77–91.
- Kajta, J. and Opiłowska, E. (2021) 'The impact of Covid-19 on structure and agency in a borderland: the case of two twin towns in Central Europe', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, pp. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2021.1996259>
- Kajta, J. and Opiłowska, E. (2022) 'Community Response to the Revival of a Rebordering Politics: The Case of Two Twin Towns in Central Europe', *Nationalities Papers*, pp.1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.15>
- Kenwick, M. R. and Simmons, B. A. (2020) 'Pandemic Response as Border Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 74 No. S1 (December), pp. 36–58. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000363>
- Konrad, V. (2021) 'New Directions at the Post-Globalization Border', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. Vol. 36 No. 5, pp. 713–726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2021.1980733>
- Magis, K. (2010) 'Community resilience: An indicator of social sustainability', *Society and Natural Resources*, Vol. 23 No. 5, pp. 401–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920903305674>
- Medeiros, E. et al. (2021) 'Covidfencing effects on cross-border deterritorialism: the case of Europe', *European Planning Studies*. Vol. 29 No. 5, pp. 962–982. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2020.1818185>
- Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière and Commission Européenne (MOT) (2021) *The effects of COVID-19 induced border closures on cross-border regions*. <https://doi.org/10.2776/342537>

- Olsson, L. et al. (2015) 'Why resilience is unappealing to social science: Theoretical and empirical investigations of the scientific use of resilience', *Science Advances*, Vol. 1 No. 4, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1400217>
- Opiłowska, E. (2009) *Kontinuitäten und Brüche deutsch-polnischer Erinnerungskulturen. Görlitz/Zgorzelec 1945-2006*. Neißer Verlag, Dresden.
- Opiłowska, E. (2021a) 'Determinants of the Cross-border Cooperation in the German-Polish Borderlands', in Opiłowska, E. and Sus, M. (Eds.) *Poland and Germany in the European Union. The Multi-dimensional Dynamics of Bilateral Relations*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 208–226.
- Opiłowska, E. (2021b) 'The Covid-19 crisis: the end of a borderless Europe?', *European Societies*. Vol. 23 (sup1), pp. S589-S600. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833065>
- Opiłowska, E. and Sus, M. (2015) 'Poland and Germany in the European Union. Transformation of the bilateral relations', in Gigaskeide, C. (Ed.) *Diversity in Europe*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, pp. 129–142.
- Opiłowska, E. and Sus, M. (Eds.) (2021) *Poland and Germany in the European Union The Multi-dimensional Dynamics of Bilateral Relations*. Routledge, Abingdon.
- Pascariu, G. C. and Rouet, G. (2019) 'Introduction: Resilience and the eastern partnership—what relevance for policies?', in Pascariu, G. C. and Rouet, G. (Eds.) *Resilience and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Countries: From Theoretical Concepts to a Normative Agenda*, pp. 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25606-7_1
- Porczyński, D. and Wojakowski, D. (2020) 'Borderlands from the resilience perspective: Diversification of state borders in former Austrian Galicia', *Regional Science Policy and Practice*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 787–807. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12306>
- Prokkola, E. K. (2019) 'Border-regional resilience in EU internal and external border areas in Finland', *European Planning Studies*. Vol. 27 No. 8, pp. 1587–1606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.1595531>
- Roth, M. (2021) 'Ein Schritt zurück, zwei nach vorne. Wie die Coronakrise uns lehrte, mit Mut die grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit voranzubringen', in Weber, F., Theis, R., and Terrollion, K. (Eds.) *Grenzerfahrungen | Expériences transfrontalières COVID-19 und die deutsch-französischen Beziehungen | Les relations franco-allemandes à l'heure de la COVID-19*. Springer, Berlin, pp. 37–44.
- Salter, M. B. (2010) 'Borders, passports, and the global mobility', in Turner, B. S. (Ed.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp.514–530.
- Sohn, C. (2014) 'Modelling Cross-Border Integration: The Role of Borders as a Resource', *Geopolitics*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 587–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.913029>
- Wyborcza (2020) Przewodniczący euroregionów apeluje do premiera o otwarcie granic. "Potrzebujemy siebie nawzajem", [Wyborcza.pl](https://www.wyborcza.pl). 19 April 2020. [online] <https://zielonagora.wyborcza.pl/zielonagora/7,35182,25881560,przewodniczacy-euroregionow-apeluje-do-premiera-o-otwarcie-granic.html> (Assessed 15 June 2021).
- Walker, B. and Salt, D. (2006) *Resilience thinking: sustaining ecosystems in a changing world*. Washington Island Press, Washington.
- Weber, F., Theis, R. and Terrollion, K. (2021) 'Neue Herausforderungen, alte Grenzen? Wie die COVID-19-Pandemie das deutsch-französische Verhältnis aufwirbelt', in Weber, F., Theis, R., and Terrollion, K. (Eds.) *Grenzerfahrungen | Expériences transfrontalières COVID-19 und die deutsch-französischen Beziehungen | Les relations franco-allemandes à l'heure de la COVID-19*. Springer, Berlin, pp. 3–18.
- Wilke, R. et al. (2021) 'Kooperation ohne Grenzen. Gemeinsamer offener Appell der deutsch-polnischen Grenzregion/Wspólny otwarty apel polsko-niemieckiego regionu przygranicznego.' *Deutsch-politisches Raumordnungsportal* [online] https://www.kooperation-ohne-grenzen.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CDR_Appell-DE_final.pdf (Accessed 25 November 2021).
- Wille, C. (2020) 'Border(ing)s in Times of COVID-19', *Borders in Perspective UniGR-CBS Thematic Issue. Bordering in Pandemic Times: In- sights into the COVID-19 Lockdown*, Vol. 4, pp. 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-b825-a20b>
- Wilson, G. A. and Wilson, O. J. (2019) 'Assessing the resilience of human systems: a critical evaluation of universal and contextual resilience variables', *Resilience*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 126–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2018.1539205>
- Wittenberg, J. (2015) 'Conceptualizing Historical Legacies', *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures*. Edited by M. Bernhard and K. Jasiewicz, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 366–378. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325415577864>
- Wörner, J. (2020) Speech given on Europe Day, Darmstadt, May 2020. [online] <https://blogs.esa.int/janwoerner/2020/05/12/speech-given-on-europe-day-2020/> (Accessed 3 December 2021).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ELŻBIETA OPIŁOWSKA is Associate Professor at the Institute of Sociology, Head of the Center for Regional and Borderlands Studies at the University of Wrocław and associate member of the Center for Interdisciplinary Polish Studies/European University Viadrina. Her main expertise is in borderlands studies, memory cultures, European integration, and German-Polish relations. She was guest professor at the UniGr-Center for Border Studies, University of Luxembourg (2021) and at the Viadrina Institute of European Studies (2020/2021). She has been granted scholarships from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Alfred Toepfer F.V.S. Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Recent publication: Poland and Germany in the European Union: The Multi-dimensional Dynamics of Bilateral Relations, Abington: Routledge 2021 (ed. with M. Sus); The Impact of Covid-19 on Structure and Agency in a Borderland. The Case of Two Twin Towns in Central Europe, Journal of Borderlands Studies 2021, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2021.1996259 (with Justyna Kajta).

cbs.uni-gr.eu
borderstudies.org

 @unigr_cbs



Interreg
Grande Région | Großregion
Fonds européen de développement régional | Europäischer Fonds für regionale Entwicklung

