The Longest Spring in History: On Interpreting the Transformations on the Polish-German Border on the Eve of Its Closure

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Abstract: The article deals with the processes of debordering and rebordering on the Polish-German border, focusing on how the so-called everyday experts from the region interpreted these changes in 2018. The research was conducted in the cities of Słubice and Gubin and the adjacent rural areas, using individual structured in-depth interviews. The data analysis was inspired by grounded theory. According to the interviewees, cultural, legal, and economic differences significantly influenced the experiences and interactions at the border despite the blurring of physical borders. The analysis of the way of interpreting the debordering and rebordering also allows us to understand the characteristics of the narratives shaping the thinking about the transformations of the region at that time and their significance for integration processes and the creation of interstices. In the discussion, I argue for reorienting contemporary studies on the Polish-German border toward rebordering as well as for a more careful analysis of the accompanying narratives, emphasizing how these interpretations can condition the course of future events, such as what happened with the closing of borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

While reporting on the project, I reviewed the research transcripts from the Polish-German border region, and one quote caught my attention. It was an interview with the President of the Merchants' Association of one of the twin cities on the Polish-German border, who shared memories of conversations with German customers at the local market. According to the account, they had heard about closing the borders. Still, it seemed unacceptable, just as it would be for Germans, as our interlocutor quickly added, stating that he could not imagine a situation where we go back to the times when there were border guards on the Polish side and border services on the German side, with checks, visas, and passports required. It is easy to understand why this excerpt struck me. The conversation took place in the fall of 2018. Reading it again after more than five years, being aware of what happened later, felt like looking at pictures from bygone times.

The establishment of the Polish-German border along the Oder and Lusatian Neisse rivers, along with the division of cities such as Frankfurt-Słubice, Gubin-Guben, and Görlitz-Zgorzelec, was a result of the Potsdam decisions at the end of World War II. Since then, the border has changed character several times (Stokłosa, 2014: 259–261; Jańczak, 2018: 512–518). The post-war period was a period of minor adjustments of the borderline and agreement discussions. Approaching the river and entering the border town was difficult, as was living in it due to infrastructural deficiencies (Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018: 28–29). In the 1950s, cross-border cooperation was still limited to the agreement on shared municipal utilities (Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018: 30). The situation began changing in the 1960s; the first cooperation treaties were signed due the political thaw, leading to mutual visits at various, albeit official, levels (Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018: 34). In 1971, a visa-free travel agreement was signed (Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018: 36). Along with the development of housing and services in the border region, this revived small border traffic and popularized the experience of contact with neighbors (Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018). This also made people aware of the differences in urban layout and the quality of life on the Polish and German sides, and triggered the emergence of stereotypes (Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018: 37–39). Restrictions returned in the 1980s due to concerns about the spread of the Polish Solidarity movement. In the 1990s, emotions around opening the borders increased in connection with expectations of Poland's accession to the European Union, accompanied by tensions and German fears of criminalizing the border, culminating in incidents such as the arson of dormitories at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt Oder (Asher, 2012: 500). Personal border controls completely disappeared in 2007. This symbolic date marks a new beginning for the process of debordering.

March 2020 brought the unexpected closure of the Polish-German border due to the COVID-19 pandemic (and other borders across the Union and the whole world; Brandariz, Fernández-Bessa, 2021: 11). Bans and quarantines severely complicated the lives of local cross-border communities (Hennig, 2021: 863–864). As a result of protests, movement resumed after three months. Still, the identity of the borderland was questioned (Rogowski, Frąckowiak, 2023) and, more broadly, the traditional understanding of

the border as a tool to protect the population from external threats was restored (McCall, 2012: 292). In November 2021, another symbolic event occurred in the Polish border village of Markosice. Due to fears of illegal migration expressed by the residents of a town on the other side of the border, also in the context of the humanitarian disaster at the Polish-Belarusian border, German services cut off stairs facilitating passage from Poland to Germany, installed by the cross-border community in celebration of Poland's entry into the Schengen area (Malinowski, 2021). In February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, an event that underscored the importance of borders as a means of national jurisdiction and control. In the summer of 2022, an ecological disaster on the Oder River reinforced the perception of the Polish-German border as a potential threat. In October 2023, Germany reintroduced border controls to prevent illegal migration and human smuggling (Frymark, 2023). This decision affected cross-border cooperation and had additional significance. Unlike previous episodes, it was a decision of the Federal Government, taken for an indefinite period (already extended several times). In January 2024, farmers' protests made crossing the border on the bridge connecting the twin cities of Frankfurt-Słubice difficult, once again changing the definition of this place from a space of exchange to a demonstration of discontent.

Recalling this history helps us better understand why my interlocutor could not imagine the return of borders. His work depended on free cross-border movement, but biographical experiences also mattered. We spoke during a period that could be described as the long spring of the open Polish-German border. This time fell between 2007–2020, when there was only optimism about an increasingly integrating world, especially within the European Union. From the perspective of the conversations held in 2018, deepening relations within the twin cities seemed to be a process only to accelerate. Reporting this story, I also realized that although we tried to avoid romanticizing the processes of blurring the Polish-German border after 2007 when planning and writing our research proposal in 2016, we thought alike. Even if we considered emphasizing or closing borders again, we imagined it would rather be in the form of new surveillance technologies, episodic grassroots manifestations of some residents close to the idea of national sovereignty or overly fearful of the effects of migration due to media influence.

However, I have decided to re-read the research material under different circumstances. The accumulation of events in 2020–2024 that introduced additional controls, affecting the atmosphere and perception of the border so that it is increasingly less associated with a space of free exchange, prompts the question of whether we should shift the emphasis in research on the Polish-German border. Instead of studying it within the framework of debordering, accept the rebordering as the new normal. As some researchers suggest, part of the announced change in approach may be a renaissance of the processual perspective in border studies and an interest in (reactions to) closing borders.

Agreeing with this stand, this paper builds on the existing tradition of research on the German-Polish borderland from the processual perspective, particularly a branch which supplements analyses of institutional transformations with an inquiry into how residents and leaders perceive these processes (e.g., Dolińska, Makaro, Niedzwiecka-Iwańczak, 2018), and the significance of border crises for the

formation of this perspective (Opiłowska et al., 2022). I see my contribution as providing a pre-pandemic snapshot of these perceptions, relating to how everyday experts (a term of Michał Podgórski) interpreted the processes occurring on the border during the long spring of open borders. These are people who, because of their roles, have extensive knowledge and preferences as well as the ability to participate in sense-making. By reconstructing their imaginations, we uncover one of the sources of transformations in values associated with the border.

Therefore, this paper aims to supplement the mentioned border studies program with analyses of how everyday experts interpreted phenomena that can be linked to debordering and rebordering processes, and how the characteristics of these interpretations can partially explain border closure strategies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research on the Polish-German border from the perspective of bordering

While sketching the study, we referred to the processual approach to the border, which is constantly in transition, helping to regulate flows but also creating territorial categories and serving a pivotal role in forming states and nationalities (Kolossov, Scott, 2013; Konrad, 2015; Herzog, Sohn, 2019). The bordering process has two variants: debordering and rebordering. The former means weakening barriers and facilitating flows, often studied concerning changes occurring at the Polish-German border after 2007 (cf. Stokłosa, 2014; Jańczak, 2018; Hennig, 2021). Rebordering means strengthening borders and sealing flows (Herzog, Sohn, 2019).

As Jańczak points out, debordering and rebordering are multidimensional processes, having a physical, political, symbolic, or social aspect. As a part of the rebordering processes, the latter may include an increase in xenophobia or the belief in a crisis of a particular model of integration or globalization (Jańczak, 2020: 8). It is also worth distinguishing between hard and soft interpretations of both bordering manifestations. As we highlighted in our project proposal, these involve not only the dismantling of border infrastructure or the abolition of personal checks, but also the disappearance or persistence of different cultural spaces rooted in discourses and practices that occur gradually and require long-term interactions (Pries, 2007; Christmann, 2010; Roose, 2010; Keller, 2013). The same is true for rebordering: examples of the expansion of border surveillance technology despite the opening of borders can be pointed out, as well as new borders manifesting not so much in materiality as in different worldviews or opinions (Eigmüller, 2006; Wilson, Weber, 2008).

Additionally, bordering processes have complex dynamics. Top-down actions (state policies) are complemented by those initiated bottom-up by local communities, as Jańczak noted (Jańczak, 2018: 512–520). The same researcher also points out that debordering and rebordering processes can intertwine, overlap in time, provoke each other, and proceed at different paces on both sides of the border, showing how complex and dynamic the establishment process is. For example, debordering, strengthened by Poland's entry into the Schengen Area, emphasized economic differences, political

sentiments, as well as demographic and linguistic disparities despite removing physical barriers. The reinstatement of controls during the pandemic revealed how interconnected the two parts of the twin city are and how much they value these relationships (Opiłowska, 2020; Hennig, 2021; Więckowski, Dallen, 2021; Opiłowska et al., 2022).

When we conducted our research, the Polish-German borderline identity could be characterized in four aspects (Rogowski, Frąckowiak, 2023). First, the relationships between the residents on both sides of the border were described by Dębicki and Doliński as "warm indifference", with other researchers also indicating remnants of prejudices and stereotypes (Dębicki, Doliński, 2013, see also: Galasiński, Meinhof, 2002; Stokłosa, 2014; Dolińska, Niedźwiecka-Iwańczuk, 2017). Symptoms of the transformation of border cities into cross-border ones were observed, with relationships becoming increasingly personal, although this process was far from complete (Dolińska, Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak, Makaro, 2017; see also Dolińska, Makaro, Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak 2018 on the transformation of cross-border social ties in the area). Secondly, values such as multiculturalism, EU integration, reconciliation, and historical depth were valued by the residents and essential for their sense of belonging, which was reflected in the production of cross-border symbols, both as part of top-down branding (Euroregions) and as grassroots social and artistic initiatives (Sandberg, 2016; Dolińska, Makaro, 2020). Thirdly, the region was characterized by specific spatial practices undertaken by individuals whom Löfgren (2008) calls regionauts. These are people buying, working, or relaxing on both sides of the border. Researchers also pointed to the asymmetry of these exchange practices. Consumption implies the adaptation of Polish suppliers to the expectations of German residents (Sandberg, 2016), and the type of consumer goods on both sides of the border reflected a different perception of the advancement of local industry and services. Fourthly, the specifics of the cultural landscape include adapting border infrastructure to new needs (Dołzbłasz, Zelek, 2019: 505–506) as well as joint infrastructure projects. An interesting discovery by researchers was also the association of Germans staying in the Polish parts of twin cities for consumption purposes with the vitality of towns or urbanization (Sandberg, 2016).

Methods

The research I refer to was conducted as part of the "DE-RE-BORD" project implemented between 2018 and 2022, aimed at analyzing socio-spatial transformations in Polish-German border regions after 2007. We were interested in how the ceasing of border controls contributed to debordering, rebordering, and establishing cross-border regions with specific cultures and identities.

The research project was developed in the tradition of communicative constructivism (Keller, Knoblauch, Reichertz, 2013; Knoblauch, 2017), which, building upon classical social constructivism (Berger, Luckmann, 1983), focused more on knowledge creation processes and introduced elements of action theory and discourse analysis. In this tradition, agency is attributed to social and cultural structures, materiality, and the mobility of actants in space. As a result, we combined various research techniques, including innovative ones: photographic walks, video tours, hybrid mapping,

and sociological film. The research was carried out along the border at the height of Brandenburg and the Lubuskie voivodeship, in divided cities such as Frankfurt-Słubice, Guben-Gubin, and the adjacent rural areas, as well as border institutions such as stations, customs depots, and airports located in Poznań and in Berlin.

The research material analyzed below comes from the second stage of the study, dedicated to the knowledge and practices of local experts. In the second half of 2018, nine expert interviews were conducted in each country. In Poland, the participants included the commander of a border guard station, a village mayor, a local journalist who is also a councillor, the head of the promotion office of the marshal's office, the chief of the volunteer fire department, and the owner of a tavern, the president of the Polish-German Society, the head of the Association of Municipal Market Traders, a sworn translator, and a library employee. The interviews included four women and five men. We tried to include people of various ages in the sample. Four participants were from Słubice and its vicinity, three from Gubin and its surroundings, and two from Poznań. The latter decision may sound controversial to border region researchers. Still, in the broader context of the project, we wanted to see how the border crossing was experienced by people traveling by plane or train between major cities. For the analysis conducted in this paper, however, I did not spot any differences in their experiences or perspectives; we talked to experts who are professionally involved in Polish-German cooperation, are in daily contact with their neighbors, know the region, and speak similarly to experts who live locally.

We used the technique of individual structured in-depth interviews. The list of topics included perceptions of the changing role of the border between Germany and Poland after 2007 and the accompanying transformations, strategies and types of actions toward the border taken by the residents and community leaders; knowledge and practices considered the characteristics of people living in border regions and their evolution since 2007; how local actors contribute to the merging or re-separation of the German and Polish sides; places, events, and activities that facilitate the perception of the border region as a "interstices".

Each interview lasted about an hour. I used transcriptions of interviews conducted in Poland for the analysis. The coding procedure was inspired by grounded theory. The interviews were structured, and the script covered topics often discussed in literature. Still, the list of questions and the dynamic of conversation allowed the interviewees to talk about the issue of interest in many ways and various contexts. Therefore, the used technique did not eliminate the serendipity. I began the analysis of the transcription in MAXQDA with theory-based coding, following the broad categories that structured the interview scenario and matched the phenomena we were interested in (debordering, rebordering, and interstices).

Then, I moved on to the phase of data-based coding, which began with the substantive coding, when I developed subsequent codes – i.e., reminders of guilt, media-creating reality, and the lack of collegial relationships – to fill the initial concepts with the participants'meanings (Gibbs, 2011: 90–91).

Next, based on the Strauss and Corbin approach (1990), we also used the axial coding to help identify relationships between different dimensions of the research subject, so connecting substantive (open) codes referring to the phenomenon, circumstances and conditions, context, strategies and positioning, and consequences. At this stage, I often added or modified substantive codes, which are strongly represented in the paper. This stage was finalized by the algorithmic verification of the list of codes and processing the categorized sets of quotes exported from MAXQDA further using a chatbot using the OpenAI language model on the GPT architecture, which I "trained" based on the aforementioned material, looking for the best matching quotes, possibility to cluster codes into broader bundles, code summaries, differences, and possible omissions that would have coverage in the data.

In the end, following the procedures (Gibbs, 2011: 90–91), I attempted theoretical coding (section *The Characteristics of interpretations*) to outline the concept of debordering and rebordering grounded in data from the period and area of the Polish-German borderland that is of interest to me here. The bot I instructed was used at this stage, also to attempt to predict how the described characteristics of the discourse, excessive emphasis on debordering and marginalization of rebordering, could have facilitated the border closure (analyses presented in the Discussion).

Results

The results will be presented in the following order. I will indicate which aspects of debordering and rebordering the interviewees' notice and value, after which I will conclude with brief characteristics of these interpretations.

On blurring borders

The transcript analysis revealed three main reasons for debordering, as perceived by everyday experts from the Polish-German borderland. The first was related to political and legal conditions. The interviewees primarily mentioned Poland's accession to the Schengen Area: "The border has changed significantly with an emphasis on there being much more freedom in crossing it" (ID2). Similar statements are accompanied by positive emotions associated with a sense of freedom and openness after this international agreement. The location and territorial changes at the Polish-German border are also mentioned in this context: "If you ask the Germans about some places on our side, they say 'Das ist Lausitz' […] so the border is artificial" (ID4). The opening of borders was thus also associated with the possibility of reuniting the historical regions. Political and legal conditions could also include internal German processes, which the interviewees noted. With the unification of Germany, the border moved westward, and more significant income disparities and the quality of life can be observed between Western and Eastern Germans than between Eastern Germany and Western Poland.

The origins of the blurring of the Polish-German border are also seen in infrastructural and economic integration. This includes the immediacy and accessibility of what is on the other side of the border,

brought closer by joint investments. In twin cities, this sense is even more profound. It relates to the mutual complementation of infrastructure and services. Transcripts also contain statements indicating the role of local policies in attracting investors from the neighboring country, such as the creation of the Kostrzyn-Słubice economic zone. Accepting the euro on both sides of the border also contributes to European integration: "We feel in Europe, to such an extent, that using the euro here is not a problem or a surprise for us" (ID7). According to the interviewees, developing communication technology facilitates cross-border economic activity and cooperation without borders. Finally, financial interdependency between both sides of the border is recognised, as well as economic inequalities motivating cross-border shopping or daily work commuters: "Despite the euro exchange rate […] there are a lot of products that are cheaper and better there" (ID3).

The third category of reasons for weakening the border in everyday experience is sociocultural exchange. More encounters mean fewer prejudices: "The lack of contact causes the view of Germany to be still associated with the war" (ID7). We also heard about cultural similarities: "As far as Germans are concerned, they are very similar to us in terms of pace and approach to work" (ID1). During discussions, there was also the awareness of the border as a resource, thus thinking about it positively and constructively as an opportunity for cultural exchange. The perception of the border as a platform, not a barrier, is well-illustrated by another statement from the person quoted before: "We try to build from the blessings that are on both sides of the border and from what the river, the Oder, gives us". Language skills facilitate this exchange. Usually, it is Poles who learn German, although "I know that it goes the other way too, and there are those who try" (ID3). Such attempts are met with enthusiasm, especially when the desire to break language barriers and understand also comes from the other side. Finally, in discussions, there was also a mention of the passage of time and the routinization of the exchange itself, which becomes an everyday experience, almost unnoticed, like crossing the border.

In analyzing how reasons are thematized, following Corbin and Strauss's advice, I also paid attention to contextual factors, moderating between the sources and consequences of the bordering of a more local or temporal nature. According to the interviewees, these could include the character of the local economy, adjusting to the mentioned benefits, and infrastructure renovations, which can facilitate or hinder the flow of people and goods. However, local organizations' and leaders' initiative and cooperation was another factor that dominated the discussions. A specific language of joining can be identified as a tool for bringing conversation partners closer: "Here, a part of the river connects because we say that the river connects, not divides us" (ID5). The activity of local entities was also frequently mentioned; consistently engaged in building cross-border ties, often limited only by finances: "We could have achieved much more, only the local government doesn't smell of money much" (ID3). Such pragmatic descriptions of cooperation sometimes even suggest its instrumentalization on both sides of the border, which we would deal with when cross-border projects are used instead to achieve separate benefits. For example, the cooperation of volunteer fire departments from both countries may be the only way to supplement equipment shortages, etc.

In the research, we were also interested in the actions taken by the individuals we spoke with regarding the debordering process: how they cope with it, benefit from it, or perhaps protest it. Especially in the context of the findings mentioned above, it is no surprise that there was a particular focus on institutional cooperation. For example, multi-faceted official cooperation for regional development was noted: "Partnership of the Oder […] we work very hard to make the border completely invisible" (ID1). Also, academic cooperation – primarily related to developing bilingualism, scientific exchange, and joint cultural projects – was discussed. Associations working together also play a significant role, implementing projects that bring different cross-border groups together: "These organizations meet, there's the society for combating disability, there are seniors, there are twinned villages that visit each other and do harvest festivals together" (ID2).

The quoted person also pointed to aspects of employment abroad: "A lot of people commute to different companies […] there is much more freedom in crossing and being in Germany than was ever possible before" (ID2). Another one emphasized shopping trips: "Something is cheaper or different, you just buy it" (ID8). Although both statements indicate economic aspects, the mobility realized in passing seems further to blur the border in these kinds of experiences. Among Germans, cross-border medical services are popular – visits to dentists, beauticians, or veterinarians in Poland indicate a pursuit of cheaper services and an appreciation for the quality (in the introduction, I cited papers demonstrating how the sort of purchased goods reflect perceptions of the communities providing them). Our interviewees also pointed to a kind of strategy, or rather a generalized attitude of openness, which turns out to be a consequence of the blurring of the border and the foundation for further cross-border initiatives at the same time: "There is this will, I would call it, to be kind, friendly, open to each other, that's really how it looks" (ID1).

In the interviews, we also tried to reconstruct how an individual's position facilitates undertaking the activities above. Direct experiences of the border were mentioned, especially regarding changes in how it is perceived and felt: "I remember how much fear it caused me, as a young one, as a child crossing the Polish-German border" (ID4). Collegial and familial ties are also significant, helping to break down stereotypes and build a positive attitude toward cross-border cooperation: "I have part of my family in Germany, in Berlin, but despise for all my life I am in touch with them, I never treated them as Germans" (ID1). Interests in history or international relations are also vital, aiding in a deeper understanding of these phenomena. Individual perspectives are also conditioned, as mentioned, by competencies and resources. Language skills facilitate communication with people from Germany and typify individuals for leadership roles in joint initiatives: "I talk a bit German there, so I'm also a contact person on the German side" (ID3). The key is also the time one must devote to cooperation to engage in similar activities: "And in this fire department, I'm certainly not alone, because here I am more on the side, or organizationally because I just don't have time for certain things anymore" (ID3). Finally, hobbies that motivate crossing borders can be included in the lifestyle conducive to benefiting from debordering processes, based on the analysis of interviews: "Personally, I ride this bike trail when time allows, don't I?" (ID9). Bicycles were also mentioned as a preferred mode of transport: "If it's going to be a longer trip, I drive a car, but if it's just a quick trip nearby to check something… I hop on the bike, and I'm there within 5 minutes" (ID2).

We were also interested in how our interviewees think about the (intended and unintended) consequences of blurring the Polish-German border and what kinds of outcomes they notice. One of them is the economic and infrastructural development of Polish border areas, especially in the initial period when the difference in prices of goods and services was more significant: "Because German citizens come to Słubice for shopping […] everyone laughed that there are about a hundred hairdressers in the town" (ID7). This included infrastructure changes, such as the appearance of a cross-border bus line or more efficient functioning of the twin city, where various urban functions are interpenetrated between border cities: "I go to the gym and come back in two hours, and it's no longer a border, just the bridge of our common city" (ID8). Some of our interviewees pointed out that such direct, material benefits, which can be drawn from cross-border cooperation projects, are also felt beyond the largest border centers, even in villages: "Well, I managed to secure 80,000 PLN in the budget at that time […] and we renovated that community center" (ID3).

The consequences are also associated with migrations to border towns. These lead to housing and a general price increase, affecting those who live there, especially people non-involved in cross-border trade: "For others [it's] a bit worse because everything also becomes relatively more expensive right away" (ID5). The adaptation of Polish border towns' offerings to the expectations of German customers also results in tailoring them to these tastes, which our respondents comment on, if not critically, then at least with a bit of sarcasm: "Słubice as a city of sex and business, as we sometimes laugh, is a border city oriented purely toward commerce…" (ID2).

As one of our interviewees points out, the processes of debordering and actions taken to facilitate it also affect integration and relationships. We have already mentioned that crossing the border – as part of everyday experience – has ceased to be associated with any additional experiences: "In Warsaw, you cross a river, in Poznań you cross the Warta, and it's just natural here for us" (ID5). However, our conversations also touched on the normalization of Polish-German relations. At least declaratively, in place of old prejudices, respect and trust have emerged: "But over the years, many such stereotypes have fallen, whether about Poles or Germans. Well, it turns out that Poles are not lazy and not just car thieves" (ID7).

While planning the research, we wondered whether a specific meta-consequence of the described changes would be the emergence of an interstice area on the border, thus a transcultural space, in line with the idea of Euroregions and the development of local multiculturalism (Dolińska, Makaro, 2020). I have already pointed to several elements that could constitute its basis: the reinterpretation of the border as a resource (instead of a barrier), the presence of Poles and Germans on both sides of the river, openness and friendliness in mutual behavior, and a cross-border bus promoting closeness and cooperation. The interviews also discussed mixed marriages or educational careers, popularising bilingualism and transcultural competencies. The river appeared in conversations not only as something that divides but also as a joint public space, a place for relaxation, spontaneous meetings, and activities that blur cultural differences: "We can walk across the Neisse, we have there, we call it 'the riviera' […] The village gathers there under the dam, and there we have a nice patch, like sand, and there we have a bonfire and barbecue. Germans come from the other side, come to us

sometimes, talk" (ID9). The dream of cross-border spaces also manifests in a shared symbolic space. Beyond communication about Euroregions, twin city days, or Hanseatic festivals promoting the exchange of experiences and the search for cultural community, in Słubice and Frankfurt, there is also the longstanding activity of artist Michaell Kurzwelly, aimed at creating and solidifying in public consciousness a shared identity and symbolism of the city of Słubfurt (Kurzwelly, Stefański, 2022).

All these elements of the cross-border community – perception and value of the border, transcultural ties and careers, shared spaces, infrastructure, and symbolic spaces – are complemented by the habitualization of cross-border utopia. Part of this cross-border "habitus" is the mentioned natural acts of crossing the border, such as crossing a street, but also experiencing the distinctive cosmopolitanism of these – though small – border urban centers, especially twin cities. From the statements, besides border towns, living in a multicultural environment appears to be associated only with large and open cities. The ability to cross the border freely, experience a culturally-diverse community, and learn various languages in the street thus makes cities such as Gubin-Guben or Frankfurt-Słubice atmospherically similar to metropolises, at least according to the interviewees: "Well, it seems to me that there's greater openness, some sort of tolerance that probably exists in big cities in Poland, and here because of this border. A small town" (ID8). These experiences also fill the residents of their Polish parts with pride for living in an open and European city, which may serve as a model for the EU integration utopia of "old" and "new" Europe simultaneously. This value sets them above the league of smaller peripheral cities relative to their countries' capitals: "It seems to me that out of ten people, seven would say that they are delighted that they live in the open; we call it a twin city in a twin city. Maybe not everyone knows and uses this term, but I suspect that most would have such positive responses that this border exists only on paper" (ID5).

To conclude this section, I would like to present a combined overview of the codes related to debordering processes and identified data (generated by a chatbot I "trained" based on the findings of this section).

Table 1. Debordering – compilation and connections between codes

Category	Description
Causes	Political and legal conditions: Poland's accession to the Schengen Area, territorial changes, the unification of Germany. Infrastructural and economic integration: infrastructure development, acceptance of the euro, technological development, economic dependency, and benefits of economic inequalities. Sociocultural exchange: more contacts and fewer prejudices, cultural similarities, thinking of the border as a resource, language skills.
Contextual factors	Local economy, infrastructure renovations, specific language of connection, activity of local entities, the instrumentalization of cross-border cooperation.
Strategies	Institutional cooperation for regional development, academic and cultural cooperation, association cooperation, taking up work and shopping trips abroad, cross-border medical services, the attitude of openness.

Positioning	Experiences of the border, collegial and familial ties, interests in history and international relations, language proficiency, time for cooperation, hobbies motivating border crossing, transport preferences.
Consequences	Economic and infrastructural development, pressure on the housing market, the integration and normalization of Polish-German relations, increase in openness and trust, the weakening of stereotypes.
Interstices	The emergence of a transcultural space, shared public spaces, mixed marriages, transcultural competencies, symbolic community, the habitualization of transborderness, the metropolitan atmosphere of a multicultural city, pride in living in an open and European twin city.

Source: own elaboration.

What solidifies and highlights differences

Analyzing the conversations in this regard, much like debordering, I was first interested in the reasons for rebordering as perceived by experts. These were seen, among others, within the administration and law. Although borders may be imperceptible, it does not mean that the issue of who is the host and control the crossers is blurred: "Anyone who enters my house can leave legally, right? They can also enter legally on my invitation, for example, if they have a warrant to search my apartment" (ID6). In our interviews, there were plenty of examples that, although international cooperation in monitoring border areas is gaining importance, it still comes with a clear division of responsibility and indications that borders as such should exist, at least for security reasons to ensure the open flow of people and goods.

Legal aspects were also discussed in the frame of difficulties of the initial period, just after joining the Schengen Area: "And when the EU opened up the border, I again had the opportunity to travel around Germany […] and I never forgave them, even though they talked to me after the borders opened, […] they still officially maintained obstacles for Polish workers in Germany" (ID4). Although protective periods have long passed, differences in local law still impact the presence of the border in experience, as we listened to humorous stories about different permissible blood alcohol levels in Poland and Germany, as well as speed limits alike. The impression of the deregulation of common standards is also intensified by subsequent changes in national laws, such as the education reform in Poland, which deviated from the European standards, hindering youth exchanges and the possibility of mixing educational careers for children on both sides of the border: "Now I notice that probably this education project will decline because there was, in my opinion, an unnecessary reform of education in Poland" (ID7).

Debordering limits were also linked to physical and geographical aspects. The river was discussed as a barrier that visualizes political divisions: "If it weren't for the bridge, it would be an insurmountable obstacle, wouldn't it?" (ID8). Reference was also made to the diversity in the anthropogenic landscape visible on both sides of the river: "On the Polish side, there are no built larsens, and there isn't that promenade like on the Frankfurt side" (ID2). The quoted statement, it's worth noting, highlights the importance of joint infrastructural projects that "tame" the border river as a pedestrian area of a common standard but also reflect the impression of discontinuity in terms of tourist attractiveness.

These differences are not a matter of obvious assessment, like the evaluations of architectural differences: "Different architecture, really, the German kind. On our side, I would say it's a bit nicer" (ID8).

Differences in urbanization are also linked to the awareness of the uneven division of cities as a result of World War II, influencing perceptions and shaping the contemporary urban structure in both parts of the twin city: "From the sources of the Neisse upstream, the cities were divided in such a way that on the left bank were the proper cities, for example Gorlitz, have you ever been to Zgorzelec?" (ID4). These disparities overlay, of course, the already mentioned different construction cultures that reinforce the experience of discontinuity in infrastructure, including cycling paths or recreational areas. Interestingly, analyzing such statements, we again realize that the lack of sealing the ground or concreting of the riverbanks on the Polish side does not necessarily have to be something negative but, rather, can evoke pride: "After all, it is a natural route, both sporty and recreational for Słubice and its residents as well as for visiting Germans" (ID2).

I also identified statements related to economic issues and prosperity. One person mentioned differences in interests: "We have a lot of common topics in environmental protection, although unfortunately, this is linked with an energy policy that we have in total contradiction" (ID1). The topic of prices was also raised, reflecting differences in wages and prosperity on both sides of the border, which can be observed daily by visiting stores. There were also voices pointing to asymmetries in treatment and the accompanying emotional reactions: "A German certainly has no problem shopping in Poland, perhaps the other way around, someone who goes and does not know the language and goes to institution X or Y, unfortunately, it might be difficult" (ID5).

This last quote illustrates how economic disparities translate into social and cultural ones. "Ma'am, it's certainly a downgrade economically and culturally for them. Let's not kid ourselves", commented one of our interviewees (ID4) on what the impressions that Germans crossing the border into Poland might be like. However, she immediately added: "We only want one thing from you – respect us"; expressing a sense of not just distinctiveness but developmental inferiority toward Germany and a need for greater recognition. In this context, recurring voices about the lack of knowledge of the Polish language among Germans or acceptance of Polish zlotys in German border stores can be read: "The problem from my side is the language. Both at work and when I go shopping" (ID8). Knowledge of German is felt as an obligation. The lack of this skill complicates handling chores and makes one aware of a hierarchy in twin cities.

Reading the transcripts, I also sought contextual factors that mediate between the identified causes of maintaining the border and its outcomes for the functioning of twin cities. Local experts we interviewed mentioned three factors: political dynamics and media influence, migration policy, and the character of cross-border interpersonal relations. In the first category, there was the current Polish government policy, which translated into discussions concerning the border and relations with Germany, disrupting the positive image of cross-border regions and putting deeper cooperation at risk: "In the last three years, there have been voices in the media that maybe we need to return to the border […] such voices were sporadic, but both on the German and Polish sides" (ID7). The quoted

statement also refers to right-wing sentiments present in the eastern German states, an important dimension of which is concern for security, aversion to migrants, and the idea of open borders: "There you can sometimes read various things related to attacks, persecutions, robberies, and so on" (ID2).

Media play a significant role in shaping the image of the other nation or in modeling the threats associated with migrations, according to the persons we spoke with: "German media… I must say this emphatically, often fall into a kind of hysteria and fuel a negative atmosphere in Germany, sometimes […] for some trivial reasons" (ID1). The same person also points to reminders of German crimes during World War II, which are sometimes used as currency in current disputes in Poland, not always to the benefit of better understanding and an atmosphere of reconciliation: "Yesterday I spoke with a lady from Brandenburg who told me about an exhibition she saw last year in Warsaw, directed against the Germans, about posters, billboards; she says she was just with her children in Warsaw and the kids asked her what it was about, why it looks like this and why Germans are portrayed as perpetrators".

During the period we conducted the interviews, the acceptance of war refugees from Syria by the German federal government provided additional fuel for similar media and political activities, impacting the way the border is experienced. Refugee families were relocated to places including Frankfurt on the Oder, and a reception center was established near Eisenhüttenstadt, just across the Polish border. According to our interviewees, this resulted in changes to the rules for admitting Polish children to German kindergartens, protests by far-right groups in Germany, and a generalized fear of open borders on both sides of the Oder: "It's terrible. There are so many ordinary people, not just some extremists. [It may be related] with the migrants, that it's not only Poles and Ukrainians who are bothersome but a general fear of migrants" (ID8).

An important contextual factor I could identify was the lack of collegial relationships connecting residents of both countries. One of the participants pointed this out: "I think we all really like each other with our colleagues, but these are rather professional relationships […] we always enjoy seeing each other, but we do not have such collegial relations" (ID1). Generalizing this experience, the relationships connecting Poles and Germans are not devoid of sympathy but remain on a professional level and do not overflow to a private dimension. Therefore, these are primary relationships connecting professionals from different countries, clients with sellers, doctors with patients, teachers or caretakers with their pupils, and university staff or tourists with guides, hindering cultural exchange at a deeper, personal level.

Analyzing the transcript, I recognized three strategies for responding to the reconstructed and perceived manifestations of the process of rebordering in the areas under study. The first is distancing or dismissing criticized phenomena that could limit further blurring of borders. An example might be the following statement, referring to a march organized by nationalist groups: "There was a march 3–4 years ago, but those were people brought to Słubice, not Słubice residents. I mean, I wasn't there at the time, because I was at work in a partner city" (ID5). Another person, commenting on an anti-migrant march organized in the same city in 2016, expresses more definite opposition: "From recent times, I only remember one, such a terrible demonstration by people with far-right views, but there

were just a handful of them" (ID8). Based on other and previously quoted statements, one could point to another strategy, which would involve recognizing and better understanding the conditions for differences, especially those that do not manifest through marches, clickbait headlines, or politicians' offhand remarks but through everyday experiences of asymmetry in treatment or different legal cultures. It would not be about leaving differences considered disadvantageous behind and moving on, but, instead, about continuing to engage in further activities for cross-border exchange.

We also asked our interviewees how they perceived the outcomes of the rebordering process for the border region. They mainly think of limitations in the functioning of the twin city, from mundane problems with accessing information about public transportation on both sides of the border through differences in educational systems and the organization of care for children from cross-border families to legal and financial discrepancies creating barriers to the development of cross-border services: "The European Union is the European Union, but each country has its supreme legal acts […] hence problems such as transferring funds for joint bus communication" (ID2). Although these issues were not directly raised in the interviews, one can also point to other consequences of bordering manifestations that challenge the development of the community, city, or region and the transborder identity. Its emergence is limited by diversity in the landscape or city structure as well as feelings of unequal treatment, the lack of sufficient recognition, or more personal relationships connecting Poles and Germans.

When conducting the interviews, this possibility seemed only theoretical; however, some interviewees, provoked by our questions, considered the possibility of such an effect of rebordering processes, which could lead to restoring border controls. Closing borders was utterly rejected, and such a possibility was negatively assessed. Let us repeat the paraphrased statement from the beginning: "We can no longer imagine a situation where we would go back to the times when border services stood and controlled" (ID7). The same interviewer emphasized the value of European integration, not only as an idea but also as a practical benefit of open borders for communities on both sides, while also pointing to the responsibility of decision-makers and those creating the local atmosphere around the borders to maintain this state of affairs: "The freedom and ease that we now have should be respected by all, both Germans and Polish ones, and politicians should be careful not to overdo it with certain ideas" (ID7).

As for the previous section, I would like to list and show the connection between the codes discussed above in the form of a table (generated by the AI from the data presented).

Table 2. Rebordering – compilation and connections between codes

Category	Description
Causes	Administrative and legal: responsibility for guarding borders, differences in local law. Physical and geographical: natural barriers, differences in urbanization and infrastructure, conflicts arising from different interests (e.g., national energy policies). Economic and prosperity: differences in prices and levels of prosperity, deficits in recognition and respect.

Contextual factors	Political dynamics and media influence, migration policy, the nature of cross-border interpersonal relations (residents of twin cities in professional roles), differences in legal and social cultures.
Strategies	Distancing from negative phenomena, distancing from marches and demonstrations, recognizing and better understanding differences, engaging in further cross-border exchange activities.
Positioning	Local leaders and actors in integration processes, individuals professionally engaged in cross-border cooperation, the border as part of professional identity.
Consequences	Limitations in the functioning of the twin city, problems with access to services and information, legal and financial differences creating barriers to development, challenges for transborder identity and community integration. Theoretical possibility of intensifying rebordering processes that could lead to the re-closure of borders, however, decidedly rejected and negatively assessed by border communities.

Source: own elaboration.

The characteristics of interpretations

Debordering appears as a process in which the border is not so much blurred as differently perceived: not as a barrier but as a platform for exchange. The research participants have experienced greater freedom of border crossing as conducive to infrastructural, economic, and sociocultural exchange in twin cities. As a result, prejudices have been weakened, and a sense of a community of interests strengthened, which, over time, can transform into a local cross-border identity, as the authors quoted in the Introduction suggested. Rebordering was described as the persistence of physical barriers, such as rivers or differences in urbanization, which solidify cultural divisions and disparities in wealth or recognition, limiting further integration of the twin cities. Administrative and legal differences in energy interests – as well as media that reinforced panic about migrants, relocated near the border with Poland and resentments present in politicians' statements – also maintained the border barrier.

Although the above summary of the phenomenon may sound like a dispassionate description, it represents an image we capture in our studies. It primarily includes the positive effects of integration and emphasizes the benefits of removing barriers, as well as an appraisal of uniting the cross-border space. Agency in these statements is attributed mainly to political decisions, infrastructure, and social initiatives, so human and intentional agencies are recognized as the main driving force of cross-border processes. Of course, this perspective is easy to explain by the position from which the participants shared their experiences. Local leaders focused on integration successes, which they strive to expand daily. Broader political and economic contexts, such as crises in the European Union, remain mostly beyond the horizon of such discussions. The only exception might be the migration crisis, which appeared in one statement. Similarly, the risks of a model for building a local economic service monoculture primarily aimed at foreigners seem unspoken.

The persistence of the border is framed by a narrative about landscape, cultural, or administrative factors, which seem to undergo a sort of erosion over time, and unwanted differences are polished under the influence of exchange processes, discreetly controlled by new surveillance technologies over the flow of

people and goods. The role of media and politics, which can heat emotions and remind us of the border as a line of division, is recognized. Still, such activity is rather seen in terms of cynical incidents. In the sense I wrote about in the Introduction, the potential closure of borders was not really considered, and its contemplation was treated as a controversial step backward and assessed negatively. This attitude is easy to understand. It is enough to explain it by the role played by the participants once more. Recognizing that they are not only representatives of border communities experiencing the benefits of open borders but also individuals engaged daily in deepening cross-border exchange, they interpret all processes that could hinder or reverse progress in integration as an unwanted threat.

Discussion

We discover similarities by comparing the reconstructed image of debordering and rebordering with studies conducted around the same time in the area. They indicate the positive effects of integration, such as the growth of multiculturalism, European integration, and reconciliation between nations. They also emphasize the importance of joint Polish-German initiatives and projects that strengthen the sense of community and belonging. Analyses of the interviews also confirm the change in the perception of the border, which, at the time of research, appeared more as a symbolic line than an obstacle. Both the statements of the everyday experts we interviewed and the findings from other studies suggest that the Polish-German borderland, especially the twin cities, were a few years ago somewhere halfway between being border cities and cross-border cities – the exchange was still mainly contractual and based on asymmetries (Jańczak, 2020: 5) – as well between the professional roles. An interesting finding from the research that supplements the state of knowledge is the identification of a certain "glocalization" of cross-border processes. Not only mentalities or attitudes but also the material composition or visual image of a place is related to broader networks of symbols that constitute them. Examples of this principle were seen in discussions about migration; the war in Syria and media discussions about borders also translated into their local perception.

According to the adopted perspective of communicative constructivism, the way of thinking on – and emotions linked to – the processes of debordering and rebordering reflect but also influence integration processes at the Polish-German border. Looking at the findings in this aspect, first, excessive emphasis on debordering could lead to ignoring its adverse effects. Experts note the problem of housing price pressure, but there may be more, such as frustration among groups that are less benefiting from integration processes. Idealizing the processes of debordering can also lead to perceiving the process as a general solution to all cross-border problems, which can result in disappointment and resistance to further similar initiatives if such a strategy proves insufficient toward goals requiring other measures. Third, perceiving rebordering as a step back or even questioning what has been achieved can negate the need for any effort or discussion of the political or administrative instruments that could be somehow associated with it. Fourth, in discussions about debordering and rebordering, there needs to be more reflection on the border as a spectacle. Emphasizing asymmetries, such as price differences or cultural perceptions, as I mentioned, is the basis of the current trade exchange. Re-drawing or emphasizing

the border can also strengthen the ritual aspect of its crossing. In other words, highlighting a once-existing border, visible, for example, in the way local tourist spots advertise themselves, enhances the transgressive pleasure. Thus, while the call to eliminate asymmetries in recognition or respect can be justifiable, unconditional debordering may weaken regional trade and cultural exchange.

The analysis of the characteristics of interpreting the processes of bordering is important for yet another reason: it allows us to see to what extent the inability to imagine rebordering, which affected the perceptions of the interviewees and ourselves, was partly responsible for what later happened and stemmed from the dominant way in which we spoke about the process. Why was it hard to imagine re-closing the border in 2018? In narrative terms, this can be explained by optimism associated with debordering; focusing on positive aspects fosters the development and cross-border exchange but marginalizes potential threats. The focus on stability rather than variability, assuming the linear and one-way development of cooperation, was also essential and quite surprising considering the history of the Polish-German border and, in the research context, the processual approach.

The answer to the question about how the above-reconstructed characteristics of interpreting bordering processes paradoxically supported the radical step of closing the borders as a response to the pandemic crisis is more complex. Several explanations dominate the literature: the use of border closure by the Polish authorities as a rhetorical act to exert control over the situation (similarly as it had previously happened in Hungary; Pap, Reményi, 2017); the Polish local government and civil society were too weak against the central authority; poor embedding of Euroregions organizations in the EU legislation; the contractual nature of the cross-border community of twin cities (Jańczak, 2020); the lack of the consideration of regional identities in EU rules for temporary closing of borders within the community (Rogowski, Frąckowiak, 2023). Based on knowledge of the phenomenon of borders, especially the Polish-German one, we can add to this the emphasis on national sovereignty under conditions threatening the population and differences in legal and social cultures, which also translate into inconsistent responses to the crisis.

In what sense was the closing of borders during the pandemic also a narrative failure? If more attention had been given to rebordering in interpretations, ways of storytelling, and studying the Polish-German border, many of the above-mentioned factors would have been easier to predict. Moreover, focusing on the benefits of open borders may have limited the development and implementation of emergency procedures, making it more difficult to respond effectively in crises. Of course, writing these words, I smile at myself, because, judging in hindsight, it is easy to fall into the trap of retrospective rationalization. Nevertheless, adopting debordering as a predominant value – speaking in the language of researchers of values (Marody, 2021: 39–43) – caused a lack of consideration for some other world images and strongly reified the first. As a result of the crisis, when the effectiveness of acting according to the values of open borders was questioned, there was a lack of some intermediate variant to which one could refer, and it became necessary to reach for radical measures and at the same time extreme interpretations of the border.

The above analysis has its limitations. Despite the typological selection of the sample, its size was small, and the area covered by the study covered only some of the Polish-German border. The

study's weakness is undoubtedly relying on data collected only on one side of the border (plans were different, but the pandemic verified the possibility of conducting comparative studies according to prior assumptions). Therefore, findings should be taken cautiously, somewhat applicable to the Polish part of the borderland, especially around Słubice and Gubin. These imperfections also suggest future research directions worth conducting, with more emphasis on rebordering stories, on larger samples and areas. It would also be worth supplementing research with an analysis of global factors that frame local interpretations of debordering and rebordering processes, also in the context of the direct reference to the role of media as appeared in the interviews.

Research conducted in this spirit is worth continuing for three main reasons. Times of border crises into which – probably for good – we have entered since the beginning of the second decade also prove to be a time of changes in values associated with them. During this period, narratives and their study gained importance, somewhat pushed to the background in recent years in global sociology due to the popularizing studies of borders from the perspective of social practice theory (the process has been less evident in Polish sociology, where the Wrocław center has consistently developed the study of border narratives; see, i.e., Opiłowska et al., 2022). As I argued, it is worth studying narratives even more today, emphasizing rebordering and nuancing its interpretations. This way, it will be possible to manage such stories better so that – despite crises – the idea of an open Polish-German border can continue to develop.

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"We expect a decision tomorrow […] from Germany to tighten controls on the borders with all of Germany's neighbors, including, of course, Poland, and at all border crossings, effectively suspending the Schengen zone on a large scale […] I do not doubt that it is Germany's internal political situation that is driving the tightening of these measures, not our policy on illegal migration at our borders." – The statement by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk regarding the anticipated reinforcement of controls on the German borders since September 11, 2024, so just before this paper was submitted for publication after reviews (quoted from the Polish Press Agency).

Acknowledgements

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Najdłuższa wiosna w historii. Sposoby interpretowania przemian na granicy polsko-niemieckiej w przeddzień jej zamknięcia

Abstrakt: Artykuł dotyczy rozmywania i odtwarzania granicy polsko-niemieckiej, zwłaszcza sposobów, w jakie tak zwani eksperci codzienności interpretowali te procesy w 2018 roku. Badania realizowano w rejonie Słubic i Gubina (oraz na przyległych obszarach wiejskich) z użyciem indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych, analiza danych inspirowana była zaś teorią ugruntowaną. Zdaniem osób badanych różnice kulturowe, prawne i ekonomiczne w sposób istotny określały doświadczenia i interakcje na pograniczu, mimo osłabienia fizycznych granic. Analiza sposobów interpretowania procesów deborderingu i reborderingu umożliwia także lepsze zrozumienie charakterystyk narracji, które kształtowały myślenie o przeobrażeniach danego regionu w badanym okresie oraz ich znaczenia dla procesów integracji i wyłaniania się obszarów transgranicznych. W dyskusji autor argumentuje za przeorientowaniem współczesnych badań nad pograniczem polsko-niemieckim, kładąc nacisk na studiowanie procesu odtwarzania się granicy oraz towarzyszących mu narracji i podkreślając, w jaki sposób owe interpretacje współkształtować mogą przebieg przyszłych zdarzeń, jak to się stało w przypadku zamknięcia granic na skutek pandemii COVID-19.

Słowa kluczowe: bordering, współpraca polsko-niemiecka, obszary transgraniczne, przemiany społeczno-przestrzenne, COVID-19