

Polish Borderlands in the Process of Change

The international conference “Polish Borderlands in the Process of Change—Part II” took place at the Castle of Książ in May 2010. The conference—alike its first edition in 2008—was organised by the European Centre of the Castle of Książ in Lower Silesia region, the Institute of Sociology of the Wrocław University and the Wałbrzych Higher School of Management and Enterprise. The conference gathered the contributors from Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia and Poland (representation of many different regions and borderlands). As an outcome of this conference will be the book released by the end of 2010. Here, I would underline the subjects that either kept coming back in several papers or evoked the liveliest debate.

As we have been observing a process of differentiation of the nature of the Polish borderlands since 2004, it was reasonable to ask about their characteristics. The Polish-German transborder area is usually the one to be treated as the most advanced for the integration and mutual cooperation. On the other hand, it has its own problems which—being different from these in the east of Poland—makes it impossible to set an example of a model. Thus a preliminary hypothesis formulated in this context by Zbigniew Kurcz was that it is the southern borderlands that seem to develop rather in a sustainable, i.e. both-sided, and ‘natural’ way. Furthermore, as it was pointed out by Hanna Bojar, among the inhabitants of the town of Cieszyn one can observe a tendency to perceive the European Union as a continuation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which means that some of the people there are used to being a part of a bigger political entity. On the other hand, there are political and infrastructural drawbacks concerning the transborder cooperation in the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian borderlands (Tadeusz Popławski). Although the question of the distinction between the Polish eastern and western borderlands is commonly known and agreed upon, there were also a few signals that one cannot exclude some phenomena that may undermine this consent in the future.

One of the issues presented and then upheld in the discussion was the position that ‘multiculturalism’ occupies in peoples’ minds and various institutions’ ideological manifestoes (Bożena Domagała). Some of the contributors to the conference pointed the fact that we are currently facing a kind of fashion or even obligation to refer to this notion in official documents, e.g. promoting a town or a region, while, as it was stated by Andrzej Sadowski, there are actually hardly any regions in Europe that truly deserve this attribute.

Another question that attracted attention were ethnic/national minorities. As it was showed by Andrzej Nikitorowicz, in the south of the region of Podlasie (eastern Poland) one has to do with an attempt to establish the socio-cultural frames in which the Belarusian and Ukrainian minorities might function, with some signs of rivalry between them as an element of this coexistence. The Ruthenians' contemporary position was cast light upon by Stanisław Sorys who mentioned that they very often are afraid to disclose their true identity to the outer world. In the Silesian case, outlined by Urszula Swadźba, it is noteworthy that the German 'attributes' (e.g. citizenship or the language at one's disposal) tend to be perceived as the elements decreasing the individual's socio-cultural capital.

The peculiarity of regions was another theme cluster. Krzysztof Malicki, for example, quoted the results of his research on the regional differentiation of the memory among the youth. One of the plots that evoked a debate concerned the level of anti-Ukrainian attitudes: is it in the borderland that these sentiments are the strongest and they recede as one moves off this area? The empirical data concerning the city of Szczecin presented by Paweł Nowak may at some points be relevant to the analysis of the local job market, and consequently—to the problem of emigration. The region of Lubuskie, on the other hand, may be treated as a starting point for a discussion on the impact the border has on the local communities' lives. The survey results quoted by Krzysztof Lisowski showed that the inhabitants of this region have the highest level of European consciousness. By means of the Czech borderland regions one was able to learn also about the lifestyle of the Gypsy as well as Vietnamese minorities against the background of the indigenous people there (Petr Balek, Frantisek Zich). The Vietnamese minority seems to have totally undertaken the mercantile activities in the Czech-Polish borderland.

A foreigners' look—which is usually the one to broaden the perspective—was present in some others lectures, too. There was a Russian voice on the Polish-Lithuanian relations in the north-east of Poland. Referring to some acts of vandalism and verbal aggression in Sejny and its vicinity, Swietłana Czerwonnaja pointed at some considerable discrepancy between the law regulations and everyday life there. In another paper the Czech-Polish borderland was set against the remaining Czech borderlands to show the spheres of life in which the impact of the border is noticeable by the local communities (Zich). There was also a German perspective as for the present and future determinants of the cooperation between Görlitz and Zgorzelec presented (Matthias T. Vogt). The same borderland was discussed by Bernadette Jonda who tried to show the changes taking place in the north-eastern outskirts of Germany due to the Polish settlement there. She also pointed at the growing position of Szczecin among the Germans from the nearby provinces who treat this city as a shopping or cultural centre. At the same time it was signalled that conducting the research in the non-Polish part of the borderland by a Pole is a challenge difficult to be met. It is mostly about the ways to make the local authorities cooperate with the researchers or at least not disturb them. There definitely is a long way to go with respect to this issue, but this point was brought up at the conference, too.

This local perspective mentioned above—which was sometimes called ‘bottom-up’ integration—was also present in the paper by Jerzy Kaczmarek who referred to the art as a means of transborder activity. He mentioned the case of Słubice and Frankfurt where a virtual transborder art town ‘Slubfurt’ had been created. The lecturer argued that it is also the art that may encourage reflections on the Polish-German neighbourhood in the context of borderland. Thus, apart from the influence exerted by the state’s position in Europe or other outward factors, there are a couple of circumstances generated by the very people, which seems to be of significant importance for the social scientists.

At the same time one needs to remember about certain limitations here, one of which are the relations between the scientists and local authorities. They, as it was pointed out by Jerzy Tutaj, are not always even interested in the conferences they have been invited to.

There were also some points for the future put forward. According to Andrzej Michalak, the question of borderland has basically run out of steam, so it should be finally closed down. This suggestion unfortunately was not drawn upon sufficiently by its author, yet it was rejected in the subsequent discussions arguing that even the conference itself was a proof of how much is still ahead. Next, as it was proposed by Andrzej Sadowski, a valuable analysis of the Polish eastern and western borderlands inevitably demand a methodological discussion. It should result in finding out reliable tools that would enable the researchers to juxtapose both types of the Polish borderlands. With reference to the question of civilisations presented by Zdzisław Zagórski, it was put forward by Sadowski to remember about that kind of divisions in the future debates on borderlands.

In the panel discussion at the end of the conference, the most interesting were the uncertainties and forecast for the future. For example, Matthias T. Vogt posed an important question what will the cooperation in the German-Polish borderland look like in a few years, when the European financial support will be significantly reduced? He also pointed out that Europe does not exist on the legal level yet, which is an obstacle for some of the transborder activities that are regulated according to the different law systems of both states. The new problem areas are going to emerge, for example, when in 2011 Germany will lift the restrictions for its labour market, pointed Andrzej Sakson. Quite a new situation is going to appear when the economic situations in Poland and Germany get more or less equalised. It will definitely take some time before it happens, but even now one may ask if this borderland will then become a place of equilibrium with neither partner being left with a feeling of inferiority. On the other hand, it is easy to predict the type of activity in the eastern borderlands then.

It should be stressed that although many papers dealt with the questions that had been discussed more than once, the conference revealed that their popularity is not decreasing.