

## URBAN AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY

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### Narrating Divided Cities: The Theoretical and Methodological Framework

*Abstract:* The notion of narratives can be regarded as a significant tool to map the complex means by which social relations are organized, made meaningful, and maintained (Somers, 1994). On the borders of Europe, social relations are often constructed across national dividing lines. Especially now, given the social consequences of COVID-19, which include re-bordering processes in Europe, the question of borders and bordering is in the spotlight. Against this backdrop, this article elaborates on the concept of narratives, which may be crucial for understanding the complex processes of deconstructing and reconstructing state borders and social boundaries. By focusing on three types of narratives—individual, public, and spatial—we apply the narrative approach to exploring divided cities and propose an analytical model that could contribute to an understanding of the processes occurring in border cities and could thus broaden the field of studies on borders and space.

*Keywords:* narratives, space, border, social relations, divided cities

#### Introduction

In the last decades the narrative approach has gained increased significance in the social sciences. However, its concepts still require clarification. There are no “self-evident categories on which to focus as there are with content-based thematic approaches, or with analyses of specific elements of language” (Squire et al. 2013).

The notion of a “narrative” has spread in various disciplines (Czarniawska 2010: 59). It has acquired many meanings and has been used by researchers as a tool to analyze a wide range of social issues (Esin et al. 2013). Barthes emphasizes that narratives can be found everywhere: “narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama [...], comedy, pantomime, paintings [...], stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies” (Barthes 1975).

Starting from the narrative approach as a theoretical background, our article focuses on divided cities in Europe as an empirical illustration. They represent a special kind of a space that is usually located “in-between”: between two or more national states, ethnic

groups, or cultures. Mostly, they refer to urban structures that developed over a long period of time as one functional organism but that were divided by a national border following political decisions at a historic moment. In the academic debate, other terms, such as “border towns/cities” or “twin cities,” are used simultaneously to define these particular urban bodies (Makaro 2020). Joenniemi and Jańczak (2017: 423) emphasize the double understanding of town twinning: first of all, twinning is about

their common historical origins and current mutual relations, but also about their potential for future cooperation. And secondly, cases are brought to the fore that employ a creative approach in cultivating an identity transcending state borders, thereby entering the area of international relations in general. They do so by establishing formal relations of cooperation under various forms of twinning programs, projects and initiatives.

Since the 1990s divided cities have increasingly attracted the interest of scholars in border areas. Such interest is due to the political and social changes that have occurred in their countries after the end of the Cold War, and also to integration within the European Union. It is worth noting that these cities have been called “laboratories of European integration” (Opiłowska and Roose 2015): “They overcame a history of divisions and developed urban life on bi-cultural grounds and under European labels. They tested the limitations of legal equalization and shaped new institutional forms” (Schultz et al. 2002: 66).

However, in considering divided cities, account should be made of the diversity of their characteristics resulting from, among other matters, how the border was established, the area’s previous border-related experience, and the rules of cross-border travel. Socio-cultural, economical, and infrastructural similarities and differences should also be addressed (cf. Zenderowski and Brzezińska 2014: 168–172), as well as ongoing processes and the development of cooperation in various contexts. On the other hand, divided cities generally also have common features: first, the fact of being one city in the past; second, having existed for some time in different national and political realities, often in mutual isolation and distance; and third, coming to such a stage in their development where the divided parts turn toward each other and accept each other as an important element of daily life (Makaro 2020: 223). Such similarities make it possible to treat divided cities as a relatively consistent analytical category and thus cases become comparable. In a divided city not only different legal systems, political orders, citizens, languages, and traditions meet, but also various stories and their interpretations.

Especially at present, divided cities are challenged by regulations and restrictions introduced in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Opiłowska 2021; Wille and Kanesu 2020). In this respect, it should be noted that recent developments in border studies have indicated a transition from seeing the border as a separating line between two sovereign “containers” to analyzing borders as complex entities, or “borderscapes” (Brambilla 2015), which are socially constructed and subject to changing processes. Hence, divided cities are spaces created by the political authorities of various states, but also by local authorities and by social actors through their activities, practices, and narratives across national borders. Against this background, boundaries may still provide a significant point of reference for narratives and identity. Newman and Paasi (2017: 196) argue that in the study of state boundaries, it is important to know whose “plots” or “turfs” dominate these identity

narratives, what they exclude or include, and how representations of “us” and “them” are produced and reproduced in various social practices, such as the media, education, and so forth. The spatial proximity of parts of a city produces a mutual interdependence which manifests itself in functional and normative dimensions (Jańczak 2018). In this context, it is interesting to see how such an interdependence is reflected in narratives. Understanding boundaries as “a specific type of narrative” will substantially contribute to broadening the field of border studies (Newman and Paasi 2017: 197).

Our aim in this article is to scrutinize how the concept of narratives is elaborated in social studies and further to exemplify how it can be applied to divided cities. We argue that this approach could be crucial for understanding the complex process of deconstructing and reconstructing borders and boundaries, which can be observed now in re-bordering processes in Europe. It should be noted that the notions of “border” and “boundary” are used here interchangeably but with reference to their slightly different connotations. Whereas the former refers to national dividing lines between sovereign states, the latter indicates the socially constructed difference between various ethnic groups (Jenkins 2015).

In the first section of the article we discuss the development of the narrative approach in social studies. In the following part we highlight three types of narratives: individual, public, and spatial. Subsequently, we apply the narrative approach to exploring divided cities and propose an analytical model. We conclude with a summary of our ideas and outline the added value of the narrative approach in border studies.

### The Theoretical Framework

Like many other popular categories, “narrative” is polysemic in nature, perhaps due to the multitude of disciplines in which it is used. Therefore, the problem of homonymy should be dealt with, that is, the problem of different scopes of significance concealed beneath the same *definiendum*, which is exacerbated by the practice of using a term without explaining it. One goal of this section is to provide a review of narrative studies in the context of the social sciences as well as to shed light on approaches that might be helpful in analyzing the social reality of divided cities.

In scholarship, two opposing approaches to a narrative have become established: one is rooted in structuralism, and the other in phenomenology (Kulas 2014). Whereas the first focuses on the narrative material itself, searching for the hidden structures that govern it but not analyzing the intentions of the author or the circumstances in which the text was created (Czarniawska 2004: 2), the other focuses on the subject’s perspective, that is, how he or she understands, interprets, and at the same time constructs social reality (Kulas 2014: 116–118). For our considerations, the second approach is more useful.

#### *A narrative as a structure*

A narrative is a meaningful structure which is created by relating (organizing, connecting, putting together) events and activities to each other, which gives them intelligibility, holistic meaning, and coherence (cf. Czarniawska 2010: 69; Rosner 2006: 7, 27). In this structure,

meaningful connections are particularly exposed due to the assigned temporality, causality, or composition (Goodsell 2005: 3). There is a departure from time in the chronological sense toward time filled with meaningful events. As Czarniawska argues (2010: 61), “complete stories (...) begin to emerge, as the actors and the observers connect separate events and actions into a plot leading to a point. In doing so, they replace chronological time with kairoitic time (that is, time punctuated by meaningful events).” Nevertheless, a narrative is a temporal structure (Rosner 2006: 7) in which a sequence of incidents is situated and which possesses—it is usually assumed—a beginning and end.

A narrative cannot exist without a narrator—a subject who will connect all the separate elements into a whole; without a narrator, a narrative would be only a sequence of events (Rosner 2006: 51).

### *The contents of a narrative*

Taking into consideration the content of a narrative, two stances can be identified. The first narrows the scope of a narrative to actions and events (cf. Czarniawska 2010; van Dijk 1975). In the second, broader perspective, a narrative could also be filled with spiritual experiences, mental states, worldviews, ideas, dreams, and phantasms (Kulas 2014: 114). It allows *qualia*, that is, sensual experience, to be taken into account (Fischer-Nebmaier 2015: 25). Furthermore, according to Chase (2018: 547) narratives can be categorized by the duration of the sequence of events they present—from short topical stories about particular events to entire life stories.

Some scholars assume that narration has a closed and defined form. Labov and Waletzky ([1967] 1997: 27–37; Franzosi 1998: 522) have distinguished the following parts: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda. Nevertheless, the expectation that a narrative will adopt a closed form can be treated as one of the false assumptions that have appeared in connection with narration. Such a requirement has been transferred straight from literary narratives, applying measures from this one order to all narratives (Lamarque 2004: 393, 397, 402–406). The stories that can be encountered in everyday life, which are not evoked by scholars, are usually fragmented in nature (Lamarque 2004: 403).

### *The “how” of a narrative: the context, the producers, and the recipients*

Apart from the “what” of a narrative, the aspect of “how” also remains important, as it refers more directly to narrative practice. Generally, the text of a narrative can be treated as situated on the “intersection of content and context” (Goodsell 2005: 6). Therefore, aspects such as who speaks to whom are important, while taking into account the situational context as well, with the assumption that the same events can be narrated in different ways. The two subjects—the storytellers and the audience—are socially situated with reference to cultural, political, and social spaces. While telling or receiving a narrative, a person draws on personal and cultural resources (Esin et al. 2013: 205). Narratives, therefore, should be regarded as social facts that “are produced through culture, justified through culture, expressed socially, and acted upon narrators and others” (Goodsell 2005: 3). It should

be emphasized that absence as well—the silent voices that have never been made real as narratives—should be taken into consideration.

### **Types of Narratives in a Divided City**

As Somers argues (1994: 618–619), narrativity is a social process embedded in four inter-related dimensions of narratives—individual, public, conceptual, and meta narratives. By exploring narratives, it is possible to “map the complex and contradictory means by which social relations are organized, made meaningful and maintained” (Somers 1994: 607). The following section focuses on urban narratives to scrutinize the three dimensions of narratives—individual, public, and spatial—that are crucial for analyzing divided cities.

#### *Public narratives*

Public narratives are those “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions” (Somers 1994: 619). They function on different scales—they may be local, regional, national, or global. Moreover, public narratives are not neutral but shape and are shaped “by particular understandings of the world which tend to prioritize one meaning over another” (Phibbs 2008) and are used for different reasons. Thus, narratives do political work. Stories are created for particular recipients in order to convince and persuade them, and also sometimes to mislead them (Riessman 2008: 8–9). Public narratives are closely associated with politics.

In the narrative communication process politicians assert that they are doing their job well; journalists claim a good understanding of events by interpreting the underlying “narrative”; and citizens have to understand the comprehensive stories and then internalize or reject them (cf. Esin et al. 2013: 3). However, in contrast to individuals, public narrators are speaking on behalf of many institutions—their organization, government, state, or political party. Consequently, a speaker or writer of a story “may be a vehicle for multiple ‘voices’” (Shenhav 2015: 49).

They “circulate throughout politics and culture in varying degrees, importance, and dominance” (Ackleson, 2001: 131). Moreover, they provide information on how policy, power, territoriality, and collective identity are framed by revealing the prevailing power-embedded hegemonic narratives and counter narratives (Ackleson 2001: 131). Thus, political narratives as highlighted by Schubert (2010) have four functions: personalizing (by presenting the politician as an individual), integrating (by recalling the common achievements or values of a group represented by the narrator), exemplifying (by dealing with a single individual as a strategy to strengthen the argumentation), and polarizing (by creating enemies or a counter narrative to one’s own story).

The success of public narrators depends on whether the narratives overlap with the social imaginaries of a wide public (Schumacher 2015). By analyzing storytelling in politics, Poletta (2008: 27) puts the power of narratives in the foreground, because politicians can persuade an audience by paying attention to the cultural norms that make some people’s stories more believable than others. When members of an audience immerse

themselves in a story told by a public actor, they strive to experience the events and emotions of the protagonists. Thus such an immersion may lead to lasting changes of opinions, as intended by the storytellers.

In applying the narrative concept to the urban space, it may be noted that in a city there are many speakers. The elites construct their stories through public media, social media, and speeches delivered on the occasion of holidays, state ceremonies, and historical anniversaries. Their narratives may also take “the form of an urban report or plan (...) and are built with objectified data: statistics and quantitative studies to show urban change” (Michałowska 2014: 55).

Moreover, as Lam-Knott argues (2020: 94), narratives can be used as a tool “to reconfigure vernacular perceptions of the meanings attached to urban space, and to transform urban space into sites of political critique toward government influence over the city.” Thus, social activists can challenge the government discourse by disseminating their story and emphasizing the city as a lived space where various narratives clash and narrative battles between mainstream and marginalized stories take place.

Lastly, it should be stressed that public narratives are dynamic, constantly changing, and dependent on many variables—the producers, their positioning, the political situation, European and global events, and social changes. In the case of divided cities, narratives are shaped by the socio-cultural context of two state systems and two societies that influence the narrative and at the same time provide resources for storytelling.

### *Spatial narratives*

When defined from the socio-spatial perspective, a city is first considered as a socio-spatial structure, reproduced in the course of everyday social practices. Second, the city space is co-created by representations of space that are ready-made schemes interpreting the urban space. Additionally, the inhabitants of cities often receive competing interpretations of the city from public and commercial institutions. Third, the re-creation and transformation of the urban space is also influenced by emotions or emotive structures, created by social practices, and shaped by representations of space conveyed in the form of a narrative on space, its sources and topics, which constitute part of the “common knowledge of the city” (Smagacz-Poziemska 2015: 35–36).

With reference to the relations between narratives and space, three areas for considering the issue can be defined (Dolińska et al. 2020: 247–248). The first is the role of a narrative in constructing space through narrating it, as Fischer-Nebmaier writes (2015: 33). Therefore, narratives constitute a reservoir of knowledge on space but also on ways of constructing space by introducing certain notions, events, and characters (Opiłowska 2019: 51). Narratives may also contain references to practices or activities maintained in the space. Second, space is an auditory in which narratives can be heard and at the same time a stage for non-verbal or non-word-centered activities undertaken on stage, that is, performances or artistic interventions (Michałowska 2014), which can be treated as a particular type of a narrative. Furthermore, such collective activities as demonstrations, marches, processions, pageants, or actions may contain narrative content (cf. Lam-Knott 2020) or be inscribed in particular ways of narrating a city. Third, the material effects

of narrative practices (e.g., monuments, posters) are placed in space, and thus space becomes a carrier of a narrative. By analyzing what is happening, what can be heard in the space, or the space's objects in connection with recorded narratives, we encounter a narrative polyphony—a consonance which is not necessarily harmonious (Michałowska 2014: 48), as space is not only constructed through narratives but also appropriated by many competing actors, and the object of the competition in this game is socio-spatial domination. Moreover, a temporal perspective should be taken into account along with the processes of layering, obscuring, obliterating, re-reading, and refreshing meanings.

### *Individual narratives*

In narrating the (lack of) presence of the border in their everyday life, the inhabitants of divided cities provide a varied representation of their individual biographical experiences. Each time, the narrative expresses the relation between individuals and the social world, while at the same time constructing and justifying this world. The essence of individual narratives is individual experience, while they simultaneously play a crucial role in the process of creating the stories themselves. Therefore, experiencing reality, while participating in specific cultural patterns, is “primary.” It constitutes a canvas for subsequent activities undertaken by the narrating subject in order to build a narrative, as well as to recreate one—depending on the passage of time, which allows past experience to be grasped in varying degree (Wasilewski 2012: 72–74). This justifies the role played by memory in individual narratives (what is remembered, how, and why?) and the role played by interpretation, which together allow the individual structure of a tale to be created.

The coherence of the narrated tales and the experience conveyed through them are reflectively connected with the various activities and increasingly varied conditions in which the tales are created (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 163). Consequently, narrative practice should include storytelling activities, the resources used to construct stories (all the experiences that might reasonably be included in personal stories, as well as locally available and understandable discourses), and the conditions shaping a narrative (the narrative framework) (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 164–165). These rules pertain to the intentions and expectations of the participants of narrative practices (Lamarque 2004: 400–401).

What should be emphasized is the variety of narrative forms. These may include not only the “ready-made text” but also “an act of story-telling” (Lamarque 2004: 394–395). A narrative may be expressed not only in a linguistic process, but also through the use of various different tools enabling storytelling (Michałowska 2014: 50; Wasilewski 2012: 74). The growing number of opportunities and ways of describing and ordering one's own experience (both pre-existing stories and those evoked by the researcher) justify broadening the scope in research on individual narratives.

Just as the methods of creating a narrative vary, the content is also diverse. Narratives include comprehensive “life stories” as well as “fragmentary” (topic-related) autobiographies constructed around a plot of particular importance for the narrator—an aspect of his or her own life. Biographies (both entire and topic-related about some significant aspect of life), in which a narrator is not a protagonist in his or her own story should also be included here (Chase 2018: 547; Helling 1990: 17–18; Kulas 2014: 123–124). Narratives, however,



do not have to be biographical—they can be “about something,” as is evidenced by personal narratives about a city, in which biographical elements undoubtedly find a proper place for themselves. As Znaniecki wrote, people who consider themselves inhabitants of a city are “not only bodies but also experiencing and active subjects, and in this sense it is not they who are in the city but—if it may be expressed thus—the city is in the sphere of their shared experience and activities; they create it as a truly complex social structure” (Znaniecki and Ziólkowski 1984: 35).

Storytelling, however, is not only an element of creating places and defining ways of perceiving the urban space but also has pre-configurative potential for determining how cities are imagined (Lam-Knott 2020: 95).

### **Applying the Narrative Approach to Divided Cities**

By applying the narrative approach to divided cities, the complexity of the urban space and border construction may be revealed. Moreover, we can explore what meanings the elites and communities attribute to the border and the urban landscape, how they refer to their own and the neighboring city, which stories are told and from which stance, as well as how the narratives are represented in the urban fabric. The following section aims at developing an analytical model to investigate narratives in divided cities. However, taking into consideration the complexity of the narrative approach and the ambiguity and vagueness of its definition, as well as the perpetual change of narratives, we do not claim to cover narratives in divided cities in their entirety. Nevertheless, the model could be a useful tool to capture a certain section of the urban situation at a certain moment and to demonstrate key factors influencing storytelling, from the sociological point of view, which assumes suiting the mode of assessment to the kind of narrative (Lamarque 2004: 400).

For sociologists, it is important to grasp narratives in their social context and to focus more on the process of their creation (both in a narrative’s interactional dimension and taking into account the social positioning of different categories of narrators and recipients) than on the structure of a narrative as a closed text. The particular narratives we find (including unfinished, fragmentary ones) will allow us to reconstruct the repertoire of stories—the collective knowledge—about the divided city. We do not expect to find one cohesive narrative. In accordance with an approach that can be called a “composite strategy,” the purpose is rather to grasp “the non-linear combination of often divergent or contrasting parts” (Pollastri et al. 2017: 4374–4375).

Within the types of narratives distinguished, it is possible to analyze such elements as narrators, recipients, and content. In individual and public narratives, structure may be considered as well (although it is not crucial for the adopted perspective), whereas in spatial narratives, carriers should be considered.

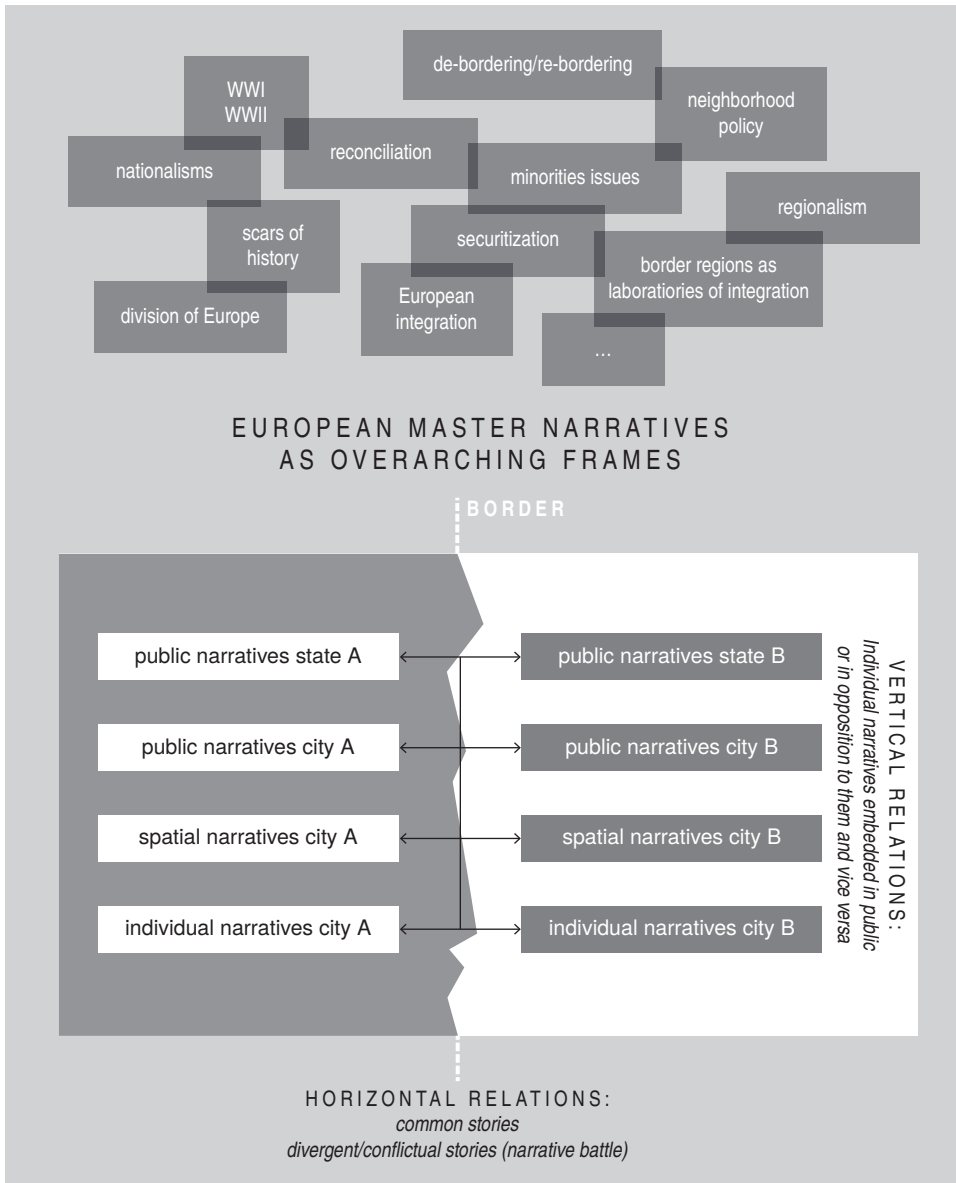
#### *Public narratives in divided cities*

As highlighted in the previous section, public narratives are produced by public actors such as politicians and the elites in order to gain acceptance and legitimacy for their



Figure 1

**Narratives in divided cities, source: authors' compilation**



actions, to convince their audience to support their decisions, or generally to influence public opinion. In divided cities the situation is more complex. Namely, public narratives could be addressed not only to the inhabitants of the particular city A but also to the elites and citizens of city B. In these conditions, while analyzing narratives in divided cities we should include the stories produced on both sides. We will elaborate on the main elements of the above model of narrative inquiry (cf. [Figure 1](#)).

### *Narrators*

The central role in producing public stories in divided cities is played by local politicians, actors of Euroregions, social activists, city planners, tour guides, historians, and other representatives of the elites. Where should we search for their narratives? The following sources are to be taken into consideration: public speeches, official policy documents (such as city development strategies), official statements by policymakers and other interest groups, administrative rules, city guides, chronicles, official city websites, social media entries, and other documents written by the elites. Moreover, apart from local narrators, the state and European or global actors can also construct stories impacting local narrators and recipients. Hence, the overarching national or supranational narratives often provide a framework or reference point for local storytellers. As mentioned in the previous section, the positioning, agency, and stance of a speaker and the participation framework have to be investigated.

### *Recipients*

In regard to recipients, it is worth noting that public narratives are usually addressed to a particular audience. In the case of divided cities, it could be the citizens of city A or B, the citizens of both cities, particular interest groups such as NGOs, business clubs, cultural institutions, the media, youth, or even stakeholders at the national and European level (an uploading process). Recipients may internalize the narratives told by public agents, especially when they feel affected by them because the stories refer to their common experience or cultural background. However, sometimes “public ‘narratives’ are treated with suspicion, as obfuscators of the ‘realities’ they gloss and hide” (Esin et al. 2013: 3). When a narrative is directed to an audience on both sides of a border, intercultural competence is required from the narrators. Therefore, in order to be effective, storytellers have to consider the cultural differences, values, and norms of both communities, their historical experience, and cultural sensitivity.

### *Content*

The content of public narratives usually provides information about policies, decisions, activities, and the important projects of stakeholders who try to gain public support for their actions and visions. Thus, they refer to selected historical or current events. In divided cities, where a border constitutes an important reference point for communities and public actors, it is not surprising that the border might become a central element of narratives. For researchers, it could be crucial to explore how a border is narrated by public narrators, that is, as a barrier, a bridge, or a resource, or is there silence on the subject? Do they include the other part of the city in their stories or not? How do they frame the border and the neighboring communities—as “us” or “them”? What stories are (not) told? Are the public narratives of both city parts convergent or divergent, or is there a “narrative battle” (Michałowska 2014) to be found?

Furthermore, public narratives reach for stories at the national or European level. In the first case, national narratives may be used by political actors to construct national unity and identity. However, it is to be noted that in the case of divided cities narrative conflicts between state A and state B may influence local storytelling. However, national narratives may

also be in opposition to local ones, which might take more account of the experience and values of local communities. By considering the European master narratives as overarching frames and the fact that divided cities in Europe are often policy takers and beneficiaries of funding programs such as Interreg, it can be argued that European/EU narratives also influence local public stories. And in fact, topoi such as microcosms/laboratories of European integration (Opiłowska and Roose 2015), de-bordering, and reconciliation dominated the public narratives of Europe and of borderlands in the years after the Second World War and the fall of communism and were an important normative driver of cross-border cooperation. Nevertheless, it has been observed in the last decade that these border-related narratives have slowly been turning into narratives of securitization and re-bordering, as promoted by some national states or international organizations.

### *Spatial narratives in divided cities*

As was previously established, in considering urban space from the narrative perspective it is worthwhile to include representations of space, that is, narratives in which people speak or write about the city—narratives as practices in the urban space and narratives materialized in space.

### *Actors*

The creators and recipients of spatial narratives belong to both orders—the public one and the individual one—which places them in macro and micro-social domains respectively. Those who represent an intermediate sphere—the meso level—complete the categorization. The triad of creators and recipients corresponds with the typology of neighborhoods in divided cities proposed by Kaczmarek (2011: 141). The neighborhood on a macro level can be reduced to the top-down political and economic activities initiated at the state, regional, or local level, though a divergence of particular policies is not excluded (Dolińska et al. 2018: 103). On the meso level, the activities of organizations, associations, and societies are considered, and on the lowest—micro—level, individual, bottom-up activities are considered. The above categorization is justified by the assumption that particular actors not only act but also report; they narrate their own practices in the city and toward the city (those practices which might leave more or less permanent changes in the space). Sometimes the authors of initiatives or the actors of activities are difficult to identify or to categorize clearly. A special role might be ascribed to the subjects who influence the urban space the most: local authorities, architects, urban planners, building contractors, local entrepreneurs, and in certain cases, artists (especially in small towns). At the same time, however, it should be considered to what degree they are dependent on the central authorities and to what extent they take into account the other city and its inhabitants. Moreover, the role of urban movements and bottom-up initiatives is currently growing, and these influence the shape of the urban space.

### *Content*

A key issue in considering spatial narratives in divided cities is what references to the borders they include: is the division based on state borders or the narrative about the twin

city predominant? Both distinctive orders find their expression in the physical sphere. A state border, independently of its permeability, is manifested at the least by border posts, boards, and state symbols. Similarly, it is possible to find in the urban space manifestations of trans-borderness (common elements for A and B, such as a common city brand, cf. [Figure 1](#)) and thinking about the cross-border community (cf. [Opiłowska 2017](#)). Furthermore, language is an important element (the monolingualism or bilingualism of A and B). It is also worth considering the physical aspects of cities: their spatial layout (which enables or prevents cross-border practices), the degree of the border area's development, the form of the border (a river, street, or empty field), and the number of crossing points.

#### *The carriers of a narrative*

The narratives of particular actors contain representations of urban space. Therefore, how the space is narrated is important. Its frame is reflected, for instance, in maps created by A and B in cooperation or independently, and depicting one or two cities. It is worth referring to the effects of practices present in space or the narratives themselves in space as carriers. They may become part of the informational layout of the city. This layout is constructed ([Wallis 1977](#)) of stable elements (i.e., memorial boards, signboards, including commercial ones, signs, names, inscriptions, and murals) and more fugitive ones (ads, slogans, stickers, graffiti, banners, posters—the latter may be presented only momentarily *in situ* by people engaging in performative actions). The importance of events and heroes is evidenced by the names chosen for public areas and the ranking is anchored in local, regional, and/or state history. Narratives may also be found beyond the strict informational layout—in memorial places, monuments, artistic installations, exhibitions, educational or thematic paths, open air museums, and so forth. In the urban landscape it is possible to differentiate many layers and some of them may be worn, obliterated, or rendered anachronistic.

#### *Individual narratives in divided cities*

The positioning of individual narratives in [Figure 1](#) above does not suggest that the position of their authors in the process of producing stories about the city is weakest. The richness of content contained in such narratives, resulting from the different practice and experience of “their own cities” by inhabitants of divided cities (both A and B), and at the same time the broad spectrum of communicating about it, shows the potential that can be used both by local elites active on both sides of the border, and also state authorities, in justifying (in a normative or rational way) realization of a policy “on the border.”

#### *Narrators*

Individual narratives are constructed by the inhabitants of divided cities, who every day experience a city with a “built-in” state border and at the same time co-create this city, excluding those who co-create the public narratives on account of their social position. Narrative practice takes place in a variety of ways, depending, however, on the motivation and tools that allow the city to register in the consciousness of its inhabitants and depending on whether the practice is the result of individual needs to record biographical experience connected with the city, along with individual feelings, evaluations, and expectations, or

whether the need is evoked by a researcher. In the first case, the narrative will be in the form of written materials, such as diaries, memoirs, blogs, posts on social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, forums), as well as visual materials such as albums or photoblogs; in the second case, the narrative will be connected with materials evoked in a given research process, which includes biographical interviews (which have a long tradition), in-depth interviews, and focused group interviews.

### *Recipients*

When considering the voices of the inhabitants of divided cities—the creators of bottom-up narratives—it should be emphasized that their social influence seems to be limited. The content of these narratives—taking into account the degree of complexity of networks of personal contacts and communication channels, not only among the inhabitants of the cities A or B, but also between A and B—makes its way—limitedly and horizontally to other inhabitants. In addition, in regard to the vertical dimension, a narrative is a material used by the local elites who are focused on the evaluations, needs, or expectations of inhabitants. The recipients are also organizations, associations, and societies, which in a bottom-up but institutionalized way, undertake activities influencing the shape of the mutual or separate social space in cities A and B. It should be stressed here that from the citizens' perspective, bottom-up, private tales about a city can determine social activity, mobilize social participation for the sake of common expectations, realize the goals of certain interest groups, and become at the same time a publicly expressed reference point. Individual narratives directed at recipients on a state or European level are also meaningful in shaping the external image of cities.

### *Content*

The content of bottom-up narratives is focused on everyday individual experience in a divided city. The content is therefore not only varied because of the different biographical experiences of the inhabitants of city A and city B but also contains very few elements of persuasion. Taking into account the specifics of living “on the border,” cross-border practices gain particular importance. They show the degree of mutualization of the urban space (both for instrumental and autotelic reasons), the urban national neighborhood on the border (spatially close neighbors as “us,” “them,” or “aliens”), and local identities built on this basis. These practices can be categorized as “experiencing borders” but also as a “community” in which a transgression of locality beyond the state administrative border might occur. The categories, around which the tales of a divided city are being constructed are identical with those mentioned in public narratives and/or are present in the space of the divided city (both part A and part B).

## **Concluding Remarks**

The aim of our article was to elaborate on the concept of narratives and its applicability to the exploration of divided cities in Europe. We argue that three kinds of narratives in particular—public, individual, and spatial ones—make up a reservoir of common

knowledge about a divided city. Numerous actors on both sides of the state border are engaged in creating stories, for which numerous resources and carriers are used (Newman and Paasi 2017).

Furthermore, research should take into account narratives created on different levels—the local level (by the elites and non-elites), the state level (states A and B), and the European level—and should consider how borders, urban space, and urban national neighborhoods are constructed by these actors. The proposed approach (a composite strategy) is comprehensive in nature and takes into account the complexity of multi-voiced narrative material. It allows simplification and unjustified judging to be avoided in order to obtain in-depth interpretations (of existing and quantitative data) and to explain reality in divided cities.

All moments of change are conducive to research “on the border,” as they make it possible to “grasp in their full clarity” re-bordering and de-bordering practices (as the refugee crisis or Covid-19 crisis, with temporary border closure) have demonstrated (Wille 2021).

The proposed model of analysis aims at showing multi-level and multi-voiced narratives in divided cities, with the complexity of relationships between narrators and recipients who are immersed in the socio-cultural contexts of the city, region, state, and Europe. However, the model might also be applicable to other spaces divided by ethnic or national borders, by taking into account the set of meta-narratives specific for their location.

### Funding

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, grant number UMO/2018/29/B/HS6/00258.

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