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## Borderland Organizations: Creating the Idea of a Borderland in Eastern Poland

*Abstract:* This article presents an analysis of borderland organizations in eastern Poland. It examines the nature of organizations creating the idea of a borderland, their territorial location, and the meanings of the borderland representations they create. The category of “borderland” is mainly used by local self-governments and NGOs. After 1989, these actors concentrated on organizing the region’s ethnic differences. The oldest borderland organizations are focused on the multicultural past of the region. Poland’s accession to the EU resulted in the reorganization of cross-border relations in connection with the emergence of new organizations interested in the state border or in the profits associated with proximity to it. The idea of a borderland in eastern Poland is supported by a small number of local institutions, which have not created a unified representation of what the borderland is. Therefore, the region has retained features of a coexisting and/or interdependent borderland.

*Keywords:* eastern Poland, borderland organizations, borderland representations, the EU’s external border, borderland culture, types of borderland interactions

### Introduction

After the turning point of 1989, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) became an interesting area for borderland studies. Since that time, the processes of creating and transforming borders, boundaries, and borderlands have provided an opportunity for research and theoretical reflection on these phenomena. The dynamic situation in this part of Europe produces various local definitions of “border” and/or “borderland” (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Kurczewska 2008). Works dedicated to Poland’s eastern borderland interestingly reflect this kind of local knowledge about the borderland. Such works accentuate the idea of the existence of ethnic boundaries and a mix of cultures (Sadowski 1995a; Babiński 1997; Kurczewska, Bojar 2005; Sadowski 2019), and define the borderland in “non-state terms” (cf. Anderson et al. 2002: 5) despite the transborder connections in that part of Poland (Wojakowski 2003; Kurczewska & Bojar 2009; Nijander & Wojakowski 2017). In thinking about Poland’s eastern borderland, two patterns of territorial thinking—spatial and linear—have thus been superimposed (see: Paasi 1999: 670; Brunet-Jailly 2005: 635).

This dualism overlaps with the ambiguity of the Polish language’s term “*pogranicze*” (“borderland”), which is recognized by sociologists (see: Kwaśniewicz 1999; Wojakowski 2002; Sadowski 2008; Pasięka 2016). “*Pogranicze*” coincides with the meanings of the English terms “borderland,” “frontier” (cf. Martinez 1994: 5; Babiński 1997). and

“boundary” (Barth 1969, 2000). On the other hand, the territory lying near the state border might also be referred to in Polish as “*przygranicze*” or “*nadgranicze*” (cf. Wojakowski 2002), or officially as “*strefa nadgraniczna*” (a borderland zone) in legal documents. Therefore, “*pogranicze*” evokes a picture of ethnic and cultural differences in the region (Babiński 1994) and the area’s peripheral status (Popławski 1995), as well as its proximity to a state border. The broadest definition of a borderland is “any neighboring of cultures that may derive from nationally and ethnically mixed genealogy and marriage, from being part of a national or ethnic minority on the territory dominated by another national culture, from an emigration situation or individual national conversion” (Kłoskowska 1996: 125). Such an understanding of a borderland does not stem from the existence of a border but rather exists in opposition to it (Staszczak 1978; Sadowski 1995c). This is an important context for the development of theory as applied to Poland’s eastern borderland.

This article focuses on common interpretations (Geertz 1993) and social representations (Burkner 2017) of a borderland in eastern Poland. The analysis refers to constructivism (Berger, Luckmann 1966) and to Niklas Luhmann’s theory (Luhmann 2007) in focusing on the role of institutionalized actors active in producing representations of a borderland. Eastern Poland contains three regions (voivodships): Podlasie in the north, Lubelskie in the central part, and Podkarpackie in the south.

My research questions are:

- (1) What kind of organizations are interested in the creation of the idea of a borderland?
- (2) Where are they located in eastern Poland and how long have they been active?
- (3) What are the meanings of the borderland representations they create?

In answering the question about the institutional actors creating the borderland, I concentrate on organizations that call themselves borderland organizations, or which obviously organize activities using that term. I am interested in the range within which these organizations shape their visions of a borderland under the influence of other institutional actors, such as local and regional self-governments, the Polish state, and the EU. The rapid appearance of a significant number of borderland organizations after 2004 (more than half the total number of organizations of that type) raises the question of whether or not the social production of the idea of a borderland is related to the transformation connected with EU accession and the accomplishment of EU projects.

Descriptions of borderland organizations take into account their territorial location and period of activeness in order to allow us to uncover both regional differences in perceptions of the borderland as well as transregional correspondences between different meanings of the idea. In the last part of my empirical analysis I describe the main semantic areas in which borderland representations are defined and produced.

### Methodology and Data

My analysis is based on desk research, interviews, and a questionnaire sent to “borderland” organizations in eastern Poland. I began the first stage of the research in 2018 by searching for organizations using the word “borderland” in their name. I eventually found twenty such organizations. I gathered documents produced by these organizations (statutes,

mission statements, information about ongoing activities and projects, press articles, etc.). I repeated the procedure in May 2020.

The database of NGOs maintained by the Klon-Jawor Association (<http://bazy.ngo.pl/>; first access: 30 September 2018, checked: 10 May 2020) and the National Court Register (Krajowy Rejestr Sądowy/KRS <https://ekrs.ms.gov.pl/web/wyszukiwarka-krs/strona-glowna/index.html>), comprising NGOs and enterprises, were important sources of data for my desk research. Neither source revealed any borderland organizations created after 2018. In 2020, however, at least five recurrent activities using the term “borderland” were notable in the region, even though they were conducted by organizations that do not use the term. These were also included in the main analysis.

In May and June 2020, four of the 20 organizations with “borderland” in their names ended or suspended their activities. Another two were sports clubs, which do not conduct any activity other than participating in sports competitions. At that time, of five entities that had been conducting significant activities, one project closed and one website was inactive. All organizations and activities were included in the repeated desk analysis. Seventeen organizations were asked to participate in an interview. They were also asked to fill out a written survey on the topic of their organization’s cooperation network.<sup>1</sup> Eleven interviews were conducted and the same number of surveys were received. The interviews were conducted by telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The conversations covered such topics as the intentions of the founders regarding the use of the term “borderland,” how the leaders understood the term, the advantages and disadvantages of using the term, and propagation methods. The questionnaire asked for detailed information about institutional practices and cooperation with other institutions (including local and regional self-governments and cross-border cooperation).

### **The Specificity of Poland’s Eastern Borderland—History and Research**

In some sense, research on borderlands anticipates theory on the subject (Brunet-Jailly 2005). At the beginning of the 1990s, research was widely conducted in eastern Poland, with the result that there was a proposal that borderland sociology should become a subdiscipline (Sadowski 1995b). The research was connected with political changes in central and eastern Europe. Poland’s eastern border was partially established in 1939 as a demarcation line between Nazi Germany and the USSR, and finally in 1944 became the state border between communist Poland and the USSR. The new border, which had never existed before, cut through territories which functioned as complete but multicultural regions despite their changing political situation (from 1914 the northern part belonged to the Russian Empire and the southern part to the Austrian Empire; between 1918 and 1939 both parts belonged to the 2nd Republic of Poland).

The situation of those regions before the division has been described as that of a borderland because of the ethnic diversity there. The first research and theoretical texts using the term “*pogranicze*” appeared before the Second World War and adopted ethnographic

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<sup>1</sup> The members of the team were Dariusz Wojakowski, Kamil Motyka, and Magdalena Nowak from AGH University of Science and Technology in Krakow.

methodology (see: [Obrębski 1936](#)). The research was conducted in northeastern Poland (during the 2nd Republic, in areas that are today within the territory of Belarus) and concerned an ethnically mixed population, without consideration of the state border (because at that time it was further east than today's border between Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus). Before the Second World War the whole area of eastern Poland could be defined as a transitional, ethnographical borderland: an extensive area where several local communities existed, with a varying extent of cultural mixing ([Chlebowczyk 1975: 23](#)). These regions were “a transition zone between two distinct categories, rather than a clear cutoff line” ([Newman 2011: 37](#)) and had more features of a frontier than of a borderland ([Martinez 1994: 5](#)).

In the communist period (1944–1989), the new state border was more tightly protected and highly controlled. The regions, which had always formed undivided units, became two sides of an alienated borderland with no possibility of cross-border relations ([Martinez 1994: 6](#)). At the same time, on both sides (but especially in Poland) ethnic minorities were clearly discriminated against. There was also no way to conduct scientific research among the multi-ethnic populations living in those regions.

The opening of the border in 1989 was quite spontaneous, and after 1991 (the fall of the USSR and the emergence of new countries) it was rather uncontrolled. The situation involved more than the mere changing of an alienated borderland into one of coexistence (see: [Martinez 1994: 8–9](#)), because the new large cross-border flows (see: [Iglicka 2001](#)) occurred alongside very dynamic processes of social and economic transformation throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The cross-border interactions appeared as one aspect of the transformation not only of border regions but of whole societies. These interactions quickly built a kind of thin economic interdependence—of the kind that could be a first step to cultural interactions—between borderland areas ([Martinez 1994: 9](#)). However, the interactions overlapped with the rise of local, regional, and ethnic identity and autonomy in those regions, which at the time seemed more important than cross-border interactions. Therefore, the first research on the eastern borderlands after 1989 ([Sadowski 1991, 1992](#); [Babiński 1994, 1997](#)) concentrated on describing the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in the area before the opening of the state border. The researchers defined the borderland as a territory interpenetrated by various ethnic groups and cultures which had existed there since Medieval times, and omitted the cross-border processes resulting from the proximity of the state border.

Between 1998 and 2004 Poland and neighboring states established the rule of law, which controls processes of cross-border relations. After accession to the EU in 2004, Poland had all the infrastructure necessary to control those relations and consequently to restrict cross-border flows and cooperation. Since 2007, EU neighborhood policy has allowed for the organization of new channels of legal and formal transnational cooperation (new checkpoints, cross-border programs, support for Euro-regions' structures). In comparison to the situation before and after 2004, it could be said that borderland interactions were basically restructured. Spontaneous and basically economic relations were replaced by regulated, institutionalized interactions connected with the state and EU policies. Thanks to these policies, cross-border (or transborder/transnational) relations became more and more important in eastern Poland (see: [Kurczewska & Bojar 2009](#); [Wojakowski 2018](#)), but their

perception was still determined by the kind of interethnic relations that had appeared in the first decade of Poland's independence. Using Oscar Martinez' (1994) models of borderland interactions, eastern Poland is still an interdependent borderland in relation to the other side of the state border, but in the past 30 years the character of that interdependence has changed radically in connection with the change of actors involved in borderland relations. These relations match what Joshua Heyman calls "culture-forming processes," combined with uneven development, which "involves both connection, and sometimes but not always mutual recognition and sharing of some cultural elements, but also differentiation and perpetuation of inequalities and distinctions" (Heyman 2012: 51). Before 2004 cross-border connections were supported by less formalized individual or economic actors and new political structures concentrated on building the institutional differences between two sides of the border (see: Wojakowski 2003). After 2004 the new actors engaged in cultural cooperation were countries and local self-government organizations, but the countries started to restrict economic and individual flows.

### **Borderland Organizations in Eastern Poland**

The phenomena analyzed in this study are directly connected with the use of the term "borderland" by local actors. The term is most relevantly applied when it is used in the name of an organization. Such organizations might be treated as the most characteristic agents participating in the creation of regional definitions of the "borderland."

The focus on the practices of organizations and the representations they produce derives from a constructivist theoretical perspective (see: Paasi 1999; Kolossov 2005). The concept of borderland is a component of social worlds that are a type of knowledge produced and sustained in interactive processes (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Thus, while the borderland concept constitutes *sui generis* knowledge produced by social actors in dynamic processes, it is also a symbolic object endowed with different meanings in the course of these processes (see: Blumer 2007).

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have emphasized that habituation is a vital context in the generalization of certain social images (typification). "Habituation" is understood as a process of the repeatability of individual actions fortifying typification and leading to the institutionalization of social worlds (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 53). Social practices are then described as actions of a repeatable nature, fortifying given senses/meanings of social categories. In this sense, borderland practices may be defined as repetitive interactions that strengthen the specific meaning of the term. Actions undertaken by organizations that identify themselves as a part (or a kind) of a borderland are a specific form of such practices and feature an effective capacity to confer meaning to the "borderland" as a category pertaining to a social world. Such actions are a complete form of institutionalization—a borderland within which the existence and activity of such an organization becomes a social institution, a permanent element of the social world (see: Paasi 1999 about the institutionalization of borders).

A borderland organization's actions may be treated, however, as a more complex mechanism, involving not only the existence of a borderland vision but its development

as well. These organizations may also be defined in categories of an autopoietic social system (a complex system). According to Nicolas Luhmann (2007: 41–43), the autopoiesis of a social system signifies the system’s ability to self-reference (making oneself a subject of reflection) and to self-reproduce, in the form of the structures of sense. Borderland organizations may define and redefine the term “borderland” more noticeably than other borderland practices, as they communicate their own activities to their social environment as being borderland *per se*. The actions undertaken by these organizations, as well as their self-referencing—or the manner in which they define themselves, their objectives, and tasks—constitute a focal point of the social meaning of the borderland.

According to Klon-Jawor’s database, in 2020 there were 24,767 NGOs in the three administrative regions constituting eastern Poland.<sup>2</sup> The database also contains information about NGOs that no longer exist. The national KRS database provides information about 10,283 registered organizations, including those that have suspended activity but have not yet been formally liquidated. The KRS data is more accurate, but the database does not contain information about the profile of organizations. Thanks to the Klon-Jawor database it may be established that only 8.7% (2,144 in that database) of NGOs describe themselves as focused on culture, art, and tradition, and 8.9% of them (2,212) as acting for local development. The numbers cannot be added together, because the organizations may choose more than one area of activity. Taking into account that the number of existing organizations is probably half the number of those appearing in the Klon-Jawor database, it might be estimated that in eastern Poland no more than 2,000 NGOs deal with local and regional culture and traditions. Many of them exist only formally, and the same applies to borderland organizations.

There is a small number of NGOs that are interested in the state border and national and ethnic diversity and most are focused on culture, art, traditions, and local development. They engage primarily in activities supporting ethnic minorities or cooperation with neighboring nations (Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine)—such aims are mentioned by 128 NGOs. 57 organizations mention “transborder cooperation,” 53 mention the “borderland” and 24 the “border” as important terms in their self-descriptions. None use the term “*nadgranicze*,” and only two use the term “*przygranicze*.” As in many cases the ethnic categories appear together with the terms “transborder” or “borderland” it might be estimated that no more than 200 of the NGOs are oriented toward national, border, or borderland issues, and that they are 10% of all the NGOs acting in the area of culture in eastern Poland.

This analysis shows the triad of Polish terms that are interconnected in the description of border phenomena: “borderland,” “transborder,” and “border.” However, only the relation between “borderland” and “transborder” appears to involve an important interpenetration of the senses and cultural interpretations of a borderland. The term “border” appears in the documents of the NGOs as a technical and not cultural category. 75 percent of those organizations use the term “border” in order to indicate that they conduct their activities abroad (*za granicą*), or they simply use the term in a geographical sense.

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<sup>2</sup> All quantitative data in this part of article was collected in October 2020.

20 of 53 organizations having recourse to the term “borderland” use it in their name (see [Table 1](#)), and five other organizations promote, as part of their activities, their own “borderland” initiatives ([Table 2](#)). A comparison of five borderland initiatives with the borderland organizations’ activities demonstrates the main weakness of time-limited actions: the lack of Luhmann’s self-reference capacity. For example, “Active Borderland,” a project conducted in Tomaszów Lubelski by Czajnia NGO, is currently coming to an end, and it is reasonable to expect that its high rate of activity up to now will not be maintained. As a member of the organization expressed it, “We’ve been active as an association for 16 years, and the intensity of our activities and promotion on the borderland territory varied over time and place. At first, it was crucial, then much less, and now, we are coming back as a brand-new version, with fresh intensity and new actions” (II 5).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the term “borderland” in such operations appears only occasionally and as needed.

Numerous borderland organizations are supported and dependent on other entities (mainly on local self-governments), and this fact significantly impacts the range and options of their activity. However, a basic formal structure with a leader secures a minimum of autonomy, which allows the sense of the organization’s activity to be defined. In addition, organizations last on average longer than their projects or conferences referring to the borderland. Due to formal and legal requirements, their operations are also documented (statutes, reports).

[Table 1](#) presents basic information about the organizations. The majority of them (11) are tightly linked to local self-governments. Others visibly show more autonomous roots (6), even though they must generally cooperate with local self-governments on different levels. One of the organizations is an academic journal belonging to a university.

In analyzing the general properties of borderland organizations, two curious phenomena may be noted. What seems remarkably interesting is the juxtaposition of the year of creation of a given organization with its geographic setting. This illustrates the dynamics of the propagation of the borderland category in the region.

With this map, the connections between location and the dynamics of creating borderland organizations can be seen. Initially, these organizations were created mostly in the northeast (near the border with Lithuania and Belarus). Two of the five organizations are very local amateur sports clubs. The organizations in Sejny (the Borderland of Arts, Cultures and Nations Center; further in the text as the Borderland Center) and Szypliszki (Borderland Folklore Group, FGB) in particular are evidently oriented toward local and regional cultural diversity. Another—in Białystok—produces a sociological journal that specializes in the promotion of the borderland as a unique cultural area. Two organizations that appeared early in this century also appeal to cultural diversity, but more in the regional context of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland and cross-border relations (the Foundation of Spiritual Culture of the Borderland, FSCB Lublin) or in regard to a specific mythology of the Bieszczady region as a multicultural Polish “Wild East” (the Association of the Enthusiasts of Country Music and Borderland Cultures in Ustrzyki Dolne).

An important moment for the creation of borderland organizations was Poland’s accession to the European Union, and in particular Poland’s joining the Schengen Area, in

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<sup>3</sup> The Roman numerals refer to the table, and the Arabic numerals refer to the position in the table.

Table 1  
**Organizations in Eastern Poland which use the name borderland**

Name of organization	Place/Region	Date of establishment	Founders/sponsors	Type of activity	Present situation
1 Borderland Folklore Group	Szpyliski / Podlasie	1980	Communal Centre of Culture/Local self-government	Local folklore, music, traditions	stable
2 Borderland of arts, cultures and nations (Borderland Centre)	Sejmy/Podlasie	1990	Borderland NGOs Foundation / Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and Podlasie Voivodship	Diversified: culture, art, education, publishing, science	good
3 LKS Borderland Kuźnica	Kuźnica / Podlasie	1949	—	Local sports association	stable
4 Borderland. Social Studies	Białystok / Podlasie	1992	Faculty of Sociology of the University of Białystok	Academic journal	uncertain
5 Sokółka Association of Borderland Cultures	Sokółka / Podlasie	2011	Local (Town) Self-government	Cultural local activity	defunct
6 Active Borderland Association	Żeszczynka, district of Biała Podlaska / Lubelskie	2017	Local Self-government	Youth activation	stable
7 Foundation of Spiritual Culture of the Borderland	Lublin / Lubelskie	2004	NGOs / Local and regional self-governments	Culture, art, tradition and international cooperation	good
8 Lublin Association of Tourist Guides BORDERLAND	Lublin / Lubelskie	2007	NGOs	Association of professionals working in the tourism sector	good
9 Schoolchildren's Sports Club Borderland	Kryłów, Mirce commune / Lubelskie	1999	—	Youth sport association	no information
10 Association for the Development and Promotion of the Dolhobyczów Commune Borderland	Dolhobyczów district of Hrubieszów / Lubelskie	2007	Local Self-government	Local development	defunct
11 Borderland Folklore Group	Dolhobyczów district of Hrubieszów / Lubelskie	2011	Local self-government	Music, singing	good

*Continued on next page*

Table 1 (continued)

Name of organization	Place/Region	Date of establishment	Founders/sponsors	Type of activity	Present situation
12 Borderland on the Bug River Association	Prehoryle in Mircze commune (Hrubieszów) / Lubelskie	2010	Local Self-government	Local development	defunct
13 Borderland's Provinces Association of Social Initiatives	Zaklików / Podkarpace	2016	Local Self-government	Local development	no information
14 Folkwisko Association of Animation of Borderland Culture	Gorajec in Cieszanów commune / Podkarpace	2013	NGOs	Culture, music, local traditions	good
15 Borderland Association for Promotion of Culture and Art	Krasne in the Rzeszów district / Podkarpace	2010	Local Self-government	Local development	good
16 In the Circle of Borderland Association of Promotion and Development of Culture and Art	Łañcut / Podkarpace	2011	Local Self-government	Local development	no information
17 Borderland Association	Budzyń in Radymno commune / Podkarpace	2009	Local self-government	Local development	uncertain
18 Association of Enthusiasts of Country Music and Borderland Cultures	Ustrzyki Dolne / Podkarpace	2001	NGOs	Music, culture, art	defunct
19 Dabar Foundation—Dialogue of Cultures and Religions of the Poland, Ukraine and Slovakia Borderland	Wetlina / Podkarpace	2013	NGOs	Culture, art, tradition	no information
20 Regional Centre of Borderland Cultures	Krosno / Podkarpace	2008	An institution run by the local government of the city	Diversified, functioning as the main city cultural centre	good

Table 2  
**Main entities in Eastern Poland using the word “borderland” in their names**

	Name of activity	Place/Region	Date of founding	Founders/sponsors	Kind of activity	Present situation
1	Borderland internet portal	Rzeszów / Podkarpackie	2009	Unidentified owner	A commercial internet site with advertisements	Inactive
2	On the Borderlands of Cultures and Nations	Sanok / Podkarpackie	2012	State High School in Sanok	Scientific conference and a series of publications	Stable activity
3	Colours of Borderland	Rzeszów / Podkarpackie	2016	The city of Rzeszów—during the realization of an EU project	An internet site and music festival	Inactive since 2019
4	Borderland Business Forum	Suwałki / Podlaskie	2016	Poland-East Science and Technology Park in Suwałki Sp. z o.o. / Polish government, local and regional self-governments	Annual business conference	Stable activity
5	Active Borderland	Tomaszów Lubelski / Lubelskie	2018	Czajmia NGO	NGO's project: Enhancement of social activities and activation of inhabitants of borderland counties	High activity

Figure 1

**Organizations using name “borderland” in Eastern Poland. Location and the time of foundation**

Key: Colour shows the date of creation: before 2000—blue; in 2000–2006—yellow; in 2007–2013—red; since 2014—green. Ovals point at organizations; squares point at practices. Empty figures point at non active organizations/practices.

connection with the start of the first EU budgetary period in which Poland fully participated (2007–2013).<sup>4</sup> Most of the organizations formed in 2007–2013 were created with the inspiration and support of local self-governments. This fact might be linked to local councils’ need to look for non-governmental partners for cooperation on EU projects. This would also explain why these organizations are oriented toward fulfilling very local needs without aspiring to wider cooperation. All of them explicitly point to the local purpose of their existence—typically in their profiles of activity and in their statutes. Though less frequent, frank statements on the subject were also made during the interviews: “Indeed, as an association, we have been and are active due to money acquired from sponsors, but we mainly organize events for local people, not events on international topics or held in cooperation between the two localities on both sides of the border. Our events were directed rather to local activity” (I 17).

Another characteristic feature of the organizations formed in 2007–2013 is their relatively short existence. Three out of four organizations that have suspended their activity started in this period. Other organizations created during the period are also declaring their intent or need to suspend their activities—unlike the relatively stable situation of organizations created in earlier periods.

The second phenomenon that ought to be considered in this description of the organizations is the diversified structures they represent. Their complexity varies, which also impacts their capacity for self-reference in regard to the borderland. The complexity of their systems may be presented on a scale. At one end of the scale is, for example, the

<sup>4</sup> After 2000, Poland benefited from three pre-accession funds that paid out until the end of 2006, which means that from that moment, the borderland areas, like the rest of Poland, were structurally included in the EU system.

Borderland Center in Sejny, which is supported by the Borderland Foundation, which also supports other organizations (e.g., the International Center for Dialogue in Krasnogruda). Around these three tightly related units, a network of initiatives is developing on the basis of the ideas of the Borderland Center. It may be concluded that the organization's complex structure and longevity allow it to be rich in self-reference. Such complexity in the structure and plurality of topics referring to the borderland appears in a few other cases of organizations that were created independently (e.g., FSCB Lublin), and those that are supported or even fully controlled by a local government (e.g., the Regional Centre of Borderland Cultures, RCBC Krosno). In the middle of the scale are organizations that are less complex in structure but still have the potential to reference many senses of the borderland in their practices. There are professional organizations such as the one from Białystok that produces the *Borderland Journal*; the Lublin Association of Tourist Guides (LATG), known as "Borderland"; and small, local, but very active non-specialized NGOs (the Association for the Animation of Borderland Culture, AABC—"Folkowisko" in Gorajec). At the other end of the scale of complexity and self-reference are organizations that focus on only one area of activity. Among these are the Borderland Provinces Association of Social Initiatives in Zaklików, which publishes a local journal, or the Active Borderland Association in Żeszczynka, which organizes a project for local youth. Such organizations use the name "borderland," but they do not propagate the sense of a borderland well.

### **Three Local Faces of the Borderland—Institutional Representations**

From the way the term "borderland" is interpreted in the cultural texts, interviews, and social practices of the above-mentioned organizations, three distinct semantic areas can clearly be demarcated in its regional and local meanings. Even though various meanings can coexist in the activity of one organization, the other organizations under examination were strongly connected to only one of the interpretations—to the degree that we can quite easily isolate these areas as different representations of the borderland.

#### *The Borderland as an Autonomous Cultural Phenomenon*

The first of the three areas implies an understanding of a borderland as a phenomenon based on mixed and permeating ethnic cultures. This permeating of cultural traditions is a kind of unique value that can be found in the places and communities of former multi-ethnic regions. Such an interpretation is perfectly illustrated in the activity of the Borderland Center in Sejny. As noted by Agnieszka Pasieka (2016: 133), according to the center's founder Krzysztof Czyżewski, a borderland signifies a "common construction of culture, a space where people not only coexist, but co-live." However, there are only two other organizations (in Szpiliszki and Gorajec) that promote the same meaning of "borderland" in their aims and actions.

Such a way of thinking uses the opposition between the territorial and cultural understanding of the notion of a "borderland" (see: Brunet-Jailly 2005) and refers to the

characteristics of a zone-like cultural borderland in contrast to simple proximity to a linear state border.

The Borderland Center in Sejny fosters the image of the borderland as a cultural phenomenon and as pertaining to a sphere of values. Borderland culture has a unique character, and despite being a junction or mixture of various ethnic traditions, it is autonomous. This kind of culture is suspected to be quite fragile at the moment, or even endangered.

Researchers analyzing the Borderland Center claim that the majority of its initiatives are strongly shifting the “borderland” toward supra-local and supra-regional activity which covers Central Europe at the very least (see: [Pasięka 2016: 139–140](#)). These aspirations of the Borderland Center have qualitative importance for the extent to which they promote the image of the borderland as a cultural phenomenon, surpassing the historically ethnic borders present in all the local communities of the area. Undoubtedly, this message is powerful and is directed outwards to the local and regional communities of eastern Poland.

The complex of images on the topic of the borderland radiates partly to the south and to other organizations in the region. The AABC in Gorajec is one of the organization’s conspicuous imitators, but in interviews with other organizations we can also see a direct reference to the Center. The initiator of the “Active Borderland” project (Czajnia NGO) emphasizes that “It is worth remembering that around the year 2000, I participated in the programs of the Borderland Center [in Sejny]. Maybe this name, the ‘borderland,’ has stayed with me” (II 5).

The leader of the oldest cultural borderland organization—the FGB from Szypliszki—declares his strong conviction that “the name [the borderland] is appropriate for defining the cultural area” now. But his primary intention—which caused him to name his organization as he did—was connected with the borderland as an area “designated by the geographical context,” or the proximity of the border. According to him, the new, cultural concept of the borderland was proposed during meetings in the Borderland Center with the leader of the organization from Sejny.

The practices of the Borderland Center are an important element of the symbolic environment for other borderland organizations. Since this is one of the oldest borderland organizations, its ideas have been taken over and reproduced by other organizations. Even though these are small and rather local organizations, it seems that with no competition from other systems producing alternative borderland representations in eastern Poland, this idea of the borderland has been most adopted for institutional reproduction.

A more direct influence of that representation of the borderland may be observed in other cases. This is how the leader of LATG Borderland in Lublin justified the choice of the name: “A borderland divides and connects...it is a point of dialogue and compromise. (...) Borders are artificial creations, while a borderland is natural. It is exceptional, unique, and one of a kind.” As the name does not match the nature of the organization’s activity, she adds that “Sometimes, we are asked about the origin of the name. The word is not necessarily associated with tourism” (I 8).

All the data allow the Borderland Center in Sejny to be perceived as a well-organized and autopoietic social system ([Luhmann 2007](#)) which has not only reproduced its own sense of the borderland but also offered it as a topic for other organizations in the region.

*The Borderland as Cross-Border Interactions*

If the first representation of the borderland is created in opposition to the existence of a state border, the second perceives the border as the reason for the cultural definition of the borderland. The main organization constructing such a representation of the borderland is the FSCB in Lublin, while another three organizations in the south of the region indicate that they have similar ideas about the borderland. The FSCB was created notably later (2004) than the organizations propagating the idea of an autonomous borderland culture described above. The association's self-presentation suggests a strong connection between the borderland and the state border, as is explicitly stated: "the proper reception of the phenomenon of the border is essentially possible in the context of local social initiatives that express themselves through overcoming the negative consequences of division and historic disputes." These divisions are perceived in historical and political categories as "overcoming the consequences of the Iron Curtain" and claim to work toward preventing the creation of a new "curtain on the outskirts of the European Union" (see: <http://fkdp.pl/o-fundacji>). Consequently, it is believed that state borders produce a fundamental cultural border on the territory, which in the interview is called both "*pogranicze*" (borderland) and "*przygranicze*" (border area). The FCSB's leader points out that its actions "concur with the debate on good neighborly relations and the need to tighten cooperation between the countries of the European Union and Eastern Europe (...) and serve a better understanding of the cultural, social, linguistic, and economic situation of our neighbors, thus fostering deeper mutual trust, which is a prerequisite for effective cooperation beyond borders" (I 7). The context of the organization's aims is the existence of national conflicts in the region in the past.

It can be stated that this is a typical cross-border organization, in the sense that its aims and practices correspond to the description of such organizations in borderland studies (see: Paasi 1999; Anderson, O'Dowd, and Wilson 2002; Sohn 2018), and in that it builds a typical borderland culture, which is the basis for cross-border integration (see: Martinez 1994; Konrad & Nicol 2011; Heyman 2012).

This way of practicing and thinking about the borderland is also present in the activity of other organizations that partly refer to such an understanding of the notion of a "borderland." Three recently created organizations—in Krasne, Łańcut, and Wetlina—focus on holding events consisting of cross-border cooperation among groups and individual artists from Poland, Ukraine, and Slovakia. An interlocutor from Krasne describes it in technical terms: "it is about promoting the art of the borderland, of the countries that are neighbors to Podkarpacie—well, not only in Podkarpacie, as the participating artists come not only from Podkarpacie but indeed from other towns near the border" (I 15).

These organizations are more oriented toward local activity, having relations with a small number of local organizations in neighboring countries. Therefore, they are rather at the small forefront of processes that are recognized to form a cross-border culture supported by institutional and political borderland actors (see: Brunet-Jailly 2005; Konrad & Nicol 2011). Such practices and such an understanding of the borderland appear in organizations recently active in the proximity of the Ukrainian border. There are also a number of EU projects being carried out in eastern Poland that involve a trans-border or cross-border

characteristic. They strengthen these representations of the borderland as cross-border cultural cooperation.

### *The Borderland as a Territorial Asset*

The two previous representations of the term “borderland” accentuated the cultural aspect, as in the unique culture of the borderland or as a territory forming the junction of various national cultures. The third interpretation definitely focuses on the territorial aspect of the term. Evidently, the question of territory has appeared before, in the context of the localization of various cultural contents or as the carrier of these cultures (national groups). Nevertheless, in the third approach, territoriality is above all treated as a space for social activity and cultural creation. The borderland reveals itself as a defined area of activity for the organization in question. This activity (similarly to culture in the first interpretation) is constitutive in defining the territory of the borderland. In other words, the activity of the borderland organization leads to the social and spatial delimitation of the borderland.

The dominant form of practice in this view of the “borderland” is the activity undertaken by local organizations (NGOs) in support of the local authorities in a border area. In these practices, the local self-government policy is to treat the borderland as a “territorial asset.” What does this consist of? Being a “territorial asset” signifies that by association with the elements of the described cultural representations of the borderland (a unique culture, multiculturalism, or cross-border cooperation), the borderland organizations (a) want to be associated with something that is positively perceived in the European and global discourse, (b) treat this association as beneficial in connection with obtaining funds, and (c) pursue their own local aims and values unrelated to any meaning of the borderland.

Two facts are significant. The first is that half of the 20 analyzed organizations presented this understanding of the borderland. The quantitative dominance does not immediately translate into imposing that vision of the borderland on the entire region, as these organizations concurrently focus on local actions in a town, commune, or district.

They set out to use the images of a borderland that exist in regional and European discourses locally and for their own purposes. In contrast to the other above-mentioned borderland organizations, this kind does not concentrate on the idea of a borderland but rather on a specific modification within the above scheme.

Second, most of these organizations were created after 2006, which indicates that they comprise a category particularly connected to the transformation resulting from Poland’s accession to the EU, thus to the influence of the external environment.

In fact, two ways of modifying the borderland idea in the practice of benefiting from the “territorial asset” may be identified. The first, which seems to be more frequently applied, is simple mimicry consisting in using the term “borderland” to describe actions typical of the local community: support for the social activity of the inhabitants, acting in favor of the “cultural identity and awareness of the local community,” the “presentation and distribution of information about the organization’s activity to the local autonomous government, economic sector, and wider public,” “formulation of opinions about legal acts concerning vital social issues,” and “prevention of dependence on alcohol, tobacco, and narcotics” (see: <http://bazy.ngo.pl/profil/200216/Stowarzyszenie-Pogranicze>). Similarly, content specific to

the borderland is absent from the activity of the FAB in Dołhobyczów: “It conducts programs aimed at serving the people. People from these areas used to work on PGRs [socialist state collective farms], which were closed in the 1990s. Many people were left without jobs and became socially excluded” (I 10).

Involvement in creativity has in this case quite a different rationale than the quest for multicultural heritage. The group’s repertory makes no reference, in the strict sense, to local traditions. Here again, such thinking and practice is common to the majority of these 11 local organizations. Only a few of them (e.g., those in Żeszczynka and Krosno), in adopting this mimicry, attempt to refer to multiculturalism (comprehended both as inherent to the region and as a cross-border phenomenon). This is the other, more developed form of imitation, one which invokes the arguments of previous representations of a borderland: “The borderland is comprehended here very broadly, not only as the area of state borders (the junction of the borders of Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine), but most of all as a borderland of cultures and diversity” (I 20).

Those organizations could very easily abandon that mimicry. The Carpathian Climates event promoting the city of Krosno is an example of superposing the idea of the borderland as a multicultural phenomenon onto local practices. Initially, the borderland aspect appeared in the general description of the event: “Carpathian Climates 2009 is now behind us, but next year we will host it again in the city’s market square, to charm us all with the artistic ambiance of the borderland” ([http://www.rckp.krosno.pl/strona-284-karpackie\\_klimaty\\_2009.html](http://www.rckp.krosno.pl/strona-284-karpackie_klimaty_2009.html)). In 2011–2016, the event officially operated as the “Festival of Borderland Cultures.” Since 2017 (the last two editions) this name has not been used and in media reports about Carpathian Climates the term “borderland” does not appear at all ([http://www.rckp.krosno.pl/strona-226-karpackie\\_klimaty.html](http://www.rckp.krosno.pl/strona-226-karpackie_klimaty.html)). The indication is that the identification with borderland culture was only instrumental. The history of this event thus also illustrates the transformation of the political climate in local and regional dimensions.

Accordingly, several borderland organizations—those holding territorial assets—greatly depend on environmental factors in their autopoiesis, or more precisely, on external symbolic resources. An essential role is probably played by the influence of local governments, with which these organizations have numerous ties. The ability to produce the meaning of the borderland, its definition, and re-definition is much less substantial in the case of these organizations in comparison with those referring to a specific borderland culture or cross-border relations. Moreover, the mimicry applied by these organizations may at most strengthen the above-described images of the borderland produced “elsewhere,” namely by more autonomous and older borderland organizations.

## Conclusion

Among the general number of NGOs in eastern Poland, borderland organizations seem to be very marginal. However, the sphere of cross-border interactions is not very institutionalized, and the borderland organizations described here already occupy a significant niche. The most numerous organizations interested in borderland interactions concern national groups: Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian. These organizations, however, primarily

support national minorities in Poland and the Polish minority in neighboring countries. Some of them make use of the term “borderland,” just as the above-described borderland organizations appeal to national identities and cultures. The terms “trans-bordering” and “borderland” are used by a similar number of organizations, but the first term is used as an adjective and does not always describe cross-border relations. At the least, borderland organizations evidently dominate the “border” NGOs.

This allows us to assume that “borderland” institutions differ from “border” institutions, as described by Newman (2011: 36), by the “function of border management, controlling the means of border crossing.” Border institutions belong to the state and state authorities. Borderland entities in eastern Poland belong to NGOs and autonomous local governments. The creation of an opposition between “borderland” and “border” is thus a practice similar to the perforation of the border by non-central-state actors (Brunet-Jailly 2005: 639). The state institutions are only interested in controlling cross-border movement and in their ability to exclude, whereas the borderland institutions are concerned with inclusion processes. Therefore, borderland practices also differ from bordering practices. If the latter focuses our attention on processes of “dividing almost everything” (Konrad & Nicol 2011: 75), the idea of a “borderland” should stress the unity of a multicultural community. Unfortunately, there is a focus on the internal—local and regional—perspective, which strengthens that specific “ignorance of the state border” in the institutional life of eastern Poland.

Thus, regional and local governments and some independent organizations—which are all supported by EU funds—are the main actors influencing borderland organizations and the representations of the borderland they produce. The representations that have been distinguished might be connected with three social/political aims:

- Strengthening the vision of Central Europe as an open area of mixing multicultural traditions;
- Rebuilding international relations by cross-cultural cooperation;
- Realization of local interests and setting them in the sphere of European values.

Borderland organizations differ regarding the place and scale of their activities, their structures and histories, and their ways of interpreting the meaning of the borderland. These differences show the dynamic nature of borderland processes and external influences. However, a general tendency to describe the political borders in the context of national and ethnic differences is evident in the material presented. The oldest and the most influential organizations are highly focused on the past. It may be assumed that the first borderland representation is a defense of the past (as multiethnic and folkloristic), while the other is an expiation of the past (as nationalistic). This corresponds with the attitudes of other institutional actors in the region: national minority organizations (Buzalka 2007) and local governments (Wojakowski 2016). Then, these organizations try to resist transnational processes rather than to absorb them, even though they refer to the ideas of the EU. With such a perspective it is easier to build a mythology of the borderland (Cunningham 2012: 373; Nine 2012; Szary 2015) than to achieve cross-border integration.

The borderland organizations focused on the future are smaller, younger, and weaker, and they are oriented toward local but casual aims. They are relatively numerous, but there is no evidence that they could produce influential borderland representations that would become the basis for long-lasting cross-border interactions. In some sense most of the

borderland organizations represent a typical feature of borderland culture—heterotopia—which is based on a cultural mosaic and has the possibility to bridge boundaries and increase productive potential (Konrad & Nicol 2011: 82–83). However, the effects of that feature are dispersed over a large area and among a small number of institutions. This dispersion, as well as the character of the state border (as the external EU border), is unfavorable for borderland organizations' becoming influential creators of cross-border interactions. In eastern Poland, borderland organizations oriented toward inclusive values might be actors creating local or regional separation. It is an inverted paradox when compared with the observation that a state border, which is constructed for separation, can become the reason for the creation of a “transition zone” (Konrad & Nicol 2011: 76; Newman 2011: 44). Of course, that separation is specific because borderland organizations still appeal to different ethnic cultures, practice cross-border relations, and participate in EU initiatives. All those practices are, however, very selective and fragmentary.

It seems that the inconsistency of the Polish eastern borderland results not so much from the very nature of the borderland (its heterogeneity), nor from the diversity of the borderland representations described in this analysis, but mainly from the intensive changes which the borderland has undergone in the last 80 years, since within that time it has come to be defined by its proximity to the state border. In such a short time, the frontier has experienced nearly all the borderland-interaction models distinguished by Martinez (1994): alienation, coexistence, and interdependence. But the transformations of those models have not been of a linear character but rather cyclic. In the last 30 years borderland interactions have been both extended and restricted. COVID-19 has brought about the latest round of restrictions, after a loosening of controls, such as when visas for Ukrainian citizens were lifted in 2017. It seems that the history of the creation of borderland organizations, with the various representations they produce, as well as the content and scope of practices they undertake, are the result of this variability of external circumstances influencing eastern Poland.

Such variability is something more than the natural dynamic of social life. It is the reason that borderland organizations encounter external obstacles in the process of autopoietic self-reproduction and “the codes and programs relating to that reproduction do not accurately describe what is happening” (Luhmann 2007: 344). This leads to the sense of the borderland as something impermanent and uncertain. When there is uncertainty about the direction of change, the past becomes more certain than the present. Those organizations that have omitted from their borderland representations the cross-border interactions connected with migration from Ukraine and Belarus to Poland reveal a disconnect with “what is happening,” to use Luhmann's phrase. The issue of migration did not appear in their documents, practices, or interviews. The idea of the borderland in eastern Poland is produced not as the existence of a culture common to two sides of the border (Konrad & Nicol 2011) but as borderland cultures which differ because of ethnic belonging, place of residence, or social position in relation to other inhabitants of the same or different ethnicity.

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