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# The Influence of the Polish-Russian Border on the Development Opportunities of the Polish Border Region

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to analyse the conditions for the development of Polish poviats (equivalent to level 1 local administrative units) located on the Polish-Russian border. The introduction to the article presents general determinants of the development of border areas in post-communist countries. The next section provides the main analysis. SWOT analysis was used because it enabled holistic analysis of all potential factors of development of the region. It was found that the internal factors of the development of the region (e.g. financial resources, level of development of transport infrastructure, human resources) are weak, except for ecological factors related to the beauty of a post-glacial landscape. Exogenous factors of development are mainly associated with receiving EU funds (a positive factor), the peripheral location in the European Union and high instability of the functioning of the Polish-Russian border (negative factors). The high instability of the Polish-Russian border's functioning related to the huge influence of political relations between NATO and the EU on the one hand and Russia on the other hand prevents local governments from drawing up long-term development strategies based on the functioning of this border.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the European countries, now called post-communist, a whole series of processes of political transformation took place after 1989, which changed the conditions and the quality of life of their citizens, for example, the promotion of democracy (Freyburg et al., 2009), liberalization of the economy (Roaf et al., 2014), state institutional reforms (Fritz, 2007), public administration reform (Nemec, 2014). These processes also translate into the regional and local level (Chapman and Meliciani, 2018; Ezcurra et al., 2007). It is most clearly visible in the case of changes in the significance of particular regions and the functions performed by the national borders.

Looking at the substantial changes in the importance of regions in the analysed part of Europe,

two processes become apparent. The first one is an increase in the importance of metropolitan areas, especially those comprising the national capitals (Egidy, 2017; Salukvadze and Golubchikov, 2016). The second one is the decline and depopulation of various regions, including the rural ones situated peripherally (Kriaučiūnas et al., 2014; Mladenov and Ilieva 2012).

In the latter case, we are dealing with changes in the significance of national borders. The most important change is to enable the citizens of these countries to move outside their own countries. After some post-communist countries had integrated into the European Union, far-reaching changes in the functions of borders in this area took place. The external borders of the enlarged European Union still remained hardly permeable to a greater (e.g. the Polish-Russian, Lithuanian-Russian, Romanian-Ukrainian borders) or

to a slightly smaller extent (e.g. the Hungarian-Serbian or Croatian-Bosnian borders). However, borders within the enlarged European Union have become very permeable, more where the countries were simultaneously members of the Schengen Area (e.g. the Polish-Lithuanian borders, the Hungarian-Slovak borders), slightly less where the countries being in the EU were not members of the Schengen Area (e.g. the Romanian-Bulgarian border, the Croatian-Slovenian border) (Golunov, 2016; Ilieş and Grama, 2010; Zupančič et al., 2018; Ilieş et al., 2011). This, of course, has also translated into the functioning of border regions. The regions located near the intra-EU borders gained the most, as these borders ceased to act as barriers. On the opposite pole, there are regions that suddenly became cross-border ones due to the emergence of new borders (e.g. the border between South Ossetia and Georgia, the border between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine). In between there are border regions along the thus far existing borders that have not become intra-EU ones (Hergezlová, 2017; Ilieş et al., 2010; Xheneti et al., 2013; Vodichev et al., 2016; Szymańska, 2016; German, 2016).

The common point of the two spatial dimensions of transformation processes discussed above is the changes taking place in the border areas. While in the case of borders between the European Union member states, the impact of these borders is currently low (because they do not constitute a spatial or institutional barrier), in the case of borders between countries that are not members of the EU/EFTA or the Union State of Russia and Belarus and in the case of external borders of the EU – the existence of these borders still has an overwhelming impact on border areas (because these borders still function as a more or less strong spatial and institutional barrier). This is particularly pronounced with people or goods trying to cross borders, which is time consuming and burdensome. It also impedes cooperation between regions located on both sides of the border. In such a situation, the border, acting as a barrier, enhances e.g. the peripheralisation of the border region, making it less attractive for investment, but also for inhabitants. This is clearly evident in the case of Euroregions, which cover three or more countries both belonging and not belonging to EU/EFTA (Grigorescu et al., 2016; Stokłosa, 2012).

Hence, the main objective of the study is to analyse the impact of the Polish-Russian border on the development opportunities of the area directly adjacent to the Polish side of the border. Multiple depictions of the border are possible, e.g. as a barrier (Więckowski, 2001), a metaphor (Nikiforova, 2010), an institution (Mielnik, 2006), etc. This study treated the border as a barrier whose permeability to goods and services is conditioned by its political character (i.e. decisions taken by the authorities of the two countries divided by

this border). The timeframe of the study covers the period after Poland's accession to the European Union, which greatly determined the significance of the mentioned border, as it has become an external border of the EU. The suggested thesis is that overdependence of the function of this border on political decisions taken in Brussels, Warsaw and Moscow makes it difficult to treat it as a stable pro-development factor.

## 2. METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The research area was defined as a border area, since the state border between Poland with Russia, which is also the external border of the European Union, constitutes its northern boundary. Thus, this area meets the basic condition for being a border area. It is also a peripheral area in spatial and not functional terms. This means that in the scale of both Poland and the European Union it is located far from the centres of political and economic life and is hardly accessible in terms of transportation (Miszczyk, 2013). The analysed area covers poviats (counties – LAU-1) located on the Polish side of the border with Russia, and more precisely with its exclave – the Kaliningrad Oblast; precisely there are 5 poviats (bartoszycki, braniewski, kętrzyński, gołdapski and węgorzewski) located in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship and the nowodworski powiat in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The latter was excluded from analysis because its border with the Kaliningrad Oblast is located on the Vistula Spit and is very short – therefore, the bordering with this district has practically no significance for this powiat (Fig. 1).

The peripheral location, both in Poland and in the European Union – which obviously negatively affects its development prospects – is an important feature of this area.

Local development is also used in the paper. There are two basic criteria distinguishing the definitions of local development (Sekula, 2012): [1] from the viewpoint of the local community and its needs and [2] from the viewpoint of the changes taking place within the local arrangement. The second approach has been adopted in the paper, because it facilitates the analysis of the impact of the Polish-Russian border on the development of the studied area.

It is thought that the SWOT analysis (Pahl and Richter, 2007) is the basic tool used to analyse the development opportunities of border regions. It has been considered as the basic method of analysis because it guarantees a holistic analysis of factors affecting the development of regions with a breakdown into: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. In addition, the analysis of development factors was used, broken down by: exogenous factors, endogenous factors, structural factors, and traditional factors (see: Ezcurra et al., 2007). The complementary role of this

analysis in relation to the SWOT analysis was to focus on which development factors occurring in the analysed area could be classified as structural and which as

traditional ones, and what the place of the state border among them is.



Fig. 1. Area of analysis (own elaboration).

Data collection was based on desk research (Czarniawska, 2014). According to the principles of triangulation – the data collected came from three main sources: (1) statistical data (regarding the population and border traffic) from government institutions: Local Data Bank and Border Guard; (2) selected studies (these were mainly documents containing development strategies) prepared for the needs of the self-government of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship and individual *poviat* self-governments; (3) scientific publications.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with the SWOT principles, the analysis was divided into four categories of strategic factors, of which the first two are internal factors and the next two are external ones.

In the case of the analysed *poviats*, among internal factors weaknesses predominate over strengths. This is confirmed by Godlewska-Majkowska's analysis (n.d.), because in its classification it included only pro-ecological activities, the strong development potentials of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, the average human capital, living conditions of the population, accessibility, and the weak economy and innovativeness.

The relatively good condition of the natural environment is one of the clearly strong points of the area covered by the analysis (Kistowski, 2013). The analysed *poviats* belong entirely to the so-called "Green Lungs of Poland" (Polish: Zielone Płuca Polski w 2015 r., 2017). Therefore, rural tourism, which has been developing dynamically in Poland in recent years, is a great opportunity for the region. However, the discussed area is less developed in this respect than the neighbouring very attractive tourist regions (Bednarek-Szczepańska, 2017). Perhaps the reason for this is low transport accessibility. The second factor may be greater attractiveness of the so-called Great Masurian Lakes Region located more to the south for tourism and

recreation. In the economic sphere, the analysed area, similarly to the whole Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, for years has been one of the least developed in the country, with relatively low investment attractiveness and low innovativeness of economy (Borowicz et al., 2016; Godlewska-Majkowska, n.d.; Dziemianowicz and Szlachta, 2005). For example, in 2017 investment outlays in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship amounted to 5,075 PLN per capita, with an average for Poland of 6,712 PLN. Intramural expenditures on R&D activity per capita in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship amounted to 184.5 PLN, with the average for Poland of 535.6 PLN (Local Data Bank). This results in a relatively bad situation on the labour market. If the registered unemployment rate in Poland in 2017 is assumed to be 100, its value in the five analysed districts ranged from 181.8 to 336.4 (Local Data Bank, 2019). Although regional authorities' planning documents assume economic growth, including an increase in the attractiveness of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (Polish: Strategia Rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego województwa warmińsko-mazurskiego do roku 2025, 2013; Polish: RSI – Regionalna Strategia Innowacyjności Województwa Warmińsko-Mazurskiego do roku 2020, 2010). However, it should be kept in mind that these are only intentions whose practical implementation depends on many factors. The province's specialisations include: water economics, high-quality food, and wood and furniture manufacturing. Of course, they may improve the inhabitants' living conditions, but they will not necessarily improve the position of the voivodeship in relation to other Polish regions (Dziemianowicz, 2017). Looking at the analysed area against the background of the voivodeship, it is predestined to develop the agricultural function (Gwiazdzinska-Goraj and Jezierska-Tholle, 2013), with the development of industry and services in cities (Godlewska-Majkowska, n.d.).

The border with Russia, which is the northern border of the studied area, is difficult to cross and there

are relatively few border crossings. Looking at Poland's transport system, we can see that the system of main roads and railway lines bypasses this area (Komornicki et al., 2015). Only the main international expressway leading from Kaliningrad to the west (S22) passes through the braniewski powiat. None of the railway lines passing through the region is more important (even those linking Braniewo and Kaliningrad, which for several years have been used exclusively for freight traffic). The accessibility of public transport to the population is also very poor (Rosik et al., 2017). The recently opened Olsztyn-Mazury Airport is located within a short distance from this area. According to the plans, it should become an important development factor (Bogdański, 2014), but, for the time being, its pro-development impact on the region is small (in 2017 it served only 101,000 passengers (Polish: Size of Polish airports – passenger traffic and aircraft movements in domestic and international market in scheduled and charter services in 2015 – 2017, 2018). By contrast, in international terms, the Pan-European transport corridor No. I Branch A (Helsinki – Tallinn – Riga – Kaunas – Kaliningrad – Gdańsk) passes through the western edge of the analysed area. Its infrastructure in the Gdańsk–Kaliningrad section is in a relatively average state (normal-gauge railway line: No. 9 and No. 204 and expressway: S7 and S22 on the Polish side). But for political-economic reasons (in particular, due to a lack of border control), the corridor No I. Branch B (Helsinki – Riga – Vilnius – Warsaw), bypassing the area in question from the east is much more often used for longitudinal transport. On the other hand, the transport corridor No. IX. Branch B (Kaliningrad – Vilnius – Minsk – Gomel), which runs parallel from Kaliningrad to the border with Lithuania is of fundamental importance to the Kaliningrad region.

Ageing of the population is a serious factor negatively influencing the size of human resources in the analysed area. In 2017, people aged 70 and over constituted 8.9-10.9% of the population of the discussed districts. The rate of natural increase (except for the Gołdap powiat) was negative. Moreover, the net migration rate was also negative (Local Data Bank).

Looking at opportunities and concerns, we can clearly see the impact of two factors. The first one is the national policy. In addition to the support from standard EU and national funds, the analysed area also receives support from the additional national level assistance programme. It is the "Operational Programme Eastern Poland 2014–2020" (Polish: Program Operacyjny Polska Wschodnia 2014–2020), which covers five voivodeships located in the east of Poland and is focused on stimulating entrepreneurship and improving transport accessibility (especially railways). In addition, there is also an indirect impact of the presence of the European Union's external border in the east of Poland – this translates into different

objectives and tasks of the Opole development strategy for the areas located at the eastern and western borders of the country (Smutek and Łonyszyn, 2016).

The Kaliningrad Oblast located north of the analysed area is quite well developed economically, especially in comparison with other Russian regions (see: Gimbitsky et al., 2014; Kuznetsova, 2015; Wiśniewska et al., 2016). In addition, this whole area has the status of a special economic zone (Gareev, 2013).

From a geopolitical point of view, it can be both a platform for lively cooperation between the EU and Russia (which would benefit the population living in the analysed area), as well as a platform for confrontation (on which it would clearly lose out) (see: Palmowski, 2013; Wendt and Ilieș, 2004; Żęgota, 2018). Of course, the areas located on both sides of the border differ in political, economic and social conditions of development, while they have very similar environmental conditions (Romanova, 2017).

On the entire 210 km land border of Poland with Russia, there are currently only 4 road border crossing points (Gronowo, Grzechotki, Bezledy, Gołdap) and 2 railway ones (Braniewo, Skandawa, Głomno is currently closed) plus one sea one (Frombork). However, there are proposals to open new connections (Gumenyuk and Studzienicki, 2018). Polish local governments also take part in this by proposing the opening of 5 new border crossings: 2 road (Michałkowo, Pearls), 2 river (Stopki, Węgorapa) and 1 pedestrian (Rapa) one. However, looking at the current political situation, this is unrealistic.

The Polish-Kaliningrad relations are a derivative of Polish-Russian relations and the EU-Russian ones. They actually started only after 1990 and were characterised by cooperation. However, as a result of the Ukrainian crisis, they cooled down (cf. Żęgota, 2014; Żukowski et al. (eds.), 2018). Therefore, it can be concluded that the state border in question is characterised by low stability and, at the same time, high susceptibility to political influence (Golunov, 2017). The influence of changing international agreements between Poland and Russia on the number of people crossing the border proves the strong impact of politics on the functioning of the Polish-Russian border (fig. 2). In connection with Poland's accession to the European Union, a new agreement was signed between Poland and Russia in September 2003, which introduced a visa requirement for passenger traffic between the two countries. In addition, the Russian authorities introduced the obligation to insure means of transport twice. As a result, there has been a significant decrease in crossing the border (Cichoński, 2004). Subsequently, the introduction of a new visa regime in June 2007 (until then the visa for Polish citizens and the Kaliningrad region was free of charge) resulted in a three-fold decrease in the number of visas issued by the

Polish consulate in Kaliningrad compared to the previous month, which resulted in a substantial decrease in the number of instances of crossing the border in 2009–2010. On the other hand, the introduction of the so-called local border traffic in July 2012, based on the EU Regulation 1931/2006, was an impulse for an increase in the number of people crossing the border. For example, in 2013, the number of local traffic cards issued by the Polish consulate in Kaliningrad amounted to over 180,000 (whereas, for example, there were less than 80,000 multiple-entry visas) (Studzińska and Nowicka, 2016). This is connected with the maximum in the numbers of instances of crossing the border, which in 2014–2015 amounted to c. 6.3 m persons a year. This had a positive impact on the Polish local governments affected by this traffic, which recorded a clear economic recovery (Anisiewicz and Palmowski, 2014). Unfortunately, in July 2016 the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs suspended the local border traffic with the Kaliningrad Oblast. This resulted in an almost three-fold decrease in the number of instances of crossing the border in 2016 and 2017. Currently, there is a rising trend.

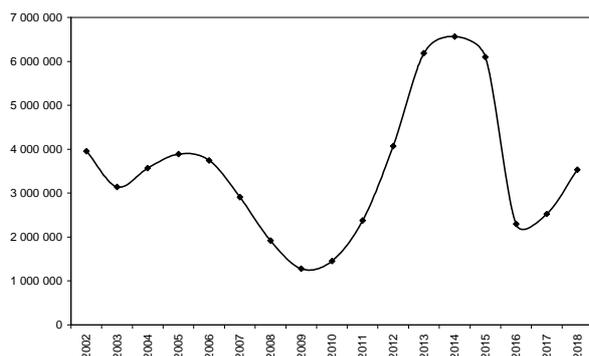


Fig. 2. Number of people crossing the Polish-Russian border in 2002–2018 (Source: Own elaboration based on Statystyki SG, 2019).

At present, the situation on the NATO and EU-Russia lines is exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine (Kiryukhin, 2016; Roy, 2014), and indirectly by far-reaching differences between Russia and EU and NATO countries about the situation in Eastern Europe and beyond (Haukkala, 2015; van Herpen, 2015). This is not conducive to revitalising the exchange on the Polish-Russian border.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysed area is characterised by one of the worst social and economic situations in Poland and there is no indication that the situation could change in the coming years (despite visible progress). Its only important strengths are its natural values, while the biggest weaknesses are the state of the economy and its innovativeness. This will result in depopulation of this region, just as of the whole voivodeship. Potentially, the

Polish-Russian border is a great opportunity for its development. Unfortunately, its functioning depends too much on political factors of a national and global character. As a result, developing a strategy for the Polish border area that would have a high probability of implementation is very difficult.

Fortunately, local governments on both sides do not show excessive interest in politics and focus on the continuation of existing cooperation (Sebentsov and Zotova, 2018). The majority of Polish local governments perceive the potential positive impact of their neighbouring with the Kaliningrad region (which is especially apparent in the development strategies they prepare). But at the same time, local authorities point out the deficiencies in the development of transport infrastructure (including a small number of road border crossings with Russia) and an unstable political situation between Poland and Russia (especially very frequent changes in regulations regarding the crossing of the border by the population) (Polish: Lokalna strategia rozwoju na lata 2009 – 2014 obszaru objętego działaniami LGD Fundacji Lokalna Grupa Działania Partnerstwo dla Warmii, 2009; Polish: Plan Rozwoju Lokalnego Powiatu Bartoszyckiego na lata 2015–2020, 2015; Polish: Plan rozwoju lokalnego. Potencjał powiatu kętrzyńskiego z uwzględnieniem planowanych inwestycji na lata 2007 – 2013, no date; Polish: Strategia rozwoju powiatu gołdapskiego, 2009; Polish: Zintegrowany program rozwoju powiatu węgorzewskiego na lata 2007–2015, 2007).

In the light of the current political situation and tensions between NATO and the EU on the one hand and Russia on the other – the Polish-Russian border should rather not be treated as an opportunity, but on the contrary – if the political situation worsens – it may become more of a threat to the local community.

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