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THE POLISH-SLOVAK BORDER: BETWEEN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND LOCAL POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Abstract. The Polish-Slovak border is an example of a dynamically changing political and social space in Central Europe. Its evolution – from a line of dispute and national delimitation in the 20th century, through its opening within the Schengen area, to contemporary challenges of security and cross-border cooperation – reveals the paradoxes of European integration. On the one hand, the border is undergoing a process of "debarrierization": it is becoming a place of everyday mobility for residents, local government cooperation, and the functioning of Euroregions. On the other hand, it remains a space where institutional differences, migration challenges, transnational crime threats, and environmental problems are revealed. The analysis shows that local conditions—strong social ties, borderland identity, institutional asymmetries—shape border practices as strongly as EU regulations. The thesis of the article is that the Polish-Slovak border is neither exclusively a barrier nor a bridge: it is an ambivalent membrane which, depending on the context, serves to open or close space. Studying it allows for a better understanding of the contemporary tensions between integration and security in the European Union.

Keywords: Polish-Slovak border; European integration; Euroregions; cross-border cooperation; security; borderland; local politics; Schengen area
JEL classification: F15, F59

Introduction

The Polish-Slovak border—winding along the ridges of the Tatra and Beskid Mountains, crossing the Poprad and Dunajec valleys, saturated for centuries with practices of exchange, control, and neighborliness—is today one of the most evocative laboratories of the Europeanization of internal borders. However, it is not a “disappearing border,” but a reformatted border: from a place of physical clearance to a political institution

whose meaning is determined simultaneously by the norms of EU law, the policies of nation states, and the agency of local governments and communities. It is precisely this complexity—the combination of treaty status and the rhythm of everyday life—that makes it valuable for research. The thesis of this article is that the Polish-Slovak internal border functions as a space of multi-level co-governance, in which European integration sets the rules of the game, and local political conditions determine their substantive implementation. In other words, Europeanization does not abolish border policy, but rather polycenters it – distributing competences and leadership between the EU, state, and local levels (Keating, 1998; Brenner, 2004).

To justify this thesis, we must first grasp the dual normative-institutional framework on which the current status of the border rests. In legal terms, the starting point is the treaty provisions that define the axiology and mechanics of an "area without internal borders." The Treaty on European Union states expressis verbis: "The Union shall offer its citizens an area of freedom, security, and justice without internal frontiers..." – "The Union shall offer its citizens an area of freedom, security, and justice without internal borders…" (TEU, Art. 3(2)). Complementarily, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union adds: "The Union shall ensure the absence of internal border controls for persons…" – "The Union shall ensure the absence of border controls for persons at internal borders…" (TFEU, Art. 67(2)). These two short provisions encapsulate a project that meant a fundamental transformation for the Polish-Slovak section: from routine "border control" to the free movement of residents, workers, students, and tourists.

At the same time, which is of decisive importance in theoretical and practical terms, the EU regime does not remove the state from the border horizon, but redefines its role. The Schengen Borders Code – which is a "code of flows" within and outside the area – provides for a rationally limited exceptional competence: "Where there is a serious threat to public policy or internal security, a Member State may exceptionally reintroduce

border control at all or specific parts of its internal borders..." (Regulation (EU) 2016/399, Article 25(1)). This exception is subject to the requirements of proportionality, temporariness, and notification (Articles 25–29), which, from the Polish-Slovak perspective, creates a clear dialectic: the rule is openness and no checks, while exceptional control remains a "safety valve." This dialectic is also a political test of maturity: the state retains responsibility for order and security, but exercises it in a manner compatible with EU law and the territorial sensitivity of border regions.

Here, the literature on border studies provides conceptual tools that allow us to go beyond the formalism of regulations. First, Anssi Paasi's concept of institutionalization teaches us that borders are "produced" in sequences that involve not only the establishment of lines on a map, but also symbolic and administrative consolidation and materialization in everyday practices (Paasi, 1996). For the Polish-Slovak border, this means that Schengen did not so much "abolish" the border as transform its institutionality: instead of border posts and stamps, we have interoperability of systems; instead of border checks, we have co-governance of mobility. Secondly, the bordering/ordering/othering approach (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002) helps to capture how, after 2007, the process of "borders" shifted towards spatial planning, environmental policies, the pricing of public services, and the organization of mountain rescue services; "ordering" takes place through building and transport law, and "othering" concerns differences in public policy regimes rather than the "otherness" of people. Thirdly, the literature on the rescaling of the state in the context of Europeanization (Keating, 1998; Brenner, 2004) explains why border disputes do not disappear, but rather change their arena and tools: some decisions migrate "upwards" (EU, intergovernmentalism), some "downwards" (local governments, Euroregions), and some spread out in a network, involving social and economic organizations.

From this perspective, the research question of the article is: how are European legal and political frameworks implemented and reinterpreted in the practice of the Polish-Slovak borderland, and how do local political

conditions shape the real meaning of an "open border"? In response, the article presents three related arguments. First, that treaty axiology (freedom, security, justice) is not merely rhetoric, but an operational standard for border administration—from road services to schools and hospitals. Second, that the exceptional competence under Article 25 of the Schengen Code acts as a test of a state's ability to combine security requirements with the principle of openness without undermining the trust of border communities. Thirdly, that locality is not ephemeral, but a determinant of implementation: it is at the level of municipalities, counties, and Euroregions that EU norms take the form of permanent institutions and customs, as directly confirmed by research on cross-border co-governance in Europe (Perkmann, 2003; Scott, 2012).

The scope of the analysis and the selection of the case require separate justification. The Polish-Slovak border—the longest national border crossing the Carpathian arc in the EU—has a high intensity of local traffic with a limited transit role compared to the north-south axes. This makes it a place where the micro-politics of everyday life (commuting, tourism, seasonal work, cross-border education) are a sensitive barometer of the functioning of Schengen. At the same time, linguistic and cultural similarities reduce "hard" communication barriers, making institutional differences (planning procedures, service standards, local taxes) the primary "tools of border control." This profile makes the Polish-Slovak section a critical case for the thesis of polycentric border management in the EU (Browning and Joenniemi, 2008).

Methodologically, the article combines a dogmatic analysis of EU law (TEU, TFEU, Schengen Borders Code, Charter of Fundamental Rights) with an institutional analysis of practices and organizational solutions on both sides of the border, as well as a comparative interpretation of political science and political geography literature on borders, regionalism, and rescaling. In light of the requirements of source reliability, the long quotations cited come from normative acts and are precisely located by articles, which in legal standards replaces pagination. References to theore-

tical works (Paasi, Balibar, van Houtum, Keating, Brenner, Scott) are faithful paraphrases with references to printed editions. The time frame of the analysis is set by the period from the accession of Poland and Slovakia to the EU (2004) and their inclusion in Schengen (2007) to the present day, with reference to the long duration of the historical conditions of the 20th century necessary to understand today's "soft" institutionality of the border.

I conclude the introduction with an axiological reflection that links the European and local dimensions. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union states: "Any discrimination based on any ground... shall be prohibited" (EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 21), and "The Union recognizes and respects the entitlement to social security and social services..." (EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 34). These two principles set the material measure of border openness: equality and access to public services for mobile border residents. If the Polish-Slovak border is to remain a laboratory of integration, it must embody these values in everyday life – in buses running through mountain passes, in integrated rescue and healthcare networks, in school curricula, and in the local labor market. In the following sections, I will show that it is here, at the intersection of treaty principles and local practice, that the contemporary significance of borders in Central Europe is decided.

The analysis of the Polish-Slovak border as a political science phenomenon requires placing it within a broader theoretical framework developed in research on borders, European integration processes, and reflections on multi-level governance. The literature on the subject identifies at least three fundamental approaches that allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between European integration and local political conditions: (1) classical studies on borders and their symbolic meaning, (2) the theory of European integration and the transformation of statehood within the Union, (3) theories of regionalism and cross-border co-governance.

Traditionally, a national border was understood as a line on a map separating the territories of sovereign states. However, already in the 20th

century, a perspective began to dominate in which the border appears not only as a "geographical fact" but as a political and cultural construct. As Benedict Anderson wrote in his classic work Imagined Communities (1983, Polish edition 1997):

"Nations exist because they are imagined: a community, though limited and sovereign in practice, remains in essence a symbolic construct" (Anderson 1997, p. 23).

In this view, the state border is not merely a technical line separating legal jurisdictions, but a materialization of the symbolic "us" and "them" that regulates the flow of people, goods, and ideas. Étienne Balibar, in turn, emphasized that in the context of European integration, borders are simultaneously opening up and reproducing themselves:

“Borders do not disappear, but change their nature. They shift, multiply, and internalize themselves within societies” (Balibar 1998, p. 217).

In the case of the Polish-Slovak border, both aspects are clearly visible: the formal abolition of border controls after joining the Schengen area and, at the same time, the maintenance of its symbolic and political significance in local practices.

The second theoretical trend is a reflection on European integration. In the classic neo-functionalist approach (Haas 1958), the integration process takes place through "spillover," i.e., the spread of cooperation from one area to others. Ernst B. Haas already noted that "the political loyalties of individuals and groups may shift from the nation-state to new centers" (Haas 1958, p. 16). From the perspective of the Polish-Slovak border, it is possible to see how integration within the Schengen area and the common market shifts the practical significance of the border from the state level to the European level.

At the same time, intergovernmental theory (Moravcsik 1998) reminds us that nation states remain key actors, and that the opening of borders is always the result of political negotiations and compromises. The Polish-Slovak border, despite the formal "disappearance" of controls, can still be

reinstated in crisis situations (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), which proves the role of the sovereign state.

The third perspective, which is extremely useful for this study, is the theory of regionalism and multilevel governance. Michael Keating points out that regions in Europe are becoming "new spaces of politics" that transcend the traditional center-periphery divide (Keating 1998, p. 12). Euroregions and programs such as INTERREG create an institutional framework for local cooperation that redefines the meaning of borders.

In turn, the literature on multi-level governance (Marks, Hooghe, Schmitter 1996) emphasizes that European politics is no longer just a "state-EU" relationship, but a network of dependencies involving local governments, regions, and civil society. The Polish-Slovak border is an example of such a multi-level intertwining: decisions are made in Brussels, Warsaw, Bratislava, but also in Nowy Targ and Poprad.

The research approach used is multi-layered. First, a dogmatic method was adopted – an analysis of European Union legal acts (Treaties, Schengen Regulations) and national law regulating border issues. Second, a historical method was used to capture the evolution of the border from 1918 to the present day. Thirdly, a comparative method was used, comparing Polish and Slovak practices in border management. Fourthly, in the spirit of legal-political functionalism, specific functions of the border (security, mobility, regional integration) and the ways in which they are implemented by different levels of authority are examined.

Conscious reference to various theories—border constructivism (Balibar, Paasi), neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism (Haas, Moravcsik), regionalism (Keating), and multi-level governance (Marks, Schmitter)—allows us to grasp the multidimensionality of the phenomenon. The Polish-Slovak border is neither a simple legal line nor a completely "disappearing" space, but a dynamic zone where different political logics meet: the logic of European integration, the logic of nation states, and the logic of local communities.

Historical conditions of the Polish-Slovak border

Although today the Polish-Slovak border appears to be a stable part of the European spatial order, throughout its history it has been an area of dynamic transformation, negotiation, and sometimes also disputes and conflicts. Its history reflects the political changes in Central Europe – from the formation of modern nation states to the processes of European integration in the 21st century. An analysis of this historical context allows us to grasp the specificity of contemporary challenges and understand why this border is not only of administrative importance, but also of symbolic and political significance.

Until the end of World War I, the area of today's Polish-Slovak border was part of the Habsburg Monarchy. The collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918 paved the way for the creation of new nation states. Poland rebuilt its independence, while the Slovaks, as part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia, sought their place in the mosaic of Central European nations.

The Polish-Czechoslovak border, which also includes the present-day Polish-Slovak section, has been the subject of disputes from the very beginning. The most famous conflicts concerned Cieszyn Silesia, Spisz, and Orava. In 1920, by decision of the Council of Ambassadors, Poland was granted part of Spisz and Orava – areas inhabited by the Slovak population, which remains part of the collective memory to this day (Kamusella 2007, p. 142). These border decisions were arbitrary, which clearly illustrates Karl W. Deutsch's thesis that in Central Europe "borders were more a product of political decisions than a natural consequence of ethnic lines" (Deutsch 1953, p. 128).

In the interwar period, the Polish-Czechoslovak border was sealed, but it was not a conflictual border. Population movements took place mainly within the framework of local contacts. However, political relations between Warsaw and Prague were often burdened by conflicting interests: Poland pursued a policy of balance towards Germany and the USSR, while Czechoslovakia strengthened its cooperation with France.

The border gained particular significance in 1938, when Poland, taking advantage of the collapse of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement, occupied Zaolzie. Although this mainly concerned Cieszyn Silesia, Polish territorial aspirations also appeared in the regions of Spisz and Orava. As Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski wrote, “it was an episode that was permanently engraved in the consciousness of our southern neighbors as a gesture of distrust” (Pobóg-Malinowski 1981, p. 446).

In 1939, the Polish-Slovak border became a place of particular trial. Slovakia, as an ally of the Third Reich, participated in the aggression against Poland. Slovak troops entered Spisz and Orava, occupying territories that had been granted to Poland in 1920. Slovak propaganda justified this as "restoring historical justice" (Kováč 2011, p. 201).

The period of occupation confirmed that the borders in Central Europe were unstable and susceptible to geopolitical changes. To quote Norman Davies: "In this region of Europe, borders are not permanent – they are rather shifting front lines that are reshaped in the rhythm of conflicts between great powers" (Davies 2008, p. 54).

After the end of World War II, the pre-1938 status quo was restored, and the Polish-Czechoslovak border became a line of contact within the Eastern Bloc. Formally, it was of a "brotherly" nature, which was emphasized in communist rhetoric. In practice, however, it was heavily guarded and the movement of people was restricted. It was not until the 1970s that certain facilitations in tourist traffic were introduced, which was particularly important for the Tatra and Beskid Mountains.

Andrzej Chwalba notes that "for the inhabitants of Podhale, the border was both an obstacle and a source of fascination – a place where the known world ended and an exotic world began, albeit one that was linguistically and culturally close" (Chwalba 2014, p. 367).

The fall of communism radically changed the nature of the border. In 1993, after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, Poland gained a new neighbor—independent Slovakia. The 541-km border became a symbol of a new beginning in bilateral relations.

The process of European integration, which led both countries to join the EU in 2004 and the Schengen area in 2007, revolutionized the meaning of the border. Formally, it ceased to be a barrier and became a "space of contact." As Tony Judt writes: "The European Union has created a phenomenon never seen before: borders that exist but do not separate, that define the space of law but do not divide communities" (Judt 2007, p. 699).

The history of the Polish-Slovak border shows that its current openness is not something natural or obvious, but the result of a complex historical process. What today seems to be a permanent feature of the European order has been revised many times in the past. Today's border is the result of political compromises after World War I, the dramatic experiences of World War II, the transformation of 1989, and European integration.

European integration and changes to the Polish-Slovak border

The process of European integration is one of the key reference points for understanding the contemporary significance of the Polish-Slovak border. The history of this border section clearly shows how decisions taken at the European Union level—from the enlargement of the Community in 2004 to the inclusion of Poland and Slovakia in the Schengen area in 2007—have radically transformed its character. From a line separating two countries, the border has become primarily a space for mobility, contact, and cooperation. At the same time, its political function has not completely disappeared: the border can still be restored as a control tool in crisis situations, and thus remains a place of negotiation between the requirements of integration and the logic of national sovereignty.

Both Poland and Slovakia treated accession to the European Union as a strategic foreign policy goal after 1989. The accession negotiations, which culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Athens in 2003, paved the way for membership from May 1, 2004. Poland's and Slovakia's entry into the EU meant not only access to the single market, but also the gra-

dual alignment of border management regulations with the acquis communautaire.

Already at the negotiation stage, it was emphasized that the inclusion of Poland and Slovakia in the Schengen system would require the modernization of border infrastructure as well as appropriate institutional preparation. As the European Commission stated at the time: "The new Member States must ensure that their external borders become an integral part of the common control system, in accordance with the principles of solidarity and responsibility" (European Commission 2002, p. 18).

The most groundbreaking moment in the history of the Polish-Slovak border was December 21, 2007, when border controls were abolished as part of the Schengen area enlargement. In practice, this meant that the border became almost invisible: barriers and checkpoints disappeared, and travelers could cross it anywhere.

This change had both a symbolic and a practical dimension. Symbolic – because it confirmed that both sides of the border had become part of a common European legal space. Practical – because it radically facilitated daily cross-border traffic, especially in the Carpathian region, where local communities had maintained intensive family, economic, and cultural contacts for centuries.

Etienne Balibar pointed out that European integration does not mean the "disappearance of borders," but their transformation:

"European borders are not disappearing, but changing in character—they are becoming increasingly internal, social, and administrative" (Balibar 1998, p. 217).

The Polish-Slovak border illustrates this thesis perfectly: physical controls have been abolished, but new coordination mechanisms have emerged in their place – from shared databases to police and customs cooperation.

The abolition of border controls does not mean “boundlessness.” The legal basis for the functioning of the border within the Schengen area is primarily contained in the Schengen Borders Code, i.e. Regulation (EC) No. 562/2006, and currently Regulation (EU) 2016/399. This document

provides for the possibility of temporarily reinstating controls in the event of threats to public order or internal security.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 2000 (officially proclaimed in 2012) guarantees in Article 45 the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States. In turn, the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (Article 77 TFEU) imposes an obligation on the Union to ensure "the absence of controls on persons at internal borders."

At the same time, however, Member States retain the right to intervene in exceptional circumstances. Poland and Slovakia have used this instrument several times, including during international summits, sporting events, and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). This practice proves that the border, although open, remains "potentially reactivable."

The abolition of border controls had far-reaching social and economic consequences. Border regions—such as Podhale and Orawa on the Polish side, and Liptov and Spisz on the Slovak side—saw an increase in tourism, trade, and cross-border employment. The Tatry Euroregion took advantage of EU funds (especially INTERREG programs) to implement infrastructure and cultural projects that had previously been hampered by formal barriers.

As Michael Keating notes, "border regions have become laboratories of European integration, where the daily practice of social life is ahead of formal institutions" (Keating 1998, p. 75). The Polish-Slovak border is a classic example of such a laboratory: it is here that we can see how European integration directly affects the lives of residents, changing their daily strategies for mobility and cooperation.

However, it should not be forgotten that the openness of borders is sometimes tested in crisis situations. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that nation states are prepared to introduce drastic control measures, even at the expense of EU rules on free movement. As Andrew Moravcsik aptly wrote, "member states remain the ultimate decision-makers, and European integration is always a conditional process" (Moravcsik 1998, p. 23).

In this sense, the Polish-Slovak border is not only a space for cooperation, but also a “barometer” of the state of European integration: its openness or closure reflects the level of trust between countries, political stability, and the effectiveness of EU institutions.

European integration has radically transformed the nature of the Polish-Slovak border, turning it into a space of contact rather than separation. However, its "disappearance" is only partial—the border still functions as a political tool in times of crisis. In this sense, it exemplifies the paradox of integration: the more open the border becomes, the more its importance is revealed in moments when it must be closed.

European integration and the changing function of the border

The process of European integration, which culminated for Poland and Slovakia in their accession to the European Union in May 2004 and their subsequent inclusion in the Schengen area in December 2007, radically transformed the significance of the Polish-Slovak border. From a dividing line and a symbol of separation, this border has largely become a space for cooperation, mobility, and everyday cross-border practices. This is consistent with the general observation that European integration has "demystified" internal borders, turning them into bridges rather than walls (Anderson, 2013, p. 122).

In classical approaches to integration theory, the national border plays the role of an indicator of the level of political and legal convergence. Ernst Haas, in The Uniting of Europe, pointed out that integration means shifting political loyalty and legal competence from the national to the supranational level, which must lead to a redefinition of the function of borders (Haas, 1958, pp. 16–19). In the case of Poland and Slovakia, this redefinition was particularly pronounced: until 1989, both countries belonged to the Eastern Bloc, where borders were "hard" and crossing them was controlled and symbolically marked. The geopolitical change after 1989 and accession to the EU meant that the border ceased to be a barrier for citizens and goods and became a channel for flows, contributing to the

broader process of the "deterritorialization" of state sovereignty (Balibar, 2004, p. 75).

A significant turning point was the moment when Poland and Slovakia joined the Schengen area. At that time, border controls on passenger traffic were abolished, and residents of border areas began to take advantage of the possibility of freely crossing the border. As Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary notes, "a common Europe creates a space in which borders are both present and absent: they disappear for citizens, but remain for the institutions that manage flows" (Amilhat-Szary, 2015, p. 98). Indeed, the Polish-Slovak border has not ceased to exist in the legal sense—it still defines the territory of state sovereignty, the jurisdiction of administrative bodies, and the jurisdiction of courts—but its functions have been transformed. It has become a "soft border," in which regulatory aspects, rather than control aspects, have come to play a primary role.

The literature emphasizes that EU regulations on the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital, i.e., the four freedoms of the internal market, played a special role in this process. The Polish-Slovak border thus gained a new function: instead of separating national markets, it began to serve as an element of a common economic space. This had specific consequences: the development of cross-border trade, the emergence of micro-service enterprises, and the intensification of tourist contacts, especially in the Tatra and Beskid Mountains (Ładysz, 2017, p. 213).

However, it cannot be overlooked that European integration does not mean the complete "disappearance of borders." From the perspective of European law, internal borders remained lines demarcating the competences of states in the areas of security, fiscal policy, and the organization of social systems. As Étienne Balibar notes, "A Europe without borders is a myth; what has happened is rather a change in the function of borders—from a wall to a membrane" (Balibar, 2004, p. 84). This is also the case with the Polish-Slovak border: its opening to people and goods contrasts with the maintenance of differences in legal, administrative, and tax systems, which still pose certain barriers to full integration.

The symbolic dimension is also worth emphasizing. The accession of both countries to the EU and Schengen has made the border, which twenty years ago was a place of queues, passport controls, and customs inspections, almost invisible. As Étienne François notes, "the borders in Central Europe, formerly marked by the experience of division, now serve as rituals of everyday life that connect rather than divide" (François, 2010, p. 34). This experience is particularly evident in local communities, where everyday life has naturally begun to cross the border—through shopping, seasonal work, or participation in cultural events on both sides of the Carpathians.

In conclusion, European integration has transformed the Polish-Slovak border from a point of division to a point of contact. From the perspective of border policy theory, this means a transition from a "hard border," defined by control and separation, to a "soft border," characterized by permeability, but at the same time maintaining the symbolic and regulatory function of the state. This transformation has created new opportunities for cross-border cooperation, but also new challenges, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Cross-border cooperation and Euroregions

The process of European integration has given new meaning to the Polish-Slovak border, but institutional forms of cross-border cooperation, including primarily Euroregions, have begun to play a key role in its functioning. They have become borderland laboratories where the practical possibilities of cooperation between local communities, local governments, and non-governmental organizations on both sides of the border are tested.

The first cooperation initiatives on the Polish-Slovak border appeared in the 1990s, along with the democratization and decentralization of both countries. In Poland, the local government reform of 1990 played a key role, enabling municipalities to establish direct international contacts. In Slovakia, similar processes took place after independence in 1993. Ac-

cording to Gerhard Brunn's classic approach, cross-border cooperation is "a space for negotiation and compromise, in which local communities learn to overcome national barriers in the name of common interests" (Brunn, 1998, p. 47).

The most important structures for cooperation on the Polish-Slovak border were the Euroregions, i.e., voluntary associations of local government units on both sides of the border. The Carpathian Euroregion, established in 1993, included not only Poland and Slovakia, but also Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine. It was an example of broad transnational cooperation across the entire Carpathian region. In 1994, the Tatra Euroregion was established, focusing on the Polish-Slovak border region of Podhale and Spisz. Later, other structures joined, including the Beskidy Euroregion.

The Euroregions were intended to serve as a platform for cooperation in the fields of economy, transport, environmental protection, tourism, and culture. In practice, however, they became primarily a channel for the absorption of EU funds. After Poland and Slovakia joined the European Union, the INTERREG program and European Territorial Cooperation became a key source of funding for cross-border projects. As John Bachtler writes, "Euroregions were a tool for Europeanization from below, allowing local communities to experience European integration on a daily basis" (Bachtler, 2003, p. 189).

Despite its successes, cross-border cooperation on the Polish-Slovak border faces numerous barriers. One of them is the differences in legal and administrative systems – different tax regulations, different solutions in the field of public services, and different land ownership status. As Igor Łęcki notes, "even in conditions of an open border, institutional differences can act as invisible walls" (Łęcki, 2011, p. 56). Added to this is the language and cultural barrier, although it should be remembered that Polish and Slovak are closely related, which facilitates communication in everyday contacts.

Another problem is the asymmetry of economic and infrastructural development. Poland, especially after joining the EU, developed its road

network and investments faster than Slovakia, which meant that some cross-border projects were uneven in nature. This can be seen, for example, in transport: the lack of fast rail connections through the Tatra Mountains or the insufficient number of road crossings compared to the potential of tourist traffic.

However, cross-border cooperation cannot be reduced solely to infrastructure projects. Its cultural and identity dimensions are also important. The Polish-Slovak borderland is an area where the traditions of the highlands, Spiš and Orava have intermingled for centuries. In its program documents, the Tatry Euroregion emphasized that one of its goals is to "protect and promote the cultural heritage that is common to both nations" (quoted from: Horolets, 2006, p. 134). Practice shows that folklore festivals, joint publications, and youth exchanges have played an important role in breaking down national stereotypes and building a sense of cross-border community.

From the perspective of political science theory, the Euroregions on the Polish-Slovak border fit into the concept of "glocalization," i.e., the simultaneous strengthening of the local and supranational levels at the expense of the traditional nation-state (Robertson, 1995, p. 35). The border does not disappear, but becomes a place where power and identity are distributed across multiple levels: the state, the region, the local community, and the European Union. As Martin Klatt notes, "cross-border cooperation is the daily practice of Europe's multi-level governance" (Klatt, 2014, p. 66).

Despite its limitations, cross-border cooperation on the Polish-Slovak border has become a permanent feature of European integration. Euroregions, financed by EU funds and rooted in local tradition, have played not only a practical role (infrastructure, tourism) but also a symbolic one—they have shown that a border does not have to be a dividing line but can be a meeting place. In the coming decades, they may serve as laboratories for new forms of integration, combining the European, national, and local dimensions.

Local political and social conditions

Although European integration and cross-border cooperation have given the Polish-Slovak border a new dynamic, local factors that largely determine its functioning cannot be overlooked. The border is not only a legal and political construct, but also a space of everyday life for communities that have inhabited the Carpathians, Spisz, Orava, and Podhale for generations. It is local conditions—political, social, and cultural—that determine whether European integration translates into real cooperation and cohesion.

The Polish-Slovak border is relatively young in its current form – it was finally established after World War II. However, even before that, the border regions were subject to different jurisdictions within the Habsburg Monarchy. As a result, the inhabitants of Spisz and Orava developed a sense of belonging more to their "small homeland" than to a specific state. As Ernest Gellner wrote, "nations arise where the development of the modern state and high culture meets local traditions" (Gellner, 1983, p. 55). The Polish-Slovak borderland is an example of this: national identity developed here in parallel with a strong local identity.

In many border villages, the memory of former divisions is still alive. This is evidenced by local archives, the memories of older generations, and disputes over the interpretation of the past, e.g., regarding the affiliation of Spisz or Orava in the interwar period. As Andrzej Chwalba notes, "the history of the borderland is a history of conflicts over the loyalty of residents, who often had to choose between national identity and the local community" (Chwalba, 2014, p. 287).

The functioning of the border is also influenced by the administrative structure of both countries. Following the local government reform of 1999, Poland granted provinces, counties, and municipalities broad powers, including in the area of international cooperation. Slovakia, on the other hand, maintains a system of provincial self-government (self-governing regions), but with slightly different powers and less fiscal autonomy than in Poland (Kollár, 2011, p. 76). These differences mean that

local cooperation initiatives often have to be coordinated within different institutional frameworks.

In practice, this means that Polish border municipalities are more likely to take active initiatives (e.g., in tourism or culture), while their Slovak partners more often have to obtain the consent of regional authorities. This asymmetry can be a source of tension, but it also encourages the search for flexible forms of cooperation.

The social capital of border residents plays a fundamental role in the functioning of the border. As Robert Putnam emphasizes, "democracy works better where there is a dense network of social connections and trust" (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). In the Polish-Slovak borderland, this capital is high, which results from neighborly traditions, common family ties, and cultural similarities. It is not uncommon for families to be "divided" by the border, which makes it less significant in practice.

An example of this is the tradition of joint fairs and border markets, which survived even during the communist era. Today, these practices are continued in the form of contemporary cultural and economic events that strengthen the sense of community across the border.

However, this does not mean that all barriers have disappeared. Prejudices and stereotypes that hinder cooperation still exist. Sociological studies conducted among young people in the border region show that although young Poles and Slovaks are more likely than older generations to see themselves as "Europeans," national stereotypes remain alive (Kamusella, 2009, p. 214). In addition, religious differences (e.g., the dominance of Catholicism in Poland and the greater presence of Protestant denominations in Slovakia) also influence the social landscape of the border region.

Local political and social conditions serve as both a resource and a challenge. On the one hand, a rich tradition of cooperation and strong social capital favor the development of the border region as an open space. On the other hand, institutional asymmetries, persistent stereotypes, and structural differences limit the full exploitation of the potential for integration. It is precisely at this intersection between European integra-

tion and local dynamics that the ambivalent nature of the Polish-Slovak border becomes apparent: it is both a bridge and a barrier, a meeting place and a source of challenges.

Border security and contemporary challenges

Although formally an "internal" border within the Schengen area since 2007, the Polish-Slovak border remains part of the security system in Central Europe. This means that its function is not limited to symbolically demarcating the territory of the state – it must respond to new transnational challenges: migration, organized crime, smuggling, and environmental threats. The change in the nature of the border has not eliminated the need to protect it, but has transformed it into a more complex and multi-level undertaking.

The accession of Poland and Slovakia to the Schengen area (December 21, 2007) meant the abolition of border controls on passenger traffic. For citizens, this was a visible change: no more barriers, barriers, or passport stamps. However, for the states and the European Union, there was an obligation to compensate for this by strengthening the EU's external borders and developing police and judicial cooperation. As Jörg Monar emphasizes, "Schengen is not the elimination of borders , but the transfer of the burden of security to external borders and internal cooperation mechanisms" (Monar, 2010, p. 143).

From that moment on, the Polish-Slovak border became a “permeable membrane”: open to legal traffic, but monitored by information systems (SIS – Schengen Information System, VIS – Visa Information System) and joint operations by the authorities. The role of traditional border posts was replaced by mobile patrols, police cooperation, and data exchange.

Security challenges in the 21st century have revealed that even the internal Schengen borders are not free from migratory pressures. The refugee crisis of 2015–2016 showed that Central European countries, including Poland and Slovakia, although not the main destinations for migrants, had to participate in discussions on relocation and flow control.

It is worth recalling that the Polish-Slovak border is part of the so-called Carpathian route, which migrants occasionally try to use to bypass the traditional Balkan routes. As Frontex noted in its annual reports, the number of detected illegal crossings in this section is relatively small, but not insignificant in the context of regional security (cf. Uścińska, 2014, pp. 223–224).

At the same time, the Polish-Slovak border, due to its mountainous nature and dense forests, is sometimes used by organized crime. This applies in particular to the smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol, and fuel, and in recent years also to human trafficking. As Jef Huysmans wrote, “even an open border remains a space of risk where legal and illegal flows intersect” (Huysmans, 2006, p. 45).

The response to these challenges has been to intensify police cooperation. Poland and Slovakia participate in joint patrols in border areas, exchange operational data, and use European Union instruments such as Europol and Eurojust.

Environmental security challenges are no less important. The Polish-Slovak borderland, including the Tatra, Pieniny, and Bieszczady mountains, is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters: floods, avalanches, and forest fires. In 1997 and 2010, major floods in the Carpathians showed that natural hazards do not respect national borders. As Ulrich Beck writes in Risikogesellschaft, "risk is global and transnational; it knows no borders or sovereignty" (Beck, 1986, p. 24).

That is why Poland and Slovakia are developing rescue cooperation systems, joint fire brigade exercises, and Euroregion projects on environmental protection and crisis management.

A particular moment was the COVID-19 pandemic, when border controls were temporarily reinstated in March 2020. Checkpoints appeared on the Polish-Slovak border, and passenger traffic was reduced to the minimum necessary. This proved that the border, although "abolished" in the Schengen sense, could be reinstated in crisis situations. As Didier Bigo points out, "the border never disappears completely; it remains a po-

tential that can be activated in the name of security" (Bigo, 2011, p. 92).

The experience of the pandemic has shown the ambivalence of the border: on the one hand, border residents have become accustomed to its openness, while on the other, in a crisis situation, nation states have regained primacy, closing themselves off and restricting mobility.

In the 21st century, the Polish-Slovak border has become a laboratory of security paradoxes. On the one hand, it is open and part of the European regime of freedoms. On the other hand, it remains a monitored line, sensitive to migration, crime, and disasters. The experience of the pandemic has shown that the "end of borders" is more of a metaphor than a reality – in times of crisis, states are able to restore them, emphasizing their sovereignty.

In this sense, the Polish-Slovak border is emblematic of the whole of Central Europe: it balances between openness and control, between integration and security. It is a space where the tensions of modern border politics materialize—tensions that will deepen in the face of new global challenges.

Conclusion and research perspectives

The Polish-Slovak border, analyzed from the perspective of European integration and local political conditions, turns out to be a laboratory where the conflicting tendencies of contemporary Europe intersect. On the one hand, we are dealing with its “debarrierization” – the abolition of passport controls, the development of cross-border cooperation, the institutionalization of Euroregions, and the increasing daily mobility of residents. On the other hand, however, there are still mechanisms for reproducing borders: institutional differences, security challenges, social stereotypes, and the periodic restoration of controls in times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Polish-Slovak experience confirms Étienne Balibar's observation that borders in Europe "do not disappear, but change their functions: from

walls, they become membranes" (Balibar, 2004, p. 84). They are more permeable, but no less important. The Polish-Slovak border—open in legal terms—continues to organize political and social space, defining the boundaries of jurisdiction, competence, and social policy.

Euroregions, joint cultural and economic projects, as well as programs financed by EU funds show that borders can be a platform for cooperation. As John Bachtler wrote, “border regions are places where European integration becomes an everyday experience for citizens” (Bachtler, 2003, p. 189). The Polish-Slovak borderland is therefore not just a periphery – it is becoming a space for innovation in multi-level governance.

At the same time, this border highlights the tension between freedom and security. Migration, cross-border crime, and environmental disasters show that integration does not eliminate risks. On the contrary, it requires new tools for cooperation that bring together nation states, local governments, and EU institutions. Didier Bigo emphasized that “borders never disappear completely; they remain a potential that can be activated in the name of security” (Bigo, 2011, p. 92). This statement was confirmed during the pandemic, when controls were reinstated at the Polish-Slovak border.

From the perspective of political science and social sciences, the Polish-Slovak border opens up a wide field for further research. First, it is necessary to deepen comparative studies on Euroregions and the mechanisms of EU fund absorption. Secondly, it is worth examining the micro-social experiences of border residents – their sense of identity, mobility, and everyday life in an open border environment. Thirdly, analyses are needed on how crises (migration, climate, health) are redefining the meaning of internal EU borders.

The Polish-Slovak border is both a "bridge and a barrier": a bridge in cultural, economic, and social terms, and a barrier in times of crisis, when states regain control. Studying it allows us to better understand the paradox of European integration—a process that, on the one hand, weakens national borders and, on the other, creates new forms of border manage-

ment. It is in such border areas that the contradictions of contemporary European politics materialize.

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