The Integration of European Union Borderlands: A Case Study of Polish Opinions on Cross-Border Cooperation along the Polish-German Border

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Abstract
Freedom of movement, one of the benefits of European Union (EU) membership, is experienced at the borders of member states, where custom checkpoints stand deserted as people move freely between EU countries. Borderlands have become spaces for the diffusion of goods, people and ideas and in a new era of cross-border cooperation these traditionally peripheral regions have become laboratories for the study of EU integration. This paper discusses the changes in the border crossing experiences of Polish citizens living in the Polish border town of Slubice and their attitudes towards the cooperation between residents of Slubice and the German city of Frankfurt-Oder.

Introduction
The border customs checkpoint booth between the Polish town of Slubice and the German city of Frankfurt-Oder stands empty as Poles and Germans in cars, on bikes, or by foot cross freely between the two countries. Cooperation between the Polish and German government has been slowly eroding the border’s traditional function as a divider. Since the official entrance of Poland into the European Union in January 2004, passports have not been required for Polish and German citizens to travel between the two countries. The control of all border customs checkpoints along the Polish-German border was abandoned on December 21, 2007, marking Poland’s full membership in the Schengen Agreement. The Schengen Agreement allowed new mobility across member country borders by removing restrictions on the movement of people and goods in Schengenland. The border’s traditional function as a barrier between Polish and German border communities is being further challenged by the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region’s support of cross-border projects. The institution has built on pre-existing cooperation between politicians in Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder to promote cross-border collaboration to solve regional problems. As part of my dissertation fieldwork, in which I sought to understand how the new freedom of cross-border movement and the euro-region’s financial support of projects which promote cooperation have influenced the lives of borderlanders, I interviewed local residents living in Slubice during the fall of 2007, a few months prior to the official elimination of border checkpoints controls. (See Figure 1 in the appendix for a map of the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region.)
In this paper, I begin by discussing Euro-regions and their contributions to the integration of European Union borderlands. Next, I briefly summarize the history of cross-border networks between Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder from the early cross-border contacts that flourished during a brief period of relaxed controls on cross-border mobility in the 1970s to the establishment of the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region in 1993. Then I discuss the awareness of Euro-regions among residents of Slubice and the influence of the cross-border institutions in shaping borderlanders mental imagery of the border region. I conclude with my interpretation of how residents of Slubice identify with the region and their perspectives on future cross-border cooperation between Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder.

**Euro-Regions and the Integration of European Borders**

The possibilities of a ‘borderless world’ became a popular concept following the European Union expansion in 2004 to include six Eastern European countries from behind the once formidable Iron Curtain. Instead of conceptualizing European national borders as frontiers dividing countries, scholars began to refer to them as spaces that encourage the diffusion of goods, people and ideas between countries (Wilson & Donnan, 1998). Borders have received special attention as important places to research the responses of borderlanders to EU policies of integration by evaluating public opinion toward European assimilation (Kaplan & Häkli, 2002), testing the emergence of new trans-border networks as well as studying new forms of barriers to interaction (Dürrschmidt & Matthiesen, 2002). The new interrelated cooperative borderlands are also places to study the development of “urban trans-boundary culture” (Dürrschmidt & Matthiesen, 2002, p. 20). Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer (2005) argue that the hybrid culture that develops in cooperative cross-border urban areas will support the emergence of a new regional identity, one which contends with national identities although it will not replace nationalism.

The development of cross-border cooperation in Europe has been aided by the creation of Euro-regions, a voluntary association of organizations which collaborate with their neighbours across a particular border in the interest of a shared goal. The official purpose of Euro-regions is to promote a positive sense of common border regional identity based on economic-cooperation and good neighbourliness (Scott, 1998, p. 609. In addition to challenging the divisive functions of borders, Euro-regions transform borderlands from peripheral areas of economic stagnation into growth poles by investing in cross-border economic cooperation and infrastructure (Thaler, 1997). The European Development Bank through the INTERREG initiative (which promotes regional cooperation among EU member countries) as well as the PHARE Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) (which supports cooperation between EU and potential member countries) financially supported projects which build cooperative bilateral relations along the Polish-German border. The first two phases of PHARE CBC funding targeted ‘hard” programs, such as large infrastructure programs designed to improve cross-border transportation between Poland and Germany, i.e. building new roads, bridges and border custom checkpoints. In the
third phase of its funding the EU, aware that a mutual respect for cultural differences is necessary for a transnational European identity and instrumental for cross-border cooperation, increased its funding for ‘soft projects,’ which are cross-border projects intended to increase cultural awareness (Grix & Knowles, 2002).

Paradoxically, although borders between EU member countries are more interrelated today as a result of economic integration and Euro-region support of cross-border collaboration and the expansion of Schengenland, international borders still remain important to national governments and borderlanders (Newman, 2006). Dürrschmidt and Matthiesen (2002) point out that along with the emergence of new trans-border networks, borderlanders nonetheless develop new forms of barriers to interaction. People maintain and create boundaries through daily activities, often long after the removal of physical barriers (Van Houtum et al., 2005). Strüver (2004) disputes the idea that state borders among EU countries are being erased or reconfigured into multi-cultural zones. In her research, which explored representations of German and Dutch popular culture on both sides of the border, she concluded that despite the existence of Euro-regions and unrestricted cross-border mobility, German and Dutch borderlanders still perceive the border as a divider. Borderlanders maintain cultural barriers and stereotypes which influence interactions between German and Dutch borderlanders. Have Euro-regions defeated this tendency by successfully supporting projects that overcome mental barriers between Polish and German borderlanders? Do projects promoting economic development and multi-cultural appreciation such as those funded by the Pro Viadrina Euro-Region contribute to the emergence of a shared regional identity between residents of Frankfurt-Oder and Slubice?

**Cross-Border Networks between Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder**

The Oder River separates the German city of Frankfurt-Oder from the Polish town of Slubice. The river forms a natural border which separates two groups of people who speak dissimilar languages, use different currency (Poland is not yet a member of the euro zone) and live in separate political systems. Yet the Pro-Europa Viadrina Euro-Region unites the two EU member countries who share environmental concerns and hopes for sustainable economic growth. The modern Polish-German border, marked by the Odra and Nyssa River (except for a small portion in the North near the Northern Polish port city of Szczecin) was established in 1945 following the conclusion of negotiations between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union at the Potsdam Conference. Poland’s borders shifted westward with the allocation of pre-World War II German eastern territories to Poland as compensation for the annexation of Poland’s eastern provinces by the Soviet Union that same year (Allen, 2003).

The physical movement of the Polish-German border westward was accompanied by the evacuation and resettlement of large numbers of people with the goal of creating an ethnographic border providing a clear division between two ethnic groups. Former German residents were forcefully evicted from the region, which Polish officials would
call the “Regained Western Territories” and the Germans would refer to as the “Annexed Territories under Polish Administration” (Allen, 2003). The area was repopulated largely by a Ukrainian/Polish population forcefully displaced from Poland’s former eastern territories (deZayas, 1979). Slubice, the former suburb of Frankfurt-Oder, became a Polish city in 1945 (Documents, 2007).

In the last 61 years cross-border links between Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder have flourished and diminished in response to changes in national relations between Poland and Germany, which have dictated the openness of the border. The Polish-German border until 1990 was an international border between Poland and East Germany, both of whom were part of the Soviet bloc, under the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence. Officially the border was referred to as the “Border of Peace and Friendship” (Anderson, 2001). The border was a heavily guarded border, and except for a brief period between 1972 and 1980, impassable for most Polish and German citizens. A visa, which at times was difficult to acquire, was necessary to cross, limiting non-official contacts between Polish and German borderlanders. Then in 1972, the first border crossing between Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder was opened, as policy changes allowed visa free travel across the Polish-East German border. In addition, the minor relaxation of restrictions on economic activities in the early 1970s allowed people to hold foreign currency in their personal possession and exchange goods across the border. The new cross-border mobility and limited economic freedoms created an opportunity for people to trade across the Polish-German border. Informal contacts thrived during this time; Poles traveled to Germany as tourists, to work in factories or look for odd jobs (Ciok, 2004).

By the late 1970s cross-border trade was again restrained by political changes in Poland, which placed new customs restrictions on the amount of foreign currency one could hold and the amount of goods people could bring across the border (Ciok, 2004). In 1980–1981, the Polish-German border was again closed as part of an East German policy to prevent the spread of social unrest caused by the Polish Solidarność movement. Solidarność was a civil society uprising against the communist government of Poland (Burrsink, 2001). Informal cross-border networks were stifled as the freedom of movement was denied to borderlanders.

The permanence of the border and Slubice’s existence as a Polish town was again reaffirmed with the signing of the German–Polish Treaty of 1991 between Poland and a unified Germany (Allen, 2003). Treaties between Poland and Germany were also signed in the early 1990s to promote good neighborliness and friendly cooperation across the border. As the socialist governments in both Poland and Germany collapsed in the early 1990s, restrictions on cross-border trade were removed. The bazaars which sprang up along the border were once again the results of local initiatives taking advantage of new economic freedoms (Kramsch, 2002). To control prostitution, theft and the trafficking of people, which also flourished across the open border, the Polish and German border municipalities established the Polish-German Commission for International Cross-Border Cooperation and the Commission for Matters of Cross-Border Cooperation and Regional Cooperation to regulate cross-border trade (Ciok, 2004). Local governments in Poland’s
border regions gained more independence to negotiate directly with their German neighbors in the late 1990s following the incorporation of European inter-territorial cooperation legislation into the Polish constitution (Kaczmarek, 2006). The decentralization of power in Poland made possible more opportunities for collaboration between Polish and German border communities, who no longer had to wait for approval from their prospective national governments to negotiate with one another.

When establishing the framework for the Pro-Europa Viadrina Euro-Region, local politicians in the Polish and German borderland took advantage of the local political will for cooperation, which had developed during the 1970s though disrupted in the 1980s (Ciok, 2004). The Polish town of Słubice and the German city of Frankfurt-Oder already had a history of cooperation, which had begun with the signing of a partnership agreement in 1975 maintaining freedom of movement across the border until 1980 (Ciok, 2004). In the early 90s, Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder signed many cooperation agreements officially establishing themselves as European Twin Cities. Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder became members of the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region, which was officially established by a signed agreement in 1993 between the German association Middle Odra, (Mittlere Oder) and the Polish Association of Lubuskie Border Communities (Stowarzyszenie Gmin Lubuskich Pogranicze). The Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region consists of the Polish provinces of Lubuskie and Gorzów and on the German side the two lands of Markisch-Oderland and Oder-Spree and the city of Frankfurt-Oder (Ciok, 2004).

The main purpose of the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region as stated under the title of the newest project, Viadrina 2007, is to support cross-border cooperation and development of a regional identity and European mindset. Other goals include the development of joint cross-border infrastructure, tourism, environmental protection, and encouraging the growth of small and medium size business (Pro Europa, 2007). To receive funding associations have to work with similar organizations across the border to develop a proposal for a joint project. Examples of projects funded by Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region include local sports competitions and training venues, a kindergarten in Frankfurt-Oder where Polish-German children learn together, and a Polish-German Senior Academy.

**Methodology**

Słubice’s location on the Polish-German border and its characteristics, such as the presence of a busy customs checkpoint in an urban area and the involvement by local leaders in cross-border collaboration, made it an ideal place to study the opinions of Polish citizens about the increasing cooperation between Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder. The bulk of information discussed in this paper was gathered through the use of photo triggers during semi-structured interviews, with participants found by using the snow-ball method. The photo-triggers were used at the beginning of my interviews to promote discussion on cross-border cooperation. This method, employed by Meinhof and Galasiński (2002) in their research on the significance of national borders on people’s
identity construction in the Polish-German border towns of Gubin-Guben, encourages participants to discuss an image representative of a topic of interest to the interviewer without imposing the researcher’s own viewpoint. Therefore participants are allowed to discuss what they believe is significant about the topic. The images I used included an historical monument to Russian soldiers, shops with German signage in the windows, the bazaar, the border checkpoint and the universities on both sides of the border. In the discussions which followed questions were used to promote a dialogue on attitudes toward the removal of restrictions on crossing the physical border and the future of cross-border cooperation between Polish and German citizens within the EU.

While in Slubice, I also conducted formal interviews with a former Pro Viadrina Euro-Region employee, Slubice’s public relations representative, and Polish students attending both the Polish University Collegium Polonicum and the University of Viadrina in Frankfurt-Oder. Surveys intended to collect information on borderlanders’ opinions on cross-border cooperation, knowledge of Euro-regions and cross-border mobility were also passed out in the park and along the main street in Slubice leading to the border checkpoint. In addition I conducted formal interviews on the website of Slubfurt (http://www.slubfurt.net/pl_start.html), an organization promoting cooperation between NGOs in Frankfurt-Oder and Slubice, with members of groups self-advertising as collaborating across the border. Most of my information came from interviews, which are useful for getting participants to share with you not how the world really is but the normative values they believe in or the way they believe it ought to be (Shurmer-Smith, 2002). To balance the information I collected from interviews and surveys I engaged in participant observation during the four weeks I spent in Slubice during the fall of 2007 as well as during my preliminary research which consisted of several visits to the region for three consecutive summers from 2005 to 2007. In the following sections I discuss participants’ responses to the following four themes: the closure of border custom checkpoints, the influence of history on present Polish-German relations, the number one purpose for crossing the border (shopping), and their awareness of new types of cooperation supported by euro-regions.

**Changes in the Border Crossing Experience**

Checkpoints dominate the mental maps of national borders on the ground by physically enforcing the presence of boundaries (Migdal, 2004). The 4-lane road and pedestrian bridge crossing the Oder River and linking the German city of Frankfurt-Oder with the Polish town of Slubice was the image residents most strongly associated with the border. The bridge was called the “friendship bridge,” or “the bridge between the West and the East,” by local politicians and was a popular symbol found on websites such as Slubfurt and pamphlets promoting Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder. The image of the bridge was used metaphorically by local politicians to symbolize the cultural bridges they were building by cooperating with their German neighbors. The bridge was the center of celebrations following Poland’s official entrance into the European Union and again to mark Poland’s full membership in the Schengen Agreement. When shown a photo of the bridge (see
Appendix, Figure 2) local residents described it not only as a symbol of division, “marking the road home” but also of cooperation, “a bridge between the two cities” (Interview, July 2007).

When asked to share memories of their first border crossing experience, participants who first crossed the border in the late 1980s or 1990s depicted a stressful situation filled with anxiety. In the early 1990s, following the collapse of communism and the removal of visa requirements to cross the border, a thriving cross-border trade developed quickly. Šlubice became well known in Poland and Germany for the large bazaar, a major source of income for the town, attracting German shoppers as far away as Berlin. The image of long lines and extensive searches by unfriendly border guards was the typical impression of a Polish border crossing occurrence. By 2000, the experience of crossing the border had changed tremendously. The change was summed up by the comments of one participant, who crossed the border for the first time in 2000 with her parents. She recounted her father’s disbelief over the ease of crossing the border: “He just could not believe that all he had to show was his passport and that no one searched him.” (Interview, July 2007).

Though the lines move quickly and passengers have only to show an ID card, border checkpoints still represent the delineation function of the border as points of state territorial control (Agnew, 2007). By showing their national identity cards, citizens reinforce their national identities, and the act of crossing a national border reinforces the existence of two nation-states. Such borders are crucial to the formation of what Agnew has called banal nationalism “by symbolically designating where the we begins and they end” (2007, p. 403). The ease of crossing made the border barely noticeable to many frequent crossers. Though some participants still had recent stories they eagerly shared about what they felt were recent unjust scrutiny by Polish and German border guards, most positively discussed the scheduled removal of checkpoints and stressed the border between the two countries would soon cease to exist; although they quickly added a mental border, which influences interactions between people, will remain for sometime. For interviewees, particularly those with small children, the elimination of checkpoints and the wait time associated with them will encourage more frequent border crossings for shopping and entertainment.

Well aware of the importance of language for erasing mental borders, an employee of the Šlubice town government discussed with me the need to come up with new words to talk about the border so not to focus on the divisive functions but rather on its unifying task as a meeting place of two different cultures (Interview, December 2007). Employees at Collegium Polonicum were also constructing new expressions to describe the increasing connections joining the two communities. The expression “we are going to Frankfurt,” as opposed to saying “we are going to Germany,” (Interview, December 2007) was meant to downplay the experience of crossing a national border and to express the closeness they felt to Frankfurt-Oder.
The Presence of the Past along the Polish-German Border

The mental border between Polish and German borderlanders is buttressed by historical distrust and economic disparities. Several scholars who have written on recent Polish-German cooperation remarked that for true cooperation to develop between Poland and Germany regional governments historical distrust and economic disparities must be overcome (Asher, 2005; Dürrschmidt & Matthiesen, 2002; Krätke, 1998; Stryjakiewicz, 1998). To understand the influence of history on relations between residents of Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder in 2007, three years after entrance into the EU and four months before the removal of border checkpoints, I used the image of the monument to the Russian soldiers in Słubice and the peace bell in Frankfurt-Oder as photo-triggers in interviews (see Appendix Figure 3).

Poland’s western territories have a multicultural history and traces of the German past can still be found in the landscape, in the form of German architecture and old cemeteries. After the transfer of Słubice to the control of Poland’s Peoples Republic, a satellite government of the USSR, the Ministry of Recovered Lands, established in November of 1945, was responsible for the resettlement and assimilation of the so-called “recovered” or “regained lands” with the rest of the country (Kulczycki, 2001). The government invested heavily in rebuilding and polonizing (the emphasizing of Polish culture and language) the newly acquired territories (Buchowski, Conte, & Ziolkowski, 2001). Streets, towns, and cities in the region were given Polish names, often in honor of important Polish historical figures. The only movie theater in the Polish border town of Słubice, housed in a pre-World War II building (built when Słubice was a German suburb of Frankfurt-Oder) was renamed Kino Piast, after the first King who united Poland in the 13th century. Piast remains a frequent name for small restaurants and other business in the border region, reflecting the efforts during the early 1950s to justify Poland’s newly acquired ownership of the region based on a historical presence of Slavic tribes in the area during the Piast era (Anderson, 2001).

In both Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder one can find monuments built to display the Soviet influence on society, which remain as reminders of the regions’ shared communist past. A Polish anthropologist claimed communist era monuments are generally ignored by much of the population in Poland (Interview, October 2007) and the citizens of Słubice were no exception. I showed participants photos of one such monument, the Peace Bell, a gift from the Russians to celebrate the official friendship between East Germany and Poland. A few of the participants who had been students at the University of Viadrina recognized the Peace Bell monument and could locate it in Frankfurt-Oder along the Oder river bank, but a distance away from the restored riverfront. No one commented further on its history, why it had been built, or its purpose. The life-long residents of Słubice had no knowledge of the Peace Bell. The pictures of the monument I showed to the Russian soldiers did prompt a short dispute over plans calling for the

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removal of the monument. The demand for the removal of Russian influences from the region was countered by a comment pointing out that some people still place flowers under the statue (Interview, July 2007). However, residents of Słubice were more eager to discuss the present cooperation between the two communities than the past.

In his work on transboundary cooperation along the German-Polish border, Scott (1998) concluded that for any real cooperation to develop there is still a need for new networks based on trust to develop between private actors as well as between public actors. The Academy for Polish and German Seniors, a joint collaboration between Collegium Polonicum in Słubice and The University of Viadrina in Frankfurt, is a good example of cross-border network building. This collaboration has provided a safe environment for Poles and Germans who lived through World War II to dismantle historical prejudices about one another. An organization of retired Polish and German professors came up with the idea for the Academy of Polish and German Seniors, which meets monthly. The purpose of the organization as described to me during an interview with one of the organizers is “to create a space where German and Polish people can interact, learning both the mentality of their neighbors, and what connects them together” (Interview, December 2007).

Lectures sponsored by the group over the last 8 years, alternating between Frankfurt-Oder and Słubice, are advertised in the local newspaper on both sides of the border. These lectures cover a wide variety of topics such as cultural celebrations and national customs. Another goal of the academy is to facilitate joint cooperation in understanding the region’s history by having the German lectures teach the history of the region before the end of World War II, while their Polish counterparts analyze the current situation. The most important aspect of these meetings is the creation of a space for Germans and Polish citizens to come together and socialize. The organizer expressed to me an obligation he felt that both the Polish and German older generation had to provide the younger students a model of how they should behave toward one another. Networks they establish at these meetings begin as equal opportunity exchanges — Germans seeking information about where to buy something in Poland, and Polish citizens looking for similar advice on shopping or jobs in Germany. By creating an environment of friendship and trust over time, the organizer of the academy predicted these networks will support more cooperation across the border. Throughout his discussion of developing equal interactions between Polish and Germans, no mention was made of transnationalism or a shared European identity in the region (Interview, December 2007).

Cross-Border Shopping

Shopping was the number one reason given for Poles and Germans to cross the border between Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder. Słubice Street, *Slubicer Straße* in German and *Słubice Ulica* in Polish, connects the two cities. On the Polish side of border, the road is better known by the popular name of *Zigarette Strauß*, German for Cigarette Street. Place names are one way in which people attach meanings to places. The name *Zigarette*
Strauß reflects the domination of cigarette stores frequented by German clientele along the street in Slubice. German students frequently described Slubice as a big shopping market for Germans, where one can buy cheap cigarettes and alcohol, fruits and vegetables, furniture, and even gas. A few feet from the border in Poland one can find numerous hair salons, pharmacies, stores selling cigarettes and alcohol, money exchange centers, restaurants, and grocery stores, with German and Polish signage in the windows (See Appendix Figure 4).

Participants who did not own or work in a business serving a German clientele often complained that the town government’s main orientation was to attract German consumers, investing money in building new stores for German shoppers but failing to invest in infrastructure for the relaxation and the enjoyment of local citizens. To support their argument they pointed out the difference between Slubice’s waterfront (a dirt path with a few benches) and the well developed waterfront on the German side (paved and with benches, art work, and restaurants). The lack of cultural events was emphasized by the recent termination of the only movie theater in Slubice. Residents now have a choice of watching foreign films with German subtitles in Frankfurt-Oder or traveling to another Polish town. Many chose to travel the greater distance to a larger Polish city with a theater rather than across the border.

Economic inequalities are a divisive factor and the opening of the border to visa-free travel created not only an opportunity for trade but also competition between Polish and German businesses (Krätke, 1998). The removal of custom checkpoints along the border will cause job losses among those who have thrived from the cross-border trade. In November 2007 taxi drivers, until then happy with the amount of money they had been able to earn transporting German shoppers, were preparing to retire or seek other employment as there would no longer be a need for Germans to cross the border by foot to avoid the long lines. A former employee of the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region claimed Euro-regions are providing the spaces and incentives to move individuals from competitive exchanges based on cross-border shopping to cooperative development on both sides of the border. One way Euro-regions support cooperation is by funding social events where Polish and German business people and politicians can interact and establish contacts for future projects (Interview, October 2007).

Building a New Cooperative Future:  
The Pro-Europa Viadrina Euro-Region

Slubice’s membership in the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region is quickly obvious to any new visitor to the region. Immediately upon crossing the bridge into Poland from Frankfurt-Oder one is greeted by a large signpost marking the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region and EU flags flying in the miniature central square. Signs are posted on the new student dorms, the University Collegium Polonicum, and Slubice’s railroad stop calling attention to the contributions of EU funding for these development projects (see Appendix Figure 5). The contributions of EU funding are so well marked that some of the
more cynical participants complained more EU funds should be directed toward projects that create jobs rather than signs. These comments reflect a frequent criticism citizens of member countries have of the large EU bureaucracy documented by academics such as Panebianco (2004).

The leadership in Slubice was often commended for cooperating with officials in Frankfurt-Oder. Everyone I interviewed in Slubice had heard of the term Euro-region before. Most could define it, and those who could not had a good understanding of what it was about, as one employee at Collegium Polonicum summed up “funding projects which encourage some kind of cooperation between Polish and Germans along the border” (Interview, November 2007). Participants recalled reading articles in the paper about Euro-regions or knew someone that was involved in some type of cultural cross-border project, the most popular being the Senor Academy and German-Polish kindergarten.

The owner of a local art gallery, who received funding from the EU to support art education for German and Polish youths and art exhibitions by artists on both sides of the border, acknowledged that without support from a grant financed by the Euro-region she would not have had the incentive to collaborate with artists across the border. The Euro-region was not the only source of funding for the gallery, which also received financial support from the German-Polish Youth Office. Nor was the collaboration between artists in Slubice and Frankfurt-Oder a new occurrence, as the former owner of the gallery had collaborated with German artists in the 1970s (Interview, December 2007).

The most visible outcome of the new cooperation between Poland and Germany is the new university in Slubice, Collegium Polonicum. The university was built in 1994 with funding provided by the EU and Germany. Strategically located seconds from the border crossing, the modern building is a place of collaboration between German and Polish academics and students in Slubice, at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, and the German University of Viadrina in Frankfurt-Oder. Many of the employees at Collegium Polonicum I spoke with had come to Slubice with the goal of learning German, believing the proximity to Germany would provide them with more opportunities to use the language. Former students who had attended both universities identified equally with the images of the University of Viadrina as with those of Collegium Polonicum (see Appendix Figure 6). Polish students who had mastered the German language expressed feeling equally comfortable on both sides and many who could afford the higher prices chose to live in Frankfurt-Oder (Interviews November 2007).

The interaction between Polish and German students is not yet what the university founders had hoped for. One former Polish student described few opportunities to speak with Germans outside of class other than in shops and while taking care of daily necessities. Many described a social environment where the Germans students tended to stick together and vice versa. The universities have implemented programs such as dorm exchanges, in which Polish and German students swap dorm rooms across the border, to
encourage more interaction between the two ethnic groups. Other programs encourage German students to take advantage of cheaper dorm prices and the opportunity to learn Polish by staying in the dorms in Słubice for a semester. Despite such programs and the new state of the art language learning facilities, an employee working in the administration department at the University of Viadrina complained few German students bothered to really learn Polish (Interview, July 2006). Polish students, however, were eager to learn German largely because of the economic opportunities associated with speaking German. The higher prices in Germany, however, prevented many Polish students from living in Frankfurt-Oder (Interview, July 2007).

The most common explanation given in interviews for the lack of meaningful interaction between Polish and Germans students was economic inequality and historical distrust. Many of the shops in Germany were out of the price range of Polish students and the German students came to Poland looking for discounts. Stereotypes based on historical animosities were the second barrier to interaction. Polish students who came from other regions of Poland brought with them the negative stereotypes of Germans particularly if their grandparents had suffered brutality during the war. They were not always eager to interact with German students, an attitude a long-term resident told me changes after they spend some time on the border and as she pointed out, many German-Polish friendships and intermarriages do exist in this region (Interview, December 2007).

**Conclusion: Słubice a Town on the Border**

The removal of all constraints on cross-border movement and the implementation of cross-border projects financed by the EU places Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder in a potentially innovative position should a bi-national European community emerge in the region. In an attempt to understand the extent of the connections between Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder, I asked participants in my interviews if it is better to refer to Słubice as a town by the border or a town on the border. The instant responses of participants in Euro-region projects, employees at the university, and hairdressers’ dependent on German clientele for their business were that Słubice was a town on the border. Residents of Słubice argued that because of their proximity to the German border they have put historical animosities behind them and are cooperating with Germans much sooner than other regions of Poland. As a result they described the region as more tolerant toward foreigners.

The aim of the Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region, as mentioned earlier, is not only to promote cross-border cooperation but also a regional identity based on a shared European mindset. The cooperation between the Polonium Colloquium in Słubice and the University of Viadrina in Germany encourages the assimilation of students within an academic environment. The former students I interviewed identified positively with the images of both universities. The Polish and German Senior Academy, housed in the brand new Polonium Colloquium building, is another example of a local project building cross-border networks and encouraging emotional ties among long-term Polish and
German residents of the region. However, the purpose of the Polish-German Senior Academy is to support a mutual understanding of the region’s history, not the emergence of a regional identity. And despite the efforts to integrate Polish and German university students they continue in the short term to segregate themselves based on linguistic and economic differences.

Has the Pro Viadrina Euro-Region been more successful in establishing reciprocal feelings across the Polish-German border than was present along the East German-Polish border of “Peace and Friendship?” A secretary in the Klodowa town office described the current partnership between Klodowa and the German town of Seelow as “real cooperation” within the Pro Viadrina Euro-Region, which she distinguished as more meaningful than the collaboration between Poland and German communities during the 1970s (Interview, July 2007). In contradiction to her positive viewpoint, a taxi driver in Slubice shared a more cynical perspective, claiming “once the signage on the stores along the border were all in Russian today they are all in German and nothing has changed” (Interview, December 2007).

The same variation in resident opinions toward the remembrance of the past illustrated by the mixed responses to the image of the monument to the Russian soldiers was present in their discussion of the benefits of membership in the Pro Europa Euro-Region for Slubice. Those who directly benefited from cross-border projects financed by the EU had a more favorable attitude toward cross-border cooperation than those who did not. Interviewees identified with the images of the bazaar and salons with Polish and German signage in the windows and were supportive of the jobs created by German tourists. Lifelong residents, however, also criticized the town’s focus on attracting German shoppers rather than investing in the development of cultural or recreational amenities for local residents. Shopping, which continues to be the number one reason for crossing the border demonstrates interactions based on economic exchanges not cultural integration.

Europe is steeped in history which is not easily forgotten therefore it is not surprising that though participants eagerly look forward to the non-stop trips to Berlin from Slubice they all agreed a mental border would continue to divide Polish and German borderlanders. A multi-cultural environment has not yet emerged along the Polish–German borderland as individuals continue to create their own borders based on stereotypes and linguistic divisions, similar to Strüver’s observations of the cultural interactions of German-Dutch borderlanders. The incentive to cross the mental border appears to be for many the economic gains they hope to acquire by cooperating with their German neighbors.

The custom border checkpoints remain on the landscape not only as a reminder of the location of the physical border but also in case the need arises to once again carefully monitor the movement of people between Poland and Germany. The Euro 2012 soccer championship hosted by Poland and Ukraine is an event for which checkpoints along the Polish-German border may be temporarily reopened to monitor the movements of the expected large numbers of soccer fans and potential troublemakers, hoodlums and criminals. In the meantime, the empty custom booths remain as a reminder that an open
border between Poland and Germany has only recently been enacted. The projects between Ślubice and Frankfurt-Oder which support the development of cross-cultural understanding, such as the collaboration between the two universities, are also relatively new. Therefore despite the persisting mental borders, the openness of the border for an extended time period and the increasing collaboration to promote economic growth in the area may in the future support the formation of a regional identity, which is not yet present in the majority of the residents’ mindset.

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References


Appendix

Figure 1: Study Area: Pro Europa Viadrina Euro-Region

Figure 2: Photo of the “The Friendship Bridge” taken in Slubice facing Frankfurt-Oder across the Oder River
Figure 3: Historical Monuments in Słubice and Frankfurt-Oder

The Friendship Bell in Frankfurt-Oder  Monument to Russian Soldiers in Słubice

Figure 4: Zigarette Strauß, Cigarette Street
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