

**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
WORKING PAPERS**



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

Working Paper No. 47

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AND REGIONAL
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WESTERN POLAND**

Halle / Saale 2002
ISSN 1615-4568

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Administrative Reform, Cross-Border Relations, and Regional Identity in Western Poland

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Abstract

On 1st January 1999, Poland introduced a new structure for local and regional government. This reform raises a number of issues of interest to the anthropologist. One is the question of the development of identities in the new units, especially the sixteen new provinces, and their connection, if any, with historical precedents. I examine this topic with respect to the province of Lubuskie, in western Poland, with special but not exclusive reference to the attitudes and activities of local bureaucracies in this regard. An additional theme is the extent to which the latter are also involved in establishing and maintaining cross-border relations with towns over the border in Germany. This can be related in its turn to the wider international context of Poland's relations with, and now agreed entry into, the European Union. I explore this with reference to both the independent links of particular towns and the development in the 1990s of so-called 'Euroregions', which now extend across all of Poland's borders, as well as certain initiatives by private citizens. The paper is part of a longer term interest of the author's in the strong development of regional identities (usually but not always non-ethnic in type) in Europe in the context of the continent's growing economic, political, diplomatic and cultural integration.

¹ The research on which this working paper is based was carried out between February and September 2002, and was funded by the Max Planck Society, through the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. I am most grateful to Professor Chris Hann, Co-Director of this Institute, for arranging funding during this period and supporting my research generally, as well as to his staff for their unfailing help. The core of the research consisted of interviews with officials at all levels of the administration in Poland, particularly where they were concerned with cross-border relations, as well as a number of their opposite numbers in Germany. I was also able to sit in on some meetings and often to take away copious amounts of publicity material and other literature with me. Other reflections are based on more casual conversations with new and existing acquaintances in Poland, including journalists and local politicians, but also ordinary people. I am grateful to all these individuals for their time and trouble. I also acknowledge the invaluable aid of Maciej Irek, who acted as my field assistant during much of this period. He showed an excellent grasp of the issues involved, as well as of Polish politics generally, and provided me with many useful insights. Naturally, however, I assume full responsibility for the contents of the present text. Versions of this paper were given to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, on 23 September 2002, and to the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, on 8 November 2002. I hope to expand on this research by conducting further enquiries in Poland and Germany in the near future. Contact: Robert Parkin, email: PRobert5@compuserve.com

Introduction

On 1st January 1999, Poland introduced a new structure for local and regional government. This reform raises a number of issues of interest to the anthropologist. One is the impact of the reform on the local administration of Poland – this theme is of interest in its own right but will not be pursued here. One issue I am addressing here is the question of the development, even creation, of identities for the new units, especially the sixteen new provinces, and their connection, if any, with historical precedents. I examine this topic with respect of the province of Lubuskie, in western Poland, with special but not exclusive reference to the attitudes and activities of local bureaucracies in this regard. Although the notion of identity was often recognised, and indeed used, by my informants, this was not invariably the case, and unless otherwise stated it should be assumed that it is essentially my term. An additional theme is the extent to which bureaucracies are also involved in establishing and maintaining cross-border relations with towns over the border in Germany. As well as having an impact on regional identities in its own right, this can be related to the wider international context of Poland's relations with, and now agreed entry into, the European Union.

However, this does not exhaust the international context in which Poland's institutional status is evolving. One of the results of the collapse of socialism in eastern Europe that surprised and shocked those who were expecting only democracy to result from it was the rise of nationalism and ethnic conflict, which led to the break-up of some existing states and launched waves of xenophobia in others. Opinions differ as to whether this surge in particularism represented a continuation of the scarcely concealed nationalism of many socialist regimes, a popular reaction to their official professions of internationalism, or the resumption of inter-ethnic conflicts dating from before the socialist period. One result has been the fragmentation of parts of eastern Europe into micro-states at a time when the western half of the continent is making great strides in international integration.

Not all post-socialist states have been affected by this trend to the same extent, especially those that were already relatively homogeneous ethnically, such as Hungary and Poland. The reasons for Poland's high degree of ethnic homogeneity today lie basically in the murder of the Jews by the Nazis in the Second World War and the territorial transfers that followed it, whereby most of Poland's Lithuanian and Ukrainian minorities became citizens of the Soviet Union, and her Germans were expelled very largely but by no means entirely from the new territories to the west and south of the country. One result of this early period of ethnic cleansing has been that, since the collapse of socialism, Poland has felt able to compare its own low level of ethnic conflict in the 1990s with the fate of Yugoslavia in the same decade.

This entails forgetting the tremendous suffering that took place in Poland between 1939 and around 1947, a period characterised not only by the expulsions just mentioned, but also to the deaths of around eighteen percent of the population and the almost total destruction of many cities and towns. There are still occasional inter-ethnic problems: Hann (1999) has reported some ethnic and religious antagonism between Poles and Ukrainians in south-east Poland; there is still a tendency for some of the more nationalist politicians to make covertly antisemitic remarks on occasion; and, like other countries, Poland has its own brigades of skinheads, who periodically target Roma and Third-World students. Generally, however, its post-authoritarian history has been one of ethnic peace.

Another reason for this relative degree of peace is that successive governments, and the political class in general that has controlled Poland since 1989, have also been keen on developing and maintaining relatively good relations with the country's former enemies. In the east this means mainly Russia and the Ukraine, where the imperatives for Poland are basic security rather than significant trade or diplomacy. Actually, relations may cool here because Poland has recently introduced visa requirements for all its eastern neighbours – a direct result of the fact that, with EU entry, Poland's eastern border will also be an EU border. Otherwise, Poland's national project is almost entirely western-oriented. A member of NATO since 1999, it has also been an applicant for EU membership since 1994. While its membership of NATO depended critically on American approval, the policy of EU entry must keep the interest of all the major existing members, but above all Germany, Poland's major trading partner. The prospect of agricultural competition and other issues have made the negotiations for membership especially tricky in Poland's case, to the extent that there are now second thoughts about entry in some influential quarters. But co-operation with Germany has already brought with it some infrastructural and other funding (on which, more below), and officially, at least, the western border is now regarded as settled in favour of the status quo.

Much of this paper is concerned to describe attempts by local officials and local people to reduce the significance of the western border still further, at the same time that the eastern border is being subjected to greater control. To this can be linked recent administrative reforms within Poland itself, as well as the growing focus on stimulating regional units and identities across Europe (cf. Parkin 1999 and references therein). Allied to this is a consideration of how local authorities, both internally and through their alliances with other authorities, and both within and outside their own nation states, are themselves, consciously or otherwise, contributing to such identities. This involves them in supplementing their supposedly rational administration by using ideas and concepts in symbolic ways in the service of particular ideologies of identity. As Chris Shore has pointed out of Eurocrats in

Brussels (1993), bureaucrats generate symbolic meanings as well as design and implement policy: indeed, the former may support the latter. With some exceptions, anthropologists have only turned to study bureaucracies relatively recently. However, it seems to me that this is one area where they are able to make a distinctive contribution by supplementing the focus on the dynamics of decision-making and of internal relationships generally within bureaucracies and other institutions, as pursued in the much longer sociological tradition of such studies.

Before I proceed with the ethnographic part of the paper, some other theoretical points ought to be made. First, ‘local’ or ‘regional’ identity in this context does not necessarily mean ‘ethnic’ identity. There are ethnic minorities in the general area, such as the Ukrainian-speaking Lemkos in south-west Poland and the Sorbs around Cottbus and Bautzen in Germany, but, apart from some remarks on re-emerging notions of Sorb identity, I am not concerned with them here. In general the focus is specifically, and quite deliberately, on the *local* identities of one particular *national* majority. One reason for making the distinction lies in the different relationships between identities that are ethnic or regional respectively and national identities. Although politically subordinate, strong ethnic identities tend to oppose themselves to the dominant national identity as epistemologically equivalent: there is a clean cut. Non-ethnic regional identities, by contrast, generally see themselves as partaking of the national identity too: the relationship is therefore rather segmented. For example – at least for the self-designated militants – Breton identity is ethnically quite distinct from French national identity and locally opposed to it (McDonald 1987), whereas Normans generally see themselves as *also* French. MacClancy (1993) has said the same about Navarrese identities in relation to Spanish national identity, at least for some in the region, in contrast with the more radically separate Basque or Catalanian identities.²

Finally, since one focus of the paper is cross-border relations, something ought to be said about borders as a topic of anthropological research. The big names here in anthropology in recent times have been Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (especially 1999; also 1994, 1998, both edited volumes), but Liam O’Dowd (2001), a sociologist and long-time researcher of the Irish border with the North, has also provided some significant insights. As with virtually all commentators on borders, we meet the perhaps trite observation that they bring people together as much as divide them, with the qualification in O’Dowd’s case that any attempt to make a border more permeable reduces its significance. Much work, of course, has been directed at activities which are indeed often seen as challenging the integrity and

² I realise that this is to paint the situation with a broad brush. McDonald makes it clear that not all Bretons stress their ethnic identity to that extent, while MacClancy seems to be saying that some Navarrese do see themselves as ethnically different from the Castilian Spanish. The same could conceivably be, or become, true of the Norman identity.

significance of particular borders, such as cross-border trading, especially smuggling (Irek 1998), migration and even tourism, as well as how border communities are themselves constituted (see Donnan and Wilson 1999 for a thorough discussion). At the same time, for O'Dowd borders are also fundamentally undemocratic institutions even in an otherwise democratic Europe, since they owe their existence and their exact configurations mostly to past wars, not democratic approval; yet even liberal democracy needs them in order to know who to distribute rights and duties to as national citizens. With their extensive apparatuses of control, they are also, for Donnan and Wilson, symbols of the state's power, and sites of perhaps the most intense degree of official scrutiny that the law-abiding citizen in particular is ever likely to encounter.

Nonetheless, local officials too may aim to reduce the significance of particular national borders, in which case they may come into conflict with border guards and other police officials representing the state as a whole. In Europe, they are doing this particularly through the creation of cross-border regions. This goes way beyond the shortening of queues or sending rescue services across the border in an emergency. O'Dowd neatly sums up their significance:

Although most trans-frontier regions are created for pragmatic or instrumental reasons to access EU funding as a means of addressing shared environmental, planning or economic development problems, it may be argued that their real significance lies elsewhere [as] cross-national policy communities, advocacy and discourse coalitions, epistemic communities where the logic of communicative action, discourse and consensus creation may be just as important as the logic of instrumental action. (2001: 103, after Risse-Kappen, reference removed).

Certainly all cross-border links between Poland and Germany seem to exist at least in part to celebrate themselves as well as to pursue practical concerns in the narrow sense, and they may even have a higher 'enjoyment' quotient for the officials involved than any real instrumentality. As O'Dowd also points out, the significance of cross-border regions and other links is frequently exaggerated by their supporters, whose core often consists of a local and rather unrepresentative elite of businessmen and officials, and they are generally woefully under-resourced. In fact, most of the foregoing remarks can apply to the present ethnographic situation, and I shall not pursue all of them further here.

Administrative Reform in Poland³

Since 1st January 1999, Poland has had a new administrative structure, which has two main aspects. One is the re-establishment of an intermediate tier of administration, the *powiat*, usually translated as county in English.⁴ This comes in between the *województwa* or provinces – which have themselves been made larger but reduced in number – and the communes (*gminy*) and towns (*miasta*). The latter two should be treated as one level for most purposes, whose units have basically remained the same as before, though they have lost some powers to the *powiaty*. The other aspect is a measure of decentralisation, with each *województwo* being given its own *sejm* or parliament under a speaker or *marszałek*, who is effectively also the political head of the provincial administration. It is precisely this creation of new provinces, with their varying degrees of historical precedent and popular legitimacy, which is of interest to the anthropologist in terms of the development and possible creation of new identities for them, both officially and unofficially.

Decentralisation was a longstanding policy of the Solidarity movement, which, after 1989, saw it as a way of countering the lingering power of the communist *nomenklatura* and of destroying the excessive centralisation exercised by socialist governments as a means of political control. From 1945 to 1975, Poland had a similar three-level system of administration to today's. The removal of the *powiaty* in 1972-75, combined with a reduction in size but more than doubling in number of the *województwa* – which thus lost a lot of the historical legitimacy they had retained as corresponding to former regions – was seen as a way of strengthening central control.⁵ It certainly constrained the activities of local authorities, among other things undermining earlier attempts to develop cross-border relations with the East Germany (e.g. between Lubsko and Forst; see below).

Another aspect of the recent policy of decentralisation is that it suits Poland's project of EU membership. In the face of scepticism, even foot-dragging, from some member governments, including especially Britain under Thatcher and Major, Brussels has managed to insist on the introduction of regional units in all member states, both as a vehicle for funding and as a way of making government more responsive to the people and of strengthening regional and local democracy generally.⁶ Through its administrative reforms, Poland has ensured that, as with

³ The historical description in this section is based largely on Millard 1999: 53-5 and Bingen 1999: 95-8.

⁴ These are nonetheless small counties by English standards, Berkshires rather than Yorkshires. The usual German translation is *Kreis* ('circle').

⁵ The change from five quasi-historical *Länder* to 22 *Bezirke* in East Germany in 1952 can be interpreted in the same light.

⁶ These policies are linked to the EU doctrines of 'additionality' (that funding coming from Brussels should be additional to, not replace, the member state's core funding) and 'subsidiarity' (that public services should be delivered by the lowest level of administration that can do so efficiently).

other legislation, her institutions and laws are EU-compatible – another long-standing policy designed to facilitate eventual EU entry.

But although the reform was generally acknowledged to be necessary by most of the major political parties, its actual implementation was highly controversial. In brief, this was partly due to the entrenched interests of successive government parties in local administrations through their near-monopoly of the post of *wojewoda*, the central government's representative in the provinces, similar to the French prefect. Serious opposition also arose for a time from nationalist and clerical circles, who opposed decentralisation as weakening national unity and introducing fancy 'German' ideas of federalism into Poland. The initial proposal for only twelve new provinces also created a storm of protest over the new boundaries, as many of the old provinces would be divided between, or swallowed up entirely by, the new ones. Some areas, like Opole, the triple alliance between Bydgoszcz, Toruń and Włocławek, and what later became Lubuskie (see below), managed to get their demands for provinces of their own accepted. In each of the last two cases, rivalries between their main cities meant that two provincial capitals had to be provided, one accommodating the administration, the other the local *sejm* or parliament. The eventual agreement, negotiated through the Social Democrat President Kwaśniewski, was for sixteen new provinces – closer to the Social Democrats' proposal of seventeen than the Solidarity-led government's original figure of twelve.

The Province of Lubuskie

Lubuskie was not one of the originally planned twelve provinces, but local people and officials exerted themselves to achieve separate recognition through newspaper campaigns and petitions to parliament in Warsaw. Even local Social Democrats were involved here, as well as the two cities of Zielona Góra and Gorzów, often considered rivals. This was less because of a strong identification with any idea of Lubuskie than because of a general disinclination to identify with any of the surrounding provinces with which the area was otherwise threatened with merger, namely Pomerania, Greater Poland or Lower Silesia. Greater Poland in particular had its eyes on the Warta valley in the north, in the hope of providing itself with a border with Germany. It failed to acquire it, with the result that Lubuskie has managed to take over territory in the north that traditionally belongs to another region, as indeed it also has in the south (see below).

In fact the idea of Lubuskie is not a new one, and the new province is in part a revival of an earlier province that had existed in this area from 1945 to 1975.⁷ The name had been chosen after the Second World War to link this area, recently taken over from Germany, with an old Polish name and with Polish rule over it in the early Middle Ages. The name itself derives from the Polish toponym of ‘Lubusz’, a fortress, now a village, opposite Frankfurt, which, under the German name of ‘Lebus’, became a medieval bishopric, with extensive lands to the west and east. What has changed is that the new province has also taken considerable territory in the south-east from Lower Silesia, though it failed to obtain the important copper-mining and therefore revenue-producing area of Głogów, thanks to Silesian pressure exerted in Warsaw. The south-west of the new province, roughly between Gubin and Żagan, was thus not counted traditionally as belonging to Lubuskie, but at certain times in the Middle Ages to Silesia (a very flexible concept historically), later partly to Bohemia, to Saxony from the mid-seventeenth century to 1815, and to Prussia after 1815. It was precisely here that, historically, Silesia ran into the area known as the Lausitz, which stretches further west, into Germany, and is now being revived as an idea too (see below). The eastern border of the province corresponds roughly to the pre-war international boundary between Germany and Poland.

Administrative Reform and the Management of Identity

Despite its takeover of territory, Lubuskie is one of the smaller of the new provinces, relatively weak politically and economically, with even official unemployment rates of up to 40% in some areas, a low density of population (and therefore a low revenue base), and about 50% of its area under forest. Agriculture is very depressed, large-scale industry virtually non-existent. This weakness has contributed to an impression that the new administrative boundaries are themselves far from fixed. This applies especially at the level of the new *powiaty*. These, it is generally agreed, still have to carve out a convincing position for themselves, though they have already caused resentment downstream of them by increasing the amount of allegedly useless form-filling required and closing much needed hospitals on financial grounds. Already three *gminy* have broken away from the *powiat* of Nowa Sól to form a new *powiat* to the east, based on the town of Wschowa. This is rumoured to have been due to the pressure of the former Polish foreign minister, Bronisław Geremek, who was born nearby, in Sława. There have also been attempts, so far unsuccessful, to unite Gubin and Lubsko as a *powiat* in its own right (separate from the *powiaty* of Krosno and Żary

⁷ On the early part of this period, one of the takeover of this territory by the Polish state, see Osękowski 1994.

respectively). Not even the boundaries of the *województwo* itself are considered entirely sacrosanct (see below).

Popular attitudes tend to support this provisionality. In general, both officials and academic commentators have routinely stressed the ‘passivity’ of the population in Lubuskie, from their arrival after 1945 right up to the present day. As regards the socialist period, this is attributed to fear of an authoritarian government that was concerned to absorb the new areas as fast as possible, coupled with the difficulties of adjusting to a new region under circumstances of a serious shortage of both public facilities and private resources. In addition, as a border area, parts of it were conspicuously dominated by the military. Since 1989 this attitude is said to have been replaced by widespread apathy and resignation over both unemployment and poverty, which in its turn has allegedly produced disenchantment with democracy and a disinclination to get involved in it. This undoubtedly reflects a high degree of bureaucratic stereotyping. More realistically, there is less apathy than a general sense of powerlessness in the face of a series of elite agendas, which, despite their claims, are not capable of significantly improving the living conditions of many ordinary people.

There also tends to be a generational difference. The older generation that actually moved to Lubuskie from the lost eastern territories, the so-called *kresy*, now mostly in their seventies, and to some extent their own children, in their forties and fifties, still tend to identify with the *kresy*, regarding Lubuskie as their physical but not spiritual home. As for younger generations, many tend to think in terms of a purely national identity, in so far as they are not focused on absorbing a globalized, English-language culture through the Internet and other international media. Even after nearly sixty years of occupation of this part of the new territories, therefore, regional identity is still weak or non-existent, except in the negative sense mentioned earlier. Other aspects of this that are sometimes alluded to include the absence in the province of any large cities with a nationally significant history (like Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań or Gdańsk), of significant industry, famous historical figures, special foods, etc. Even the characteristic landscape of the area, namely its extensive forests, is being lost, it is felt, to commercial exploitation.

Attempts are nonetheless being made at a number of official levels to develop a sense of local identity. This relates first to the media. Lubuskie has its own regional television news programme. While one of the local newspapers already referred to ‘Ziemia Lubuska’ before the reforms, others have been launched with the same focus or have shifted towards it; there are now also newspapers for many of the new *powiaty* too. Another source of identity creation is local festivals. In themselves they are not new, and most towns celebrate their existences and histories at some point over the summer. Typically these days, they consist of a mixture

of sport, music, the provision of food and drink, and other marketing and selling opportunities for local businesses, and there may be a special focus on activities for, and by, children. Partner towns abroad may be represented, and these days the European flag of twelve stars on a blue background is sure to feature somewhere. But other celebrations may now refer to the *powiat* and or *województwo*, at least in part, as at one ceremony to hand out medals to fire service personnel that I witnessed. At other times, local identity is not expressed, or only historically. One town in the region celebrated 700 years of its incorporation as a town in 2002. The celebrations went on intermittently throughout the year, but two consecutive days in May stand out in particular as illustrating this tendency. The first day was very much a celebration of the history of the town, which stressed its foundation, architectural heritage and economic history – a largely German history, in fact, though this was not emphasised. The second day was devoted to a celebration of the *kresy* from which most of the population derives, with traditional songs being sung and traditional food being offered for sale. Of the two days of celebration mentioned above, the second, devoted to the *kresy*, seemed to me to have the most significance to those attending. But on neither day were issues of nationality stressed: in other words, the fact that this had been a largely German town within living memory, and that it was now virtually wholly Polish, was glossed over.

This is typical, by and large, of how the history of the area is dealt with in, for example, the tourist literature that many towns issue.⁸ Despite the war and the neglect of the socialist period, the province has a valuable architectural heritage, though less striking than in some other parts of Poland. Laws exist to preserve the old and therefore partly German character of town centres from being undermined by new building. Attempts are made to use this heritage as a basis for attracting tourists to the area. Again, however, its history as a specifically German history, while not denied, is certainly not stressed, despite the fact that the urban population was always largely German, and that even Polish rulers in the Middle Ages often granted settlements the status of towns under German law (especially the *Magdeburger Recht* well known to historians). Nor is the ethnic takeover of 1945 and after given much attention, let alone its often violent circumstances. If it is mentioned, it is normally in terms of the ‘liberation’ of a particular town: it is rare to mention specifically the expulsion of the former German population.⁹

⁸ Another context in which this is important is obviously education, especially at school level. This is a large issue in its own right, and I do not have space to discuss it here.

⁹ Since much of this publicity material is bilingual in Polish and German, it is often interesting to compare the two versions. Given that Germany is a major source of the hoped-for tourism, the German version is often even more sanitised than the Polish one.

Cross-border Identities

In effect, what I have just described amounts to the adoption, even appropriation, of a separate historical legacy.¹⁰ Officially, a value is sought in that legacy, even though the present-day population of the area finds it difficult, if not impossible, to identify with it directly. On the other hand, this might also be interpreted as a conscious attempt to re-establish contact with a history long past, and to forget the break in that history represented by 1945. In the late 1940s, this could be connected with the claims frequently made by Polish historians and other apologists that Poland was merely returning to territory she had previously ruled about a thousand years earlier.¹¹ In the 21st century, it has at least as much to do with attempts to ignore the border that runs along the Oder/Odra and upper Neisse/Nysa rivers, and to recreate the territory on both sides of it as a single entity. This is especially visible in tourist literature, which often sets out to attract Germans particularly, thus re-creating a past when this whole area was not only German, but a playground for Berliners in particular. This itself practically demands a certain lack of specificity regarding the different ethnic and national histories of the area.

However, this is not simply a matter of boosting tourism. In the south-west of Lubuskie, especially in the area between Trzebiel, Żary and Żagan, attempts are being made to revive the older regional identity of Łużyce (Lausitz in German), with or without its Sorb population. As mentioned earlier, Łużyce was a part-Brandenburg, part-Saxon area extending from around Lübben in Germany to the borders of Silesia. Although containing a large German or Germanized population, it is also associated with the Sorbs (often ‘Serbs’ in non-English literature) or Wends, a population speaking a distinct Slavonic language, and commonly identified as a Slav ‘tribe’ in Polish history books. Although Sorbs were mostly expelled from present-day western Poland along with the Germans in 1945, current attempts to revive a Łużyce identity often specifically refer to their earlier presence in the area.¹² Many of these attempts are being supported by local amateur historians and enthusiasts, but there are also official initiatives, such as the plan to open a Sorb museum in Żary later this year (2002). There is already an open-air museum showing re-creations of historical Sorb and other local buildings at Buczyń, south of Trzebiel. Local historians (e.g. Malinowski 2002; Piwoński

¹⁰ There are, of course, other cases in which an earlier architectural heritage has been appropriated, if only for tourist purposes, by a successor population or regime, e.g. Greek sites in Turkey, or Roman sites in North Africa or Britain.

¹¹ Nor is this fantasy, as at least one neutral observer, the American historian Terray, has observed (1983: 13).

¹² Not that there is always much clarity over this. One official was very uncertain when asked whether there had actually been any Sorbs in this part of Poland before 1945, though he was definite that there had been ‘Sorb culture’ there. His acknowledgement of the possibility that there be some people claiming to be Sorbs there today may be more ethnographically accurate than he realised, though I still need to investigate this properly.

2000) also claim that, despite official and unofficial pressures to Germanize them, Sorbs and Sorb culture and language existed here up to 1945, and that, until the Prussians came in 1815, Germans and Sorbs lived together peacefully – a rather typical mythologization of history, which conveniently forgets that the Prussians counted as Germans from at least some perspectives.

It is clear from Piwoński's historical account in particular that, as with other incipient nationalisms, Sorb ethnic identity was greatly developed ('revived'), if not entirely created, in the mid-nineteenth century. Its role today seems to be to emphasise the unified history of what is now southern Lubuskie but what was Łużyce. Using the latter name means emphasising the common Slavonic, and therefore non-German, history of the area. Sorbs may not be Poles, and indeed they are not claimed to be, but they are Slavs, and their history of settlement in this part of present-day Poland can therefore be used as one further justification for the takeover of this territory by Poland in 1945. In this discourse, Prussians in particular tend to appear as intruders with no historical rights to what had been common Slav territory. In justifying the post-1945 takeover, therefore, Sorb culture is appropriated in the name of a common Slavonic, non-German past and identity. This in its turn supports the contention – as yet embryonic, but capable of further development in the future – that the far south of Lubuskie is really Łużyce, and not Lubuskie at all. It also involves forgetting the fact that, as German citizens, the Polish authorities expelled Sorbs from the new territories in 1945 along with ethnic Germans.

Cross-border Co-operation

As mentioned earlier, cross-border co-operation between regional and local government bodies is a big issue in the context of European integration at present, at least among officials, if not always and everywhere the ordinary people they administer. Of course, it is because of this difference in perspective that matters of regional identity enter the picture, as a means whereby officials can support and justify often unpopular cross-border initiatives. These remarks apply equally to Poland, where they have an added interest, given that the country is a candidate member of the EU. Co-operation also has narrower, more practical incentives for border communities in Poland, namely that, under certain conditions, it allows immediate access to some EU funding, and local authorities on both sides of the EU border need international partners to qualify for it. Thus, for example, the construction of sewerage systems in Polish villages may be funded with EU money, so long as there is a cross-border dimension to them – not difficult to argue in this case, given that the border is a river system.

However, not all cross-border links involve towns that are actually located right on the border, nor are local authorities themselves necessarily involved.

One instructive example is the town of Lubsko, in *Żary powiat* and therefore some twenty kilometres from the border, still known to Germans by its pre-war name of Sommerfeld. Its oldest cross-border link is with the German town of Vlotho, which is not on the border at all, but right in the middle of Germany, near Minden and the E34 *Autobahn*. In 1945 many Germans who were expelled from Sommerfeld ended up here, including the last mayor of Sommerfeld, who was soon elected mayor of Vlotho. Desiring to retain links with what was now Lubsko despite its takeover by Poles, he proclaimed that Vlotho would henceforth be Lubsko's *Pate*. This German word literally means 'godfather' and in this context therefore suggests a relationship of sponsorship, even adoption, rather than true partnership. For example, Vlotho periodically sent material though non-monetary help to Lubsko, especially in the martial law period. Since the collapse of socialism it has become more of a true partnership, with mutual visits twice a year: in 2002, for example, there was an exchange of popular music groups, each of whom took the trouble to introduce themselves in the host language. In general, this relationship now appears to exist in, of and for itself, a matter of sentiment with an emphasis on 'culture', with few if any management or commercial aspects; there is even speculation that it may disappear in time, though genuine friendships have evolved between officials of the two towns.¹³

Lubsko has a more practical agreement with Forst, the nearest town over the border in Germany, an association that also includes the commune of Brody, the main Polish village and commune between the two towns. This is actually the second such attempt to create a partnership, the first having been made in the 1970s. However, this fell foul of the abolition of the *powiaty* in Poland in 1975 and in any case never involved ordinary people, only party and other officials. The stress in the current initiative is on involving ordinary citizens, though the whole thing is still being driven by officials in practice.¹⁴

The main focus of the present agreement with Forst is the construction of a bridge across the Neisse/Nysa river (and therefore the border) just north of Forst, due to be opened in autumn 2002, which, it is hoped, will stimulate both trade and tourism in the area, although it has already produced controversy over alleged delays on the German side. Other aspects of the

¹³ Vlotho also has a separate twinning arrangement with Aubigny in central France, which one minor official in Vlotho described to me as being based on nothing more concrete than *Lust*, which, in the somewhat convivial atmosphere of the conversation, might be translated as 'Just for the fun of it'. This illustrates the way in which many such arrangements seem to exist to celebrate themselves and little else.

¹⁴ Lubsko also has a formal link with Helsingør in Denmark, though this is dormant at present for unclear reasons. As for Forst, it also has ties with two Canadian counties, with East Lothian in Scotland, and formerly with Jurbarko in Lithuania, though the latter arrangement collapsed over an alleged swindle.

relationship include school exchanges and mutual language-learning, the latter being seen as filling an important gap, given the few Poles who can speak German and almost total lack of Germans who can speak Polish.

Another local example of cross-border co-operation is the town of Gubin. This is actually one of a number of divided towns along the border, which were single units within Germany before 1945. In the 1990s there have been a number of attempts, with varying degrees of success, to reunite these towns, regardless of the border. Thus in Zgorzelec/Görlitz there are now cross-border bus services and special quick queues for taxis, while in Frankfurt/Słubice there is still a lot of antagonism over border crossings and smuggling – the two most used crossings are here – despite the presence in both towns of the cross-border Viadrina University, designated a ‘European University’.¹⁵

Gubin and its German twin Guben lie somewhere in between these examples along a scale of co-operation, as well as geographically. Co-operation is helped to some extent by the fact that the two towns are more or less equal in size, unlike the other cases, and therefore, people say, they only need one theatre, one technical school, etc., taken as a whole. There is a proposal to open a Polish island in the middle of the river to direct access to the German side. The greatest achievement produced by this co-operation to date is the construction of a new sewerage plant to serve both towns. Yet this also shows that the national dimension is never far away. Located on the Polish side, the plant has to be a Polish company for legal reasons – it is not a joint venture – and it employs mainly Polish staff, apart from some German technicians who cross the border every day.

Guben is obviously the most important partner for Gubin, given the possibilities for infrastructural cooperation, but it does have other partners. One is the small town of Laatzen near Hanover, a recipient of refugees from Gubin in 1945, with which the link only dates back some ten years or so and is cultural rather than managerial or commercial in nature. Another partner is Páks in Hungary, a link that is currently dormant but could be revived at any time if, for example, a partner is needed for a future application. A third partnership is with another Polish town, Kwiedzyń, near Gdańsk. This highly unusual arrangement, since it is within the same country, is reported to have started at the whim of the respective mayors about ten years ago, when there was a boom in such cooperative arrangements; this indicates the fashionable element in some of these activities.

Some of the inner-Polish tensions that can arise from such agreements are illustrated by recent events in Brody. This village is dominated by a small castle, or what in England would

¹⁵ See Irek 2001. Viadrina is the Latin word for the Oder/Odra, and therefore neutral as between German and Polish, as well as suggesting the universal values associated with medieval Latin (the integration of Europe is sometimes described as a return to medieval, pre-nationalist values of community and universalism).

probably count as a modest stately home, originally built and owned in the German period by the von Bruhl family; their descendants still live near Kustrin, the next border town in Germany going north from Frankfurt. The castle fell into disrepair in the socialist period, though it was used intermittently as a store, hostel etc. In the 1990s, two expatriate Poles were involved in attempts to restore it. The first attempt, involving a South African Pole, never got off the ground at all. A second attempt was made by a Canadian Pole, who managed to restore one wing of the building before being arrested in Germany and convicted on charges of smuggling and money-laundering. The German-Polish friendship association he founded during the restoration work is now assumed in the village to have been a scam at least to reduce his debts, if not actually to aid him in his criminal activities. The question now arises as to whether the von Bruhl family themselves might become involved in completing the restoration work of their old castle. While no decision has yet been taken, this raises in a very high-profile fashion the possibility of a German takeover of what has become Polish property. This is perhaps the most sensitive issue of all in this part of Poland, and is aggravated by the realisation that, at some time after EU entry, Poland will have to allow foreigners to acquire land in the country without the irksome restrictions that apply at present.

Another issue that has arisen in Brody relates to the renaming of the local gymnasium or high school. A list of six suggested names, five of them Polish but the sixth being Alois von Bruhl, the German who actually built the castle and developed the village in the late eighteenth century, was presented to the pupils themselves as part of the process of arriving at a decision. Perversely, from one point of view, they opted for Alois von Bruhl, because they knew their local history and were impressed by his significance to it. They were supported in this by the governors of the school, though not the director, who disallowed it on a technicality, nor the commune council. Their counter-argument is basically that this is a school in Poland, and that there are plenty of perfectly respectable Poles after whom it might be named, so why on earth chose a German? When I left the matter was still in abeyance, pending the first local elections under the new system in autumn 2002. Both issues, however, are seen by some as representing a creeping Germanization that is only bound to increase further on EU entry, despite official denials that Germans are unwelcome.

One other downside of cross-border co-operation is the occasional tensions that arise within particular bureaucracies themselves. Thus in one town, there was resentment among older officials of younger, bilingual staff who had been brought in to run cross-border co-operation and were able to go on expenses-paid trips to Germany to visit partner towns. This was aggravated by the fact that some of the older staff, but not their younger colleagues, had been left unpaid for months, due to a delay in the town being reimbursed for certain public

expenditure by the provincial authorities in Gorzów. Although the two budgets are ring-fenced from one another and cannot be vired, this still exacerbated the bad feeling.

Problems also sometimes arise between groups of officials on either side of the border. I was able to attend one of a series of meetings in one twin town to discuss cross-border co-operation up to 2030. These meetings were being arranged by the German side and funded with EU money from a budget that can only be used within the EU. This meant that the Polish officials who were expected to take part in these meetings were not benefiting from it financially as their German partners were. Officials in Poland frequently feel that they are only the junior partners in cross-border co-operation, with German partners sometimes pursuing quite different agendas, not to say being lukewarm to Polish concerns or failing to return Polish hospitality connected with cross-border visits.

Euroregions

Guben and Gubin are also the joint headquarters of one of the four Euroregions into which the German-Polish border is now divided, namely Spree-Neisse-Bober/Sprewa-Nysa-Bóbr (henceforward SBN; named after local rivers), which covers most of the pre-reform province of Zielona Góra in Poland and the *Landkreis* of Spree-Neisse (Guben, Cottbus and Forst) in Germany, as well as Głogów in Lower Silesia.¹⁶ The other Euroregions along the border are focused on Szczecin (including certain districts in southern Sweden), Frankfurt an der Oder/Ślubice, and Görlitz/Zgorzelec (on the latter two in particular, see Irek 2001). Indeed, the whole of the Polish border now partakes in Euroregions together with the adjacent districts of neighbouring states, and there is an annual conference of those involved on the Polish side of these organisations (in 2002 this was held in the resort village of Łagów, near Torzym).

Euroregions are basically unofficial associations of local authorities across borders. They frequently describe themselves as NGOs, and from the German point of view are often seen as being based on cross-border ‘agreements’ (*Verabredungen*), not ‘contracts’ (*Verträge*). They were originally created in the early to mid 1990s to compensate for the continued centralisation of administration in Poland in the years after the collapse of socialism, though still before the devolution of power after 1999; from the German point of view in particular, they were also seen as a way of combating unemployment by boosting cross-border trade. Now that devolution has arrived, some local politicians argue that the Euroregions are now redundant, especially given their lack of formal power. For example, the new bridge at Forst,

¹⁶ Głogów joined because of its existing links with Eisenhüttenstadt, a town in Germany that is a member of this Euroregion.

mentioned earlier, is emphasised as an official project of the provincial government headed by the *marshalek*, one that had nothing to do with the Euroregion.¹⁷ Indeed, a lot of Euroregion activities seem to consist of meetings containing little but exhortations to better cooperation, overcoming the legacy of the past and mutual stereotypes (Poles as smugglers, Germans as land-grabbers, etc.). Nonetheless Euroregions have promoted cross-border co-operation in everything from trade to culture, tourism to school links, infrastructure to the easing of border restrictions.

Although there are plenty of precedents for them in western Europe, especially along the Rhine, the term 'Euroregion' itself appears to be particularly popular in eastern Europe as a way of affirming the European identity of aspirant states like Poland. Euroregion logos are prominently displayed, especially when entering major towns in the area, but also on tourist and other publicity material. Being NGOs, Euroregions can only implement decisions that have been passed by their member local authorities separately as part of routine local decision-making in their respective nation states. Thus, despite all the rhetoric of cross-border co-operation overcoming national tensions, there is necessarily a national dimension to their work, as in the EU itself. For example, one of the major achievements of the SBN Euroregion is that its residents can now cross the border using identity cards only, without having to show passports: yet this decision depended on the prior agreement of the respective national governments in Berlin and Warsaw. Euroregion officials are rarely if ever salaried as such and almost invariably have other duties, though they may have their own offices and even buildings in some cases.

Dating from 1993, the SBN Euroregion originally consisted of just six communes on the Polish side plus Forst and Cottbus in Germany, though soon expanding to its current limits. In Poland it is largely associated with the enthusiasm of one particular individual, a local civil servant in Zielona Góra and a former MP, but a native of Gubin. Nonetheless, some of his German colleagues claimed that the initiative in setting up the Euroregion actually came from their side – a not untypical conflict of claims. A more open conflict concerned a German plan, never implemented, to shift the German headquarters of the Euroregion from Guben to Forst, capital of the Spree-Neisse *Landkreis*, which stimulated protests from Gubin, for which this represented a challenge to the unity of the Euroregion. This could be interpreted as a local example of what seems to be a quite common aspect of processes of devolution generally, namely that their advocates frequently want to halt the process once it reaches them. For

¹⁷ Euroregion members generally consist of communes on the Polish side and *Landkreise* on the German side, together with a number of firms and other private organisations. On the Polish side, the *powiaty* and provinces are not involved at this level. However, the new Polish provinces are creating links of their own with German *Länder*: in Lubuskie's case, this means principally Brandenburg.

example, Scotland remains quite a centralised state, despite its own achievement of devolution within the United Kingdom.

Aims and outcomes

In this area, at least, money, especially the possibility of obtaining EU money, is seen as a main reason for entering into cross-border relations of the sort I have described. This is only partly true in practice. For one thing, and quite simply, money is typically not sought for itself, but for what it makes possible in terms of improving infrastructure and services, including especially education, and with them, the quality of life for local residents (cf. Irek 2001). This may also apply to what we might loosely call ‘cultural’ or ‘symbolic’ things that support the idea of a particular cross-border region having a common identity. Secondly, money is not always emphasised by officials themselves. Both the leading Polish and German figures in the SBN Euroregion, despite their enthusiasm for cross-border co-operation, felt that this was more a matter of management than finance. In general, both thought the significance of the EU link exaggerated, applications being more trouble than they were worth – an accusation frequently also directed at the Euroregion itself by communes in the area trying to raise money through it.¹⁸ The Polish representative in particular had no interest in developing contracts with Brussels directly (e.g. through the Committee of Regions) and did not even favour Poland joining the EU.

Outcomes, in the areas of trade links and tourism in particular, have mostly proved disappointing up to now. Businessmen are put off by their own lack of knowledge of legal regimes in the other country, as well what are perceived to be the extra risks to investments. One Polish businessman said that he had indeed obtained fresh contacts and business from his membership of the Euroregion – but only on the Polish side of the border.¹⁹ Tourism is held back by a lack of facilities even at potentially major sites, and planned cycle routes and horse trails do not always join up because some communes are less enthusiastic than others in creating them. Cultural projects are often only short-term, even when they are talked up tremendously, often because the money runs out. Thus one cultural ‘Eurocentre’ that was set up in a resort village in Poland about thirty miles from the border in the mid 1990s – widely trumpeted at the time as a great advance in cross-border co-operation and cultural understanding – was actually only funded for one year by the Euroregion. It is now

¹⁸ For example, the requirement to provide the application on disc, and with an English translation, was seen as a significant disincentive in making an application for, perhaps, only Euros 1000.

¹⁹ Trade may precede and create such links, as well as following them. Thus the twinning arrangement between Nowogród Bobrzański and Lubbenau started through commercial cooperation between building firms, that between Bobrowice and Bruck in Bavaria through a Polish firm marketing local mushrooms there.

completely forgotten in the village itself, even in the administration and the converted castle that had accommodated it.

In other cases too, there is often a publicity deficit about such ties. Although the various Euroregions have their newsletters, which are made available free to the general public, town-twinning arrangements are often scarcely publicised at all. In one town in Poland there is a placard with a photograph of the tree-planting ceremony celebrating the town's twinning with a town in Germany, but no information is provided concerning where the partner town is (not even the country), let alone that the ceremony had actually been held there. One official's response to this lacuna was that it was such a small town that everyone knew what was going on there anyway. There is also frequently uncertainty about where partner towns actually are. In one extreme case, a partner town that I was told was in Holland turned out to be in Denmark, and I had to tell the same deputy mayor that another of his partner towns, this time in Germany, was not actually a member of the same, or indeed any other, Euroregion.

Unofficial Links

However, this uncertainty and lack of publicity should not lead one to overlook certain popular initiatives in creating cross-border links. In Brody, a local businessman there has set up a cross-border association of his own which is mainly concerned at present to encourage school links, especially for purposes of language-learning, rather than business. Most unusual in this respect is the story of Wellmitz, a village just north of Guben in Germany, and its relationship with Welmice, a Polish village near Bobrowice. Both sides being struck by the similarity of names,²⁰ they decided to investigate further as soon as the border opened, and to develop the contacts thus made into a regular partnership. This is characterised by regular mutual visits for local festivals, sports events and so on, as well as the German village collecting and sending clothing, toys etc. to the Polish village, which is visibly poorer. These contacts have been pursued thus far by local people in each village with little or no input from local officials, though the latter often turn up at festivals; indeed, those who have set up this relationship like to see themselves as cultivating 'human' contacts and not just an image, as official ties so often seem to. However, this informality may change: the mainstay of the arrangement in the Polish village is aiming to become its next mayoress so as to be able to take things further.

²⁰ The first root in each name probably means 'brook, stream' in Old Polish and/or Slavonic. The suggestion of one official in Bobrowice, that Germans had gone from the Polish to the German village itself in 1945, proved to apply to the area around Wellmitz rather than the village itself.

In another example of individual initiative, one elderly German I met, who had been born in Lubsko, was now a frequent visitor to what he still called ‘Sommerfeld’, was well known in the local administration, and had plans to publish a book of old postcards of the town – a common publishing project in the area generally at present.²¹ He was particularly anxious to demonstrate his goodwill towards Poland and towards the Poles who had taken over his birthplace, and to overcome the past, being concerned to distance himself from those Germans who turn their backs on cross-border links of this sort. Such demonstrations of goodwill are frequent (especially, perhaps, on the German side) and may seem heartening, but the very stress on them indicates an underlying tension in these relationships that is absent from other examples elsewhere in Europe; quite simply, they are not yet taken for granted.

In Poland too, there is a similar spread of attitudes to cross-border ties. While for many reconciliation with Germany is what is important, and not just for narrow economic reasons, for others cross-border links – and even regionalisation itself, which is exceptionally strong and well-developed in Germany – are simply devices to extend German hegemony into eastern Europe, where Germany has already been the chief trading partner for a number of years. This is especially the line of the nationalist far right, as enshrined in Andrzej Lepper’s Self-Defence Party. Stories of scams surrounding German companies abound in these circles, concerning their alleged corruption, their use of Polish front-men, or their moving from town to town to obtain tax concessions, leaving a swathe of unemployment in their wake, as do complaints about the Polish government’s sycophancy to Germany (the failure any longer to celebrate the German invasion of September 1939, for example) – although, of course, one is assured, there is nothing wrong with Germans as such.

Some General Conclusions

Since this is very much ‘work in progress’, I shall not offer firm conclusions here, simply some further ethnographically based reflections to end with.

First, we have seen that officials often see themselves as cultivating an identity for the province or for the whole area – provided, of course, that they recognise the word ‘identity’ to begin with, which is not always the case. Sometimes the word ‘mentality’ is used, especially by Germans, who tend to be more concerned with overcoming the prejudices and hostilities of the past, and see this as a psychological problem, though also one that can be overcome through education and individual good will. In one planning meeting between the two sides

²¹ For example, a similar project concerning Guben/Gubin has already been published. There is already a semi-public photographic exhibition of Lubsko, today and yesterday, housed in a cellar under the town hall.

that I attended, identity and mentality were discussed at the same level of importance as the development of tourism, education or transport links. These discussions brought out a degree of disagreement. While the German moderator stressed the identity of the double town, at least some Polish officials stressed national identity as the only meaningful option in the area. For the Germans again, a strong local identity was seen as a way of keeping people in the area to seek for work – a particular problem in many towns in eastern Germany, given the torrent of people going westwards in search for work.²² For other Polish officials, on the other hand, only jobs would keep people in the area: without them, there would be no identity anyway. The question of identity is thus being discussed at official level, but with varying views as to its significance, if any.

Secondly, national politics may also have an impact on these activities. While national centres, that is, Berlin and Warsaw, want to keep key decisions in their hands – especially over funding, which, whatever its source or destination, still goes through them – they are not above exploiting local cross-border ties for their own ends. In the forums of the Euroregions especially, local officials and politicians are able to say things that Berlin or Warsaw might like to say, but cannot for either domestic or diplomatic reasons. The principal such reason is probably that the respective national populations as wholes are more sceptical of co-operation with the other state than those along the border – according to opinion polls, for example, there is more support for EU entry in western Poland than in the centre or east of the country. At the same time, complaints about the nature of cross-border co-operation that might create a diplomatic incident at international level can be made more innocuously at local level. National governments therefore need a way of sending both positive and negative messages about co-operation to one another without doing so themselves; local contacts provide this.

Another aspect of relationships between national capitals and border areas is the potential for the polarity of centre-periphery relations to become reversed with the development not just of cross-border co-operation, but also of strong and fairly autonomous cross-border regions. For example, both Guben and Gubin complain of neglect by their respective national governments, both being located on fairly remote parts of the border. By combining their hinterlands as a Euroregion and placing its headquarters in the double town, they have themselves become centres.²³

²² In Guben, for example, officials are planning for a population that has declined by a half since 1991. The population of Görlitz has also declined (Irek 2001).

²³ A similar example from within the EU is the Atlantic Arc planning region, which unites the entire Atlantic coast of Europe into one region with common interests and problems in tourism and fishing, and sometimes a stress on a common Celtic culture. This coast is, of course, by and large a region of peripheries within the respective nation states, such as Brittany within France. Now, however, by accommodating the headquarters of the Atlantic Arc at Rennes, it itself has become a centre. Yet other examples of such multi-national regions are the Alpine Arc and the so-called 'Centre Capitals' region, which stretches from Banbury in Oxfordshire to the

Thirdly, at the risk of romanticising the situation somewhat, it is worth stressing the large amount of goodwill that exists behind these activities. There is still no shortage of either Poles or Germans who have little time for, and even continue to hate, one another. The activities even of those who advocate increasing cross-border co-operation do not always run smoothly, sometimes creating resentment on the other side, though rarely threatening a complete breakdown. This reflects an inevitable combination of differences in perspectives and in perceived interests, different national pressures, and the influence of, and reactions to, particular political egos, of a sort that is entirely typical of European politics generally. Nonetheless – and in parallel with the internal ethnic peace of most nation states – this is one part of eastern Europe where international co-operation has so far run relatively smoothly and produced real gains from the point of view of those who dislike conflict. I would argue that this is typical of this half of the continent rather than otherwise, despite the tragedy of the Balkans in the 1990s.

Lastly, both official and unofficial challenges to the integrity and permanence of the western border are gradually producing a new situation that will reduce its significance considerably even before EU entry. These cross-border activities reflect, but also contribute to, the idea of a ‘Europe of regions’, which is supposed to prevent a return of either nationalist competition between states in Europe or authoritarianism within them. At the same time, while this will be an expanded Europe, it will also be an incomplete one. On its now more heavily controlled eastern border, Poland is also contributing to an alternative idea, that of Fortress Europe, while ensuring that it will itself be within the laager. It is through the tensions between these two ideas that regional, national and international identities will be worked out in the Europe of the future.

Ruhr and from the Loire to the Randstad in Holland. Originally just planning regions drawn up by Brussels, some enthusiasts for the European idea have advocated replacing the nation state with these units, which are of comparable size to the nation state but multi-national as well as cross-border, as a way of finally ditching the nationalism underlying what are sometimes referred to as ‘Europe’s civil wars’. This would mean declining political significance for existing national capitals. This is very much a minority view even among officials involved in cross-border relations, though they are well aware of its ultimate implications.

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