

Borderlands in times of crisis: The possibility of de-marginalisation of the Polish border zone with Russia after the outbreak of war in Ukraine

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Abstract

The Polish-Russian border, closed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, transformed into an iron curtain without any chance for its disappearance in a long-term perspective. The ongoing conflict between Russia and the EU started an experiment in the Polish zone bordering with Russia with respect to the planning of economic growth in the new reality – in a fully isolated area – where the border is a limitation and not an opportunity. According to the author's research, the crisis caused by the permanent closing of the Polish-Russian border and suspension of contacts with the Kaliningrad Oblast, which initially was a hard blow for the border communes, with a particularly difficult economic situation, may – in the long-term perspective – turn out to be an important driving force for changes. The primary purpose of this paper is to identify the main actions taken by the Polish local authorities at the border with Russia, the aim of which is revitalisation of the local economy after the Polish-Russian border was closed. The article is based on a number of in-depth expert interviews carried out in the Polish border area.

Keywords: Polish border zone with Russia, re-bordering, war in Ukraine, de-marginalisation

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1. Introduction

Recent events have once again assigned Poland's eastern borders with the role of providing security. For fear of loss of sovereignty, government authorities decided to seal the political borders and to increase their visibility by erecting walls and fences. The Russian aggression in Ukraine heightened the fears of European citizens for their own safety, forcing the domestic authorities to make the borderlands secure (cf. Opiola et al., 2022).

The example of the Polish-Russian border ideally fits the new border trends. The construction of a temporary barrier, preceded by sealing the border in the institutional and legal dimensions, changed the daily life of the local communities at the Polish-Russian borderland. In spite of the fact that since the moment of its delimitation the border has been characterised by unique dynamics in the degree of its permeability, until the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022 it had served as an important incentive for local and regional development. Volatility, which is the immanent feature of the Polish-Russian border, had been to a certain degree domesticated by the local actors from the borderland. As noted by Komornicki, Wiśniewski and Mischczuk (2019, 480), the region worked out an ability to derive benefits from the vicinity of a hard and weakly permeable border. At moments of an increased degree of permeability, the residents and the local authorities from the Polish zone bordering with Russia

used it to improve the difficult economic situation of the region. In turn, at times when it was sealed, they simply waited. Use of the border as a development incentive – emerging at moments of exogenous shock, caused by positive relations on the level of central authorities – was considered the only possibility of counteracting the progressing peripherisation (cf. Łukowski, Bojar & Jałowicki, 2009; Studzińska, 2021).

The reality of the Polish-Russian borderland, closed since the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic, changed in spite of the claims of Lara-Valencia and Laine (2022, 10), who believe that a full isolation of borderlands is impossible. The example of the Polish-Russian borderland, on account of its strong exposure to geopolitical risk, must be treated as a special case in border studies. The military and symbolic role of the Kaliningrad Oblast for the Russian Federation results in the attention of the Kremlin being strongly focused on the policy of the region's securitisation (Vendinaa et al., 2021). In turn, according to Bieleń (2019), the policy of the Polish government with respect to Russia is dominated by the fear of Russia and acting to the detriment of their own interest. The extraordinary role attributed to the Polish-Russian borderland in the context of European security entails that any type of mutiny of the residents of the Polish zone bordering with Russia at the moment of sealing of the border would stand in opposition to the general interest of the residents of Europe. Hence, the local

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community experiences the prevalence of security over the welfare of the local economy. The Polish-Russian borderland is a good example of “coexistent” border areas (Martinez, 1994). As suggested by Prokkoła (2022, 26), ‘from the resilience point of view, this means that if a border community faces a sudden stress event and disruption, they must mainly rely on local capacities and domestic institutions’. The primary purpose of this paper is to identify the main actions taken by the Polish local governments at the border with Russia, the aim of which is revitalisation of the local economy after the Polish-Russian border was closed. In her discussion, the author attempts to answer three key research questions:

1. Is the development of peripheral border areas possible without using the border as a resource?
2. How do the local governments of border communes handle the new reality created by the Russian and Ukrainian conflict?

3. Are the actions taken by local governments contributing to the improvement of the economic situation of the analysed communes?

Furthermore, the author tries to show that the crisis situation experienced by the Polish local governments in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine may become a strong development incentive for communes with a strong exposure to geopolitical risk. The study encompasses communes that belong to the Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes (Stowarzyszenie Warmińsko-Mazurskich Samorządów Pogranicza) (Figs. 1 and 2). Reference books offer a broad array of modes of delimiting border areas based on the administrative criterion or distance from the border (*cf.* Sitek, 2016; Komornicki, Wiśniewski & Mischczuk, 2019). Nevertheless, the grass-roots initiatives of local authorities as part of the Association motivated the author to take up field studies.



Fig. 1: The Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes
Source: authors' elaboration

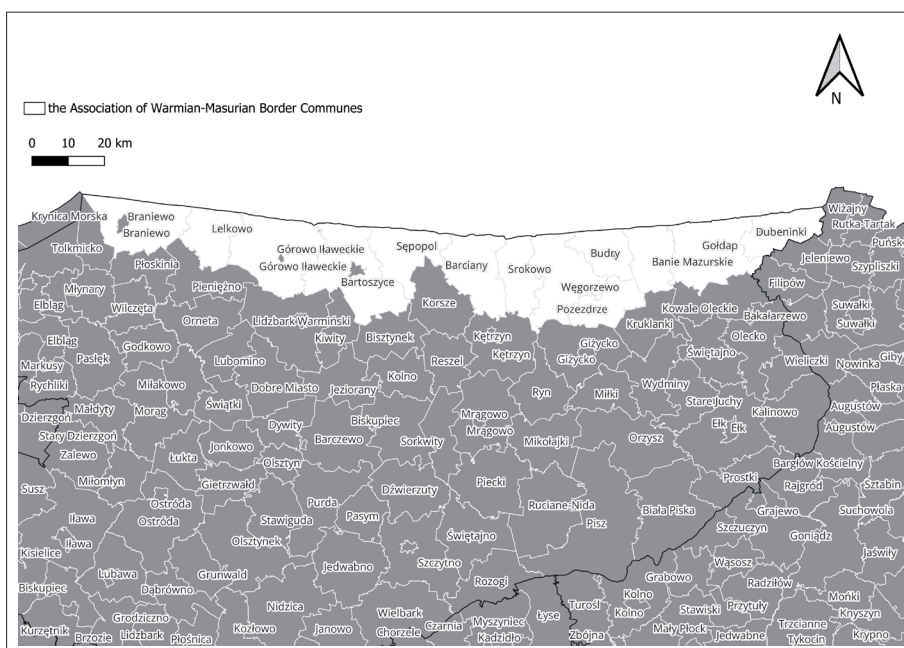


Fig. 2: The Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes
Source: authors' elaboration

The paper is merely an introduction to the discussion, and aims to encourage further studies on the future fate of the Polish zone bordering with Russia. The actions presented in the paper – given their initial level – require more comprehensive analyses. In turn, the formulated conclusions must be verified. The author's intention is to draw the border researchers' attention to the present situation of this region, unique in the scale of Europe, so that in the long-term perspective scientists representing various academic fields may observe and assess better the possibility of the de-marginalisation of fully isolated border regions.

2. Theoretical background

In compliance with the general overview of literature, border regions are relatively often identified as peripheries (e.g. Zarycki, 2011; Böhm & Drápela, 2017; Komornicki, Wiśniewski & Mischuk, 2019; Leutloff-Grandits, 2022). As noted by Deleixhe, Dembinska and Iglesias (2019), the peripherality of border regions is not only an outcome of their geographic distance from the centre, but also of the burden of their institutional distance with respect to the central authorities. These areas are usually economically weaker and have a less developed infrastructure, as compared to the regions located in the central part of the state (Böhm & Drápela, 2017). Given their economic and geographic distance from the economic centres, they are called 'double peripheries' and even 'double peripheral dead ends' (cf. Leutloff-Grandits, 2022; Paül et al., 2022).

However, it cannot be concluded that peripherality is the immanent feature of border regions. Examples of European regions located along internal borders of the European Union prove that borderlands may build their competitive advantage based on the resource of the state border (cf. Sohn, 2014). Durand, Decoville and Knippschild (2020) claim that these regions, on account of their socio-economic links, are good examples of spaces to 'check the pulse' of the level of European integration. Nevertheless, Prokkola (2022, 31) notes that 'the difference between the EU internal and external border regions underscores the difference that the geopolitical environment makes from the viewpoints of resilience'.

The level of border use by the border regions was particularly visible at the moment of their global revival when the fears of the spreading of the SARS-CoV-2 virus were running high. According to Opiłowska (2021, 597), this has clearly shown 'how closely connected the border regions are and how the trans-national border spaces have changed.' This isolation – even though temporary – immediately increased the peripherality of border regions (Rosik et al., 2022). It follows from the literature review that assigning the role of a barrier to the border regions was particularly poignant for the borderland residents (Klatt, 2020; Kajta & Opiłowska, 2021; Opiłowska, 2021; Opiola & Böhm, 2022; Lara-Valencia & Laine, 2022; Paül et al., 2022). Medeiros et al. (2021), wishing to highlight the negative consequences of the sudden and clear reinstatement of borders, described the actions of central authorities as Covid-fencing, thus comparing the global isolation of borderlands to the physical erection of border walls. According to Radil, Pinos and Ptak (2021, 134), border closing as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic was a clear example that borders in crisis situations are reinstated as an important tool used to defend from the 'enemy' and that this tool is applied equally willingly by both authoritarian and democratic states.

Acceptance for 'hardening' the political borders should be an important clue for the borderland actors that in crisis moments believe their daily reality is particularly at risk and depends exclusively on grass-roots initiatives (cf. Böhm, 2021; Kajta & Opiłowska, 2021; Opiłowska, 2021). Experiences gathered by the representatives of local and regional levels of borderland administration during the time of Covid-19 constitute an

important basis for their activities in the nearest future (Opiola & Böhm, 2022). First of all, the unilateral and top-down decision on border closing, without taking into account the cross-border nature of European borderlands (Böhm, 2021), has shown that 'nation-states continue to play the decisive role in transborder relations, leaving subnational actors dependent on central decisions' (Kajta & Opiłowska, 2021, 2). The fact that consultations with borderland authorities were overlooked should be an important guideline for the local leaders for building a dialogue with the central authorities in the future. Jańczak (2020) even suggests that the sub-state authorities should be in ongoing contact with the government and remind it about the significance of cooperation for the cross-border regions. Secondly, borderlands around the world, even though only for a moment, experienced a great experiment in the form of resistance to crisis situations and a search for new solutions to continue actions in border areas. Studies carried out by Kajta and Opiłowska (2021, 20) proved that the critical situation of the border regions has created new trajectories of trans-national cooperation. All actions taken at the governmental level have solidified the conviction of the local governments at the borderlands that the situation of the border regions fully depends on their creativity.

Even though re-bordering is not a new phenomenon, it seems to take root in Europe more and more. As suggested by Opiola et al. (2022, 19), 'for a long time, the Europeans have not been so worried by their future as they are now due to what is going on with the borders and around them.' The war in Ukraine has challenged the post-Cold-war order in Europe (Freudspurger & Schimmelfennig, 2022). 'In Finland, the events caused a "seismic shift" in the mode of looking at Russia and the Finish and Russian border' (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2022, 1). As follows from the Eurobarometer survey (2022), over 40% of respondents in Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Finland and Estonia believe that the defence policy of the EU, including the defence of external borders, should be a priority, and that the European Parliament should address it in the first place. The geographic proximity of Russia caused panic among residents of Europe and a desire to reinforce the defence function of borders. In response to the citizens' expectations, Finland is implementing a pilot project of erecting a 200 km fence at the Finnish-Russian border (BBC, 2023). Poland is placing anti-tank barricades at the border with Russia and Belarus. Furthermore, it is sealing the Polish-Russian border by building a temporary wall (The Defense Post, 2023). Europe is clearly aiming for a separation of Russia and Belarus from the remaining part of the continent, implementing the project of a European 'curtain made of barbed wire' (Washington Post, 2023).

Are these activities a just direction that will improve Europe's security, or only an expression of a certain helplessness of the central authorities with respect to the next crisis situations? There is no straightforward answer to this question. The researchers claim that increasing a country's defence systems by erecting walls and barbed wires is a highly ineffective action (cf. Nail, 2013; Deleixhe, Dembinska & Iglesias, 2019; Opiola et al., 2022). According to Paasi (2022, 18), the ongoing construction of border fences is nothing else but a production of 'theatrical performances' for the distressed nations. However, it goes without doubt that the hardening of borders is strongly affecting the border regions, increasing the number of double peripheral dead ends. State authorities seem to forget that a border is a multi-functional institution used by the communities at various levels of spatial aggregation. That is why the demonstration of power through the process of re-bordering in Europe should be accompanied by specific national and EU policies addressed to areas located in the shadow of the more and more solid borders. As suggested by Prokkola (2022, 31) 'the borderland's resilience has its own logic that is interconnected yet simultaneously different from the national and European Union political agendas'.

3. Methods and data

The paper was prepared based on the results of field studies carried out in the period between July and December 2022. The research material was gathered during nine study visits to the Polish border zone. In the course of the research, nineteen in-depth expert interviews were completed. The interviews were carried out with mayors and heads of border communes (in special cases, interviews were held also with their deputies). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The local authorities were asked about:

1. The main social and economic problems of the border communes,
2. Impact of the war in Ukraine on the economic situation of the communes, and
3. Activities for the sake of de-marginalisation.

The key issue addressed in the course of the studies were benefits resulting from membership in the newly-established Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes. In total,

fifteen interviews were held. To expand the research perspective, the author included in the interviews experts on the local and regional development of border areas and journalists representing newspapers with regional and national coverage, specialising in issues pertaining to the Polish-Russian borderland. The interviews were conducted in Polish and translated into English. The respondents' data were anonymised and coded (Tab. 1). The entire study was supplemented with an analysis of the territorial strategy of the Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes, which forms a consistent vision of border communes for the future of the region. The strategy was developed in January–September 2021 in cooperation with the advisors. Association of Polish Cities and members of the Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes. Although the strategy was created before the Russian invasion, its authors – taking into account the changing geopolitical situation and its impact on the region – have prepared solutions that can be developed in the border area even in the event of a closed border.

Interview code	Type of expert	Date of interview
W01	local authority, rural commune, man	12 July 2022
W02	local authority, rural commune, woman	7 July 2022
W03	local authority, town; man	19 September 2022
W04	local authority, rural commune, man	17 August 2022
W05	local authority, rural commune, man	12 July 2022
W06	local authority, rural commune, woman	14 September 2022
W07	local authority, rural commune, man	12 July 2022
W08	local authority, rural commune, woman	17 August 2022
W09	local authority, rural commune, man	26 August 2022
W10	local authority, town; man	30 August 2022
W11	local authority, rural commune, man	7 July 2022
W12	local authority, town; man	7 July 2022
W13	local authority, town; woman	7 July 2022
W14	local authority, rural commune, man	2 December 2022
W15	local authority, town, man	2 December 2022
E01	expert in regional and local development, man	30 October 2022
E02	expert in regional and local development, man	2 September 2022
D01	journalist, woman	16 September 2022
D02	journalist, man	8 December 2022

Tab. 1: The list of interviewers Source: Own elaboration

4. Results: the Polish border area with Russia in the era of crisis

4.1 The new reality of the Polish border area with Russia after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the opinion of the local authorities

Independently from the modes of delimiting problem areas, the Polish border zone with Russia in the majority of studies is listed as an area at risk of permanent marginalisation (cf. Śleszyński et al., 2017; Komornicki, Wiśniewski & Miszcuk, 2019; Śleszyński, Herbst & Komornicki, 2020). In line with the conclusions formulated by Komornicki, Wiśniewski and Miszcuk (2019), the Polish-Russian border is a border of significant 'disadvantages', where all the border units require potential developmental support. The 2030 Borderland Strategy (Strategia Pogranicza 2030, 2021, 15) clearly stresses that the 'practically closed Polish-Russian border is a key factor for socio-economic peripherisation of the borderland, leading to its relative impoverishment, human drain and weakening of the bases of its further development.' According to local authorities, this region is characterised by progressing depopulation, ageing of the society and a difficult

economic situation, which makes it an area of low attractiveness with respect to settlement and investments [W02; W09; W10; W11]. The 2030 Strategy of the Warmian-Masurian Province (2022) indicates that communes located at the border with Russia are characterised by a low index of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, rural areas with a low level of living conditions are concentrated along the border with the Kaliningrad Oblast.¹

For a number of years, the difficult situation in the region had been mitigated by attempts at using the Polish-Russian border as an important development incentive (cf. Łukowski, Bojar & Jałowicki, 2009; Studzińska, 2021). In periods of an increased degree of border permeability, the Polish border zone benefitted from the development of trade and tourism in the region, implementing numerous investments addressed to clients from the Kaliningrad Oblast. As noted by one of the mayors [W12],

'the tourist traffic relied on traffic with Russia. Major tourist centres – for example Goldap – addressed their offer to Russian tourists. The stream of Russian tourists was flowing fast. Many affluent tourists came from Kaliningrad.'

The four-year period of the local border traffic led to the revival of the borderland (cf. Sagan et al., 2018). Thus, some borderland

¹ The author, intending to assess the actions aimed at counteracting the progressing marginalisation, purposefully did not perform a detailed analysis of the socio-economic situation. Such assessment is available in the strategic documents (among others, the 2030 Borderland Strategy, the 2030 Development Strategy of the Warmian-Masurian Province) and in reference books (among others, Śleszyński, Herbst & Komornicki, 2020). The author's intention is to identify the main development problems, aggravated in relation to the conflict situation in Europe, and the modes of solving them.

actors forgot about the military role of the Kaliningrad Oblast and strong dependence between the degree of border permeability and the geo-political determinants. The subsequent events leading to stronger and stronger hardening of the Polish-Russian border proved that the expectations of the local authorities and residents with respect to the use of the benefit of their border location were too high.

Gradual sealing of the Polish-Russian border since the suspension of the local border traffic thwarted the cross-border activity until its total elimination at the moment of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequently Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The new borderland reality challenged the possibility of further use of the border and set new challenges before the local and regional authorities. As noted by one commune head [W08],

'we were friends with our neighbours, with the Zheleznodorozhny Commune and the Pravdinsky District. They were our friends, we visited each other. As part of the Association, we even filed one joint application [to procure EU funds – author's note]. I talked to the province governor about opening the border crossing point in the commune, but the war stopped it all.'

'Before the closing of the border, the residents maintained social, trade, service and economic contacts with the Russians. Today, we have some kind of paralysis in the town' [W03].

According to the studies carried out by Statistics Poland (2023), the expenses incurred by foreigners crossing the Polish-Russian border in the third quarter of 2022 as compared to the analogous period of 2019 dropped by 85.5%.² As noted by one respondent [W04],

'suspension of the local border traffic extinguished the service market, but now with the war, everything got worse [...] We had a million potential clients and now we have a wall.'

As follows from the statistical information provided by the Border Guards (2023), approx. 370,000 crossings were recorded at the Polish-Russian border in 2022, which is only 6% of the border traffic recorded at the Polish-Russian border in 2014 (Fig. 3).

The overall climate of the Russia and EU conflict not only hindered the cross-border activity of the residents of the Polish-Russian borderland, but also put an end to the cross-border cooperation. As noted by Bartnik and Bielewski (2022, 36), the Russian aggression against Ukraine immediately led to

the termination of multilateral and bilateral contracts with the Kaliningrad Region. The Baltic Euroregion decided to suspend the membership of the Kaliningrad Oblast. The Warmian-Masurian Province terminated the cooperation agreement signed with the Kaliningrad Oblast in 2001. The border communes cancelled the bilateral agreements. Even though for many local authorities the decision to freeze the cooperation – an expression of solidarity with Ukraine – was the only right solution at the time of the ongoing conflict [W02, W09 and W13], it must also be said that it postponed their development prospects. As noted by one representative of the local authorities [W03],

'I have been working for the local government for 10 years and since the first days of my work we established and maintained friendly contacts with the representative of the Kaliningrad Oblast authorities [...]. Today, slightly under the pressure of the media, but also our own logic, we had not only to freeze these contacts, but also terminate them. I did it with a painful heart [...]. Suspending all relations changed the mode of functioning of the local government. At this moment, we do not speak about partnership with the neighbours, but we are looking for partners in different places in Poland and Europe.'

The local authorities not only lost the opportunity of pursuing joint measures as part of bilateral contracts, but were also forced to continue on their own the projects started with the Russian partner as part of the 2014–2020 Poland-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme. Furthermore, in line with the decision of the European Commission, the Polish and Russian cooperation for the new financing period of 2021–2027 was suspended (Bartnik & Bielawski, 2022). The end of cooperation of the Polish border communes with the Kaliningrad Oblast is a development problem for many local governments. One respondent [W12] comments that as follows:

'Our situation after closing the border is even worse than before [...]. The whole system relied on cooperation with Russia. The bubble burst. The funds [from the suspended Poland-Russia Programme – author's note] should be assigned to the assistance for the north-eastern wall, so that we could start re-building our infrastructure in separation from the Kaliningrad Oblast. For years, this infrastructure was built with the thought about clients from Russia. Now everything has disappeared. A bad after-taste remains. What is more, additional support is needed.'

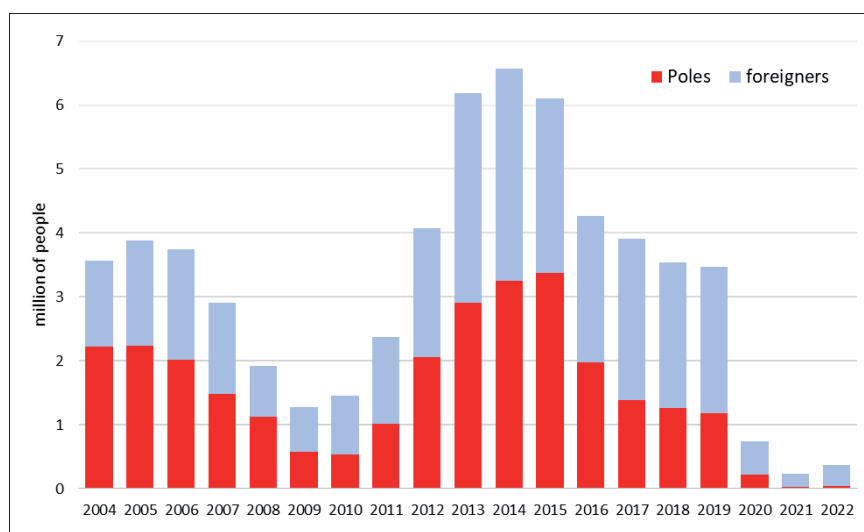


Fig. 3: Cross-border traffic in the Polish-Russian border area 2004–2022
Source: authors' elaboration based on Border Guard 2023

² In line with the information provided by Statistics Poland (2023), the citizens of the Russian Federation are dominant among foreigners crossing the Polish-Russian border.

The territorial government sees the relocation of funds from other programmes, among others the Poland-Lithuania Programme, as an opportunity, and takes specific steps in this respect.

‘We requested the Marshal and the Minister to start negotiations on re-assigning the funds from the Poland-Lithuania Programme for the support of the border areas with Russia. So far, we have not been successful. Yet we are hoping that at least some of the funds will be reassigned to us. We are doing all we can. We know that it is a great opportunity for us so we are fighting’ [W11].

On 10 March 2023, the Joint Monitoring Committee for the Poland-Russia Programme decided to transfer only the additional funds – recovered from the Russian partners – to the Polish beneficiaries implementing the projects as part of the 2014–2020 financing period (PLRU, 2023). This decision does not offer any opportunities for procuring funds for new projects. Due to this, the solution does not respond to the needs of the Polish zone at the border with Russia.

4.2 An attempt to de-marginalise the Polish border area and its effectiveness

The studies performed by the author show that the Russian aggression in Ukraine increased the difficult socio-economic situation in the region. One of the development opportunities is the use of the potential of the Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Communes, set up in 2019. In spite of the fact that the idea for setting up the Association appeared even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, it must be stated that its role in the process of de-marginalisation of the region may be essential. According to the information provided by the local authorities, the idea for setting up the Association was sparked by joint challenges in the socio-economic area. The Association, thanks to the support of external experts as part of the Advisory Support Centre project (Centrum Wspierania Doradczego) (financed by the EU), embarked on the path of strategic planning of the development of the Polish border zone with Russia (Report of the Advisory Support Centre..., 2022). As noted by one commune head [W06],

‘the most important is the fact that the association exists and brings together representatives of units that are similar.’

In addition, another respondent [W11] stated,

‘We are all border communes. This affects, among others, limitations in the development of communication. Nobody wants to invest in roads that lead to the border where you have to turn and go back to the centre of Poland. We have set up the association, we started to look for solutions and to prepare a joint strategy, the Advisory Support Centre has appeared and everything went smoothly.’

Without doubt, the mere establishment of the Association should be assessed as a manifestation of a certain maturity and growing awareness that acting together in a partnership offers a significant opportunity for ‘saving’ the region from permanent de-population. The representatives of the local authorities did not hide the fact that they see their membership in the Association as an opportunity to source external funding, as confirmed by the deputy mayor of one commune [W010],

‘we are a local government with slight own revenues and that is why we are trying to participate in initiatives thanks to which it is possible to seek financing for investments constituting the ‘backbone’ of the operation of a commune. Here, I have the infrastructural investments in mind.’

It is worth stressing that these individual motives may in the future bear fruit in the form of a change of thinking about management.

Membership in the Association has opened new opportunities for the local governments. Apart from a chance to seek external funds, the local governments created a space for the exchange of thoughts and experiences. This practice, even though applied by the local governments very often, is a certain novelty in building the competitive advantage for the local governments from the Polish zone bordering with Russia. As noted by a respondent [W01],

‘a definite majority of communes located along the border expressed willingness to join the Association. We also did not want to remain outside of it. We were intent on it so that at least the thought about development is transferred from one commune to another.’

An important benefit from acting together is an increased power of their voice. The local authorities are aware that they represent an area with a low population density, located in a peripheral part of the country. Thus, they are aware that their agency increases when they act jointly for the region, as confirmed by the respondents’ answers.

‘We would like to show our problems with greater force’ [W07].
‘The more of us, the stronger our voice would be. We would like our Association to become known in Poland. We would like the borderland to be united [...]. Our actions are intended to promote this area and to make life here attractive’ [W02].

Promotion of the region and building a strong, recognisable brand are some of the major activities taken up by the local governments as part of the Association. However, building the brand requires not only time, but primarily specific changes for the sake of improving the current situation of the region. Promoting the region as part of a planned experiment of unconditional basic income as a tool limiting poverty and economic inequalities has turned out a strategic marketing measure.³ As noted by one expert [E02],

‘the number of press articles about the borderland from May to June 2022 was higher than in the last ten years. Poles, not living in the region started to recognise the place. It was because of the project of unconditional income for the borderland.’

The initiative of launching the pilot project met with a considerable interest of the domestic media, but also the residents of the borderland. As noted by a representative of local government [W01],

‘the Association has promoted itself wonderfully, congratulations. The idea is interesting. Our residents asked straightforwardly what criteria had to be fulfilled and who would receive the money. I am waiting with bated breath for the commencement of the project.’

The optimism of representatives of local governments with respect to the possibility of sourcing funds for project implementation and its efficiency in the process of counteracting social inequalities is moderate. Nevertheless, the example confirms that the local governments are ready to use the new tools of local development. As concluded by one expert [E02],

‘there is openness to various experiments [...]. There is a desire for change.’

The local decision makers became aware that the special location of the area requires the preparation of projects adjusted to the specific nature of the area. Development of qualified tourism and eco-tourism, attracting seniors to the enclave of silver tourism, along with an attempt at setting up the mobile People’s University of the Borderland (Uniwersytet Ludowy Pogranicza), are only some of the ideas for reviving the Polish border zone (Strategia Pogranicza 2030, 2021).

³ As part of the project, a selected group of residents (from 5,000 to 31,000) – based on previously specified criteria – would receive the amount of PLN 1,300 for two years (Strategia Pogranicza 2030, 2021).

The next activity increasing chances for success is the selection of a leader. In the opinion of Gorzelak and Jałowicki (2014), the local leaders are the most important factor of local success. As noted by one expert [E01],

‘we miss leaders here. This is the problem of these partnerships – if there is no natural-born leader, then this is a very slow process.’

Lack of a strong leadership is one of the key problems of the Polish zone bordering with Russia, which needs competent persons to represent the border zone on the regional, national and international level. Performance of multiple development plans requires external support. The future of this area depends on (1) the inventiveness and experiences of local leaders, (2) dialogue between borderland actors with central and EU authorities and (3) building mutual trust (Fig. 4). As noted by an expert [E02],

‘it is possible that the borderland already has an idea for itself, but the region and the government does not have any ideas for this area. And without it, nothing will change. In other countries, areas with such low population density have different tools that guarantee transportation, or atypical solutions in schools. I am observing the borderland and there is no possibility of testing an inter-commune school there.’

In line with an opinion of a development expert [E01], the key to success is

‘to say out loud that we need different thinking about the borderland in the dimension of regional and national politics. Not only the national programmes.’

4.3 Development of the Polish border area in the shadow of the closed border

The analyses performed for this paper show that in order to accomplish the development goals, the borderland needs a number of changes. Apart from initiated actions, the key factor necessary to accomplish success in the long-term perspective is to turn away from the border permanently and to see it exclusively through the prism of an additional development incentive. One expert claims [E02],

‘you have to stop thinking that the border may become an impulse for development [...]. The strategy should rely on the fact that no impulse for development comes from there, for any reason. We have to build the future with such awareness.’

This statement was confirmed by another respondent [E01] who suggests that

‘you have to stop thinking about doing something with Russia. No, there is nothing like this now. Now is the moment that we

have to focus on looking for something different, on building some competitive edge’.

The actors of the Polish border find it hard to immediately change their thinking about the border.

‘Here, everything was related to the border,’

concluded a respondent [W04]. For many locals, it still represents some potential (even though temporarily extinguished) source of income. It is worth stressing that one of the major postulates of the organisation was to reactivate the local border traffic and increase the openness of the Polish-Russian border (Strategia Pogranicza 2030, 2021). Without doubt, the present situation in Europe – caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine – has completely changed the potential resources that could be used by the Polish border zone. The local actors are slowly realising that they have to stop thinking about the border in the category of a development determinant.

‘The events in Ukraine have shown that we have to rebuild our thinking and look for other solutions,’

suggests one commune head [W11].

The local governments from the borderland have received a unique opportunity to work out new development trajectories. As justly noted by one expert [E02],

‘it is very hard to introduce changes when you are struggling not to drown.’

Nevertheless, the socio-economic situation of the Polish zone bordering with Russia is so difficult that it is worth treating the current crisis situation as a driving force for changes. Yet will the local governments take the risk and follow the more difficult, but also more effective path? Or will they choose the easier, but less stable path, abandoning the selected direction at the moment when the border opens? This scenario is difficult to foresee and depends on multiple determinants. The most significant factor conditioning the permanent de-marginalisation of the zone – in contrast to the general beliefs of local actors – is the permanent sealing of the border. The longer the border remains a non-accessible resource, the more local authorities will have to start the process of planning the commune’s development based on other potential. Furthermore, important factors preventing marginalisation include:

1. The immediate selection of a leader,
2. Sourcing external funding for performance of at least one project, and
3. Continued cooperation with external experts.

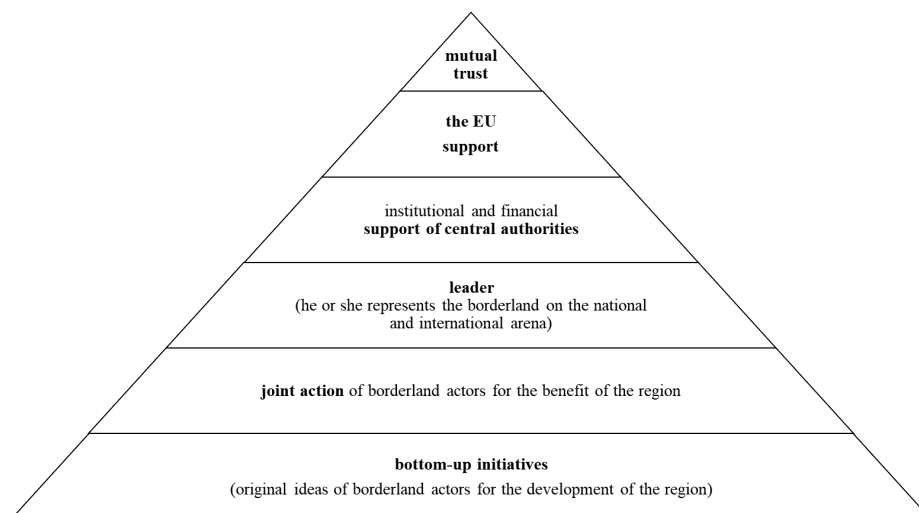


Fig. 4: The main determinants of development of Polish border area with Russia
Source: authors' elaboration

In line with the opinion of borderland experts, the region needs joint benefits which will drive the cooperation. The local borderland actors need a materialisation of specific ideas. The eagerness that characterises individual actors cannot subside, because it forms one of the major success factors. It must be borne in mind that the border – at the moment of its re-opening – will be an attractive factor of local development, yet the completed studies show that the local governments should not abandon the path that they have chosen. Otherwise, the budding ‘borderland phenomenon’ will share the fate of other isolated border regions (cf. Leutloff-Grandits, 2022).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Russia’s military attack on Ukraine assigned the eastern border of the European Union with the role of a barrier, not only in the formal and legal dimension, but also the physical one. Permanent fencing off of the European Union states from Russia and Belarus proves that the changing relations between the European Union and Russia has transitioned into the era of ‘permanent freezing’ (cf. Nitoiu, 2017; Dembińska, Mérand & Shtaltovna, 2020). The overall climate of the conflict in Europe has intensified the peripheral nature of some border regions. The borderlands that are in the shadow of the hardened border face new challenges. Even though the borderland researchers have claimed that closed borders are in contradiction to the interests of border regions (Lara-Valencia & Laine, 2022; Richardson & Cappellano, 2022; Leutloff-Grandits, 2022; Opiłowska & Kajta, 2022), yet the studies performed for the purpose of this paper show that some borderlands – on account of their key significance in the context of Europe’s security – cannot counteract the progressing peripherisation by making use of the potential embedded in the political border. This resource is characterised by limited availability.

In relation to this, should regions of this type use the border only in the moments of its increased degree of permeability? Or should the local actors find their own paths of development and make use of different resources of local growth? The example of the Polish border zone shows that the attempts at counteracting marginalisation based on the benefit of the borderland location have ultimately ended in failure. The temptation to use the border as a resource resurfaced a number of times at moments when the relations between Russia and the EU and Poland were friendly. In this way, it prevented the local governments from planning long-term economic growth, not based on exogenous shock, but on endogenous potential.

In the author’s opinion, the crisis caused by the permanent closing of the Polish-Russian border and suspension of contacts with the Kaliningrad Oblast, which initially was a hard blow for the bordering communes, with a particularly difficult economic situation, may – in the long-term perspective – turn out to be an important driving force for changes. Effort put into the preparation of specific projects, forming a solid base for further actions, may turn out to be the only just development alternative. Actions taken by the local authorities of the Polish border zone after the military attack of Russia show that the growth of border regions in the difficult reality of the sealed border is possible.

The attempt at leaving the ‘*cul-de-sac*’ of the Polish border zone with Russia fully depends on bold decisions of local authorities, but also the support of regional, national and European authorities. The role of political decision-makers in the process of rebuilding not only the Polish zone bordering Russia, but all border regions which are the peripheries of the peripheries, is crucial. As follows from the performed studies, the key to success is to act jointly, not only as far as the local governments are concerned, but also in their dialogue with the government. A significant factor in the process of preventing marginalisation

is understanding the special situation of this area by the top ranks of the public administration and addressing specific, earmarked support here.

The performed analyses lead to the conclusion that the attempts at creating an attractive border region, made by the local authorities of the Polish zone bordering with Russia, are possible. Nevertheless, the road to reduce de-population and permanent marginalisation of the region will not be easy. It will require the perseverance of the local actors, ongoing dialogue with central authorities, external support and systematically monitored efficiency of the performed actions.

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