

**Joanna Frątczak-Müller, Anna Mielczarek-Żejmo:
Euroregion. Od partnerstwa do sieci współpracy
transgranicznej [Euroregion. From Partnership
to a Cross-border Cooperation Network], 2019,
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Elżbieta Opiłowska¹

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Written by Joanna Frątczak-Müller and Anna Mielczarek-Żejmo, the monograph represents the area of so-called borderlands studies. The authors deal with the important topic of German-Polish cross-border cooperation as exemplified by the Spree-Nysa-Bóbr Euroregion (SNBE). The undeniable value of the book is the empirical research conducted on both sides of the border and involving the leaders and local communities living in the Euroregion. Thus, what the reader learns about is the perspective of not only the elites, but also the beneficiaries of cross-border initiatives undertaken in the SNBE.

The structure of the work is correct and consistent with the model of a scholarly thesis. It contains an introduction, in which the authors outline the objectives of the work and present its main assumptions, four chapters, including those relating to the theoretical framework and the results of the empirical research, and a conclusion.

The main objective of the research is to analyse the functioning of the Euroregion “as an institution undertaking activities aimed at the integration of the Polish and German border communities and to identify factors conducive to the strengthening of integration and mutual trust” (p. 10).

¹ Elżbieta Opiłowska (ORCID: 0000-0001-7084-2631) – head of the Center for Regional and Borderlands Studies, University of Wrocław; elzbieta.opilowska@uwr.edu.pl

The first chapter of the monograph concerns cross-border cooperation and is based on the following three theoretical perspectives – regionalization and soft spaces, the network theory, and public sphere governance – which are discussed based on the Polish and foreign literature on the subject.

The question that arises during the reading of the book and which has not been clearly addressed by the authors concerns the defining of cross-border cooperation and, therefore, the borderlands themselves. Taking into account the communes belonging to the SNBE, the distance from the border as well as cross-border practices may have a significant impact on the nature of cooperation and its perception by inhabitants, especially on the Polish side of the dividing line, e.g. Gubin, Łęknica vs. Zielona Góra or Wschowa.

The second subchapter discusses the conditions of cross-border cooperation in the German-Polish border region. The authors rightly note that it is influenced by the visions of borders generated by the state and the historical baggage of the borderland – mass population relocations after World War II, relations between the GDR and Poland, or changes after 1989.

As far as the formal basis for the Euroregion's activities is concerned, it is presented in a correct and comprehensive manner – they refer to EU law, national documents, as well as SNBE documents. Adopting the typology proposed by H. Dumala (2009), J. Frątczak-Müller and A. Mielczarek-Żejmo assigned the SNBE to the dispersed model.

The second chapter deals with the SNBE as a cross-border cooperation institution. It discusses the building and functioning of the Euroregion. The authors distinguish the following factors influencing cross-border cooperation: 1) programmes providing funds for the implementation of projects, 2) the experience of the partners, and 3) the existence of informal social networks. Informal networks of social relations, the third of the aforementioned factors, seem to be particularly interesting as a vehicle facilitating the functioning of the SNBE in the process of initiating cooperation, disseminating its content and consolidating its processes.

Empirical research is based on three methods – a content analysis (of documents and websites), a survey (a quota sample of 600 Polish and 200 German respondents), and free interviews carried out with 50 Polish and 20 German leaders of cross-border cooperation. The conducted research is supplemented with the results of secondary literature review, which further strengthens the conclusions formulated on the basis of the empirical research.

The survey shows that approximately only 50% of the respondents on both sides of the border have heard of the Euroregion, while the youngest (aged

18-29) have heard the least about the SNBE. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents (more than 80% on both sides of the border) assess the functioning of the Euroregion as a good initiative which has improved Polish-German relations (more than 60% of the respondents).

By contrast, the main barriers to creating partnerships are a lack of information on the SNBE among young people, difficulties in finding partners in the German part of the Euroregion, and a relatively low recognizability of the SNBE among the inhabitants of the Euroregion. The second barrier, which is also emphasized in other studies, appears to be particularly important. It results from differences in the respective economic potentials and, consequently, different needs and objectives of the partners. The authors indicate the necessity to improve the dissemination of information about the activities of the SNBE, which may result in increased interest and participation in cross-border projects.

The third chapter is devoted to the SNBE as a cross-border cooperation network. It is based on an analysis of the content of partially structured documents and interviews. The empirical analysis allows the authors to distinguish four types of partnerships based on two criteria: the type of bonds between partners (formal or informal) and the type of entity initiating cooperation (the SNBE or others). Three of them are used in the SNBE and are discussed on the basis of selected examples. The most numerous group is formal partnerships initiated by institutions other than the SNBE. Does this indicate the weakness of the Euroregion as an initiator of cross-border projects or the spill over effect of cross-border cooperation beyond the institutions whose tasks include the development of cross-border cooperation?

An important issue raised by the authors is the knowledge of the language of the neighbour, which influences the effectiveness of cooperation and its potential intensification. This is also confirmed by other research (Eurobarometer 422, 2015), according to which language differences are perceived as a major barrier in cross-border relations. Studies on cross-border cooperation often highlight the creation of ad hoc partnerships for the purpose of absorbing European funds. Therefore, an important aspect is an analysis of factors that affects the sustainability of cooperation, which the authors conduct in this monograph. The sustainability of cross-border cooperation can be ensured fulfilling the following three conditions: choosing a proper cooperation leader, providing a favourable organizational climate in entities participating in a partnership, and ensuring a positive attitude within the environment of participating organizations.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on the border community and “an analysis of the effects of the functioning of a cross-border social network, i.e. the SNBE”. (p. 75). Referring to the concept of a local community (Graham, Graham

1994), the authors distinguish three features – 1) sharing a community, 2) a geographically separated area, and 3) the existence of ties between them. In the case of the SNBE, the first two conditions cannot be met, so the authors rightly concentrate on the third one, analysing the mutual attitudes of the inhabitants, their daily contacts, and exchange of values and services. Referring to the concept of a borderland effect (Gołdyka 2008; Zielińska 2007), the authors assume that attitudes towards neighbours in the borderland will differ from those of people living in the other parts of the neighbouring countries (p. 76). It should be noted that the SNBE can only be partly regarded as a borderland area. The survey shows that the vast majority of the respondents (89% of Poles and 95.5% of Germans) believe that friendly relations between Poland and Germany are possible. However, Germans much more often (83.5%) than Poles (38.7%) declare that they like their neighbours. The dominant attitude of Poles towards Germans is indifference (52.7%). Comparing the results of the survey with those of nationwide surveys conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), where the percentage of respondents feeling aversion was higher than that of respondents declaring indifference, the authors cautiously indicate the borderland effect.

An important aspect of shaping the social borderland is an exchange of intangible assets. The authors' research shows that participants of cross-border projects exchange the patterns and values of their respective national cultures.

In the final part of the book, the authors not only summarize the empirical research, but also refer to the applied theoretical perspective of social networks, indicating the conditions for the sustainability of partnerships as well as barriers to the process of developing cross-border cooperation. They are (rightly) cautious about the influence of the SBNE on good relations between Polish and German neighbours.

To sum up, the monograph by Joanna Frątczak-Müller and Anna Mielczarek-Żejmo is an important contribution to research on Polish-German cross-border cooperation. Its strengths are a combination of qualitative and quantitative research as well as free interviews and surveys conducted on both sides of the border. The authors refer to the latest literature on the subject, skilfully combining theoretical concepts with empirical analysis in the particular chapters of the book. This is an important publication not only for researchers specializing in borderlands, but also for practitioners and leaders responsible for the shaping of cross-border cooperation, especially in terms of disseminating knowledge about the SNBE among the inhabitants of the Euroregion.

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