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## INTERCULTURALITY AND TRANSCULTURALITY AS NORM AND PRACTICE: A READING OF GERMAN-POLISH BORDERING

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Starting from the EU-official assumption that European integration would mainly be achieved by local cross-border cooperation, this paper develops a closer look at the notions of intercultural understanding involved. It takes local discourse within a German-Polish border setting as a case which reveals contested interpretations of inter- and transculturality, especially when related to bottom-up perspectives on borders. Held against social practice at the border which strongly underlines cultural difference, the hi-flying idea of “Europeanization by interculturality” is put into perspective. Years after the top-down opening of the border, pragmatic bottom-up routines of co-culturalism tend to transform local bordering into something distinct yet still indeterminate.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past 20 years, border policies and funding schemes of the European Union have been based on the general assumption that good international relations and European integration would best be promoted by cross-border cooperation (Scott 2006). This is no wild speculation. It is in line with the recent mainstream of political thinking on European integration, which has been focused on interculturality. In fact, interculturality has been declared a vital multi-level and multidisciplinary objective by the European Commission (Leclercq 2003). Transborder interchange and communication on the basis of local transnational political communities can be understood as a tool of such a “politics of interculturality” (Dervin 2011). By overcoming the formal demarcation of political borders, cross-border cooperation would pave the way for a new European identity and a peaceful

regional neighbourhood. This idea has been contained within and promoted by the model of the Euroregion (Perkmann 2002), among others.

By definition, locally practiced cross-border cooperation involves contact between and encounters with protagonists who ascribe themselves to distinct cultures, be they national or regional, ethnic, professional or otherwise defined. Yet, explicit references to problems of interculturality are scarce in European border studies. While the economic, political and governance-related aspects of the new European regionalism have been discussed to a large extent (cf. O'Dowd 2002; Scott 1999a), the very process of cross-border interaction of European social agents, including the intercultural experience of exchanging ideas, attitudes, emotions, values, symbols etc. has received only minor attention (pioneering: Paasi 1999). Explicit ventures into this field have mainly been made in connection with recent steps of EU eastward enlargement (see, e.g., Matthiesen/Dürschmidt 2002; Odiemczyk 2010; Weiske et al. 2009).

This article will take up these loose ends, taking the eastward enlargement of the EU as a crucial test of regionalisation based on cross-border cooperation. It will trace the modes and problems of interculturality involved in everyday practice at the border as discussed in the literature. In doing so, it focuses on the German-Polish border region which has developed into a significant case. Here the domestic manifestations of interculturality implicit in models and routines of cross-border cooperation can be observed in situ.

The following chapters will explore selected regional arenas of intercultural learning and communication before and after the EU accession of Poland. With regard to political borders, interculturality has been understood in interdisciplinary studies as the individual and collective capability to bridge separate systems of values, norms, institutions and everyday practices (Lavanchy et al. 2011: 5). This understanding refers to a supposedly natural diversity of social groups and the existence of distinct cultures. In spite of its normative bias, it has been prominent in migration studies and research on multiculturalism (Klopp 2002; Prato 2009), in management studies (Sabel 2010), pedagogics and education studies (Dietz 2009), communication research (Giordano et al. 1998) and anthropology (Hofstede 2001; Schmidt et al. 2012).

Common sense also takes for granted the division of cultures, hence it stands to reason that political thinking stresses the significance of achieving a common understanding of the local situation on both sides of the border. The road to such an understanding would entail intensified cross-border communication, and interaction within and across social milieus located around the border. Although there is much reason to make use of the term

“transculturality” in order to indicate the significance of changing cultural divisions (Sandkühler/Lim 2004), the normative implications of this theoretical (philosophical) term might prove difficult to handle. I will come back to the intricacies of this distinction later on.

Recent changes in the regulation of EU borders have revealed the difficulties of achieving a shared understanding across borders in several respects. First of all, there are a multitude of re-interpretations of the meaning of the border, anticipating EU enlargement as well as following it. These ongoing re-interpretations shall be captured here by the term of bordering, which has recently been established in border studies as a term to reflect changing interpretations and usages of borders. Bordering is a process of socially constructing and re-constructing political borders, not only in the political sphere but also in economic practice and in people’s everyday lives (Bürkner 2011; Geisen et al. 2008; Newman 2006; Scott 2009; Scott 2012; van Houtum et al. 2005). Bordering implies ideation, as well as the practical definition and exploitation of resources necessary for action. The results of bordering as performed by different social groups, political institutions and administrative bodies tend to differ considerably since there are heterogeneous interests, perceptions and experience involved.

The EU is responsible for a potentially widening gap between a pre-conceived philosophy of the border, which lays down the foundation of a particular border regime, and border-related practice. Early documentation of pre-accession interpretations of the German-Polish border show that bottom-up local bordering tends to differ dramatically from normatively imbued, top-down definitions by the EU and nations. EU suggestions to increase the free exchange of goods, people and capital across the border have been met by many locals with scepticism, fears of economic loss, xenophobia and perceptual defence (Bürkner 2002; Dürrschmidt 2006; Matthiesen/Bürkner 2002). In particular, issues of cross-border interaction and intercultural exchanges between Germans and Poles were addressed very reluctantly – quite contrary to the optimistic political expectations by EU representatives. Heterogeneous bordering had obviously produced adverse interpretations and fragmented practices with regard to inter- and transculturality. Up to date this problem has hardly ever been studied in a systematic way.

This article therefore sets out to shed some light on the entanglement of different interpretations of interculturality. Based on a rough review of empirical literature before and after the EU accession of Poland, the major differences in public and scientific discourse on cross-border interaction and exchange will be sketched out. The evolution of concrete bordering processes will be traced, i.e. the process of everyday construction of borders as

cultural demarcations and, in contrast, as occasions for bridging cultural difference. Conscious of the elusive nature of interpretations and imaginations, a cautious reading of bottom-up orientations in interculturality and/or transculturality will be given. A subsequent look at local bordering (as part of social practice) will finally contribute to a critical assessment of official EU assumptions according to which the reduction of separating effects of a political border would trigger adaptive responses, especially new intercultural understandings and emotional ties (cf. Büttner/Mau 2010: 279 ff).

## 2. INTERCULTURALITY AND TRANSCULTURALITY AS IDEA AND ESSENCE

In Germany the notion of interculturality has been introduced into public and academic debates in connection with the scholarly discourse on the condition of the multicultural society (Beyersdörfer 2004: 43). Yet, it has been subject of international debates before, and in a much broader thematic setting. It has been defined from the perspective of pedagogy, language didactics, cultural anthropology, ethnology and philosophy. Condensing the variety of definitions to a common denominator, it can be said that the notion has two basic dimensions: On the one hand, it denominates a systemic condition, i.e. the quality of encounters between separate cultures that influence one another. On the other hand, interculturality denotes the capability of individuals and groups to approach one another and interact or communicate against the backdrop of different cultural belongings (Lavanchy et al. 2011). The concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural learning have been derived from this idea (cf. Bennett 1998; Fennes et al. 1997). They seek to study the conditions of communication in situations of cultural interference. At the same time, they develop normative ideas about the prerequisites and effects of intercultural understanding. In particular, intercultural pedagogy markedly draws upon the normative implications of this analytical perspective, trying to give advice for the bridging of cultural differences by means of social learning (cf. Auernheimer 2004; for an example of practical textbooks, see Erll/Gymnich 2007). Critics of this perspective point to the dangers of thinking in terms of essentially fixed cultures, which actually accentuates and perpetuates the differences it seeks to reduce (Griese 2004). The essentialism inherent in interculturality eventually leads to the territorialisation of culture by making cultural boundaries spatially "visible" (Lavanchy et al. 2011: 9).

Recent debates in cultural anthropology indicate that there are even more problems of conceptualizing cultural difference. Confronting the cate-

gory of the foreigner and overcoming the “fear of difference” (Schiffauer 1996) are seen as fundamental objectives for any society, since such a project would challenge unreflected ideas of normality. In everyday life the “clash of normalities” (Roth 2012: 18 ff), which is a part of encountering foreigners, also implies a high degree of ethnicization. Ethnicity, in turn, has been conceptualised as thinking in terms of “natural” cultural differences and non-reconcilable identities based on primordiality and traditional community (Fenton 2010: 87). The recent German debate on “parallel societies” that are allegedly constituted by culturally incompatible, large migrants groups exemplifies how easily the idea of quasi-natural difference has been accepted and normalised in academic and public discourse alike (Bukow et al. 2007).

Contrary to the idea of the clash of distinct, homogeneous cultures with fixed boundaries that is contained within concepts of interculturality, the term “transculturality” denotes a mixture or hybridisation of cultures that emerges under the condition of globalisation. Cultures are understood in a twofold way: 1) as “smooth” entities that are globally interwoven so that a multifaceted global culture rather than distinct individual cultures emerge; this perspective, however, also maintains the essentialist idea of separate cultures (Welsch 1995); or 2) as variable, continually changing social constructs arising from co-existing personal interpretations (Sandkühler/Lim 2004), which render the idea of pre-existing cultures obsolete. Instead, it suggests the possibility of multiple identities emerging flexibly from, an increasing plurality of social orders and of hybrid orientations (cf. Pieterse 2001). It draws attention to the social process of othering (Lavanchy et al. 2011: 5), i.e. the formation of social distinctions, the attribution of foreignness to others, the distinction between “us” and “them”, between insiders and outsiders, etc.

Although not always explicitly referring to individual concepts of interculturality or transculturality, the official EU rhetoric of cross-border cooperation and regionalisation employs a number of essentialist understandings (cf. Leclerq 2003). First of all, it conceives of culture as fundamentally distinct, with those included in constant need to get to know each other, learn from one another, and bridge cultural gaps. Such gaps are also identified between territories of mutual interlinkages that are divided by political borders, often addressed as cross-border regions (Perkmann 2003). Large parts of scholarly debate on European integration and European borders simply echo this political interpretation. Although there are points of contact with the spatialisations created by ethnonationalism and irredentism (cf. Ambrosio 2001) – i.e. regions imagined as culturally homogeneous that

should not be divided by national frontiers – it does not give in to the suggestion of “natural” culturalism, since it concedes that there is an ongoing development of interlinkage through social action. Yet, its logic still suggests that there are fixed cultural boundaries that matter as constitutive factors of borders, and that they might be more influential on people than political borderlines: Either they are important for establishing collective identities, or they are important as factors that hamper integration, good-neighbourly relations and new transborder identities.

Only a minority of authors subscribe to the idea that has been invoked by the concept of transculturality. They envisage Europe as a potential melting pot where new “European” identities and new (trans-)regional belongings are created by bottom-up social networking and communication (Deger 2007: 146 ff; Eder 2006; Fligstein 2010; Hettlage/Müller 2006). Here the essentialist bias resides more in the background but remains present nonetheless: Europe has to end somewhere, even under conditions of globalisation and contested territorialism. Hence, there is a tacit understanding of Europeanness and Non-Europeanness inherent in “European” transnationalism. At least this perspective brings with it some analytical potential for the development of a new sensorium for global-local interdependencies, especially for those that have been propelled by new communication technologies. Among others, it allows for reflections on free-floating cultural entities (between the internet and local experience) and on the common and flexible extension of traditional socio-spatial categories (local community, region, borderland) into temporarily constructed, context-driven spaces around the globe.

In sum, when talking about cross-border interculturality, it should be kept in mind that in social practice the idea of fixed cultures and their boundaries often remains implicit. Therefore, the construction of the other, of “us” and “them” has to be analysed in more local detail, and with a critical focus on the social construction of the normality of borders. Although easily intelligible, this postulate has seldom been adhered to in border-related social studies. For the purpose of this article, interculturality has been re-considered against its inherent tendency to rely on fixed cultural items.

In a complementary way, the term “transculturality” will be used here in order to address new, floating commonalities between agents and institutions which require hybrid mental concepts and joint understandings of everyday culture – or even a blending of heterogeneous (not necessarily national, ethnic, or otherwise categorized) cultural elements.

### 3. BORDERING AS A MEANS OF ESTABLISHING INTERPRETATIONS OF INTERCULTURALITY

In order to better grasp the spatial aspects of inter- and cross-cultural encounters in the context of borders, the term “bordering” is proposed here as a tool in the quest to identify changing everyday definitions of borders involved in cultural relationships. Bordering has been defined as a very general process of socially constructing difference and distinctions that serve as boundaries – in everyday life as well as in the professional realm of economics, politics, the judiciary and military . It is based on techniques of social othering, i.e. of thinking in terms of cultural, social or systemic otherness that is attributed to persons and collectives (Geisen et al. 2008). By means of bordering, socio-cultural boundaries are rearranged, thereby producing new social and spatial orders (Scott/van Houtum 2009; note the usage of the term “b/ordering” by van Houtum et al. 2005 who lays stress on the aspect of ordering).

By definition, bordering entails a particular logic and specific practical modes of dealing with cultural and social difference. The concept treats difference as being under continuous construction. The underlying rules and institutions have to be considered as dependent upon negotiation and convention (e. g. between the members of a social group or a social milieu, but also between groups). While interculturality and transculturality can be addressed in a variety of social contexts (e. g. urban, rural, on the job, etc.), the concept of bordering narrows the focus to those social processes that are related to political borders, and to other “hard” social boundaries that are connected to political borders. At the same time, it introduces a multi-level perspective that relates everyday culture (mainly located at the border) to systemic items such as political systems, economic regions, nations, supra-national organisations and the global sphere (see Aure 2011).

### 4. EUROPEANISATION: EU EASTWARD ENLARGEMENT AND SUBSEQUENT READINGS OF INTERCULTURALITY

From its early stages in the 1990s onwards, the EU philosophy of a United Europe and a Common Internal Market has been framed by policies of Europeanisation. Europeanisation can be understood as a top-down project established by EU institutions trying to spread the European philosophy. This is an undertaking that at times manages to infiltrate national and regional policy-making, thereby altering domestic opportunity structures (Börzel/Risse 2003; Knill/Lehmkuhl 1999). The philosophy of

a United Europe involves thinking in terms of cultural and social commonalities, of shared beliefs and common identities, as well as common purposes, imaginaries and specific notions of development (Deger 2007: 158 ff). This top-down project has been taken up in different ways by regional and local agents. The irritations and conflicts at the local level that have been caused by its political impetus are still rather unexplored by borderland studies. The same holds true for local residents' adaptation to changes in formal definitions of the border, especially for their ongoing re-interpretations of the situation and the corresponding changes in everyday culture. Europeanisation from below, originating from these re-interpretations, might come along in rather unpredictable ways. Depending on heterogeneous global, national and local context, locals continually interpret and decide anew what they accept as shared values, cross-border linkages, cultural proximity, joint interest etc. (cf. Fligstein 2010: 8 f). In this way, Europeanisation draws on very fundamental procedures and "techniques" of bordering. Or, if you like to put it the other way around: Europeanisation is a special variant of bordering that needs the context of EU territorialisation and EU membership to become relevant locally.

For the border regions, Europeanisation as a top-down project has become tangible mainly by the introduction of explicit border regimes. The current regime aims to reduce the separating effects of the national borders between member states (de-bordering), while reinforcing the external borders of the EU (i.e. borders to non-member countries). Especially in the new accession states of Central Eastern and Southeastern Europe this has been effected by introducing new barriers to cross-border economic exchange and immigration. This understanding of Europeanisation laid the foundation for a number of derived ideas, institutions and regulations. On the one hand, the internal integration of member states has been promoted by the idea of the Europe of regions (which aimed at reducing nationalist interpretations of economic, political, social and cultural boundaries). This idea implied a number of "nested" notions: the promotion of international and interregional cooperation, intercultural learning and convergence, and increasing social integration across the EU territory.

On the other hand, the implementation of these ideas has been embodied in particular political initiatives directed towards border regions. While EU regional and structural funds promoted the reduction of regional disparities and the creation of a homogenising social space among the member regions and states, the Interreg initiative aimed at ameliorating the divisions between regions that were formerly separated by a "hard" political border. Although Interreg funds have been available from the 1970s onwards for a variety of purposes connected to economic, social and cultural integration,



their usage by local municipalities has assumed a strong cultural bias after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Interreg projects along the new external borders (German-Polish, German-Czech, Austrian-Slovak, etc.) mainly concerned cross-border political exchanges, cultural rapprochement and everyday encounters between populations at the local level (Bürkner 1997; Scott 1999b).

The project of enabling access to the EU for as many post-socialist countries as possible lent special momentum to this cultural bias, leading to a plethora of "official" events of cultural exchange during the years immediately preceding the consecutive accession dates. The EU philosophy established by Interreg and other parallel funding schemes (e.g. programmes like Cades or Phare/CBC that were directed towards the preparation of candidates of the following accession rounds, such as Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) always entailed imaginations of a united Europe that was based on intercultural understanding, mutual respect of regional and national cultures, adaptation to a globalising world (that the EU was an integral part of), and possibilities to increase mobility and participation. Furthermore, facilitated access of the EU population to education, the reduction of language barriers, and so on. Personal encounters between national politicians, professionals and the local population across the border were seen as a means of promoting intercultural understanding and learning, which, in turn, was meant to be conducive for the achievement of European integration (Büttner/Mau 2010: 281).

Although the small world of border regions seemed to be an exclusive playground for initiators of cross-border projects, large EU initiatives tailored to the implementation of the Internal Market (Lisbon Strategy) and an unfolding European Knowledge Space (among others, the Bologna Process) provided the fitting ideological backdrop to the small schemes of intercultural cross-border encounters. The future EU citizen, as it were, should enjoy the benefits of rising economic opportunities brought about by regional mobility within the EU, free access to regional educational facilities and labour markets, unrestricted consumerism and good access to the global economy. At the individual level, a seminal prerequisite seemed to be lifestyles of limited cosmopolitanism, which were supposed to reduce cultural barriers to mobility and flexibility. Interculturality, then, advanced to a political end in itself that should be implemented as practically as possible.

## 5. LOCAL GERMAN-POLISH READINGS OF INTERCULTURALITY

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, both parts of the German-Polish border region remained in relative isolation for a considerable time, as if in a state

of shock. This resulted from the fact that the German-Polish border had been one of the most contested post-socialist borders. It not only represents the remnants of one of the most hermetic borderlines of the Cold War. It has also been addressed as a very sensitive political and cultural boundary since it is the point of contact between two nations that suffered severe damage in the Second World War, which are the root of a lot of two-sided animosities and hidden recrimination that can still be felt in everyday life at the border.

Apart from the task of finding new cultural orientations, the abolition of the socialist systems in East Germany and Poland had absorbed much of local agents' attention and energy. The local residents kept their eyes on the restructuring of their immediate surroundings, which usually extended no further than to a small area centred on their own "national" part of the border region. Radical de-industrialisation and west-bound migration on the German side, moderate de-industrialisation, small-scale micro-business development and selective immigration on the Polish side, were markers of a structural constellation that apparently did not entail much cross-border interchange –except for the small traders and customers of the mushrooming border markets of the 1990s. Cross-border and transborder cooperation were a matter of informal individual initiative (as practised, e.g., by binational couples, local associations and border commuters), or of formal EU and national initiative directed towards establishing German-Polish business relations and constructing West-East traffic infrastructure (Matthiesen/Bürkner 2001). The quality of these interconnections can be described as mildly intercultural, with protagonists of Polish milieus being more open to communication and interaction than their German counterparts (Dürschmidt 2006). This also applies to more formal economic and political cross-border relations. Apart from early attempts by regional chambers of commerce to stimulate entrepreneurial cooperation across the border, self-developed local political initiative for cross-border cooperation was low during the early stages of post-socialist transformation (Scott 1999b).

### **EU Bodies and Agents: Euroregions, Beacon Projects and EU-friendly Local Politics**

After 1995, cross-border political initiative was encouraged by the subsequent introduction of German-Polish Euroregions, which by the millennium covered the entirety of the border region, from the Baltic Sea to the German-Czech-Polish border triangle. Their primary objective was to encourage cross-border cooperation at several levels (the economy, the political systems, everyday culture), and to facilitate access to EU funds, espe-

cially those of the Interreg, for local municipalities. Although the original idea of the Euroregion, as developed in West European border regions of the 1980s, had a strong grassroots component, the recent creation of Euroregions on the Eastern fringes of the EU involved more top-down elements of strategic regionalism by cross-border cooperation, including multilevel institution-building and governance (Perkmann 2002). Astonishingly, border studies have raised only little empirical evidence of the problems of implementation. Yet, it is well-known from media reports that there were multilateral problems of communicating and exchanging ideas. Since the representatives of the Euroregions had no official political or organisational status, they found it difficult to communicate with national politicians and bureaucrats, especially with those who had previously been involved in the socialist system.

A markedly asymmetrical pattern of cross-border communication developed: While receiving much idealistic support from national and regional (Länder) bodies, German Euroregion representatives initially gained only gradual acceptance from local politicians or other stakeholders in their national area, except for those politicians who were explicitly EU-friendly. Polish representatives, on the other hand, often established good relations to German policy-makers and officials, yet had great difficulties in establishing ties to Polish local and national politics (Odziemczyk 2010: 27 ff). Especially national politicians were suspicious of the potentially subversive effects of EU policies and the intended empowerment of regions and localities. Socialist-style top-down rigorism and the newly "Europeanised" subsidiary politics tended to clash with one another, often with the effect that many initiatives and projects that the German and Polish representatives of the Euroregions agreed upon could not fully be implemented. The flip side of the coin was that intercultural learning united the Euroregion's representatives and their friends within their small intermediary enclaves on both sides. Yet, intercultural understanding could not be promoted efficiently at a larger scale for a considerable amount of time. It was not before the millennium that larger cooperative projects (e.g. tri-lateral urban networks) integrated the stakeholders into lasting frameworks of mutual responsibility and co-dependency (Odziemczyk 2010: 400 ff).

### **Agents of Local Resistance and Indeterminacy**

Early case studies on border milieus in the twin cities of Frankfurt/Oder-Słubice and Guben-Gubin demonstrated that local political commitment towards supporting the Euroregion initiative was rather low.

Apart from local elites and outstanding "EU politicians", such as some dedicated mayors, the number of supporters was limited until the date of Poland's EU accession. On the German side scepticism and local self-containment prevailed, combined with rising fears of being at an economic disadvantage as soon as the borders would be opened (Matthiesen/Bürkner 2001). In some communities, such as Guben, pro-EU mayors were replaced by more conservative localists who appealed to defensive and Euro-sceptical attitudes prevalent in the local population (Geßler/Konieczny 2004: 43). More curiosity and hope for positive economic development in the future were to be seen on the Polish side, yet on the whole cross-border rapprochement was conducted in a reluctant manner, in many cases hidden from the public. Empirical evidence on the collaboration of small-sized enterprises raised by Blaneck (2005) even shows similar levels of disengagement on both sides. Especially on the German side an atmosphere of distrust, fear and insecurity, often fostered by right-wing political activism and widespread xenophobia, made it difficult for individuals and groups to approach one another in an uninhibited way.

Europeanisation from below, then, was either an activity undertaken by single promoters of the European idea or a matter of remote, small-scale activities across the border, as exemplified by small entrepreneurs, students, cross-border married couples, or small associations (e.g. the proverbial stamp collectors). At the same time, there also were a plethora of symbolic municipal projects funded by the EU (e.g. cross-border banquets, official meetings of German and Polish politicians and officials, cultural events such as the 'poetry steamboat' on the River Oder etc.). Although supported by an elitist wave of good will and enthusiasm, these events often received only scarce attention from the larger local public and thereby made them appear as political window-dressing.

Even early large-scale beacon projects, such as the European University Viadrina and its Polish counterpart across the River Oder, the Collegium Polonicum, were subject to the intricate mechanisms of intercultural trial and error under the conditions of distrust and insecurity. Originally installed as vanguard institutions, these universities struggled to integrate themselves into the local urban context. In Frankfurt/Oder, they were politically relegated to enclaves of an external world that in cultural terms was perceived by locals as strange, or at least "not as our own". Inside these universities, interculturality was defined as a positive norm that was supposed to enable students to participate in a larger European job and career market. Intercultural studies became a regular part of the curriculum for students to choose from. The very location of the university, situated at a potential East-West gateway, symbolized the authenticity of the ambition.

Interculturality was also practiced by national students in their everyday lives, mainly by living on the other side of the river. Yet, this interculturality is of an asymmetrical nature. The number of Polish students studying in Frankfurt/Oder was considerably higher than the number of German students studying at the Collegium Polonicum. The West-East economic gradient heavily influenced the direction of intercultural activities. In everyday practice, national students tended to live secluded from the "foreign" majority, amidst their native milieus, or commuted across the border so that their contact with "foreign" students remained occasional only. As if to exacerbate the fragmentation of relationships, the German students at Frankfurt/Oder in many cases did not live in the city but commuted to Berlin, spending only a few days per week at the university. There was a sharp contradiction between an academic atmosphere of intellectual open-mindedness inside the university, and an indifferent, sometimes even hostile local environment (Mahlkow 2004). Interaction with this environment were not seldom accompanied by xenophobic threats against students and other individuals who looked as if they did not belong to the domestic scene, e.g. employees of small high-tech enterprises that formed a cluster at Frankfurt. This contradiction between the inclusive atmosphere of the university and the harsh surroundings was resolved individually by commuting, making use of the regional "brain train", which connected the globalised metropolitan milieus with the small academic enclave milieu at Frankfurt.

Finally, to complete the picture, it must be said that the local public perceived interculturality as something that was detached from their everyday lives. To their mind it was tied to symbolic projects (such as Intercultural Studies at the Viadrina), some occasional collaboration guided by university teachers, business relations established by enterprises, and other formal occasions.

## 6. PRE-ACCESSION VS. POST-ACCESSION READINGS OF INTERCULTURALITY

### Before...

The readings of interculturality that emerged in this border region turned out to be products of the prevailing macro-political and structural arrangements of their time. For reasons of analytical clarity these arrangements shall be addressed here as pre-accession and as post-accession configurations, respectively. Without getting into the intricacies of the political history of Poland's EU accession, the focus on the German-Polish border

region nevertheless reveals a lot of insightful political details. In particular, it illuminates how ideas generated at EU and national levels influenced local responses to the big issues of the day.

The pre-accession period can be characterised as a time of idealistic thinking and symbolism, at least as far as the EU and national political levels and their regional modes of adoption are concerned. Earlier interpretations promoted by "EU politicians" within the region and by representatives of the Euroregions were often oriented towards idealistic notions of cultural rapprochement (cf. Engel 2006; Schoppengerd et al. 2004: 72). The ideal was to develop a consciousness of one's own proximity to the neighbouring culture(s), to value the cultural achievements of the other, as well as cultural differences, and to allow for some degree of commonality and hybridisation. These understandings were very close to academic notions of transculturality, where visions of living in or seamlessly changing between two cultures could be developed. Concomitantly, strong symbols of mutual understanding or of bridging cultural differences were nurtured – in the physical manifestations of feasts involving citizens on both sides of the border, officially organized meetings between local administrations from either sides of the border, plans for bus lines over the border, etc.

On the German side, these interpretations were not rooted in domestic bottom-up understandings of cross-border encounters, and the symbols were not read as belonging to one's own everyday culture. The eve of Poland's EU membership was defined by the paradox that the symbolic imagery that had been nurtured seemed to indicate a warm embrace of the coming border opening, whereas major parts of the political elite and of the local population were secretly reluctant to embrace the idea and disgruntled by it (Matthiesen/Bürkner 2002). In German border milieus, local protagonists behaved as if the idealistic concepts mentioned above originated from "outer space", imposed by a European and national vanguard that they did not want to fraternise with. To their minds, this new cultural elite resembled too strongly the protagonists of the Western system that had taken over after 1990. For many, these actors symbolised the cultural expropriation they had experienced during the 1990s. There was a strong undercurrent of passive resistance to modernisation in everyday life and in local politics. It prevented "EU politicians" from gaining acceptance from a large majority of the local population.

With the accession date of 2004 drawing nearer, economic fears relating to the free movement of "foreigners" increased. As a reaction, local political municipalities tried to prevent further external interventions, by rejecting political advice from other political levels and even from non-local civil society organisations. This isolationism was based on cultural localism that

was not explicated to externals. "Either you feel it or you leave it" was the motto. The feeling was rooted in collective memory and experience reaching back to the socialist period – where hidden resistance had also been based on tacit understanding, local knowledge and coalitions of silence. Against this backdrop, encounters with other cultures – not only everyday Polish culture, but also migrant cultures that also could be observed occasionally in the border region – could not be encouraged as matters of good will or of curious discovery. They were not an attractive alternative to the all-pervading depression blues hummed by the losers of modernisation.

### **...and after**

The date of accession marks a sharp turn in public discourse as the spirit of anxiety and antagonistic stance no longer found public expression. While immigration and gloomy labour market issues had dominated public opinion immediately before, these subjects now disappeared as by the flip of the switch (Mai 2012). The new developments were communicated by the local media as promising opportunities, offering increased cross-border mobility and an economic upswing. Now and then these expectations were counter-balanced by worries about increasing crime rates and about possible negative effects of the forthcoming free flow of workforce between the two local labour markets. Public attention focused on the physical infrastructure of borders which were abolished or reconstructed now, accompanied by reports about the unspectacular "new" everyday life, in which old fears were revealed as baseless. Yet, the undercurrent of resistance on the social level persisted. For a while it was reinforced by the debate on demographic change and the gradual depopulation of East German regions. Ironically, during this phase of communicative opening the expression of unease was thrown back to more subtle narratives than before. The official rhetoric of the successful border opening had become hegemonic in a way, delegating alternative readings to informal discussions in backrooms and bars.

From 2005 onwards, the political landscape of the border region has experienced decreasing political tensions. The Euroregions have lost much of their symbolic significance as institutions that could reclaim interculturalism. Nowadays they are a regular part of the political daily routine. Yet, their capability to exercise political pressure or influence public opinion is very limited. Together with the diminished eligibility of the border region for EU regional and structural funds, the need for local agents to give in to presumed ideological suggestions from the EU level has declined. At the same time, the relationship between EU supporters and staunch locals has

become more relaxed. This does not mean that their controversial aspirations and understandings of cultural exchange have changed much: The EU rhetoric represented by the Euroregions still entertains strong normative ideas of transculturality, mainly in connection with the goal of European integration and the reduction of regional differences. Only the strong symbolism of former times (by means of transborder events) has become much weaker, so that the need to position oneself in relevant public debates is no longer perceived as urgently as before. Antagonists of the EU are still at work, albeit in a more sophisticated and not always obvious way. Their political significance has become a bit unclearer, and concrete counteraction is undertaken only occasionally.

Changes in the constellation of protagonists have become visible in recent developments in transborder living and dwelling in the conurbation of Szczecin. Middle class residents of the booming city of Szczecin experienced increasing difficulties finding a decent flat or house on the Polish side of the border. The housing market in the Polish part of the border region had been very tense from the beginning of the 1990s on, and in the case of Szczecin it had neither been able to take up immigrating workforce nor to produce sufficient offers for an expanding segment of wealthy clients. Hence the latter looked for suitable real estate in German villages and small towns near the border. Since the local economic downturn and the emigration of German residents had left many flats and houses unoccupied (especially in the former socialist housing blocks), this surplus in dwellings was quickly made use of. In the meantime, there has been a considerable rise of Polish households in this area. They live on the German side and commute to their workplace in Poland (Łada/Frelak 2012).

This phenomenon has been addressed by several social groups involved, in a symbolic way and from different perspectives: The new Polish middle class residents in Germany regard their foreign residence as a symbol of economic success and status acquisition. The big real estate agents on the German side that had been in severe crisis immediately before are now able to claim that it was their achievement to have attracted so many new tenants. And the local politicians who feel morally indebted to the undercurrent of resistance in their communities have begun to re-interpret the situation: Now they boast that it was due to their successful management that this profitable development was able to happen.

Closer examination reveals that it is not only symbolism that was cultivated here – rather, it is an unintended, contingent process of Europeanisation from below. Necessary economic change and everyday inertia cost German protagonists their ability to define the situation. More agile agents virtually overwhelmed them – to their own (albeit modest) benefit, since the



new residents contributed to the regeneration of previously decaying urban settlements. Nobody can deny that there is a touch of irony in this. In the end, cultural exchange had been reinforced by economic necessity. The same locals who had resisted modernisation, and who were suffering unemployment while cultivating feelings of cultural superiority, were now forced to find some arrangement with an altered, "intercultural" situation. On the other hand, members of the Polish middle class, who had been regarded as economically inferior in terms of national wage differentials before, now find themselves at a superior status in their new German neighbourhoods, establishing this small piece of "New Europe" according to their needs and wishes. In these villages, German and Polish milieus might continue to be socially segregated; yet, even under this condition encounters between these foreign groups must be regarded as an interesting social experiment. It constitutes something like "interculturality without a model", and it establishes a new variant of bottom-up Europeanisation. Of course, this variant, like so many others, is not free from social tension and potential inter-group conflict.

Another example of unprecedented interculturality and Europeanisation from below has been established by a different type of new protagonists on the stage. The imperative of cross-border cooperation has been taken seriously by professional milieus at Frankfurt/Oder and Słubice that expected real advantages from intercultural learning and exchange. A group of German and Polish university teachers and researchers had become increasingly concerned about the difference in national educational cultures. This concern became especially relevant against the backdrop of the "intercultural" framework set up by their gateway universities, the European University Viadrina and the Collegium Polonicum. This framework, in turn, had been backed up by European and state politics seeking to develop a knowledge region transcending the border which eventually might guarantee for future economic prosperity (cf. Lammers et al. 2006: 60 f). The first move the local academics made in order to find out how they could better interconnect their communities across the border was to try and go beyond political prescriptions. Instead, they made a step aside by basically exploring the foundations of their "national" disciplinary cultures. They established exploratory projects (Fichter-Wolf 2010) on academic cooperation and future modes of collaboration. Instead of pursuing initial ideas of high-flying transculturalism, they developed a new pragmatism. Looking for easy ways of getting collaborative projects going, they established something which might be called "unquestioned interculturalism". They did not strive to blend concepts and working routines in favour of a common "transcultural" idea. Instead, they tried to accept cultural differ-

ence as a provisional fact and developed a mutual respect for national or regional academic traditions. Where cooperation was easily possible, it was realised – where not, it was not defined as a failure. Additionally, the circumstances and types of cultural difference that became visible on these occasions were taken as a starter for subsequent discussions about the social construction of just this cultural difference.

This, in turn, has contributed to a new culture of learning to which the term “Europeanisation from below” can be attributed.. Again, this bottom-up approach has not been independent from top-down modes of Europeanisation: The basic motivation of academic exchange clearly referred to the Bologna type of academic mobility and the creation of a ‘European space of knowledge’. Yet, this abstract idea has been re-interpreted as a practical challenge that had to be met in the everyday functioning of academia. This, in turn, indicates a new transnational self-confidence on behalf of local actors that had hardly been visible before. It can be taken as a first sign that this border region is gradually coming of age. Of course, this is a societal niche that does not affect the rest of the society near to the border too much. Yet, it gives an example of how Europeanisation and interculturality might become independent from top-down prescriptions and idealistic impositions.

## **7. CONCLUSION: INTERCULTURALITY IS WHAT PEOPLE MAKE OF IT**

The EU project of promoting interculturality within its territory has left ambiguous impressions and fragmented effects. The top-down drive to reduce the division induced by the German-Polish border was launched very early in the 1990s, with the Euroregions as its spearhead and a network of EU-friendly politicians as allies. It produced different responses on both sides of the border, a more pragmatic, open-minded one on the Polish side, and a more seclusive, defensive one on the German side. Although there are remarkable differences between individual milieus as to the intensity of interaction with their counterparts across the border, the degree of curiosity involved in cross-border contact, and the willingness to accept former foreigners as good neighbours, the overall image is one of asymmetrical relationships and only selective, occasional success.

Evaluated against the overarching imaginary of a united, cohesive Europe employed by the EU, this outcome might be judged as disappointing. Yet, one must not deem the idea of interculturality a failure unless there is a free exchange of cultural traits and hybridisation abounds. This is an

imagination which belongs to normative concepts and political dreams, evoked in a unique way by the specific historical events and the developmental enthusiasm of the 1990s. The normality of interculturality as it presents itself in the German-Polish empirical case instead consists of asymmetrical social relationships, arbitrary initiatives by individuals, local chaos, anxiety of future developments, etc. It is often connected to the mutual utilisation of social, cultural and economic resources across the border. This aspect of bordering, of drawing personal and collective borderlines that enable individuals to benefit from the specific border context, seems to be much more formative of interculturality than the striving for abstract ideals as pre-fabricated by a supranational organisation. Europeanisation from below, arising from this to and fro of sometimes chaotic activities, tends to assume a shape that not always conforms to the positive idealism of a harmonious, socially integrated Europe. It has to encompass social disparities, partial socio-cultural barriers, a lot of local indifference toward the "other side", and even perpetuated "360 degree" resistance by the losers of modernisation against any attempt at colonizing the border (region) by means of overriding political concepts. Europeanisation of this type does not always have a bright side. For many border dwellers the small processes of unwanted or unintended Europeanisation from below have even brought about new economic constraints, reduced freedom of choice and collective feelings of estrangement and foreignness. This dark side of Europeanisation has to be taken into account in future analyses on bordering and interculturality.

As far as the occasional empirical evidence raised in the past allows us to see, interculturalism in the German-Polish border region has been based upon strong everyday assumptions of cultural difference. Local protagonists had a hard time finding ways of getting into contact and cautiously getting to know each other. Transculturality in the sense defined above has only rarely become visible, mainly in proverbial "closed shops" established by professional milieus. For instance, academic projects aimed at solving specific problems of intercultural communication provided secure spaces from where to explore the options and limitations of increased proximity. Yet, even in these contexts, a period of exploration and open-minded discussions was often followed by some retreat into something which might be called friendly and respectful co-culturalism – yet with the possibility of developing it further into free-flowing hybridisation, if so desired.

"Accept your neighbour the way he is now instead of asking for too much, and too early" is the pragmatic bottom-up answer to a preceding wave of top-down idealism and the corresponding frenzy of activism. Maybe this slowed EU drive to achieve a quick barrier-free consolidation of

borders can give an idea of the rhythm and the temporal scope of Europeanisation. In this particular case, the pace had been accelerated during the 1990s and the early millennium years due to the pressures of societal transformation and rapid EU enlargement. Individual attitudes, informal institutions and everyday routines lagged behind. They are now reclaiming some of the time they were not given before to adapt.

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