

“I THOUGHT THAT EVERYONE PERCEIVED THE SITUATION SIMILARLY TO ME.” THE CZECH-POLISH “CIESZYN-SILESIA” REGION AS A CASE OF A POLYSEMIC BORDER

Ondřej ELBEL and Vincenc KOPEČEK, both Ostrava (Czech Republic)*

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Summary

This study addresses the issue of “covidfencing” (the resurrection of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic) in the context of the historically and ethnically complex region of Cieszyn Silesia / Těšínské Slezsko / Śląsk Cieszyński / Teschener Schlesiens on the Czech-Polish border. Conducting interviews with cross-border workers, representatives of municipalities or cross-border regions, and a street survey in a border town, this study analyses the impacts of covidfencing on this region between March 2020 and March 2021.

* Mgr. Ondřej ELBEL, MSc., Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, University of Ostrava, 30. dubna 22, CZ-701 03 Ostrava, Czech Republic; Doc. RNDr. Vincenc KOPEČEK, PhD., Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, University of Ostrava, 30. dubna 22, CZ-701 03 Ostrava, Czech Republic. – E-Mails: ondrej.elbel@osu.cz; vincenc.kopecek@osu.cz.

Applying the concept of BALIBAR (2002), this study shows that the border between Czechia and Poland in the Cieszyn Silesia region has characteristics of a polysemic border. Some inhabitants experienced the border closure due to the pandemic situation as an existential threat, some organised protests because they perceive the border region as a whole to be their home, some claim that the resurrection of the border did not influence anything in their lives. This study introduces the complex network of cross-border relationships and discusses the possible reasons for different perceptions of the border.

Keywords: Border; cross-border mobility, cross-border work, COVID-19 pandemic, covid-fencing, Czechia, Poland

Zusammenfassung

„ICH DACHTE, DASS JEDER DIE SITUATION ÄHNLICH WAHRNIMMT WIE ICH.“
DIE TSCHECHISCH-POLNISCHE REGION „CIESZYN-SILESIA“ (TESCHENER
SCHLESISIEN) ALS BEISPIEL EINER POLYSEMEN GRENZE

Die vorliegende Studie befasst sich mit dem Thema des „Covidfencing“ (einer Wiederaufnahme von Grenzkontrollen während der Coronapandemie im Bereich bis dahin völlig offener Grenzen) im Kontext der historisch und ethnisch komplexen Region Cieszyn Silesia / Těšínské Slezsko / Śląsk Cieszyński / Teschener Schlesiens an der tschechisch-polnischen Grenze. Die Auswirkungen, die „Covidfencing“ auf diese Region im Zeitraum von März 2020 bis März 2021 hatte, wurden anhand mehrerer Interviews mit über die Grenze pendelnden Arbeitnehmer/innen und Vertreter/innen von grenzanliegenden Gemeinden und Regionen sowie mithilfe einer Straßenumfrage in einer Grenzstadt analysiert.

Unter Anwendung des Konzepts von BALIBAR (2002) wird in dieser Studie gezeigt, dass die Grenze zwischen Tschechien und Polen in der Region Cieszyn Silesia (Teschener Schlesiens) Merkmale einer polysemen Grenze aufweist. Manche Einwohner/innen erlebten die Grenzschließung aufgrund der Pandemie als existenzielle Bedrohung, andere organisierten Proteste, während andererseits ein Teil der Einwohner/innen behauptete, dass die „Wiederauferstehung“ der Grenze nichts in ihrem Leben beeinflusst habe. In dieser Studie werden demgemäß das komplexe Netzwerk grenzüberschreitender Beziehungen analysiert und die möglichen Gründe für die unterschiedlichen Wahrnehmungen der Grenze diskutiert.

Schlagwörter: Grenze, Grenzsperrung, „Covidfencing“, Grenzübertritt, Tschechien, Polen, polyseme Grenze, grenzüberschreitende Mobilität, Grenzpendler/innen

1 Introduction

“In April 2020, we had an incident with a Polish soldier. We were hiking with my wife near the border and we were collecting wild garlic. In doing so, we stepped half a meter into Polish territory. Immediately a soldier came, and we had to show our IDs because we had allegedly breached the borders of the sovereign state. He acted

quite harshly. It was shocking for us. He called the local police who arrested us and after two hours released us with an excuse.” (Czech citizen working in Poland)

The worldwide spread of coronavirus in 2020 and 2021 has once again highlighted the omnipresence of borders in human societies. After the first outbursts of the epidemic in China and later in Europe, countries decided to limit the diffusion of illness with border measures (e.g., the strengthening of controls, the re-introduction of checks, or even the total closure of borders, cf. COLFER 2020; PACCES and WEIMER 2020). In the context of the European Union, some of the previously almost invisible borderlines became much more evident and difficult to ignore (BÖHM 2020).

In spring 2021, more than twelve months after the first introduction of protective health measures in European countries some posed the question of how the borders and their functions changed during this special year (for a context of the Schengen Area, see OPIŁOWSKA 2020). LEE et al. (2020) discussed the coordination of cross-border travel and trade under pandemic circumstances, CASAGLIA et al. (2020) analysed the bordering discourses in the context of populism. MEDEIROS et al. (2021) elaborated on the covid-fencing effects on cross-border regions from the European perspective. In their study, they mention numerous aspects of cross-border cooperation disrupted by the process of border closure (the Czech-German or Polish-German commuting of workers, dependence of the Austrian healthcare system on cross-border workers, problems with traffic on Spanish-Portuguese borders).

This paper builds upon the reflection of BÖHM (2021) about the heterogeneity of borderlands which became even more salient during the pandemic. The main research focus of this article can be summed up into the question: “How did the covidfencing re-bordering measures influence the everyday life of the borderland populations?” As the closure of border did not have to affect all of them to the same extent, we want to outline a possible direction in research on this pressing issue. Using an analytical concept of polysemic borders (BALIBAR 2002) we will discuss the question of how the COVID-19 restrictions have affected the people in the borderland region around the city Cieszyn / Český Těšín which is itself divided by the Polish-Czech border. Together, they belong to the Euroregion Těšínské Slezsko / Śląsk Cieszyński (see Figure 1).

This region has been under the continuing attention of human geographers and cross-border cooperation scholars for three decades (SIWEK 1996; KORNACKA-GRZONKA 2017; BÖHM and DRÁPELA 2017; PÁSZTO et al. 2019; DOŁZBŁASZ 2015; TAMÁSKA 2017). The events of 2020 and 2021 related to the coronavirus upsurge created favourable conditions for the new wave of border scholars’ contributions (BÖHM 2021; 2022; KAJTA and OPIŁOWSKA 2021; 2022).

The aim of this paper is to enrich the debate about this region and at the same time to broaden the theoretical understanding of the covidfencing impacts on borderlands. Metaphorically speaking, we will narrate the story of the Czech-Polish border in Cieszyn Silesia during the COVID-19 restrictions and demonstrate that there are different perceptions and narratives of covidfencing and that the studied border is truly polysemic.

The article is based on methodological and data triangulation (FLICK 2004). First, a brief manifest content analysis of Czech media was conducted in order to structure the



Source: Designed by Luděk KRTIČKA, University of Ostrava, Department of Human Geography and Regional Development.

Figure 1: The historical region of Cieszyn Silesia with its urban centres

research field into distinct periods typical of different perceptions of borders during the pandemic. Second, interviews based on three different sampling techniques (key informant, snowball, and convenience heterogeneity sampling) were used in order to reach three different populations (regional politicians and officials, cross-border workers, and the general public).

2 Polysemic Border

Most generally speaking, people tend to divide the world into specific territories (DIENER and HAGEN 2012). There are always some demarcations that demonstrate different sources of authority and this division of space influences human societies as well (BOSSONG et al. 2017). It was a nation-state that corroborated this trend and pushed through the national identity as a defining category for delineating boundaries between countries (JOHNSON et al. 2011). However, the assumption of nation-states that the geographical borders also coincide with borders of societies was unreachable. Borders are not static, and their meanings are being reproduced continuously. The existence of border stones and guarded officials checking the people crossing the border cannot disprove that the functions of borders

are perpetually changing. Therefore, a constructivist approach prevails in border studies. Scholars pay more attention to the bordering processes (e.g., discursive, material, securitisation) than of borders as static lines (SCOTT 2012).

BALIBAR (2002) pointed out that each border brings along history and was formed according to the geostrategic, economic, or political interests. Still, borders are constructed through political discourse (CASAGLIA et al. 2020). Nevertheless, important border sense-makers are those who cross them and live close to the border (BIOTEAU 2007). The analysis of everyday life is also important for the investigation of cross-border identities and practices that contribute to the meaning that the border bears (MARTINEZ 1994).

Using this micro-approach, we may see the differences in the modes of perception of borders. ANDERSON et al. (2003) highlight the differentiation in whom or what is allowed to cross the borders. In other words, they acknowledge the inequality that for some people the border is open, for others just porous or completely closed. BALIBAR (2002), thus, argues that borders are polysemic. They “do not have the same meaning for everyone” (BALIBAR 2002, p. 81). Each human sees borders from their perspective which is determined by social class, citizenship, experience, or identity.

Frequently, the concept of a polysemic border is associated with migration (SALTER 2008), where the distinction between citizens, asylum seekers, or economic migrants is being categorised. However, we want to argue that this categorisation is also applied to the very basic context of everyday border crossing. Border spaces are active fields (BIOTEAU 2007) being developed by logistics, networks, cross-border cooperation, or criminal activities. Therefore, the concept of polysemic borders may show who is or can be active or passive in this sense.

When we look more closely at the border zones, one can argue that the border affects every citizen. Due to the border effects (LEIMGRUBER 2005) and usually peripheral position, they watch the border either as a bridge or a barrier. The border may create incentives or limit them. From this point of view, the institutional setting is probably the same for everyone. However, it is the individual response to these incentives that make borders polysemic.

3 Covidfencing as a Re-bordering Tendency

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, some differences stemming from polysemic perception of borders are probably more visible. When the governments decided on the closure of borders, the level of cross-border integration decreased (MEDEIROS et al. 2021). The cross-border regions which were previously well-integrated suddenly became only interdependent or coexistent when we adopt terminology from MARTINEZ (1994). In such unstable times (like in the case of the COVID crisis), the flow of capital and people may be severely limited. Moreover, the economic climate is not favourable and, therefore, previously symbiotic relations may degrade to the sole coexistence with very rigid controls that did not have a precedent in the past.

The overarching and above-defined term “covidfencing” (MEDEIROS et al. 2021) represents a terminological effort how to describe the extraordinary measures adopted by the

governments to severely limit the cross-border flow of people. As such, this phenomenon presented a new case of re-bordering processes that are occurring inside of the Schengen Area in the last two decades (KRIESI et al. 2021). The European Union has originally come up with an opposite conception of debordering that strives to deconstruct strict border regimes and to initiate and enable new cross-border processes (JAŃCZAK 2018). However, the events related to the global migration and subsequent nationalistic narratives presenting national borders as a fortress (LAMOUR 2022) have triggered re-bordering tendencies. This meant a reintroduction of border controls and the construction of fences or walls (PAP and REMÉNYI 2017). However, the process of othering at the border has been reshaped once again during the COVID-19 pandemics when several states allowed the border crossing only under strict exceptions.

Regarding the covidfencing literature with a special focus on Cieszyn Silesia, several important reflections have been published between 2020 and 2022. BÖHM (2022) focused on the notion of “joint-living space” in the Cieszyn Silesia which was often evoked after the covidfencing measures had been adopted. The level of cross-borderness of several Facebook groups, job-related networks and pandemic-related cross-border activism have shown that the context of cross-border integration in Cieszyn Silesia presents a rather successful case of crisis resilience in comparison with other Euroregions (see also OPIOLA and BÖHM 2022). KAJTA and OPIŁOWSKA (2021) studied the fragility of cross-border governance and functional networks in times of covidfencing. Their results show the importance of existing informal relationships of Euroregions and earlier experience with cross-border initiatives which became the key factors for crisis communication and flexible problem-solving tactics. After an observation of the situation of Cieszyn Silesia region under the circumstances of pandemic, they notice a positive side-effect of the pandemic. The impacts of covidfencing measures helped to realise how mutually dependent both parts of the region are.

BÖHM (2021) added another important argumentation thread to the discussion when he reflected on de-bordering and re-bordering literature in context of covidfencing (see also NOVOTNÝ and BÖHM 2022). According to his research, the pandemic-related re-bordering tendencies led to the local economic crisis and re-emergence of mutual animosities. His article also emphasised the role of cross-border civic society in advocating the interests of local population. The content of such discussions in the context of Cieszyn Silesia and another area (in the Polish-German borderlands) was studied by KAJTA and OPIŁOWSKA (2022) who identified four discursive strands on border closures (border closure as a tragedy for local population; border closure as a threat to the integrated Europe; health and safety as primary values; national interests in focus).

4 Case Study Selection

The Cieszyn region is very old, indeed. Its history can be traced back to the year 1281 when the Duchy of Cieszyn split from the Duchy of Opole and Raciborz. The ducal lands maintained their integrity until 1918; firstly, as part of Poland, then as part of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, and after the incorporation into the Habsburg Empire and the Silesian Wars, the Duchy of Cieszyn [Teschen] belonged to Austrian Silesia. In this paper,

we cannot discuss the complex history of this area broadly. This basic introduction was, nevertheless, important to explain that this region lies on the edges of historical Bohemian and Polish states and was under strong Austrian and German influence. As a result, a very intricate compound of religious, linguistic, and later national identities emerged (MORYS-TWAROWSKI 2018).

This constituted a challenging situation after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its successor states (Czechoslovakia, Poland) claimed the former Duchy of Teschen also with the means of a military campaign (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012). The delineation of a new border in the middle of a former duchy (along the river Olza/Olše) created a previously unprecedented intervention into everyday life and divided a number of families. Even more importantly, a division of the region contributed to the burdens in historical memory and mutual animosities between Czechs and Poles, and to the suppression of the former Silesian identity (BÖHM and DRÁPELA 2017). As a most evident symbol of past glory, the former capital of the duchy of the same name, Teschen (Cieszyn / Těšín), was divided between the two states along the Olza River.

However, one century after the division of the historical region, this area represents a unique case in the context of the Czech-Polish borderlands. Before the Second World War, most of the actual border regions between Czechia and Poland were inhabited by the German speaking population, expelled after 1945. The Cieszyn region and its neighbourhoods are, therefore, remarkable for the historical continuity not affected by the massive population transfers. Many economic or sociological indicators, thus, naturally transcend the border and show continuous trends (PÁSZTO et al. 2019). Another factor inhibiting the cross-border cooperation is the cultural and linguistic proximity of inhabitants in the Cieszyn region (inhabitants of the Czech part of the region often speak Polish fluently and about six percent of them, 28,000 in total, claim Polish nationality).¹⁾ Cross-border families are not unusual (RUNGE J. and RUNGE A. 2020).

Suitable conditions for mutual interpersonal and business contact (SIWEK 2018) are even strengthened by the high level of industrialisation which helps cross-border labour and consequently provokes a higher number of cross-border passages (TYKKYLÄINEN 2009). After indicating the structural conditions of the cross-border region we will discuss the developments of 2020 and 2021 in light of BALIBAR’s concept.

5 Cieszyn Silesia under the COVID-19 Pandemic

As explained in previous sections, the border region around Cieszyn / Český Těšín contains a rich structure of relationships and practices. Due to the historical preconditions and cultural proximity, the inhabitants are more accustomed to crossing the border and living on both sides of it. The promising development of cross-border cooperation was suddenly

¹⁾ The Czech part of the historical region does not correspond with the actual administrative borders of districts and municipalities. The share of the people declaring Polish nationality is thus only an estimate on the basis of the 2011 population census. However, in several municipalities in the south-eastern part of the region, ethnic Poles constitute about 50 percent of the population, or even more.

interrupted in March 2020 because of border closure measures introduced by the governments of Czechia and Poland. During the following months, the dynamic of the pandemic situation and various scopes of governmental measures created a specific environment that made the border only semi-permeable.

This paper discusses the first twelve months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 – March 2021). In order to demonstrate how the conditions for cross-border mobility diverged during this timeframe, we conducted a brief analysis of Czech media. The news articles were made available through the *Anopress* database.²⁾ There, 1960 articles were found with the query “hranice AND Těšín“ (“*border AND Těšín*”) between March 1st, 2020 and April 1st, 2021. Because the aim of this analysis was only to structure the research field and identify particular periods, we did not analyse all articles found, but we selected every tenth entry. Thus, the corpus of 196 articles was analysed using a manifest qualitative content analysis (cf., e.g., BENGTTSSON 2016; BERG and LUNE 2017, pp. 186–187). On the basis of this analysis, six distinct periods were distinguished.

1) *March 2020: Panic – Borders as a protection*

In the first weeks after the first case of COVID-19 disease had emerged in Czechia, the dominant media discourse about borders concentrated on the protective measures on how to slow down the spread of the virus. As a result, the news media focused primarily on the repatriation of Czech tourists from abroad and the effort of the Czech government to limit the cross-border flow to the necessary minimum. The impact of cross-border measures implemented from above to the microsphere of cross-border regions was not discussed yet.

2) *March – May 2020: Unintended consequences – Borders as an obstacle for cross-border commuters*

However, very soon, news media started to share stories about people in border regions whom border closures caused serious problems. Primarily, the sector of cross-border work had a prominent place in the discussion. The Czech commuters who worked on the other side of the border (mainly in Germany and Austria) created an association that voiced their interests and outspoken criticism of border mechanisms. Under the obligation of presenting the negative COVID-19 test on the border, the commuters complained about a sparse network of facilities providing tests and their expensive price. Another subject of criticism was that the government closed most border-crossing sites which resulted in high traffic and long tailbacks near the small number of operating border-crossings.

With a lower intensity, Czech media also reported the problems of workers in the opposite direction (from Poland or Slovakia into Czechia). Thus, the problems of foreign workers were not so visible in the Czech media even though the border closure concerned dozens of thousands of people only in the region of Cieszyn Silesia. The media paid even less attention to the issue of families that remained divided by the border. On the other side, the stories from the city Cieszyn / Český Těšín appeared on news

²⁾ *Anopress* (<https://www.anopress.cz/>) is a full-text database covering Czech media, including daily newspapers, magazines, online and social media, and transcriptions of TV and radio programmes.

platforms, when the local activists exposed banners on both shores of the border river Olza with slogans “We miss you, Czechs!” and “We miss you, Poles!”.

3) *May and June 2020: Border more persistent than elsewhere*

The third phase in the year marked by the COVID-19 restrictions concerned only the Czech-Polish border. The Polish border regions then reported higher numbers of new COVID-19 cases than Czechia and its neighbours. Therefore, the restrictions on the cross-border flow lasted longer in the Czech-Polish borderlands in comparison with other Czech border regions. For the area of Cieszyn Silesia, stricter rules for cross-border mobility were in force even longer. As discussed later, that sparked emotions between Polish cross-border commuters.

4) *July – September 2020: Short summer of “normality”*

What followed was the timespan when the limits on border crossings were cancelled and local people, as well as tourists, could enjoy the free border regime they had known before the pandemic. However, with the second wave of COVID-19 cases (since September 2020), new restrictions emerged.

5) *October 2020 – February 2021: “Just another lockdown”*

In the autumn of 2020, the coronavirus restrictions once again froze social life in general and cross-border flow in the border regions. However, the scope of restrictions was updated given the experience from Spring 2020. Firstly, the facilities providing COVID-19 tests were more frequent and the list of exceptions on who was allowed to cross the border was immediately defined. The needs of cross-border commuters were partially satisfied as they had to get used to presenting negative COVID-19 test results and documents from the employer on the border.

However, most other cross-border interactions were limited to a minimum. The autumn and winter months of 2020/2021 brought about paradoxical phases of imbalance in border restrictions because the Polish government did not apply as strict measures as the Czech cabinet. As a result, Czechs were allowed to travel to Poland for short visits and Czechs could for example go skiing, go to pubs or visit fitness centres. These activities were forbidden in Czechia and legal in Poland. Such a regime did not last the whole winter, so inhabitants of border regions had to follow the news from both countries to know what was possible and what was not.

6) *March 2021: Return of guards*

The period of semi-open Czech-Polish borders during the winter of 2021 was disrupted at the beginning of March when the Czech government declared stricter lockdown rules with police controls on the borders of the districts. As people were not allowed to cross these borders (apart from the defined exceptions), they also could not leave their district through the national border. The presence of police guards was, therefore, more frequent on the borders.

6 Field Research

After structuring the research field and identifying the six distinct periods, which illustrate the environment where research participants live and where they gained their experience,

we proceeded to the interviews. We divided the population into three parts with possibly a different experience of covidfencing measures, and these three populations constituted the three pillars of our field research. The interviews were collected in the period between April and May 2021. Our aim was to collect the individual narratives during the time when the strict covidfencing measures were in force – despite certain limitations these measures posed to our research, including the impossibility to cross the borders and conduct a street survey on the Polish side.

In the first and second pillars, we have used episodic interviews (which stand between a semi-structured and a narrative interview), however, the questions asked differed in each of the pillars; in the case of the third pillar we combined the episodic interview with a brief structured interview. We have selected the episodic interview because it best fits our research goals. We were interested in narratives, but at the same time we did not ask our respondents to discuss their lives in general (as would be the case of a narrative interview *sensu stricto*), but we asked them questions focusing on particular topics and situations which respondents experienced and about which they referred in a narrative way (cf. FLICK 2009, pp. 185–190). All episodic interviews were analysed using thematic narrative analysis (cf. RIESSMAN 2008, pp. 53–76) and the interview material is quoted extensively.

In the first pillar, we used the key informant sampling (cf. TREMBLAY 1989) in order to reach regional politicians and officials. Our assumption was that these persons would provide a broader picture of how covidfencing measures affected the studied region as such. In total, seven online interviews were conducted with mayors or deputy mayors of larger cities (population > 20,000) in the region of Cieszyn Silesia located close to the international border (Český Těšín, Karviná, Třinec, Bohumín in the Czech Republic; Cieszyn in Poland) and with representatives of the local Euroregion (one for the Czech side, one for the Polish side).³⁾ The interviews were conducted online on the ZOOM platform and during the interview the informants answered the questions about:

- The role of borders in the everyday life of their city/Euroregion.
- How often the inhabitants of their city/Euroregion cross the border and why.
- How did the closure of borders due to the pandemics affect the lives of inhabitants in their city/Euroregion.
- How did cross-border mobility evolve between March 2020 and March 2021.

³⁾ As the two parts of historical Cieszyn Silesia were integrated into different countries after 1918, the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation contributed to the fact that while the former capital of the historical principality located on the Olza/Olše river became a periphery, the former peripheries on the principality's western and eastern borders formed by the rivers Ostravice/Ostrawica and Biała/Bělá, respectively, became parts of larger urban areas which stretch far behind the historical borders of the principality.

The former city of Polish (now Silesian) Ostrava was merged with the city of Moravian Ostrava and other urban settlements to form the city of Ostrava which lies in four historical lands (Moravia, the Principality of Opava, the Duchy of Racibórz, and the Principality of Cieszyn). Silesian Frýdek was merged with Moravian Místek to form the district city of Frýdek-Místek, and, finally, Silesian Bielsko was merged with Galician Biała to form the city of Bielsko-Biała, which was the seat of the Bielsko Voivodeship until 1998. These three cities are in fact the largest urban settlements in Cieszyn Silesia, but due to the fact that they are not functionally part of the borderland, we excluded them from our survey.

- What kind of issues/questions/incidents do they have to solve concerning border closure between March 2020 and March 2021.
- How did the cross-border cooperation look between March 2020 and March 2021.

In the second pillar, we interviewed cross-border workers – the group that belongs to the most affected by the cross-border mobility restrictions. Using the exponential non-discriminatory snow-ball sampling (cf. NOY 2008), we were looking for the people who live on one side of the border and work on the other one. To minimise the possible bias, the snowball sampling was based on four different gatekeepers. In total, we managed to interview 16 informants, who belonged to one of the following empirically identified categories: (1) Polish citizen living in Poland, working in Czechia; (2) Polish citizen living in Czechia, working in Poland; (3) Czech citizen living in Czechia, working or studying in Poland; (4) Czech citizen living in Poland, working in Czechia. The questions we asked them were as follows:

- How long have they been working on the other side of the border?
- Why did they move there / search for a job there?
- How did they perceive the border in the past (in childhood, prior pandemic, etc.)?
- Before the pandemic, did they experience any complications in cross-border life (e.g., administrative, etc.)?
- Was it frequent among their friends/relatives/neighbours to commute to the other side of the border?
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the lives of cross-border workers?
- How would they describe the situation of the cross-border worker in the later phases of the pandemic (after the first shock of March 2020)?
- How did the border closure affect the practices of their relatives/friends/neighbours that are not cross-border workers?

The first two categories of participants created an illustrative image of the experience of regional political elite and cross-border workers under the conditions of covidfencing border restrictions. As will be shown below, the unique status of cross-border workers allowed them to commute across the border more often than the other citizens. To analyse the gap between cross-border workers and the population in general, the third pillar of the study was realised. At the end of May 2021, a brief street survey was conducted in the city of Český Těšín among 40 people either from the town or surrounding municipalities.⁴⁾

The convenience heterogeneity sampling was used (cf. ETIKAN et al. 2015). The participants of the street survey were older than 18 years, the sample was composed equally of men and women and all age categories (youth, middle-aged people, elderly citizens). Because the character of the sampling and the conditions under which the research in the third pillar was realised did not allow us to conduct longer interviews, we replaced most of the open questions used in the episodic interviews in the first two pillars of the research with closed-ended questions. These questions constituted the structured part of the inter-

⁴⁾ Unfortunately, a similar survey on the Polish side of the border could not be realised due to the closed borders.

view which enabled us to put the narrative (episodic) part of the interview into a broader context. The episodic part of the interview then consisted of only one open question, focusing on individual experience with closed borders. The structure of the interview was as follows:

- How often do you cross the Czech-Polish border in Český Těšín? (if the border is open): *Daily / more than once a week / a maximum of once a week / once a month / less than once a month or not at all.*
- What is the reason for your trips to Cieszyn? *Shopping / job / leisure activities / family reunions / different.*
- How is your life affected by the border closure? *Open question.*
- How often did you enjoy the commerce or leisure activities in Poland during the phase of pandemic when Poland adopted less strict measures than Czechia? *Daily / more than once a week / a maximum of once a week / once a month / less than once a month / not at all.*
- Do you think that your relatives and friends from Český Těšín *are affected by the closure of borders more than you / are affected by the closure of borders approximately equally as you are / are affected by the closure of borders less than you are?*

The goal of the third wave of field research was not to provide a representative survey of how the covidfencing was perceived by the general public, but to find out if there were different narratives from those shared by the informants in the first and second pillar.

7 Findings

“We are joking about it, but we often say that we are the New York of Central Europe. But in 2020, we became a victim of our own success” (Czech representative of the Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia).

The complex milieu of relationships, populations, ethnolinguistic identities which the preceding quote refers to, was an often-mentioned topic during the interviews. Some participants were very well aware of how special the characteristic of the region around Český Těšín / Cieszyn is.

“We perceive the situation differently than those who neither live in borderlands nor work here or have never been here, do. The perspective from Prague or Warsaw is much different.” (Czech citizen, working in both countries)

Throughout the research, it turned out that the region of Cieszyn Silesia is not only rich in cross-border opportunities. It is also internally diverse and there are remarkable contrasts between the citizens' perceptions. However, to see the differences, it is first important to see the perspective of cross-border workers.

When speaking about the formative experience of cross-border workers with borders, the older ones remember back to the times before 1989 when the border regime between

Czechia and Poland did not allow free passage and in a majority of cases a special invitation from Poland was necessary for crossing the border. After 1990, the conditions were partly relaxed, but the presence of a border guard was perpetual and the two border bridges between Český Těšín and Cieszyn allowed only unidirectional traffic. Having one border-crossing site from Czechia to Poland and another one in the opposite direction made the situation non-flexible. The memories from the times before 2007 (when Czechia and Poland joined Schengen) or even older experiences with the isolation of both cities before 1989 are strong associations when it comes to the closure of borders due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

“When I started with my studies in Poland thirty years ago, the border was truly solid. One had to make an effort to cross the border. All personal documents had to be in order; we had to bring certification for customs. We could take just a few ordinary things; it was forbidden to carry any goods.” (Czech citizen working in Poland)

“When the border checks were reintroduced in 2020, it was an oppressive atmosphere, the guards were checking all the documents. It was like during my childhood from which I still remember long queues on the border.” (Polish citizen working in Czechia)

“In spring 2020, I met one lady. When the army came to guard the border bridges, she started crying as she had a strong association of the Polish State of exception 1981.”⁵⁾ (representative of Český Těšín city)

However, it was certainly the period after 2007 (accession to the Schengen Area) that was a referential point for the participants’ reflections on their cross-border experience. The moment when Czechia and Poland lifted the border restrictions opened opportunities and it is doubtless that participants in this study from a group of cross-border workers were able to make use of it.

“The main change came in 2007 with Schengen, many people started crossing the border for work, medical or educational reasons.” (Polish representative of Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia)

“After 2007, I did not perceive the border in any way. The border was almost unperceivable. In Cieszyn, the border was the river, but outside of the city when I went biking, I did not realise whether I was in Czechia or Poland.” (Czech citizen working in Poland)

⁵⁾ State of exception, declared by Polish general Wojciech Jaruzelski on December 12th, 1981, meant a major turning point in the history of the Polish People’s Republic. The communist regime arrested members of the Solidarity movement and in parallel, the state introduced even stricter border control. That day has a prominent place in Polish historical memory.

The change in 2020 was even more dramatic for young people who did not remember the stricter border regimes and were not used to perceiving the border:

“To be honest, I did not care about borders until March 2020.” (Czech citizen studying in Poland)

It was evident that for people in the Cieszyn region, cross-border work was also an opportunity for other activities across the border.

“For us, it was not a border, it was a bridge! I had my hairdresser in Poland, my favourite shops as well. I was in Cieszyn once a week or more.” (Czech citizen, studying in Poland)

Not perceiving the border, cross-border workers played a role of a bridge between countries for their relatives or friends:

“Thanks to my job, I discovered Czechia much better. I started learning and speaking Czech. With my wife and four children, we spent almost all weekends in Czechia.” (Polish citizen, working in Czechia)

“Of course, I always saw some contrasts between Czechia and Poland, but the borders ceased to be a problem in 2007. It was normal to cross them even five times a day. Our child was born in Czechia, we lived in Poland, our child drank the Czech infant formula we were buying in Czechia.” (Polish citizen, working in Poland, living in Czechia)

This trend had also broader consequences:

“In the last couple of years, a new phenomenon emerged – to travel in Poland [for leisure]. I see this also among my friends. It also works the other way around from Poland to Czechia.” (representative of a Czech town)

“After 2016, higher numbers of Czech tourists started appearing in Cieszyn. At first, they were asking us in the information centre, where the market was, where they could buy something. But later (2017–2018), they started coming with questions about where any restaurant or tourist attractions were. [...] Therefore, we employed a Czech-speaking worker in the information centre.” (Polish representative of Euroregion, Cieszyn Silesia)

As just discussed, the Czech and Polish borderlands were grown through mutual interactions in the last years before the pandemic. The more the relationships were advanced the sharper the contrast that accompanied the closure of borders due to the pandemic. For the cross-border workers, it was an emotionally difficult situation which also meant existential uncertainty for some of them.

“Many of my colleagues who work in the factory had to move to Czechia to secure their job. They had to leave their families alone in Poland.” (Polish citizen working in Czechia)

“They divided a city which we understood as one entity, they tore apart all the contacts, social interactions. [...] It was tough. Not even the Olza River can save us from the virus. I find it childish when countries close borders due to the epidemic.” (Czech citizen working in Poland)

“It drove us crazy. There were soldiers with guns on the border bridges. It looked like a war. It was psychologically harrowing [...].” (Polish citizen working in Poland, living in Czechia)

Apart from the inability to work in an office behind the border, the closure of borders also had consequences for the families which were suddenly divided by the border. The situation also impacted people who had their doctors in the neighbouring state. During the interviews, participants mentioned missing childcare or interrupted cancer therapy.

“My mother lives in Poland, she is alone. It was an enormous dilemma for me where I should have stayed. With my mother in a neighbouring country? Or in the country where I have work? I decided on the second option so I could speak to my mother only by phone. I also did shopping for her by phone. It was traumatic.” (Polish citizen, living partly in Czechia and in Poland, working in Czechia)

Besides the trauma, emotionally difficult moments, and uncertainty, the cross-border workers also tried to campaign actively for the opening of borders. During the spring of 2020, they wrote a letter to Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, the others contacted a Polish Member of the European Parliament who is based in Cieszyn. The representatives of the Euroregion conducted separate initiatives when they tried to explain the situation of cross-border regions to the Czech as well as to the Polish Ministry of Regional Development. Cross-border workers also found important allies in local patriots that consider Český Těšín and Cieszyn as one city and did not want to come to terms with the division of the cities by the border. Together and also with the patronage of the mayors of Český Těšín and Cieszyn, they organised a dual protest that marched parallelly on both shores of the Olza River. The people who prepared the banners and posters manifesting the Polish and Czech friendship and common ties also originated from the community of local activists.

What some participants suffered about, was an upsurge of xenophobic thinking and assaults on social media. They also complained about discrimination. As foreign workers, they had to be tested for COVID-19 while Czech workers were not tested at all. In total, it looked like the cross-border workers were the transmitters of the virus.

“I felt bad about the deterioration of the atmosphere between people. We firstly arrived in Czechia in May 2020 after the first lockdown, got our COVID-19

negative test results. Even with a valid negative PCR test, I was afraid of going to visit my grandma in a Czech retirement home as a visitor from Poland. Czech regional politicians were spreading theories that we Poles were responsible for the new cases of COVID-19 in Czechia.” (Polish citizen, who moved in summer 2020 from Poland to Czechia)

The cross-border workers regarded the fact that opinions about the border closure in society were sometimes in sharp contradiction to their own experience with incomprehension.

“It was striking for me when I heard the reactions of some people on border closure. I thought that everyone perceived the situation similarly to me. But they were saying: ‘Keep the border closed, it is very good.’ [...] They wanted to protect themselves because they are the most important [...].” (Czech citizen working in both countries)

This observation indicates that the covidfencing effects on people living in borderlands are not equal. Some people live very close to the border, but they do not care much about the neighbouring country. Those who were used to crossing the border on a daily or regular basis perceive the border in a different way than the others. The longer the border restrictions are in effect, the wider the gap between cross-border workers and others is. The certificate issued by the employer makes a difference between people.

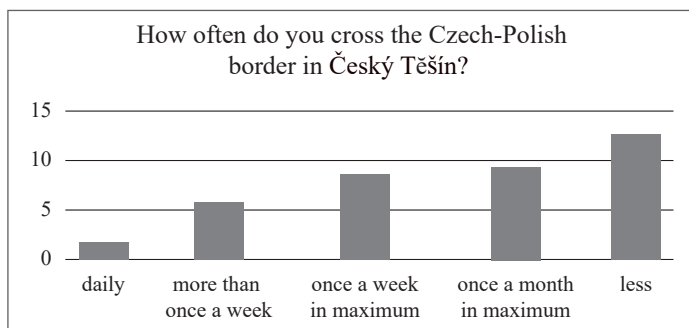
The differing perceptions of the covidfencing effects are apparent when we look at the interview material collected within the third pillar of our research. Given the limited size of our sample we are not able to generalise our findings for the whole population, but besides voices which expressed similar experience to that of the cross-border workers and of the regional political elite (e.g., *“This is as if someone stole me one half of my city.”*), we also heard different stories.

“My life is not affected by the border closure. Before the pandemic, I went shopping to Polish Cieszyn once a month, but I don’t miss it now.” (a woman interviewed during street survey in Český Těšín)

The informants approached as part of the street survey usually admitted that they were used to crossing the border before the pandemic, mainly to buy something (see Figures 2 and 3). However, the COVID-19 pandemic showed that these contacts became unnecessary for them. The ties were probably too weak, and these informants simply changed their social practice. Two thirds of them declared their relatives or friends in general cross the border more frequently which created a perception of indifference towards the neighbouring country (see Figure 5).

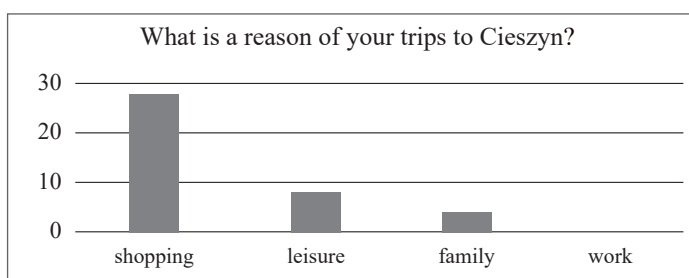
“Yes, my parents or other family members are going to Poland whenever they can. They are rushing there for sales. For me it is not as important.” (a man interviewed during street survey in Český Těšín)

Eighty percent of the informants did not enjoy the benefits resulting from the less strict epidemiological measures in Poland (open bars, fit centres, commerce) during the Czech lockdown in January of February 2021 (see Figure 4).



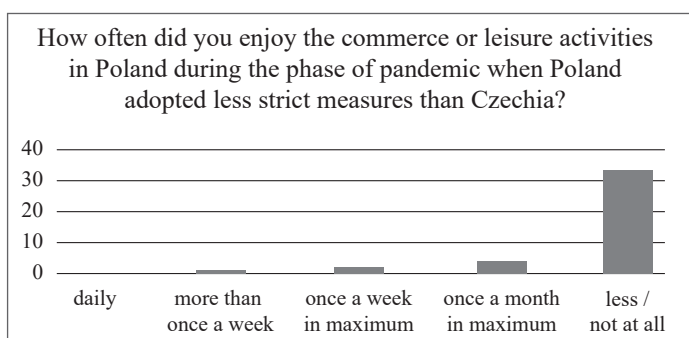
Source: Data from the street survey (see chapter 6, n = 40). Own work.

Figure 2: Frequency of cross-border mobility in Český Těšín / Cieszyn.



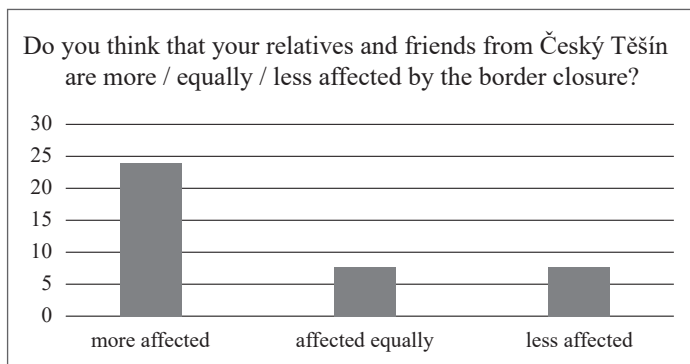
Source: Data from the street survey (see chapter 6, n = 40). Own work.

Figure 3: Reasons for cross-border mobility in Český Těšín / Cieszyn.



Source: Data from the street survey (see chapter 6, n = 40). Own work.

Figure 4: Pandemic cross-border mobility from Český Těšín to Cieszyn.



Source: Data from the street survey (see chapter 6, n = 40). Own work.

Figure 5: Perception of the impacts of pandemic covidfencing in Český Těšín / Cieszyn.

The difference in perception may also stem from the place of residence. The city Třinec is located just 10 km south from Český Těšín and it also borders Poland. However, on the other side of the border there is only a small village that is not attracting cross-border mobility. As some of the participants acknowledge outside of Český Těšín, the perception of border and Polish borderlands is different.

“I live in Třinec now and this city lives completely differently. Although we have a border crossing here, many people did not feel the effects of the border closure. Except for the impossibility to go shopping in Poland. And for sure some people do not even shop there. Some of them do not like Poles and are happy with the border restrictions. These people were more hit by the closed pubs. The border is not part of their lives.” (Polish citizen, working in Poland, moved to Czechia in summer 2020)

“Here in Třinec, I have some friends who never cross the border, they do not need Poland at all. Maybe they go there for shopping once a year at a maximum. When the pubs and fitness centres were closed in Czechia, we could cross the border and my friends joined me and they could at least try it for the first time in Poland.” (Czech citizen, studying in Poland)

8 Discussion: The Cross-border Workers between Isolation and Miscomprehension

Although cross-border workers are usually very heterogeneous populations (PIGERON-PIROTH 2019), the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic integrated their experience. The events of the year 2020 struck the cross-border workers and their careers with improbable

intensity. Before the pandemic, they understood the areas beyond the border as their opportunity and they were able to utilise this advantage on the job market. The covidfencing restrictions (MEDEIROS et al. 2021) disrupted their mobility pathways and threatened their working contract. As one participant noted during the narrative interview, suddenly he and his Polish colleagues became a burden for the Czech employers who could not count on their presence.

The renaissance of borders inside the Schengen Area in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the networks that were operating and developing for dozens of years and were growing in intensity. It was also surprising for the experts from Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia when they realised how many people commute between Czechia and Poland due to their job. The pandemic has, therefore, become a catalysing moment for people in the borderlands. The covidfencing measures diversified the experiences of people in these areas. In the first period of the pandemic during spring 2020, a gap existed based on the fact that, due to the border-closure, one group could work and the other one could not. Later, the status of cross-border workers allowed them to cross the border as a privileged group. However, they did not understand it necessarily as an advantage because of the unstable job market and the sometimes unpredictable political decisions that could easily turn against cross-border workers again.

Cross-border mobility contributes importantly to the bordering processes (SCOTT 2012; BIOTEAU 2007), and the border measures installed during the COVID-19 pandemic to limit cross-border movement were doubtlessly a case of a re-bordering process that materialised the border again. As explained above, the possibility or impossibility to cross the border caused the difference between groups. Therefore, as stated by VAN HOUTUM and VAN NAERSEN (2002), the nation-state implemented the process of “othering” on the border. The status of citizens could either lead to permission or denial to enter the neighbouring country. Such a mechanism may resemble the situation of migrants. It makes a difference whether they have the status of refugees, are asylum seekers or do not belong to these categories, and their chances to cross (e.g., Schengen external) the border are thus limited.

Such policies contributed to the polysemic nature of borders (BALIBAR 2002) even inside the Schengen Area which was famous for its borderless character. In the case of this study, this concept may be applied to the Czech-Polish borderlands near the city Český Těšín/Cieszyn. The events of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the population does not perceive the border uniformly and the relationship to the border and the neighbouring state may be influenced by some criteria that usually originated in the pre-pandemic period. Throughout this study, the following possible difference-makers were identified:

- *Status of cross-border workers* – As already argued, the category of cross-border workers was the most vocal group that called for the easing of restrictions. They perceived the border more intensively as the restrictions in the first phase of the pandemic denied their approach to the job. As a result, their point of view was unique and not always understood by the general population.
- *Status of cross-border families* – The situation of cross-border families has been a specific feature of the Cieszyn/Český Těšín region for a long time. During the

COVID-19 pandemic, however, such status usually has not meant an exception from the cross-border restriction. The governments aimed the cross-border restrictions to limit the mobility and encounters between people. The social-distancing and self-isolating paradigm stood against family reunions in general and that was, even more, the case of families divided by borders. People belonging to this group perceived the situation even more sensitively during the so-called first wave of the pandemic between March and June 2020 because of fear for their relatives. Some others were not allowed to care for their retired parents which also meant a burden of stress. This experience of division and sudden symbolic distance between two banks of one river was another important viewpoint that contributed to the polysemic character of the Czech-Polish border. For some of the members of this group, the Polish national identity may be an important additive factor for the perception of the border. The border divides the Polish minority in Czechia not only from their families but also from their nation-state.

- *Category of borderlanders* – MARTINEZ (1994) uses the expression “borderlanders” to describe people who live in borderlands and experience cross-border life intensively. A part of their life occurs in one country, while some other activities are reserved for the neighbouring land. The borderlanders share this lifestyle with people from the cluster of cross-border families and cross-border workers. They became used to the advantages of the Schengen borderlands. In the context of Cieszyn/Český Těšín, they spend their free time in Poland and go shopping there. In Czechia, they have healthcare, bilingual education for their children and less expensive flats. Apart from the previous two groups in this typology, they lack official cross-border ties of either work contracts or family relationships. Often, young people belong to this category as they did not experience or do not remember the period before accession to the Schengen Treaty or the border regime before 1989. The covidfencing affected the borderlanders most in their everyday practice. The effect neither consisted of the existential unsureness of cross-border workers nor the emotive separation of families. It was a perspective of cross-border citizens who were not used to perceiving the border in their everyday life.

Importantly, people belonging to this category may show a high sensitivity for local patriotism which is manifested by claims like “I consider Cieszyn and Český Těšín to be one city”, “They deprived us of one half of the city”. The special characteristic of the border city(ies) Cieszyn/Český Těšín is a subject of enthusiasm and pride. The impossibility of encounters, cross-border mobility, and other benefits of everyday life on borders led some members of this category to the activism (petitions, demonstrations) and support of the struggle of cross-border workers.

- *Category of occasional border-crossers* – Persons who belong to this last category perceive the border just occasionally mainly through irregular shopping or an exceptional cross-border trip. Otherwise, the activities of occasional border-crossers take place just on one side of the border. With the lack of or having only superficial experience of benefits from cross-border life, this group did not see harm in the closure of the borders.

This rather initial study indicates that such group could be found in border city(ies) Český Těšín/Cieszyn, however, more often it is a domain of other cities in the region (Trinec, Karviná, Wodzisław Śląski).

It is noticeable that it was the intensity of the cross-border experience before the pandemic, which may have been a decisive factor for the perception of borders during the period under the covidfencing restrictions. The meanings of borders are different among the population (BALIBAR 2002) which seemingly fits for the region of Cieszyn Silesia while covidfencing could serve as a catalyst for this finding which is worth subsequent analyses. It could also be useful to gather data about the cross-border practice in this region and also to more deeply focus on the occasional border-crossers and identify the persisting barriers that prevent this group from adopting the lifestyle of borderlanders who can fulfil the Schengen ideal – crossing the border without noticing it.

9 Conclusion

“Then, when I first crossed the border after the first lockdown, I had tears in my eyes. Emotions played a big role. Poles who just work in Czechia perceive it differently than me. Because I grew up in Czechia, it is my home.” (Czech citizen, living in Poland, working in Czechia)

This study indicates that the cross-border practices in the Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia/Těšínské Slezsko/Śląsk Cieszyński are truly diverged. As a result, people living in this borderland region perceive the border in different ways. That means the border can be termed polysemic in a way defined by BALIBAR (2002). The reasons for this have their roots in a period before the COVID-19 pandemic (cross-border work, families living on both sides of the border, the intensive cross-border life, or a lack of contact with the neighbouring state). Members of these groups lived for some time next to each other and the discrepancies did not seem to be apparent. It was the COVID-19 crisis as well as the resulting covidfencing restrictions consisting of a reintroduction of border controls, which emphasised the different experiences of people living in the border region.

The covidfencing effects have most intensively affected cross-border workers. The extent of this job market and the number of commuters across the border were underestimated before the crisis even by experts. The closure of borders showed that cross-border workers have been playing the role of drivers of cross-border contact. It was not only their intensive everyday experience of border-crossing but also various activities they perform on the other side of the border.

This study may question a myth about the borderless world of the Schengen border regime. Such a situation where borders no longer mean limits, but bridges may be valid only for the cross-border workers and to some extent for the enthusiastic borderlanders. For the others (occasional border-crossers) this goal is still a long way ahead as they see some barriers in a border. It is, therefore, important for further research to ask, in the words of one of our interviewees, “who does not need Poland” among Czech inhabitants of borderlands

and vice versa. These findings may be essential for the future of cross-border contacts and provide a solid ground for further cross-border projects.

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