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RESILIENCE AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING THE POLISH-BELARUSIAN BORDERLAND DURING THE MIGRATION CRISIS

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – This study aims to assess the applicability of the concept of community resilience as a theoretical framework for analysing the Polish-Belarusian borderland during the 2021 migration crisis. It explores how local communities adapted to the crisis, considering the borderland as a dynamic social space influenced by both global and local phenomena.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The article is based on qualitative research, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The study focuses on the experiences of local communities in the Polish-Belarusian borderland during the migration crisis. The focus group was conducted with sociology students living in the closed zone, while the in-depth interviews were carried out with residents of various localities within this area, using the snowball sampling method. The analysis was grounded in the theoretical concepts of social resilience and everyday life, complemented by a historical perspective that highlights the role of unprocessed collective trauma in shaping current adaptive strategies.
- ▶ *Score/results* – The research reveals that the migration crisis significantly disrupted the daily lives of borderland residents. Despite these challenges, communities demonstrated adaptive capacities by developing new strategies to cope with the crisis. These included leveraging social and cultural resources, such as neighborhood support and grassroots initiatives, to mitigate the destabilisation of everyday life.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The study's originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from border studies and resilience theory. By integrating these frameworks, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how local communities navigate complex crises, emphasising the role of social capital and local adaptation strategies in rebuilding and strengthening community ties under duress.

| **Keywords:** borderland, crisis, resilience, everyday life

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the concept of community resilience in terms of its applicability to the study of the Polish-Belarusian borderland in the Podlaskie Voivodeship during the migration crisis that began in the summer of 2021. The paper uses the concept of resilience, defined as the adaptive capacity of communities in the face of sudden crises, and the concept of borderscapes, which treats the border as a dynamic social space, undergoing constant transformations under the influence of global and local phenomena.

It is worth considering how borderland communities engage a variety of social and cultural resources, including neighbourhood support and grassroots initiatives, to mitigate the destabilisation of everyday life. The work points to the relevance of social capital and local adaptation strategies to help rebuild and strengthen community ties in difficult circumstances.

2. Borderland as an object of social research

In this text, I focus on the Polish-Belarusian borderland in the Podlaskie Voivodeship after 2021. This borderland is territorially defined by the border between Poland and Belarus, which was established in 1945 (previously as the border between Poland and the USSR). Since 2007, it has also been the Schengen border and is 418 km long. It has fourteen border crossings, seven roads, five rails, one seasonal river crossing for canoes and one pedestrian/bicycle border crossing in the Białowieża Forest open only during the day. A great piece of this border runs along rivers (Bug, Narew). Crossing Poland's eastern border allows further, freer movement throughout the European Union. The border between Poland and Belarus itself was a relatively secure border until the summer of 2021, and the neighbouring borderland has been described in the literature as a borderland of long duration – that is, a borderland with formed social relations. The centuries-long coexistence, but also the influence of large state organisms and “historical nations”, which produced a constellation of intercultural relations specific to this borderland, shaped a standard of socio-cultural relations peculiar to it (far from homogeneity).

Borderlands have been the subject of analysis in the social sciences for several decades. Borderlands are laboratories of social relations of sorts, as anthropologists Donnan Hastings and Wilson M. Thomas write: “Almost everything

that concerns the daily lives of people in the modern world can and does happen in its borderlands. This makes borderlands interesting to sociologists, although they are nothing special. However, some things can only happen in borderlands” [2007: 19].

In Poland, they particularly developed after 1989 owing to the work of Andrzej Sadowski, Grzegorz Babinski, Zbigniew Kurcz, Jerzy Nikitorowicz and others. Several research centres in Poland have particularly focused on the study of borderlands, transborderality (Wrocław, Opole, Białystok, Cieszyn, Gdańsk). The analyses of borderlands so far have made it possible to recognise the structure of the borderland population, the social identity of the borderland, to analyse social relations in borderlands in terms of relations between the dominant group and national/ethnic minorities. In recent years, as Irena Szlachcicowa notes, a theoretical turn has been taking place in border studies. This is a spatial turn and a relational turn (relations turn) [2019: 20]. Borderlands are described by researchers as a laboratory of social processes, identities and attitudes towards others/foreigners. The social space of a borderland is: “the totality of social relations occurring in the borderland area of states, together with the factors that condition them. This space is created, *inter alia*, by all types and kinds of social institutions (formal and informal; economic, political, educational, religious, etc.) administrative units, groups and social organisations, which generate and organise the specific borderland field favourable or unfavourable for establishing, developing and maintaining contacts, social relations and ties between entities located in the borderland area and beyond” [Zielińska, Mielczarek-Żejmo, 2020: 400].

After 1989, when a period of systemic transformation began in Poland, researchers were able to start studying borders and borderlands in new, ideologically unconstrained dimensions. This was of momentous importance for “rediscovering” cultural (ethnic, religious) diversity. For the nationality policy of the communist authorities led to a separation of the consciousness of coexistence with other ethnic and religious groups in the Polish national discourse. The tradition of the multicultural Polish state and its past were kept silent, and the few representatives of minorities functioned on the margins of society, pushed into the niche of internal exoticism and “*cepelia*”. Hence, at the beginning of the transition, the attention of researchers was focused on showing that national/ethnic minorities existed in Poland, although the nationality structure of the state had changed radically since World War II [cf. Bieńkowska-Ptasznik, 2007: 9–12; Łodziński 1989: 11–25].

3. The Polish-Belarusian borderland and its specificity

The first researcher to start empirical research on the Polish-Belarusian borderland was Andrzej Sadowski. He focused on showing the national phenomenon of the Belarusian minority inhabiting the borderland in question, analysing the national identity and cultural diversity of the borderland. He was one of the first to develop the subject of borderland sociology in Poland after 1989. After a period of analysis of individual minorities and the study of the new order of ethnic relations in the north-eastern borderland, the attention of the team working with Andrzej Sadowski focused on what a culturally diverse society is and what it can be.

4. The current situation in the Polish-Belarusian border region – new research challenges – a theoretical framework

The current crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border began in the summer of 2021. The Polish public heard about it after residents of Usnarz described on social media what was happening in their village. It was about the detention of a group of migrants by the Border Guard and keeping them in a clearing near the border for an extended period of time. The story was described by Joanna Klimowicz of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, among others: “This situation is supposed to have prevailed for a week now. Trapped in the open air, in a strip of no man’s land, the people have no possibility of movement or shelter. They have set up a temporary encampment, burning fires at night to keep warm. They are waiting for a decision from the Polish side so that they can apply for international protection here. They still have food, provided to them by border guards. The refugees are scared and desperate” [www 1].

The story of the group from Usnarz sparked a heated discussion in the media, we could observe how two different discourses were developing: the humanitarian discourse and the hybrid war discourse [cf. Bieńkowska, 2023], or as Justyna Straczuk defines it, the grassroots, activist discourse and the governmental discourse [cf. Straczuk: 2023]. The Border Guard published daily statistics showing the scale of attempted border crossings, which was significantly higher than at the same time in previous years. The Polish Border Guard provided social media announcements, emphasising that the situation is an emergency: “In August of this year, 2100 persons attempted to cross the Polish-Belarusian border illegally.

Out of these, the Polish Border Guard prevented 1342 people from attempting to cross the border and 758 foreign nationals were detained and held in secure centres for refugees run by the Polish Border Guard. From July to 17 August, 380 foreign nationals were transferred out of Poland (including those to their country of origin).” By way of comparison, in the whole of 2020 the Border Guard detained 13 groups attempting to cross the border – a total of 114 persons [Klimowicz, 2021].

In August, the state authorities decided to create barbed and razor wire entanglements on the border to make it more difficult to cross. In total, these entanglements were built with the help of the army along 180 km of the border. This was modelled on an analogous fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border. On 2 September 2021, the President of the Republic of Poland issued a decree imposing a state of emergency in the border area in 115 towns in the Podlaskie Voivodeship and 68 in the Lubelskie Voivodeship. In the region covered by the state of emergency, there are numerous limitations related to the organisation of mass events, assemblies, protests, cultural events and persons travelling to this region must always have identification with them. Many restrictions have been implemented – taking photographs or filming selected places and buildings is forbidden, journalists are banned from the state of emergency zone, as well as anyone else except for the residents. Access to public information has been restricted.

The introduction of the exclusion zone was justified on the grounds of security and the actions of the uniformed services, but it did not mean an end to the influx of migrants. The crisis has continued and is continuing. In addition to the creation of the temporary exclusion zone, the authorities took measures to build a steel barrier, to create a wall in a strip near the border.

The attention of the media and researchers was mainly focused on analysing the actions of the ruling party and the migrants. The local border communities were hardly mentioned. One had the impression that the local community had become an invisible actor in the situation taking place on its territory.

The situation that can be observed here has been escalating for several years now, and several stages can be distinguished – from the initial shock, the sense of temporariness of the strange/new situation, through the gradual getting used to new regulations introducing restrictions for the local community (the exclusion zone created on 2 September 2021 by a decree of the President of the Republic of Poland). The Russian attack on Ukraine and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the construction of a wall on the border, the progressive militarisation of this

borderland, or the Shield East programme announced by the authorities, were also important milestones.

The current situation in the borderland strongly resonates with the previous state of ethnic relations in the area. The social space of the Polish-Belarusian borderland is being transformed by the migration crisis that began in the summer of 2021 caused by an influx of migrants wishing to cross the Polish border from Belarus. The scale of the control of the relatively “new” migration route by the Belarusian authorities and the actions taken by the Polish authorities (e.g. the presence of soldiers, border guards, inspections, etc.) transformed the daily life of the inhabitants of the border areas, who were confronted every day with a situation that was new to them.

The relations in the local communities, culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse in the border area, encountered specific and unique challenges caused by external factors, as a result of which the well-being of the Polish-Belarusian border communities (understood as the security of the border and of the people living in the border area) was threatened. This well-being is de facto something fragile and relatively new, built after the post-war events that strongly influenced the attitudes of the people living in the border area. The borderland has its own specific and complex history.

When planning research in a crisis situation, many factors are relevant; the knowledge of the history can explain the specificity of the reactions of local communities to current events. When considering a theoretical framework that allows for a multifaceted view of the local border community, it is worth focusing on the concept of resilience.

Community resilience is the ability of a community to cope with crises, adapt to change and recover from difficult situations. Resilience is understood as an adaptive process in social relations that emerges and exists between governance, obedience and resistance [Krüger, Albris, 2021]. This community resilience is understood as the ability of members of a particular community to take deliberate and meaningful collective action to mitigate the undesirable effects of crises and return to a state that allows for the safe and sustainable development of that community [Paton, Johnston, 2001: 273]. It can be surmised that social mechanisms such as solidarity, support or cohesion allow a community to acquire and maintain the necessary flexibility in the system, which in turn enables the effective use of its material, psychological, social or cultural resources in the face of crisis [Walsh-Dilley, Wolford, 2015]. Resilience is also captured as a security paradigm [cf. Stępką, 2021]. Contemporary security challenges are distributed,

hybrid, networked, uncertain and thus in need of continuous recognition, assessment and management [Dunn, Cavelty et al., 2015]. This is the type of challenge we face at the Polish-Belarusian border. Resilience recognises the uncertainty, complexity and high dynamics of the security environment, and goes even further by framing impending disasters as something that cannot be controlled [Dunn, Cavelty et al., 2015]. A key element in this approach to security is the recognition of the uncertainty and inevitability of impending events and a move away from the belief that the future can be managed and crises can be completely prevented [Dunn Cavelty et al., 2015: 9]. What is needed is not so much a preventive capacity as a broadly understood culture of preparedness, based on central and local (including bottom-up) mechanisms capable of absorbing shocks and/or adapting vulnerable elements of the social, economic or political system [Adey, Anderson, 2012]. Resilience appears as an adaptive process that shapes and is shaped by social relations [Krüger, Albris, 2021]. At the heart of the resilience approach there is no the identification of threats, but the identification of the weakest links, i.e. the most vulnerable points in the system [Zebrowski, 2013: 166]. Stepka emphasises that: “security policies should focus not so much on narrowly defined defence against threats, but, above all, on continuously increasing the resilience and capacity of systems to restore their resources and regain functionality, should they be compromised by a crisis” [Stepka 2021, after Kaufmann, 2016: 102]. According to Stepka, the concept of resilience emphasises that all elements of a system should be ready to assist weaker, more vulnerable links (an example of such a mechanism would be the use of the armed forces to assist vulnerable groups during a non-military crisis). In this view, security is highly networked, systemic in nature, interconnected by various dependencies to support each other. At the centre of the resilient security paradigm there are, often marginalised or even overlooked, elements such as education and critical thinking skills, learning and development productivity, social cohesion and solidarity, or legal certainty.

Community resilience can be analysed through indicators such as the level of mutual trust and support among community members; Civic engagement – the number of people participating in community activities, NGOs or volunteering; the nature and strength of local relationships, formal and informal social networks; the sense of cultural belonging to one’s community; the level of education to adapt to change; economic stability, access to healthcare and public services, quality of infrastructure; crisis management plans; capacity to innovate.

5. Research questions

Combining the concept of resilience with the perspective of everyday life provides an opportunity to analyse the current situation in both individual and institutional dimensions. Piotr Sztompka lists among the categories of everyday life: space, relationships, time, temporality, non-reflexivity, corporeality, rituality, spontaneity, Everyday life category [Sztompka, 2008]. These two theoretical concepts complement each other and allow us to show how the crisis was and is perceived by the borderland inhabitants.

Can communities that pass on unspoken/silent trauma through successive generations develop competences related to resilience? Do they have the tools with which to deal with difficult, crisis situations? In Agnieszka Holland's film *The Green Border*, the inhabitants of Podlasie are not visible, and if they do appear, it is only marginally. After a screening of the film at the Forum cinema in Białystok with the director in attendance, the question arose as to why the local community was not there, why their involvement was not visible. This could give the impression of passivity on the part of the local community, but was it really passivity, or rather acting in secret, without publicity? Trying to answer this question takes on a different dimension when viewed through the prism of the story described by Anna Prymaka-Oniszk in her book *Kamienie musiały polecieć. The Erased Past of Podlasie*. Although the events described by the author refer to the past, to the period before and after the Second World War, when reading this work we can have the impression that it also tells about the attitudes of contemporary inhabitants of Podlasie, attitudes based on trauma inscribed in the history of the Orthodox, Belorussian minority in the area of the present Polish-Belorussian borderland. As the author emphasises, the historical policy of the state has an impact on the fact that these events have not been named or explained to this day. Anna Prymaka-Oniszk outlines the history of the "playing out" of Polishness and Belarusianness, commonly referred to as Ruthenianness, through her personal recollections, pieced together from the many told stories, interwoven with documents collected from archives.

Considering the past, including the silent past, is an important element in the research process to find out what strategies local communities can produce in new crisis situations.

The local community is often stereotyped, assessed and judged without any in-depth analysis, as in Andrzej Leder's text in *Krytyka Polityczna* "(...) This experience, transferred to eastern Poland in letters, in stories of those returning from

emigration, pervades attitudes towards refugees from Islamic countries trying to cross the border. Resentment, fear, contemptuous, dehumanising remarks – this is not only the result of Kaczynski's vile allusions about diseases carried by 'them' – it is the bountiful harvest of the derogatory and sometimes dehumanising situation in which many Polish emigrants earn their living in rich Europe. Who was despised, will be despised..." [www 2]. Leder's words are assessing, although he bases his assessment on his subjective impressions of an essay by Sylwia Urbańska and Przemysław Sadura describing not so much an in-depth study as a research reconnaissance at the beginning of the migration crisis. Leder's text encountered a polemic by Kamila Fiałkowska and Michał P. Garapich, "Podlasie is not a land of stone-hearted people". As the authors write: "(...) Andrzej Leder exoticises and stigmatises the borderland population, taking away the agency of those who oppose the oppressive actions of the state".

6. Conclusions

This is just an excerpt from the comments and assessments of local residents that have emerged in the context of the current migration crisis. Tellingly, there is no space in all of this for residents or reflection on their condition although it is safe to say that they have found themselves at the centre of events.

In the autumn of 2021, we organised focus research with sociology students from the University of Białystok who lived in the exclusion zone. We wanted to know their perceptions of the situation then, at the beginning of the crisis. One phrase, a term referring to migrants, that was said during this study: "let them go already" defined not indifference to migrants but rather a longing for what was there before the crisis began. Simple and naïve in its message, the phrase expressed a wish to return to the familiar, everyday, ordinary world. Undoubtedly, the experience of the migration crisis can be a source of social trauma for the inhabitants of the exclusion zone and surrounding areas. According to Piotr Sztompka, traumatogenic change always has a negative impact on the community – it is associated with disorganisation, dislocation, being thrown out of balance [Sztompka, 2000; 2002]. I assume that the inhabitants of the Polish-Belarusian borderland experienced a crisis understood as: "feeling or experiencing events or situations as unbearable difficulties, depleting endurance resources and disrupting coping mechanisms" [James, Gilliland, 2004: 26]. The situation as of summer 2021 in the borderland in question challenges the security of local communities in their

daily lives. I assume that the crisis situation in the Polish-Belarusian borderland has activated individual and community resources (material, psychological, social or cultural) to cope with its complexity. This ability to cope with disruptions, the survival of individuals or systems (e.g. ecological or economic) in a reality marked by complex and unpredictable crises and tensions is referred to as resilience [Bourbeau, 2013]. Social capital or social practices (e.g. grassroots initiatives, support groups) play an important role here, allowing individuals to mitigate the negative consequences of crisis events and to constitute a “new normal”.

It is worth remembering, however, that the application of the concept of resilience cannot be the result of a hasty choice or a certain fashion for this perspective, as Karol Konaszewski [2020: 35] emphasises in his work. This author shows the complexity and ambiguity of the term residualism, especially when we take this concept from new research areas, interdisciplinarily. However, the concept of resilience is already used in the field of border studies. The concept of resilience appears, for example, in David Newman’s 2006 text “The Resilience of Borders in a Globalising World”, but the author does not explain the concept itself, but he focuses on demonstrating the need to understand territory not only as a physical space, but as a socio-political construct that reflects identity, power and emotional ties. He emphasises that such a perspective is crucial for the resolution and management of contemporary conflicts. The concept of residuality is also used to show a perspective on the experiences of migrants (cf. *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, Reece Jones).

In recent years, the concept of resilience in border studies has developed particularly in the context of analyses of cross-border cooperation during the Covid 19 pandemic. Examples of the application of this concept include the work of Elżbieta Opiłowska, [cf. Opiłowska, 2022], Hyneka, Ganowicz and Shelvakh [2024] and many others.

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