Transnational and Trans-regional Cooperation and Effects on the Situation of Minorities: A Case Study of the Polish–Ukrainian Border Region

I. History and Geography

The Polish–Ukrainian border region is characterized to a very great extent by the frontier that separates these two countries and by the concept of periphery. The name ‘Ukraine’ itself is derived from a Slavic word meaning border or boundary. The dominance of the frontier in people’s everyday lives is based on the history of the region, which has been characterized by many border changes and conflicts. The fact that today it also represents an external border of the EU contributes to a continued domination in everyday life.

The concept of an independent Ukraine emerged in the twentieth century. Previously, the country was dominated by Poland, Lithuania, Russia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of which it was part (as the ‘Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic’) from 1922 until its independence in 1991. Northwestern Ukraine, including Galicia and part of Volhynia, remained in the hands of Poland until after World War II. As a result of the historical developments briefly described, we find a plethora of minorities in the region.

In the years after World War I and the revolutionary upheavals that followed it, the territory that after World War II is considered Ukrainian was part of four states. Bukovina, whose population at that time was two-fifths Ukrainian in total but two-thirds Ukrainian in its northern part, was annexed to Romania. Transcarpathia joined with the new democratic Czechoslovak Republic under the name Subcarpathian Ruthenia, where it enjoyed the freest development of any Ukrainian territory in the interwar period. Poland incorporated Galicia (less ethnically homogenous) and western Volhynia (more heavily Ukrainian), together with smaller adjacent areas in the northwest. The remaining territory east of the Polish border constituted Soviet Ukraine.

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The question of how to deal with the minorities that resulted from these border changes has long existed in the region. It was also one of the aims of the Paris Peace Treaties to cater to their needs; at the time, this was attempted through the principle of national self-determination and thus self-government. Due to the enormous ethnic complexity of the area, however, it was not always possible to draw clear lines of division between the individual ethnic groups.\(^3\)

All over, it can be said that Polish–Ukrainian relations are burdened by tragic incidences in the past. Already, between the wars, there had been numerous conflicts between the Ukrainians aiming for their own state and Polish officials.\(^4\) Also, during World War II (in 1942 and 1943), Ukrainian nationalists committed mass murder against the civilian population living in the eastern territories of Poland. In addition, armed fights took place between mutineers in the Ukrainian army and the Polish military from 1945 to 1947. The Jewish minority of around three million people, whose culture heavily influenced the border region, was almost effaced due to the evisceration policy.

After World War II, a permanent redrawing of Ukraine’s western frontiers took place. With the compensation of German territories in the west, Poland agreed to the cession of Volhynia and Galicia. The ensuing mutual population exchange—and the subsequent deportation of the remaining Ukrainian population by Poland to its new western territories—created for the first time in centuries an almost clear ethnic, as well as political, Polish–Ukrainian border (see below for the so-called ‘Operation Wisła’).

Today’s border between Poland and Ukraine has not developed historically nor has it been defined according to ethnic–national criteria.\(^5\) It was drawn at the river Bug after the war in 1945. However, it had already been foreseen as almost following the same line as the border between Poland and the Soviet Union at the Paris Peace Conference under the name of the Curzon line. The Curzon line was favoured because it was the best approach possible, equalling a demarcation line according to the minority situation. This meant that, despite a very intermingled and mixed population, the line would leave as few Poles in Ukraine and as few Ukrainians in Poland as possible. However, the line cuts through the historical region of Galicia. Galicia is—besides Transcarpathia—one of the two historical regions at the Polish–Ukrainian border. Geographically, the approximately 500km length of the border between Poland and Ukraine is dominated in the northern part by the river Bug. The southern part of the border region is dominated by the Carpathian mountain range, which separates Transcarpathia geographically from the main part of Ukraine. The two Euroregions in which crossborder cooperation is taking place are accordingly named ‘Euroregion Bug’ and ‘Carpathian Euroregion’.

