

Krystyna Dziubacka, Justyna Pilarska

Institute of Pedagogy, University of Wrocław, Poland

Borderlands of the Countryside. Dilemmas of the Quality of Life – Experience of the Polish Transformation

Abstract

This study is a reflection on the quality of life of the countryside dwellers in the Polish–German borderland. It has been assumed that the assessment made is conditioned by the consequences of changes within the functioning of the state borders. Based on the findings from the research conducted in 1993 and 2010, an analysis of the changes of social reality in the place of the countryside dwellers' residence was made, followed by an attempt to define determinants of the attitude of the countryside dwellers towards given social, economic and political aspects of the reality, as assessed and expressed by them.

Keywords: countryside, the quality of life, borderland, border, transformation, social research

Introduction

The problems which arose as a consequence of the transformation launched in 1989, as well as strategies typical for given environments to solve

them, constitute issues which – drawing on researchers' attention in the course of years – have become relatively well recognised. This fact favours the somewhat structured discussion over the matters of the quality of life of the countryside dwellers, subject to changes occurring within its specific areas. Pondering this topic, at the beginning we would like to stress that the way of perceiving and assessing the experienced problems, i.e. its scale, character and effects, does not result from the change itself, which, according to definitional assumptions, 'disturbs the founded, stable order, aborts the continuity, distorts the balance, and undermines habits and customs' (Sztompka 2000: 11), but as has been repeatedly proven, it predominantly comes from the fact that at the beginning of the transformation, Polish society displayed low quality of human capital, such as health condition, education, professional structure, financial situation, etc. (Giza-Poleszczuk et al. 2000: 46). Thus, Poles lacked competence in dealing with challenges of the new reality. It was reflected in the experienced fears and anxieties, weakening the ability to interpret their own situation and the situation of the country (state) appropriately. Subsequently, it undermined the long-nurtured beliefs, judgements and values (Ziemilski 1995: 20), antagonising the individuals and groups. This, in turn, affected the experienced quality of life. Still, although Poles dealt with numerous problems, they did not lack enthusiasm, as political changes that had been expected for decades entailed positive assessment of the general direction of the growth, and it prevailed over the negative perception, particularly during the initial phase (Zagórski 1999: 12).

As Pankowski proved (2005: 103), in 1991 over half of those polled expressed the belief that the processes taking place within the first year of the radical system transformations were beneficial, and only slightly more than a quarter of the questioned reported aggravation of their situation. Nationwide, fluctuation in moods, conditioned by given stages of the economic reconstruction and socio-political transformations (e.g. implementation of reforms), did not alter the general conviction of society concerning its positive character. Nevertheless, with reference to the domicile, the place of employment or the living conditions, enthusiasm was rarely manifested (Strzeszewski 2005). The latter was also scarcely signalled in the villages of the Polish–German borderland.

Own research conducted in 1993 in the areas of the borderland communes of Bogatynia and Zgorzelec (Lower Silesian Voivodeship) revealed

a lack of satisfaction with the living conditions (71.3%), accompanied by the tendency to perceive the past as better and safer than the present time (67.8%). A significantly lower level of satisfaction declared in given aspects, compared to the general Polish examinations, yet still in accordance with the overall feelings of the countryside (Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2009: 197)¹, revealed a unique specificity of the local factor that in the case of the analysed region was determined by its boundary location. Analysis of the influence of given stages of the transformation on the character of transformations of the borderland in consecutive years enabled examination of its repercussion for the quality of life of the countryside dwellers located in the Polish–German borderland of south-western Poland. This area encompasses the commune of Bogatynia (previously Reichenau), located south of Zgorzelec/Görlitz in Lower Silesian Voivodeship (Kondracki 1978; Strumff 1964)². Its borderland specificity (the tripoint of Poland, Czech Republic and Germany) as well as industrial character (former output and processing of brown coal) generated a local uniqueness of the transformative processes taking place within. At the same time, economic (resulting from the restructuring processes) as well as political (related to the altered function of the state borders) and social (i.e. shifts in values, norms and patterns linked to the democratisation of life) changes made it a rare field for the research on life quality, subject to the recalled factors. Consequently, the empirical material gathered in the course of 17 years (quasi-panel) provided a reliable ground for the attempt to indicate the direction and dynamics of changes in the time period defined by the influence of the transformation.³

¹ As Fedyszak-Radziejowska implied, the rural areas in response to the economic difficulties of the state took the role of the ‘absorber’, preserving not only the poverty but also hidden unemployment, i.e. hundreds of thousands of those ‘unnecessary’ in agriculture, for whom the job market gave no chance to leave farming.

² In the literature on the subject the area is known as “Worek Turoszowski”, “Worek Żytawski”, “Półwysep T” or “Tripoint”. These descriptions result from a specific shape of this territory, determined by the outline of the state borders. From the west, along the Nysa Łużycka river – according to the stipulations of the Potsdam Conference – there is the border with Germany. The border with the Czech Republic starts from the south part of the Porajów village and the former state crossing Żytawa (today Zittau), and then it curves down towards the east and runs towards the north in the shape of a “sack” or a “peninsula”. From the north the area is surrounded by the villages of the Zgorzelec commune.

³ The last stage of the field research took place in September 2010.

Borderland as a determinant of the quality of life – notional entanglement

For the purpose of the research, to which reference is made in the article, the category of “quality of life” was determined as a subjective assessment of the degree of the fulfilment of needs resulting both from existential aspirations of the individual as well as from determinants shaping the character of the surrounding objective, socio-economic and spatial (material) reality. Such a manner of its operationalisation required taking into account the system of values of the countryside dwellers of the Polish–German borderland. Amongst such values, next to those associated with family, health or access to the labour market and material goods, peace and safety were at the forefront, essentially conditioned by the location of the area.

As far as operationalisation of the notion that ‘quality of life’ does not cause considerable problems, defining precisely the idea of the ‘borderland’ within a theoretical framework is not that feasible. The universality of applying this notional category, as well as the universalism and commonness assigned to it, extend beyond the area acknowledged in the social sciences as the ‘territory’, which, as a consequence, entails the number of definitional dilemmas. Moreover, upon the attempt to specifically define ‘borderland’, the problem of semantic nature emerges, resulting from the fact of perceiving such an area as a form of location outside the centre⁴, encompassing marginalisation, provinceness or ‘an area of deficit’; thus, each expression involves a hidden depreciation of the place, not to say the persons within (Robotycki 2007: 12). At the same time, within explicit determination of the connection between the borderland and evaluations of the quality of life of the countryside dwellers (borderland in the concept of centre *versus* outskirts), the borderland area itself generates some substantial issues. For the purpose of this analysis, we would like to define the category of a ‘borderland’ as conceptualised territorially and politically, specifying it as an area laid on national or regional edges (Bukowska-Floreńska 1994: 165), that is, between centres, i.e. ‘between this what exists within the borders and overlaps, hence can belong to both centres. [...] upon

⁴ In accordance with the concepts of the ‘borderland’, the peripheral location constitutes its immanent feature.

leaving the centre which is most often stiff and closed, we enter the area of diversity, the otherness and dissimilarity' (Nikitorowicz 1995: 11). Thus, it is predominantly the area which 'constitutes the subject of influences and the mutual permeation of cultural phenomena of the two neighbouring nations (states) in conditions of the precedence, inferiority or equality, yet without destroying the bond with own national area' (Wrzesiński 1980: 12). In such perception, the borderland is understood as the realm of social facts related to two competitive cultural patterns. As a result of their collision, the process of creating new, different values takes place. The *sine qua non* condition of developing borderlands is the existence of a border which defines and outlines its territorial (geographical) reach, providing an element of the cultural landscape and exerting influence on the economic reality of the area within (Ciok 1990: 7). The functions of the borderland determine the character of occurring interactions, at the same time shaping the specificity of the mentality and mindset of its inhabitants (Misiak 2000: 309).

Each political border generates – to a smaller or larger degree – a barrier, limiting the flow of people, goods, money, etc. The scale to which it functions as such an obstacle depends predominantly on the international situation, mutual relations between the neighbouring countries, and changes in their political, ideological or economic situation. The function of the border, reflecting the differences and socio-political resemblances among the divided societies, determines the widely comprehended living conditions, including the sense of security. In the Polish reality of the pre-transformative period, the western border of Poland served as an example of a totally excluding barrier (particularly shortly after the Second World War), or at least considerably limiting contact between communities on both sides. The process of liberalisation of some of the provisions after 1989 facilitated the development of cultural, social and economic relations, previously absent from this area. This is when the direct contact came into existence among communities inhabiting the borderland (Kurcz 1997: 23). Although these changes were perceived positively, they also generated some new problems. The latter, as manifested on both sides of the border (the new Polish–German border became one with a country belonging to the European Community), threw light on the functioning of local communities on both sides of the borderland dealing with the new reality. The reported conflicts resulted both from experiencing the repercussions of the economic crisis and from

the growing crisis of social identity, which in the context of the integrative processes was of paramount importance, as it disclosed the lack of tolerance and acceptance for the foreigners (Salzman 1991; John 1993).

Areas of confrontation with the 'new'

Although changes within the functioning of the borderland initiated with transformation and further changes within the state borders (in 2004 and 2007) were perceived as beneficial (Fic and Fic 1997: 55-68; Misiak 1997: 124), as for the area of the explored villages of the Polish-German borderland, the level of declared satisfaction of their residents in this regard was significantly limited. While in the borderland cities such as Gubin and Słubice the fact of the opening of state borders was welcomed with great enthusiasm (87.3%) (Lisiecki 1995), countryside dwellers of the analysed communes were more reserved in their evaluations. The percentage ratio of those accepting the changes reached 24.8%, compared to 40.8% definitely dissatisfied and 34.4% of those manifesting ambivalent attitudes. Such distribution of results originated from a number of various, complex and, at times, contradictory experiences. In terms of the newly emerging economic opportunities, the advantages of the area embraced: an increased number of border checkpoints, increased value of the empty warehouses, including properties suitable for commercial services (storage capacities that used to belong to the state collective farms), possibilities of launching own business activity within services as a response to the intensified transborder and touristic mobility, or chances to 'catch up on some odd jobs' abroad, as the offer and specificity of the locally developing labour market under the new circumstances provided the opportunity to gain basic or additional sources of revenue. The resourcefulness revealed by the countryside dwellers of the borderland and their ingeniousness in this regard ('well, you can always exchange this and other', 'business is going well', 'I pick blueberries and mushrooms and I sell them to Germans') could give birth to the belief that diversification, as encouraged by the authorities, had already become a fact. Nonetheless, in the perception of the examined at that time, changes in the borderland generated predominantly adverse effects for the quality of their life. The rise in the pathology of social life was being underlined (involving the processes of smuggling, drug addiction, prostitution, drunkenness,

assaults and robberies), including organised crime and general deterioration of the living conditions in the area, followed by the disturbed sense of security and peace. Markets and bazaars that emerged along the entire Polish–German border were one of the reasons for the infringement of the ‘eco-friendly framework of everyday life by interferences in functioning of the municipal services increasing the probability of road accidents, or notoriously exceeding of norms of noise and air pollution’ (Kurcz 1993: 59–89). Those markets frequently provided a source of income for a considerable number of residents of the border areas, yet, on the other hand, they accumulated numerous problems. For instance, they became a material reflection of some morally and legally dubious indicators of life success (Gołdyka, Lisowski 2002: 99). The character of the relations and life patterns of the representatives of given groups of interest taking place in such marketplaces were difficult to accept by, in many ways, a traditional countryside environment. A lack of infrastructure which would meet the needs of the intensified migration flow often forced the tradesmen arriving from different parts of Poland and the world to live in hard or primitive conditions, often in the marketplaces with poor washing facilities, no access to running water, or a garbage dump. Therefore, the aesthetics, sense of security, and so-called ‘decencies’ of the local villages were affected, as they became landfill sites, old car parks or dumping sites (e.g. for Trabants transported from Germany and abandoned by the roads), storage areas, or hidey-holes for goods of often quite illegible origins. The presence of foreigners (mainly from Eastern Europe and farther) constituted another problem, as they tried to cross the Polish–German border illegally. Becoming the victims of the dishonesty and ruthlessness of those promising them the help of ‘carriers’, cheated and deprived of all livelihood, they were frequently stranded in private properties, whereas their desperation gave rise to behaviours assessed by the countryside community as pathology or deviation (thefts, prostitution), strengthening the feeling of a threat and disinclination towards them. Problems emerging with the framework, and as a consequence of opening the state borders, were not limited to such phenomena, as the lack of satisfaction with the direction of changes taking place also resulted from the alleged ‘uncontrolled presence of Germans’⁵ on the Polish side of the border.

⁵ Quotation from an interview from 1993.

Fear and hostility towards the western neighbours revealed in the research reflect the phenomena of existing stereotypes, xenophobia, and particular beliefs that the Germans 'now will for sure do all to regain their land'. In order to understand the moods displayed during the research, we shall refer both to the history and personal experiences of the residents on both sides of the Polish–German border (Koćwin 1993: 27) and to the power of the communist propaganda sanctioning the policy of the closed borders. Sense of a threat, linked to the potential territorial claims of the western neighbour, strengthened by the rhetoric of the former system and empowered in the process of socialisation, favoured public approval for establishing a totally excluding function of the border (particularly in the first period), or maximally limiting contact between communities on both sides. Sense of peace and safety gained in such a way bore the costs of a year-long marginalisation and isolation. Disinclination towards the Germans not only was verbal, but also was manifested in a defined approach to the so-called 'formerly German property'. In the explored area, its devastation – especially in the first years of the resettlements within the so-called Regained Territories – resulted both from the incompetence to manage more technologically advanced households and from the hostility directed at everything defined as 'formerly German'. The lack of a sense of identification with the place of residence did not favour the protection of the cultural heritage of this region either, perceived for decades as strange and empowered by the strong conviction that 'they will be back here soon'⁶. Such attitudes, unchanged for years, were displayed through reluctance towards Euro-regionalisation of the European Union, as disclosed in the research from 1993. Nonetheless, in this regard the respondents from the researched region did not notably stand out from the ones inhabiting other rural areas of Poland (Pankowski 2002: 37–59). As Sakson implies, defining the residents of the borderland in general, the fear of Europe as such was predominantly manifested as 'a fear against the Germans and their potential repurchase of Poland' (Sakson 2004: 34).

Problems generated as a consequence of the accomplishment of the first phase of transformation did not provide support in the borderland for the beneficial valuation of this area as a place in which to live, or for the sense of satisfaction from the quality of life. The distinct improvement in assessment

⁶ Excerpt from an interview from 1993.

in both of these areas was registered within the framework of research from 2010.

Borderland in the post-transformative reality

Changes taking place at given stages of the transformation contributed to the process of balancing social relations in the borderland. As revealed in the research from 2010, a distinct increase in the level of approval for liquidations of the formal borders (including the one with Germans – 84.7%) provides one of the positive examples of such change. This noticeable shift in attitudes, however, does not imply that all of the residents of the area recognised and acknowledged without reservations the new chapter in the history of the Polish–German relationships. It does not, additionally, imply that the problems resulting from the specificity of living in the borderland ceased to exist. For instance, according to some of the respondents (4.6%), liquidation of the previously tight and protected borders was rather an ‘abnormal’ and ‘dangerous’ act, and proved to be one of the contemporarily essential problems of the borderland. As for the questions related to other areas of life in the countryside in the borderland, we shall point to the fact that neither their character (compared to findings from 1993) changed, nor the course of the cause altered, i.e. the dominant boundary nature of the region. Thus, the ‘open border’ was to blame for organised crime, smuggling and drug addiction, prostitution and alcoholism, allegedly favoured by the ‘easy access and freedom of transporting cheaper alcohol from the Czech Republic’⁷.

The borderland was also to be charged with generating unemployment on the Polish side of the border, entailing a decrease in the competitiveness and popularity of the local marketplaces, involving demand for defined products which once were perceived by Germans as attractive (‘dwarfs are no longer in vogue; they are fed up with it’). It is one of the reasons why, according to the researched, some residents of the area abuse alcohol (‘they are drinking because of feeling down, and I know it because when the neighbour lost the job, he started heavy drinking, but before that it was rather moderate’), or behave in a way unacceptable by the local community

⁷ Excerpt from an interview from 2010.

(‘I don’t know about prostitution, but as for the stealing issues, I think they do it because they are hungry’). According to the respondents, proximity of the border still concentrates and generates negative phenomena, whereas culturally unfamiliar behaviours appearing within the countryside seem to lower the sense of security in the domicile (16.4%). Such a stand is opposed by 38.4% of respondents, for whom the immediate vicinity of the border has not only implied the rise in the security level (maintained by the Polish–German services having tightly cooperated with each other), but also provided opportunities to become inspired by the lifestyle patterns that became a point of reference for own behaviours and aspirations (‘I would like to live the way Germans do’).

Although it is explicit that the attitude towards the western neighbour become slightly more positive, including mutual relations of the inhabitants on both sides of the borderland, as for the countryside of the region, the tendency to perceive the vicinity of the border in the context of the stereotyped threats remained unchanged. It is thought-provoking that such a tendency is not correlated with features of the social status of the examined, such as gender, age, and level of education. The correlation occurs, however, with reference to such factors as the place of residence. It has been reported that the residents of the directly neighbouring borderland towns (e.g. Sieniawka, Kopaczów, Porajów) do not build the image of the reality threatened by the ‘otherness’, though dealing with the relations with ‘others’ due to the proximity of the border existing in there. Strikingly, this image is shaped by those who inhabit more distant villages (often of an agricultural character), unexposed to such contact (Hess, Leoński 2001: 197)⁸. It favours the conviction that still, in many cases, the foundation of the declared judgements lies in the stereotypes and prejudice.

The manner of valuing the region, with its borderland specificity, as a place ‘good to live in’ provides one of the examples of favourable changes recorded in the course of the years (10.8% in 1993, up to 63.2% in 2010). The most frequently recalled attributes encompass the labour market (36.5%), in which attractiveness concerns not only the local industry, but

⁸ According to the recalled authors, this image is still, to some degree, coherent with the observation pointing to the fact that given attitudes and beliefs concerning Germans are shaped by such determinants as age, education or place of residence, implying that more positive and realistic attitudes are expressed by those living in close proximity of the borders.

also the opening-up of space for individual economic initiatives strengthened by the already positive assessed transborderness of the area. Highly assessed social infrastructure (26.4%) strengthens the effectiveness of the individually undertaken activities and cooperation. Its allocation within the region, combined with the availability on the German and Czech side accompanied by the relatively low distances, assures efficient accomplishment of arrangements and other matters.

According to the statements of the countryside dwellers (21.7%), the advantage of the area as well as its potential touristic attractiveness is reflected in the unique local cultural heritage. The Sorbian architecture and other monuments of the history of this region, although neglected or even devastated for years, set such examples. Making reference to this element is of particular importance, not only in the context of the possibilities to implement demands of the multifunctional development of rural areas and taking into account the development of rural tourism, but also predominantly due to the fact that it is becoming an indicator of the identification of the residents with the area, as a place of 'theirs'. Changes in attitudes and an increase in the awareness of the residents of the explored villages of the Polish–German borderland constitute a sign of the times, initiating the encounter of the former (pre-war) hosts of this land with those presently residing there, also in the context of the latter's attitude towards the pre-war places of memory. They positively contrast with the negative approach of the new residents that arrived there after the Second World War, who were sceptical towards everything recognised as 'German'. Some cases worth recalling concern the caretaking of the cemetery of the First World War soldiers (and former dwellers of this land), i.e. a place moved from the liquidated Rybarzowice village to the village of Kopaczów, renovation of the material heritage monuments of this area, or registering other places of memory from before 1939. Interestingly, these places and locations are no longer perceived as strange, or 'other' (post-German), but are recognised as the elements of the native cultural landscape, something owed to the local institutions and organisations cooperating on both sides of the border.

The above-mentioned matters merely indicate some wider changes occurring over the years within the area of the social life of the borderland, generated by changes in the function of the border. Yet, their analysis allows drawing a conclusion not only that the way of perceiving the border and its role has changed, but also that the mutual relations and attitudes of the

dwellers on both sides have altered. The 'former enemy' became a neighbour with whom the respondents are linked not only by business matters or cooperation of the local organisations acting on both sides, but also more and more frequently by private relations and mutual assistance ('well, does it matter after all if the neighbour is Czech? By me, even Germans are fine as long as they act as good neighbours⁹'). The reported changes not only support the positive perception of the living conditions in the villages of the borderland area, but also allow perceiving such a place as one in which it is good to live (77.6%), influencing the change in moods, and reflected in the assessment of the quality of life.

Quality of life of the countryside dwellers in the borderland – conclusions

In its assumption, the review of examinations carried out in the course of years in rural areas of the Polish–German borderland was to reveal the character of changes within the living conditions subject to the alteration of the state border functions, at the same time capturing its significance for the declared evaluations of the quality of life. Analyses of the empirical material allowed confirming the growth in satisfaction both from the living conditions shaped by subsequent processes (stages) of Polish transformation, and from its quality. While in the research from 1993 the number who were satisfied and highly appraising the quality of their own life reached 21.6%, the research from 2010 reported a rise in this percentage to 52.1%. The proportion of negative evaluations also reversed: from 67.8% in 1993 to 23.8% in 2010. Comparing the data with the results of investigations carried out by other researchers in a similar manner, i.e. taking into account temporally corresponding periods, it is evident that, although the direction of changes is coherent (a gradual increase in moods), residents of the explored villages still have not reached the level of satisfaction equal to the other groups of examined Poles (Koralewicz, Zagórski 2009: 17; Ziółkowski 2006: 170). It is rather intricate to explicitly determine the cause of the displayed differences; however, it can be assumed that the divergence can originate from a diverse way of conceptualising the reality shaped, on one hand, by

⁹ Excerpt from an interview from 2010.

the specificity of the domicile and, on the other hand, by the culture of the countryside circles and their lower susceptibility to changes (i.e. less accepted and implemented with smaller enthusiasm, yet with greater carefulness). It is particularly palpable in the borderland where, as a consequence of the changes extorted by confrontation of 'the conventional' with new phenomena, the habits and customs (within family life, work life, and social relations) determined by the rural lifestyle are becoming subject to review, similar to the negative stereotypes shaped and strengthened by the years of living in social, political and cultural isolation of the borderland. The character of occurring changes not only questions the values of the rural lifestyle, which is traditional in many ways, but also forces one to inspect the acquired and strengthened upon socialisation schemes of functioning, instilled beliefs, and 'old truths', particularly the ones concerning the Germans. As a consequence of the occurring transformational changes, accompanied by the liquidation of formal borders transforming the current image of the Polish-German borderland, the countryside has also become subject to economic revival, encompassing new places of employment, new patterns of behaviour, new attitudes, and strategies for solving individual and local problems. These phenomena are followed by the increased level of aspiration shaped by new patterns of culture and, above all, by tolerance towards this, which used to be perceived as strange and hostile.

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