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## RECREATING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY — THE PROCESS OF RECONSTRUCTING POLISH-SLOVAK CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS AFTER 1989: THE CASE OF THE VILLAGES OF SROMOWCE NIŻNE AND ČERVENÝ KLÁŠTOR

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the article is to show the process of reconstructing institutional, and grass-roots, cross-border relations in the Pieniny area of the borderland between Poland and Slovakia after 1989. By virtue of a decision issued in 1920 by the Council of Ambassadors, an international border between Poland and Czechoslovakia was established. For over a hundred years the permeability of the border was regulated by political decisions and diplomatic relations between both countries. The border marked by the Dunajec River divided the community of Pieniny highlanders, creating a barrier which, in some periods, was completely impassable. The article is based on field research conducted in two villages called Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor. The research was supplemented with a review of legacy data as well as one of institutional sources which documented the process of establishing formal cooperation between Poland and Slovakia at a local level (as part of Euroregion as well as The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation TATRY). An analysis of the empirical material proved that the key moment that initiated the restoration of cross-border relations in the researched area of the Pieniny borderland after 1989 was the signing of the Declaration of the Territorial Self-Governments of the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic regarding the creation of the "Tatry" Region on 31 October 1993, and finally the signing of an Agreement between Polish and Slovak self-governments on establishing a cross-border association for the "Tatry" Euroregion at a Founding Congress in Nowy Targ on 26 August 1994. The culminating point of the Polish-Slovak rapprochement at the local level was the opening of a footbridge on the Dunajec River (12 August 2006), connecting the villages of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor, which enabled the reunification of both communities and the reconstruction of mature, neighbourly cross-border relations somewhat in isolation from the issue of the location of the actual border. One hundred years of Polish-Slovak cross-border relations can be pithily summed up in the following words: "a little bit of smuggling, a lot of poverty, but little politics".*

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**Keywords:** Polish-Slovak border, Political relations, Cross-border community, Local identity.

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary history of Europe is a history of creation, recreation and above all — crossing state borders, constituting a "paradigmatic case of borders", ones institutionalised and legally sanctioned, which are a "physical barrier, established in the mind but also a cultural idea reflected in space" (Lubaś 2013: 25). Building order in our life-world and organising it according to various accepted categories is one of the basic strategies for ensuring the functioning of the social order. As Georg Simmel wrote "A human being is [...] a creature who needs boundaries and crosses them all the time" (Simmel 2006: 254).

The term "border" itself contains a certain ambiguity when it comes to interpretation, something which Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár drew attention to in an article published in 2002. The authors introduced a basic differentiation between "social borders," seen as actual divisions of the social reality, and "symbolic borders," defined as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Molnár, Lamont 2002: 168). Via this approach, symbolic borders may constitute a justification and legitimacy of the existence of social boundaries, having real consequences for community members.

Similarly, Anthony Cohen argues that borders "are spheres of reflection: about who someone is; about who others are" (Cohen 1994: 74) and which build upgraded meaning planes. Such boundaries are therefore elements that help make up a community, because "by definition, the boundary determines the beginning and end of the community. [...] The boundary includes the identity of the communities as well as the identity of the individuals, and is brought into existence by the requirements of social interaction. The borders are determined because communities interact, in one way or another, with the whole from which they are, or want to be, separated" (Cohen 2013: 192-215).

It brings us closer to the discussion on the designation of the word "border" that is present in contemporary reflection on social boundaries. Two different views are clearly visible here - one sees the "border" in noun form as a static image, a stable outcome of demarcation practices and the division of a community according to the adopted criteria (Buchowski 2004), the other - focuses attention on the process, using a "verb" approach reflecting the processual nature of borders and their fluctuating course (Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer 2005).

Another, complementary theoretical debate on social boundaries arise taking into consideration the character of the border itself - Ed Williams and Martin van der Velde emphasize its duality – on the one hand, borders – especially in the European politics - are used as an instrument to reach some political and economical goals, on the other though – they may be a final goal themselves. The third, most possible variant considers them to be - on the one hand a tool, and on the other hand - an effect of the process of separating selected social groups (Williams, Van der Velde 2005).

They are also not to be overestimated "the influences which state borders and historical changes to these borders have on the everyday lives of people living near a border, those living on two sides of an international border, or those simply making a living from frequently crossing such borders" (Lubaś 2013: 111). In the case of communities residing in the immediate vicinity of an international border, one can observe a unique phenomenon — the situation of a borderland, characterised by "emerging new values, attitudes and behaviours that cannot be reduced to those one might find in ethnically homogeneous environments" (Róg 2009: 42). Donnan and Wilson write bluntly, "some things can happen only at borders" (Donnan, Wilson 2007: 13).

Being an inherent part of the history of Europe, the changeability of the location of social boundaries strongly affects the symbolic dimension of divisions, as well as the need to narratively adapt to their presence when interpreting history (Delanty 2006, 2017). One tool for this "adaptation" is a so-called "symbolic policy" that emphasises the importance of the elite in shaping local discourses. As Murray Edelman argues, the key role in shaping the interpretation of historical events and constructing local narratives is played by politicians who, by employing a cognitive and emotional communication layer, give symbols a meaning consistent with the political interests of the groups represented (after Kaufmann 2001: 15-47). Symbolic boundaries are therefore created by charismatic individuals who impose their vision of the world on all members of the community, and what sustains and strengthens social boundaries in an international cross-border area (also called a *boundary*) are not only ritual forms and behaviours practised by the entire community, but above all imaginary constructs, internalised divisions, the social consequences of which are visible in the daily relations of community members (Eder 2006, Scott 2012, Paasi 2011, 1996, Strüver 2004).

Rituals and narratives that build boundaries between communities also play an important role in the daily "flagging" of the homeland (Billig 2008) in borderland areas and in recreating social divisions. Mary Douglas writes about the classifications that create the local social order ("order-producing"), ones that are meaning-making and form-giving to social life (Douglas 2007: 77-80). Importantly, regardless of the specificity and determinants of group identity, so-called socially effective differences (i.e. distinctions significant from the point of view of a given community and seen in real social relations) underpin the divisions that form within local communities (Barth 2004). That is why borders and their social effects are most clearly visible in the activity of cross-border communities, which in their everyday functioning in the face of and through boundaries - embody the social effectiveness of the defined divisions.

Contemporary Europe, with its complex history of changing borders and their social effectiveness, should be – therefore - understood as an area in which “the nature of borders is in a process of fundamental change. The concept of 'border' is in a process of functional differentiation, which means that economic, social, legal, political and identity spaces are increasingly bounded separately” (Christiansen, Jørgensen 2000: 62). Thus, it can be said that defining national borders in Europe is a constant, ongoing process of a "daily plebiscite" character, the results of which are confirmed not only in activities at the international level, but above all - in real activities at the level of micro local communities.

“Borders and the regular crossing of borders, have become part of our routine experience, particularly in Europe where borders proliferate (between an increasing number of EU member states and non-member countries, or within countries as sub-national and city regions assert their EU-sponsored autonomy and assert a new spatial existence) but where the importance of individual borders is in many cases very much reduced” (Rumford 2006: 156).

Due to the processes of European integration - the effectiveness of interstate borders in Europe, perceived as limitations in transport or international trade, has significantly decreased. This does not mean, however, that boundaries as such have lost significant - their effects are still felt at both the individual and group levels. Furthermore, the partial transformation of the meaning of national boundaries within the European community also contributed to the creation or strengthening of borders of a different, non-political nature, including ethnic and cultural borders.

One of the most accurate theories that allow us to understand the specificity and multifaceted nature of today's border divisions within the European community is the concept of phantom borders, which are neither constant and immutable solid structures, nor – purely constructivist, liquid phenomena. As the authors argue, the contemporary phantom borders are an effect of interaction of three related areas, which are: 1) imagined in mental maps and narrations, 2) objectified and subjectified actors, and 3) contextualized daily practices (Hirschhausen, Grandits, Kraft, Müller, Serrier 2019). The authors argue, that only the combination of these three aspects brings to life a socially effective border, the meaning of which is not only symbolic, narrative, but also observed in the geographical and interactive space.

The frequent changes in the course of European borders lead also to arising one more challenge area, related to the stability of the national identity shaped in these conditions. One of the key questions is what place (if any) will the new, emerging European identity take in the consciousness of individuals and society? Can it constitute a kind of alternative to national, local identities, or maybe it will be shaped on a different, supranational level? In other words, what kind of Europe - national, non-national, or perhaps supra-national, will be formed in the course of contemporary border-drawing processes? Gerard Delanty argues, that “the logic of Europeanization has tended towards the Europeanization of national identities rather than the demise of national identity” (Delanty 2007). Therefore, we should not look for a European level of identification now, constituted beyond the particular national identities, but rather observe the mixed, hybrid, national identities, which have been transformed within the process of Europeanization (Delanty 2007).

And this is the dynamic of building a local community in the unique situation of borderland, emerging from the process of reconstructing state, national and ethnic borders in the Pieniny section of the Polish-Slovak borderland, that this article is devoted to. Using the example of the local community (Sromowce Niżne - Červený Kláštor), I will try to show how activities carried out by political actors at the international level resonate at the level of everyday cross-border interactions, i.e. micro-relations between neighbours, anchored in negotiated historical interpretations, everyday good neighbourly practices and a common identity axis. The last question is, how are socially effective boundaries shaped in the local community functioning across the state border and how the cross-border community is shaped?

## 2. Local context

This article discusses the case of the Polish-Slovak borderland, which can be described as "old" (Babiński 2014), "transitional" (Chlebowczyk 1975) and "symmetrical" (Babiński 2014, Sakson 1990). In this area, the interpenetration of cultural and social systems is clearly visible, while maintaining the legal and political separateness of both communities. The last four decades (which have brought a noticeable intensification of relations in the researched borderland area, and above all a strengthening of Polish-Slovak collaboration — including collaboration as part of the "Tatry" Euroregion Association)), have led to the development of a cross-border community, one in which the distance between Poles and Slovaks is becoming blurred, creating a platform for a community of experiences and everyday practices. Due to the cultural proximity, interactions in the border area are natural and create the impression of a cross-border community that escapes a simple national division. Interestingly, this cross-border nature of the community is also reflected in identity issues; the inhabitants of the region in question avoid unambiguous declarations of nationality, identifying themselves generally as "local" or "from here", which is indicative of their origin being one of the six Pieniny villages. On the Polish side these are Sromowce Niżne, Sromowce Średnie and Sromowce Wyżne, and on the Slovakian side they are Červený Kláštor, Nižné Šváby and Majere. A similar phenomenon is also observed in other borderlands and is a manifestation of "a kind of life wisdom, in times of political turmoil and threats of persecution" (Plit 2008: 10).

Apart from this cultural balance, political and economic differences are observable in the Polish-Slovak borderland, although they do not determine relations in the local community of Pieniny highlanders, which can undoubtedly be described as "symmetrical" as no single country dominates. Although in recent years the standard of living in Slovakia has clearly deteriorated and Poland has become a more economically attractive country, this did not affect the symmetry of Polish-Slovak relations at the level of micro-relations between neighbours in the researched territory.

In order to explore the shape and importance of divisions in the borderland community, it seems necessary to analyse their social memory, which is considered to be "a set of ideas about the past existing in a community, as well as all people and events from this past, the knowledge

of whose existence is considered obligatory and which are commemorated in various ways, and, finally, various forms of this commemoration” (Szacka 1985: 68). Importantly, the choice of which people and events are perceived as significant by a given community may be subjective and different from the narrative adopted in common discourse. Thanks to this, analysing oral (social) history allows us to capture the perspective of the actors and marginalised groups who actually shape the history of local people, despite the fact that they do not participate in creating great historical narratives. And it is based on such an analysis of history, i.e. spoken and being told to this day, that the analysis presented in this article was carried out.

The community living in the villages of Sromowce Niżne (on the Polish side) and Červený Kláštor (on the Slovak side) is an example of a community functioning at the intersection of arbitrarily designated administrative borders and social boundaries created bottom-up, reflecting the actual distinctions within the community of highlanders from the Dunajec River area. The demarcation line imposing the top-down dichotomous division is the international border drawn in 1918 and finally confirmed, after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, between the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic. However, this division does not coincide with the location of ethnic boundaries which cross the political borders as well as the real divisions that constitute Polish-Slovak international relations at the local level.

## **2.1. Methodological note**

The article bases on a part of a research material collected during a sociographic research conducted in the Polish-Slovak borderland in 2013-2016, and updated and revised in 2021 based on a review of the literature on the subject. The entire research material covered various topics related to the local identity of the inhabitants of the cross-border Pieniny area, as well as the local history and culture of the Polish-Slovakian highlanders. One of the intriguing threads, however, turned out to be the issue of building and recreating the local border in the context of the processes of European integration and bringing countries and nations closer together within international structures, and this is what this article is devoted to.

In the course of the conducted study, extensive analytical material was collected, consisting of an analysis of documents and historical sources (i.e. institutional data), a review of

current press and information materials (i.e. 'non-institutional' data), and an in-depth analysis of a selected data corpus (collected in the course of an in-depth monographic study in the villages of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor, involving 140 individual in-depth interviews with inhabitants of the villages of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor). Only a part of the collected material found its direct application in the topic addressed in this paper, although thanks to such an extensive data corpus it was possible to take a comprehensive, contextual approach to the topic discussed.

The field research was carried out according to the established theory paradigm and following a procedure proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, and the theoretical model was built using four basic analytical steps (Glaser and Strauss: 2009): 1. Comparing the events applying to each generated category; 2. Integrating categories and their properties; 3. Establishing the boundaries of the theory; and finally 4. Writing the theory, although by maintaining an awareness of the limitations resulting from the adopted research methods it is possible to construct a so-called "mid-range theory", which does not aspire to be a "great theoretical edifice" of a universal character (Merton: 2002).

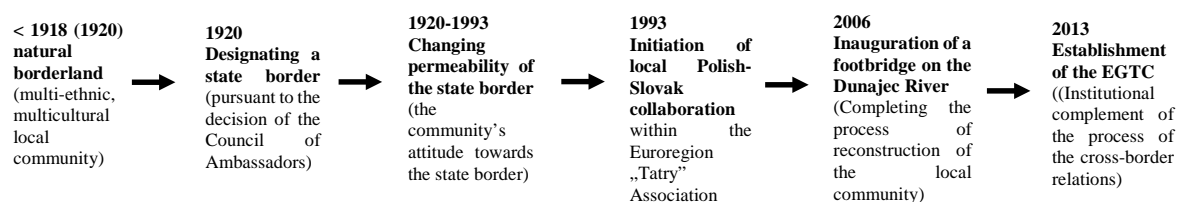
And although the conclusions drawn from the conducted research cannot constitute a universal theory, they can be successfully used in order to better understand the experiences of other borderland communities, whose fate has inevitably been bound up with the international border and its changing location. A similar intuition has been expressed by Piotr Sztompka, writing about a so-called "real model", which is "any such community that is subjected to empirical research not so much to obtain knowledge about itself, but rather to indirectly get to know another community" (Sztompka 1968: 48). In this sense, the studied local community of the Polish-Slovak borderland can be examined via the prism of a real natural model, and the research conducted in its vicinity can be treated as a study "conducted not for purely diagnostic purposes, but in order to obtain information about wider social systems within which local communities function" (Sztompka 1968: 48).

### **3. Reconstruction of Polish-Slovak border relations from a historical perspective — an attempt at a synthesis**



The historical process of constructing and, after the democratic breakthrough in 1989, of re-constructing Polish-Slovak borderland relations in the area under study can be presented in a diagram which has been simplified to a certain extent (see Diagram 1). Diagram 1 highlights key periods in the history of the studied area of the Polish-Slovak borderland, ones significant from the point of view of recreating the cross-border community and cross-border relations in the last century of Polish-Slovak relationships.

**Diagram 1. Reconstruction of Polish-Slovak border relations in a historical perspective**



Source: own work

### 3.1. A natural local community

From the perspective of the discussed historical process and the creation of foundations for the cross-border Polish-Slovak community, the key moment would seem to be the establishment of official relations at the international level and the establishment of the Polish-Czechoslovak administrative border in 1920. Before the nation state-based (national) border on the Dunajec River was drawn, relations between the inhabitants of Sromowce and their neighbours across the river were a daily occurrence. The area of today's Polish-Slovak borderland was somewhat of a natural borderland, where Polish, Slovak, Hungarian and German influences intertwined, as did (from a cultural perspective) Pieniny and Spiš influences too (Spiš being a region that lies mainly in northern Slovakia). This mixture brought to life a multi-ethnic,

multicultural community, one which used a language that was a blend of both the Polish and Slovak Pieniny dialects with various German, Hungarian and Ukrainian influences.

Since the areas of today's Polish-Slovak borderland were settled, the proximity of the river and thus access to a convenient transport route have enabled the surrounding towns to develop quickly both economically and socially. Both villages on the Dunajec River (Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor) have made the most of the benefits of the Dunajec for many centuries, functioning as one community, divided by a crossable geographic barrier. The beginning of the 20th century, however, brought a clear division of the community according to national identity, something which meant that after the end of World War I, new, previously non-existent states of a national nature appeared on the map of Europe. Among them were the independent Republic of Poland, revived after 123 years of partitions, and the Czechoslovak (or Czecho-Slovak) state, the existence of which was proclaimed on 28 October 1918, when formal hostilities had yet to finish.

### **3.2. The beginning of official Polish-(Czecho)Slovak relations**

The location of international borders in post-war Europe was set by the Treaty of Versailles, signed in June 1919 by the Entente Powers, Germany, and other allied and associated countries. Detailed Polish-Czechoslovak issues were settled a few months later, under the treaty signed in Saint-Germain-en-Laye near Paris. It was decided at that time that, after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, a new state would be created from a proportion of its lands, i.e. Upper Hungary, Moravia, Czech Silesia, Bohemia and Transcarpathian Ruthenia — Czechoslovakia (the so-called First Czechoslovak Republic). The architect of the union, Tomasz Masaryk (affectionately dubbed "Tatíček" by the Slovaks), became president. This decision, had above all vivid formal consequences as it created - for the first time in the contemporary history - two separate nation states, and divided the inhabitants of the Dunajec highlander community into two separate national societies.

The demarcation of new borders in Europe was associated with a great deal of dissatisfaction on both sides of the divisions. The tense relations, related especially to critical border areas, incl. Cieszyn (in Zaolzie), Spiš and Orava, took sometimes the form of open armed

conflicts (Jesenský 2014) and made it practically impossible to cross the border on the Dunajec River from the beginning of the 1920s. "When in 1920 the international border was established on the Dunajec, the world closed for the Sromovians" (Baszak 2005: 24). And although cross-border contacts were not formally banned, attempts to get to the other side of the river were restricted by procedures that accompany the crossing of a border. From the point of view of everyday practices between neighbours, the usual relations between the inhabitants of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor became extremely difficult, but thanks to the commitment of the communities of both villages they were not completely severed. "Despite the new, official, disadvantageous situation, family ties were maintained. The Dunajec River was still treated by the local people as an element connecting both communities" (Baszak 2005: 24).

### **3.3 Local cooperation in the shadow of World War II**

On 14 March 1939, the First Slovak Republic was established, referred to as a "puppet state", a "satellite" of the Third Reich (although it was formally an independent state). Due to the close collaboration of Jozef Tiso - the leader of the First Slovak Republic - with the near surrounding of Adolf Hitler, Slovak troops, allied with the troops of the Third Reich, participated in the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. The Nazi army crossed the Dunajec River on horses with weapons attached to their harnesses. The infantry crossed the river on pontoons at the level of today's Červený Kláštor. Only a few shots were fired in Sromowce, and luckily there were no deaths among Poles. Although older residents mention two Germans killed at the hands of Poles (who then went into hiding for a long time), this information has never been confirmed in any historical sources.

Due to tense relations at the state level, trade with Slovakia was strictly forbidden, and moreover, the area's inhabitants were obliged to hand over a monthly quota of cattle and food to the German occupier. The oldest inhabitants of the village remember these times as a period of terrible hunger, and at the same time of enormous interpersonal solidarity that allowed them to survive this hard time. The food supply difficulties were accompanied by a flourishing of the grey economy and widespread smuggling (especially popular among young and physically fit people), which "by definition [...] depends on the existence of a border and what the state defines

as things that can be legally imported or exported" (Donnan, Wilson 2007: 138-139). "Smuggling and borders," the authors write, "are to some extent defined by each other" (Donnan, Wilson 2007: 138). Virtually everything that was in demand among Slovaks was smuggled in, mainly nails, salt, caustic soda, feathers, and tobacco leaves. Scarce footwear, as well as textiles and fabrics, much more readily available on the Slovak side, were taken to Poland. Goods were shipped across the river at night when border patrols had departed from their posts. If a smuggler was caught red-handed, he was stripped of his goods and punished with a heavy fine. There were also prison sentences and forced transports to work in Germany.

At the end of 1944, the Russian army crossed the present-day Polish-Slovak border territory, liberating the areas near the Dunajec, imposing the rule of the Red Army at the same time. However, the inhabitants did not feel any significant improvement in their living conditions, because instead of the Germans, the Russians took on the role of the oppressor. They preyed on young women, and plundered houses of food and valuables. However, they did allow people to cross to the Slovak side without any problems, so families living on both sides of the Dunajec River could meet after many years and resume relations.

In the summer of 1945, the Russians left the area surrounding the Dunajec River, and they were replaced by the Polish army, at first favourable to the local population, but with time they gave way to young, extremely strict departments of petty officials. Interestingly, while there was no partisan activity in Sromowce during the German occupation, acts of sabotage occurred immediately after the liberation, provoking the Department of Security to conduct an investigation into resistance against the authorities.

### **3.4. Neighbours with their backs turned to the river (1945-1960)**

The first post-war years were a time of great poverty in Podhale. What the Germans did not steal was plundered by the Russians in the last months before the liberation. Due to the abolition of the compulsory quota, cattle and horses could be seen in villages. The inhabitants of Sromowce, who were sent to Germany for forced labour, returned with modern methods of raising cattle and growing plants. Farms slowly revived, giving inhabitants hope for better times.

In the 1950s, the Slovak side of the Dunajec River was dominated by agriculture. In 1968, however, there was a radical change in the organisation of work; all the land was merged in the area surrounding the Dunajec and a so-called "druzstvo", the equivalent of a Polish state-owned farm (PGR), was established. At that time, in order to get to the other side of the river, it was necessary to have an appropriate pass, issued only in justified cases (e.g. in connection with important family events). Everyday contact for families living on the opposite banks of the Dunajec River was extremely difficult. 24-hour patrols stationed in the border zone made it impossible to just cross the border or even approach it; the local population was therefore forced to develop certain ways of maintaining contacts with the inhabitants of Červený Kláštor, e.g. by talking "over the river", although, as the inhabitants of the surveyed communities recall, a large proportion of Polish-Slovak friendships did not withstand this trial and over time fell apart. Family relationships also became looser, and they could only be sustained to a very limited extent in the post-war period.

### **3.5. Hand in hand across divisions (1961-1989)**

Despite the difficult economic situation, Sromowce Niżne relatively quickly came into the possession of new modern conveniences. The construction of a paved, asphalt road began in 1961, but due to the need to transport gravel and cement by horse, the work dragged on for almost seven years. As a result, in 1968 the first state-operated intertown bus arrived in Sromowce, radically changing the professional and social situation of the inhabitants of the village.

Under the Polish People's Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the functioning of the Dunajec community at the micro-level of everyday neighbourly life resembled a shared struggle against adversity. Residents shared what they had, even though their resources were very limited. Economic vicissitudes in the Polish-Slovak borderland was very large; after years of prosperity, there was a tragic collapse from which it was difficult to recover. However, being close to another country which experienced slightly different fluctuations in its economic situation (for Poles it was Czechoslovakia, and for Slovaks it was Poland) made it possible to survive even the most difficult moments.

This close collaboration and exchange in the Polish-Slovak borderland zone concerned, among other things, the labour market too. In the 1970s, when the economic situation was much better across the southern border, some Poles sought employment in Czechoslovakia. Young girls travelled to the sewing plant in Spišská Nová Ves, and men often took odd jobs on the farms of their neighbours across the Dunajec River.

Although the post-war years, according to the stories told by the inhabitants of Sromowce, brought Poles and Slovaks from the Dunajec River closer to each other, some Sromovians experienced a flaring up of old resentments passed down from generation to generation. Mutual antipathy reportedly had very real consequences, including denunciations that Slovaks made on Poles who illegally crossed the border along the Dunajec River. Regardless of these individual cases of denunciation and the occasionally visible resentment felt towards neighbours across the river, it can be said that the period of "people's democracy" was a difficult test of Polish-Slovak relations. It was a test which, despite strenuous efforts on the part of the authorities to cool down these relations and limit their intensity, was passed by the community on the Dunajec River. When it comes to the difficult political conditions that prevailed in the second half of the 20th century, Polish-Slovak relations were still maintained, and good neighbourly relations (with some minor exceptions) did not break down. The inhabitants of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor once again proved that for them community is of supreme value, and their joint struggle with their oppressor additionally strengthened these relations.

#### **4. Reconstruction of the Polish-Slovak community after 1989**

Thanks to the democratic political changes that took place in Europe in the late 1980s, local relations on the Polish-Slovak border normalised. Approaching the border river, the Dunajec, became legal again, although one was still not allowed to cross the international border that ran along it. The closest border crossing used by the Sromovians was 14 km away, a foot and road crossing in Łysa nad Dunajcem (previously called Golembark). This crossing was opened in 1956 and initially it was made available only to Poles and Slovaks at designated hours of the day. It was not until 2000 that the crossing gained international status, though not for long, because in 2007, under the Schengen Agreement, it was completely abolished.

The community of the villages of the Dunajec river embraced the political changes with great joy, and the symbolic "opening" of the borders between countries brought the inhabitants a great relief. This is what one of the older female residents of Sromowce Wyżne recalls: *It was amazing! We went to Edyta right away, to her cousin. Come on, god, it's tonight. We will sit here and don't worry, we will come. It was such a freedom. Cool!* [WF\_01\_14]. Thus the long-awaited connection of the cross-border community of Pieniny highlanders, functioning de facto as one, has become a fact.

#### **4.1. Establishing relations at the local level**

Thanks to the creation of a favourable atmosphere of cooperation that took place after these political changes, it was also possible to achieve an official Polish-(Czecho)Slovak rapprochement. In previous decades, the governments of Poland and Czechoslovakia had cooperated within the Soviet Bloc, but relations between both countries were characterised by a great deal of courtesy, and decisions were made in consultation with the authorities in the USSR. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about real, substantive Polish-Slovak cooperation, when its nature was determined by the leaders of another country. Grassroots cooperation (throughout the area that makes up today's Polish-Slovak borderland) formed in the 1990s, laying the foundations for the subsequent intensification of Polish-Slovak relations within European structures.

The natural, neighborly needs of the local population, although suppressed and impossible to fulfill for many years, remained in the minds of the Pieniny highlanders, not letting themselves be completely forgotten. Strategies to tame the border in the everyday life of the inhabitants of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor, developed over the years of functioning at the junction of two national states, allowed the local population to maintain cross-border relations regardless of the nature and permeability of the border on the Dunajec. Residents coped in various ways to get around the burdensome formalities accompanying expeditions to Slovakia. In the summer season, young people sunbathing by the river took advantage of the guards' moment of inattention to get to the Slovak side unnoticed. As a young resident of Sromowce remembers, *I have also walked through the water more than once. And then that was the limit. You just waited for the border guard to leave, or the police on the other side, and you walked*

*by. Or you were swimming on the Dunajec on a mattress - it flowed afterwards. You swam here, and then we went to the other side there [W\_60\_K\_14].*

The first idea of establishing formal cooperation between Poland and Slovakia in the region of the Tatra Mountains was born during a local government conference organised in Zakopane in 1991. The idea of closer cooperation developed over the next two years, and thanks to the involvement of a group of local press and television journalists, in 1993 representatives of government authorities and local councils met. The talks took place in two stages; first in Poprad (27 May) and then in Nowy Targ (28 May), and as a result of the discussions, a common position was hammered out and included in a Declaration of Intent signed by both parties, emphasising the need to popularise the idea of partnership in local and national media. Although adopting the declaration was a purely symbolic action, it was a promising first step towards establishing real Polish-Slovak cooperation in the Tatra borderland area.

The Polish-Slovak rapprochement was also helped by the domestic situation in what was then Czechoslovakia, which for years had struggled with internal tensions between the Czechs and Slovaks, united as one state. Their leaders' ambitions and separatist ideas prevailed, however, and led to the so-called "velvet divorce", initiated by Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar on 1 January 1993. Pursuant to the decision made by both presidents, the federal state was dissolved, in place of which two separate nation states were established, i.e. the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, the latter having since become an independent societal actor and Poland's partner in discussions on cooperation in the Tatra Mountains.

The Polish-Slovak borderland established in the wake of the decision to dissolve Czechoslovakia (compared to other areas where the nation states came into contact) stood out from the very beginning in some respects, ranging from its cultural and linguistic richness, to its complex history and politics, to the very geographical location. Paradoxically, it was this borderland landscape that largely determined the specificity of today's cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic in this area.

Established in 1993, the Polish-Slovak border is 541 km long, a significant stretch of which is located in protected areas due to its unique flora and fauna. This situation made it necessary to both regulate various legal issues related to protecting nature, as well as to establish international institutions to ensure the protection of the natural heritage of the Tatra Mountains.



The Polish-Slovak border boasts, among other things, The Dunajec River Gorge, and the possibility of crossing its narrow body of water cutting between two mountain massifs has become a tourist attraction advertised throughout Europe.

The need to protect their exceptional natural and landscape assets, as well as to extend cross-border cooperation to other areas of activity, prompted representatives of Polish and Slovak local authorities to mull over the establishment of an association aimed at developing relations between Poland and Slovakia in the Tatra Mountains region.

#### **4.2. A formal community**

The first to come up with a formal proposal for cooperation were the Slovaks who, in July 1993 in Kieżmark, presented the Polish side with their own concept for of an interregional union gathering together districts (Polish ‘powiats’ and Slovak ‘okres’s’) and communes in the immediate vicinity of the Polish-Slovak border. The location of the boundaries of the future cross-border Tatra area was also proposed, and it was to include towns and villages from the Slovak districts of Dolný Kubin, Liptovský Mikuláš, Poprad, Stará Ľubovňa and Spišská Stará Ves, and on the Polish side the areas of the former Nowy Targ district, located in Podhale, Spisz, Orawa and in the Pieniny.

On 31 October 1993, i.e. after the break-up of Czechoslovakia into two sovereign states — the Czech Republic and Slovakia — *the Declaration by Territorial Self-governments of the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic to mark the creation of the "Tatry" Region* was signed in Zakopane , and this declaration became the first and the most important step in the effort to shape, or more accurately reactivate, the Polish-Slovak cross-border community. According to Babiński, the establishment of the "Tatry" Region (which would later transform into the Tatra Euroregion) was one of the key conditions necessary for the idea of cross-border cooperation in the Polish-Slovak borderland area to develop (Babiński 1997). The year 1993 can therefore be regarded as the moment when symbolic cross-border cooperation was initiated, which was the first stage in the reconstruction of the local community in the studied area of the Polish-Slovak borderland.

The next steps were taken soon after on 18 August 1994, when the "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Slovak Republic on Cross-border Cooperation" was signed in Warsaw, which was to lead to the finalisation of many years of efforts to initiate the activities of the Euroregion. Both Governments then declared their desire "to support [...] cross-border cooperation, thus contributing to economic and social progress in both countries"<sup>1</sup>. The document defined the priorities of this cooperation at the local and governmental level, and delineated 15 areas of cooperation that required special commitment from both sides. Among them were nature and environmental protection, education and science (including reciprocal teaching of the neighbour's language), as well as industry, agriculture and trade.

Finally, on 26 August 1994, during the Founding Congress in Nowy Targ, an Agreement was signed between the local governments from Poland and Slovakia to establish a cross-border association for the "Tatry" Euroregion, which was to contribute to "accelerating the comprehensive development of adjoining areas of the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic, with reference to the historical roots and mutual relations of these regions"<sup>2</sup>. For the Polish side, the document was signed by administrators of thirteen communes and mayors of three member towns, including, as a representative of the Czorsztyn commune, the then commune administrator, Stanisław Wojtaszek.

The following two years of Polish-Slovak collaboration as part of the "Tatry" Euroregion were marked by neighbourly rapprochement and mutually getting acquainted with the other country's inhabitants and the history of today's Polish-Slovak borderland. For this reason, in 1995, in Nowy Targ, Rabka and Zakopane, a festival called the "Days of Slovak Culture in Poland" was held, during which over 600 artists (and keen amateurs) presented various aspects of Slovak music, crafts and traditional cuisine from various regions of Slovakia previously unknown to Poles. Similarly, in the following year (1996), "Days of Polish Culture in Slovakia"

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<sup>1</sup> The Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Slovakia on cross-border cooperation, p. 1. The document is available at: <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WMP20040210370> [accessed: 3/06/2021].

<sup>2</sup> Agreement between the local governments of Poland and Slovakia on establishing a transborder union of the "Tatry" Euroregion, article 1. The document is available here: [http://www.euroregion-tatry.eu/pliki/umowa\\_o\\_utworzeniu\\_euroregionu\\_tatry\\_199424bfb258d2,129f2.pdf](http://www.euroregion-tatry.eu/pliki/umowa_o_utworzeniu_euroregionu_tatry_199424bfb258d2,129f2.pdf) [accessed: 3/06/2021].

were organised in Slovakia (in Námestovo, Dolný Kubin, Liptovský Mikuláš, Spišská Stará Ves, Stará Ľubovňa, Spišská Nová Ves, and Kežmarok), enabling brothers and sisters from across the southern border of the Tatra Mountains to get to know Poland not only from the official side, but also behind the scenes.

In the same year, the "Tatry" Euroregion was added to the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR). Legal issues concerning how inhabitants of the border area crossed the Polish-Slovak border were also regulated. The result of the negotiations was the Agreement between the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on Local Border Traffic, drawn up in December 1996 in Zakopane, which entered into force at the beginning of September 1997. The law laid out the rules for crossing a simplified international border for citizens whose registered abode was in the border zone within which the villages of Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor are located.

The year 1997 brought an intensification of Polish-Slovak cultural cooperation in activities supporting the maintenance and restoration of the regional culture of the Polish-Slovak border. The publication summarizing the first years of operation of the Euroregion "Tatry" states that "The implementation of projects contributed to the establishment of cross-border contacts and cooperation between local government organizations, associations, cultural and educational institutions and sports clubs. The Small Euroregional Projects implemented by the Euroregion "Tatry" constituted a prelude to thinking in terms of European integration, in the dimension of small local communities"<sup>3</sup> (Majorczyk 2000).

The role played by these grassroots activities cannot be overestimated - it was possible to involve the local population in building Polish-Slovak social capital, the most important one, based on the will of social actors themselves - borderland residents, and not - as has been the case so far - on the initiative authorities. As the person involved in handling micro-projects admits, *they certainly brought Poles and Slovaks closer, especially since it often happens that under one project, a small project, contacts are usually made, which later result in joint ventures in large infrastructure projects and such projects Well, there are at least ..., such partnerships*

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<sup>3</sup> A. Majorczyk, *Łączą nas Tatry*, Biuro Rady Euroregionu „Tatry” w Nowym Targu, Nowy Targ 2000.

*established as part of micro - projects, which later moved to implement larger projects, that is, there are many [W\_14\_K\_15].*

### **4.3. One step away from a fully-fledged community**

Further development of relations in today's Polish-Slovak borderland took place with the idea of establishing close collaboration (economic, political and cultural) in order to implement joint projects financed with state funds and those from the EU (after the accession of Poland and Slovakia to the European Union on 1 May 2004). This phase of the evolution of Polish-Slovak relations is referred to in this article as the "semi-crossable-border" period (in force in 1999-2006). The entry into force of EU regulations significantly limited checks on people at the border crossing in Sromowce Niżne, making it easier for residents and tourists to cross the border on the Dunajec River. Thanks to the accession of the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic to the EU, the citizens of both countries obtained EU citizenship, entitling them to cross borders within the EU using documents confirming their identity (an identity card or a passport). Additional customs points for EU citizens, who were subject to simplified customs controls, were designated at border crossing points. The Polish-Slovak border on the Dunajec River — although formally open — still remained an obvious natural barrier, preventing regular Polish-Slovak contacts within the community of Pieniny highlanders by the Dunajec River.

Under EU law, citizens of the Member States have been granted EU citizenship, which allows them to move and reside freely within the territory of the EU (on the basis of a valid identity document). Both Poles and Slovaks took advantage of these opportunities, buying selected goods from their neighbors. As reported by the inhabitants of the frontier villages, *that was the calculation. It was cheaper, it was more profitable, and you could do anything. We also went to Christmas for beer and vodka, and now you don't drive, it's not profitable, because it's too expensive now. My husband said that he didn't even want to drink their beer anymore, and it once paid off.* [W\_23\_K\_14]. Immediately after the borders were opened, Slovaks came to Poland mainly for food - meat, confectionery (including the famous fudge with a daisy, or Popular Fudge), while Poles supplied themselves with flour, pasta and alcohol in Slovakia (mainly beer and rum), and delicacies and sweets (including the famous Student's chocolate).

The accession of Poland and Slovakia to European structures has opened up new possibilities when it comes to financing projects and investments from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the aim of which is to support the development of European regions, especially peripheral regions, neglected by other support programmes. Under the ERDF, the Interreg IIIA Programme was launched to promote cross-border cooperation in areas located in close proximity to the external and internal borders of the European Union. In 2004-2006, the Interreg IIIA Poland-Slovak Republic Programme was implemented in the studied area of the Polish-Slovak borderland, covering activities in three fields: infrastructure development, socio-economic development, and technical assistance offered to applicants.

In 2005 work began on the New Financial Perspective of the European Union 2007-2013, which envisaged the continuation of activities undertaken in the Interreg IIIA Programme in the new formula of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). The purpose of ETC was to implement and promote international projects in the European Union, with particular emphasis on projects in international borderland areas. Among the projects initiated under the ETC were the Cross-Border Cooperation Operational Programme between the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic 2007-2013, which was of key importance for the studied area of the Polish-Slovak borderland, and chaired by the Association of the Carpathian Euroregion Poland (Leading Partner), and members included, among other bodies, the "Tatry" Euroregion Association, the "Beskidy" Region Association, and Higher Territorial Units in Žilina and Prešov.

#### **4.4. The real rapprochement in Polish-Slovak local relations**

The culmination of the process of shaping a real, mature community in the studied border area took place on 12 August 2006, when a pedestrian and bicycle footbridge was opened spanning the Dunajec River, connecting Poland's Sromowce Niżne with Slovakia's Červený Kláštor. Since then, everyday relations in the studied community of Pieniny highlanders have taken on a completely different form and intensity, leading to the establishment and reconstruction of truly close neighbourly relations that exist above and beyond the border. The symbol of the footbridge over the border river Dunajec is not accidental at all here. The river has connected the surrounding villages for years, both on the Polish and Slovak side, and nourished

their inhabitants in two ways: indirectly, by giving them jobs transporting wood and other goods (centuries-old rafting), as well as directly, by providing water and fresh food in the form of fish and crustaceans (Baszak 2007, Janicka-Krzywda, Ceklarz 2014).

In 2006, after almost a hundred years of petitions and requests from the residents, it was finally possible to permanently connect Sromowce Niżne with Červený Kláštor by means of a pedestrian and bicycle bridge, initially serving as a border crossing intended only for local border traffic. For the first year there was simplified customs procedures (in accordance with the Local Border Traffic Act), so a natural phenomenon was free, essentially unregistered traffic between the Polish and Slovak side. The inhabitants learned to function in permanent proximity to the border, making it feel almost invisible. Ultimately, the border control on the footbridge in Sromowce Niżne was completely abolished on 21 December 2007 with the entry into force of the provisions of the Schengen Agreement, signed by the President of the Republic of Poland on 7 September 2007. Pursuant to the provisions of the Agreement, all time limitations regarding the use of the border bridge were then abolished, allowing Poles and Slovaks, as well other nationalities, to freely cross the border on the Dunajec at any time. A similar fate befell all of the 54 Polish-Slovak border crossings that were then in existence.

The first mentions of any need to build a bridge on this part of the river date back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the Sromowce Niżne Commune Council adopted a resolution on the planned permanent connection of Sromowce with the neighbouring Szwaby Niżne (Červený Kláštor). Until then, there had only been an irregular cable ferry crossing that depended on the weather conditions. On 14 May 1914, twelve members of the Commune Council headed by the head of the commune, Jan Dziurny, signed an application that read: *Jan Dziurny, head of the commune, hereby petitions for efforts to be made [to] build a bridge on the Dunajec River, as people who live here have no connection with the world and as a result of this, instead of becoming richer, they are becoming poorer, and as we, the poor, will not be able to build the bridge ourselves, we are forced to ask the Governor orally in Lviv to grant us the appropriate amount for the construction of the bridge. I authorise trustworthy people to go to Lviv, Reverend Jan Kwiatkiewicz and Jędrzej Waradzyn, and the travel costs will be borne by*

*the commune from the commune fund in the form of transport to the railway station and transport back and by rail, and some for food.*<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the unexpected outbreak of World War I in August 1914 interrupted the activities, and the interwar period — instead of seeing the completion of the planned scheme — brought a wave of border disputes, burying hopes for the following years. Although the idea of building a bridge over the Dunajec River was resumed right after Poland regained independence in 1939, these actions also failed.

Almost 150 meters long and 2.5 meters wide, the footbridge (designed by the "Mosty Wrocław" S.C. Research and Design Team under the supervision of prof. dr. hab. Jan Biliszcuk, the then Director of the Institute of Civil Engineering of the Wrocław University of Technology) is one of the world's longest suspended (cable-stayed) structures made of glued wood. The footbridge became a bridge (in a metaphorical and literal sense) over the obstacles and divisions within the community of Pieniny highlanders. It connected two villages which, due to the arbitrary political decisions taken almost a hundred years ago, were divided by a clear (and impassable) international border. This supposedly small structure turned out to be a milestone in the history of Polish-Slovak relations. Finally, we managed to connect the two banks of the Dunajec, two local communities - Sromowians and Kláštorians, and above all two nations, so closely related to each other, i.e. Poles and Slovaks.

Inhabitants of both communities clearly felt the change in their everyday life that followed the opening of the footbridge on the Dunajec River. As one of the inhabitants of the village says, *they are so happy that they can come to each other, they can visit each other, that there is nothing, there is no obstacle. Because when there was an obstacle, even during the communist times, it was forbidden to contact when people wanted to talk to each other, because it is known that in Červený Kláštor and Sromowce there are different people who have families. Well, one always had to stand on watch and see if the border guards were coming, and the other person from the family shouted to each other there. They contacted, asked about health, what was going on in the family, or if someone died there, then ... was it some uncle or aunt, just such mundane matters, right?* [W\_26\_K\_14].

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from the minutes of the meeting of the Sromowce Niżne Commune Council preserved in the village chronicles.

Ultimately, the border check on the footbridge in Sromowce Niżne was completely abolished on December 21, 2007 with the entry into force of the provisions of the Schengen Agreement, signed by the President of the Republic of Poland on September 7, 2007. Pursuant to the provisions of the Agreement, the time restrictions on the use of the border bridge were then abolished, allowing both Poles and Slovaks, as well as representatives of other nationalities, to freely cross the border on the Dunajec at any time.

The opening of the footbridge over the Dunajec transformed the studied border community into a cross-border community, functioning not across the state border, but towards it. The border has been tamed and included in the daily definition of relations in this small local community, becoming not so much an obstacle or a barrier to everyday contacts, but their constitutive element. The inhabitants of Sromowce cannot imagine today that the border and the neighbors living on the other side of it could not exist.

#### **4.5. A fully-fledged institutional community**

The institutional completion of the process of creating a cross-border community in the border area under study took place in August 2013, when the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation TATRY Ltd. was established, which is a body with legal personality under European Union law, and which can therefore independently coordinate and implement Polish-Slovak cross-border projects. The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation is a cross-border organisation established by the "Tatry" Euroregion Union (on the Polish side) and the "Tatry" Region Association (on the Slovak side). The EGTC operates in the territory of the Polish Małopolska Province, and in Slovakia it covers counties in the Prešov Region (Stará Ľubovňa, Sabinov, Poprad, Levoča and Kežmarok), the Košický Region (Tvrdošín, Ružomberok, Námestovo, Liptovský Mikuláš, Dolníň Kubín) and the Žilina Region (Spišská Nová Ves)). The registered office of EGTC TATRY is in Nowy Targ, therefore Polish law is applicable to the functioning of the EGTC.

Activities aimed at establishing an EGTC in the area where "Tatry" Euroregion operates were included in the project "From the 'Tatry' Euroregion to the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation", which received funding from the European Regional Development



Fund under priority axis 2, "Socio-economic development of the Cross-border Cooperation Program: Republic of Poland-Slovak Republic 2007-2013".

In 2007, a Polish-Slovak Working Committee was established to evaluate the possibility of transforming the Cross-Border Association of "Tatry" Euroregion into EGTC TATRY. Due to the need for the governments of both countries — the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic — to ratify EU regulations and adjust certain legal procedures work on the creation of the new institution was only finalised on 14 August 2013. The next step was granting EGTC TATRY legal personality, which took place on 20 September 2013, with the signing by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland of a decision to enter EGTC TATRY Ltd. into the registry of groups run under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## **5. The Polish-Slovak community in the face of contemporary challenges**

Today's relations in the Polish-Slovak borderland are harmonious and amicable. Both communities benefit from their proximity to each other, maintaining a natural, cross-border homeostasis. History has come full circle and after a hundred years it has returned to the beginning, i.e. natural relations across an international border (before 1920 the border did not formally exist; today, under the provisions of EU law, the border is permeable and crossable basically without restrictions).

The Polish and Slovak authorities are continuing the implementation of joint, cross-border infrastructure and social projects aimed at eliminating obstacles to the sustainable development of the European community. As part of the subsequent stages of the Interreg Poland-Slovakia programme (currently the EU financial framework for 2021-2027 is in force), measures are being taken to develop the area's shared cultural and tourist potential (under Priority I "Protection and development of the natural and cultural heritage of the border area"), to improve the condition of infrastructure and transport (Priority II "Sustainable cross-border transport") and strengthen human capital (Priority III "Development of cross-border education and lifelong learning")<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For more see the programme's internet site: <https://pl.plsk.eu/o-programie> [accessed: 07/06/2021]

Particularly noteworthy are certain projects dedicated to building a cross-border community in the Polish-Slovak borderland. Pursuant to the decision of the Monitoring Committee of the Interreg programme taken in March 2019, 32 projects selected in a competition received funding totalling over 33 million euros, of which as much as 5.3 million euros was allocated to projects relating to cross-border education (including, among other things, the establishment of a Cross-Border Education Centre for the "Tatry" Euroregion for Polish and Slovak local government employees).

A difficult test for Polish-Slovak cross-border relations arose during the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2020 and the first half of 2021), which froze everyday contacts and relationships in the community of Pieniny highlanders. Due to the pandemic in the Slovak Republic, a state of emergency was announced (beginning on 12/03/2020), significantly reducing the possibility of transiting the area and crossing the state border. Officially, the Polish-Slovak border crossings were not closed, but traffic on them in practice stopped. The first, most restrictive limitations were only removed on 20 June 2020, when Poland was added to the list of countries that were considered safe in terms of the coronavirus epidemic threat. Due to the fast-changing pandemic situation, restrictions fluctuated over the next few months, and they were also affected by the emergence of new variants of the virus and the development of various "waves" of the pandemic.

In October and November 2020, the Slovak government opted for the "nuclear" option of mass testing all citizens of the country. They managed to test about two thirds of the population (out of 5.5 million citizens) and identified over 50,000 new cases of the virus. Unfortunately, as it soon turned out, these radical actions did not bring long-term results, and the scale of the spread of the pandemic in the Slovak Republic exceeded the government agencies' wildest expectations (and their state of preparation). With the culmination of the wave of cases in January 2021, at the request of the government of the Slovak Republic, 31 firefighters (with paramedic diplomas) from Małopolska were delegated to help and support the Slovaks in conducting tests for Sars-CoV-2 infection.

After periods of freezing and loosening cross-border relations, finally, as of 31 May 2021, the Slovak Republic has introduced a so-called "tourist semaphore", which (thanks to the constant monitoring of the pandemic around the world) regulates the rules of entry and return to Slovakia from individual countries across the globe, taking into account mitigating

circumstances relating to restrictions and the need to undergo quarantine, such as whether someone has had a vaccination against Sars-CoV-2 or registered on a dedicated website when entering the territory of the Slovak Republic<sup>6</sup>. Everything indicates that, after the lock-down, issues related to the pandemic are stabilising and cross-border relations are returning to normal. A normal that both Dunajec communities have been working towards for a hundred years.

## **6. Summary — a Polish-Slovak micro-history overshadowed by great politics**

The above analysis of the history of Polish-(Czecho)Slovak institutional relations shows the consequences which (at the micro-level of local activities) political decisions made at the level of national and international politics have. These decisions drew a clear formal border right through the community of Pieniny highlanders living in Sromowce Niżne and Červený Kláštor. The realm of official activities was, and still is, focussed on strengthening and recreating national and nation-state divisions, which - when it comes to the everyday practices of the local community - are of practically no importance.

Diplomatic activities, carried out on many levels of cooperation (including as part of European structures, through the "Tatry" Euroregion Association, or through EGTC TATRY), entail a diverse range of political actors who, despite many cultural and linguistic similarities, act as separate states. Moreover, some of the financial support programmes made use of by the inhabitants of the Polish-Slovak border area are directed to international consortia, and therefore they are supported by teams that bring together representatives of at least two different countries. Both Sromovians and the inhabitants of Červený Kláštor are eager to participate in such activities, seeing them as an opportunity to obtain funds necessary for the development of their local communities. In this sense, in the sphere of official institutional activities, the border (perceived as the distance between Polish and Slovak societies) is maintained, and its emphasis enables the implementation of joint Polish-Slovak cross-border projects.

Looking at today's Polish-Slovak relations at the state level, it can be stated that - despite difficult pandemic experiences - they have proceeded harmoniously, and their cordial nature (and

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<sup>6</sup> <https://korona.gov.sk/ehranica/> [accessed: 07/06/2021]

attachment to supranational heritage) is evidenced, among other things, by such events as the friendly meeting of the President of Slovakia, Ivan Gašparovič, with the then President of Poland, Bronisław Komorowski. This conviviality was highlighted by a joint rafting trip along the Dunajec Gorge (23 August 2013), several meetings between current President Andrzej Duda and the President of Slovakia, Andrej Kiska - including on the footbridge in Sromowce Niżne (2 October 2015) and on a nearby mountain called Kasprowy Wierch (7 March 2017), and the official visit of the newly-elected president of the Slovak Republic Zuzana Čaputova to the Presidential Palace in Warsaw (15 July 2019). Among the many words and declarations uttered during these meetings, one could clearly hear repeated talk of the establishment of close relations between Poland and Slovakia within the Visegrad Group and the necessity to act hand in hand in the face of the various new challenges that Europe is currently tackling.

The everyday life of the Dunajec community goes on according to its own unwavering rhythm, often detached from the "great history" of the international order, and in neighbourly relations the border basically — instead of dividing — connects the inhabitants of the opposite banks of the Dunajec. This does not mean, however, that the social relations observed in the Polish-Slovak borderland do not reflect diplomatic and political decisions taken at higher levels; however, the community of experiences and often difficult living conditions has brought Poles and Slovaks living on the Dunajec closer together, building in them a sense of belonging to one cross-border community of highlanders from the Dunajec River, above and beyond historical and political divisions.

Similar experiences have recently been described by Tomasz Grzywaczewski, who has studied the fate of the Kashubians on the border of the Second Polish Republic: "It was 1937, I was seven then, and life on our distant border went on as always. A little smuggling, a lot of poverty, but little politics" (Grzywaczewski: 2020). And so too went the history of the Polish-Slovak borderland, away from great politics, merely out of concern for the most precious value — the local community.

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