

Pomerania. In the borderlands between Germany and Poland

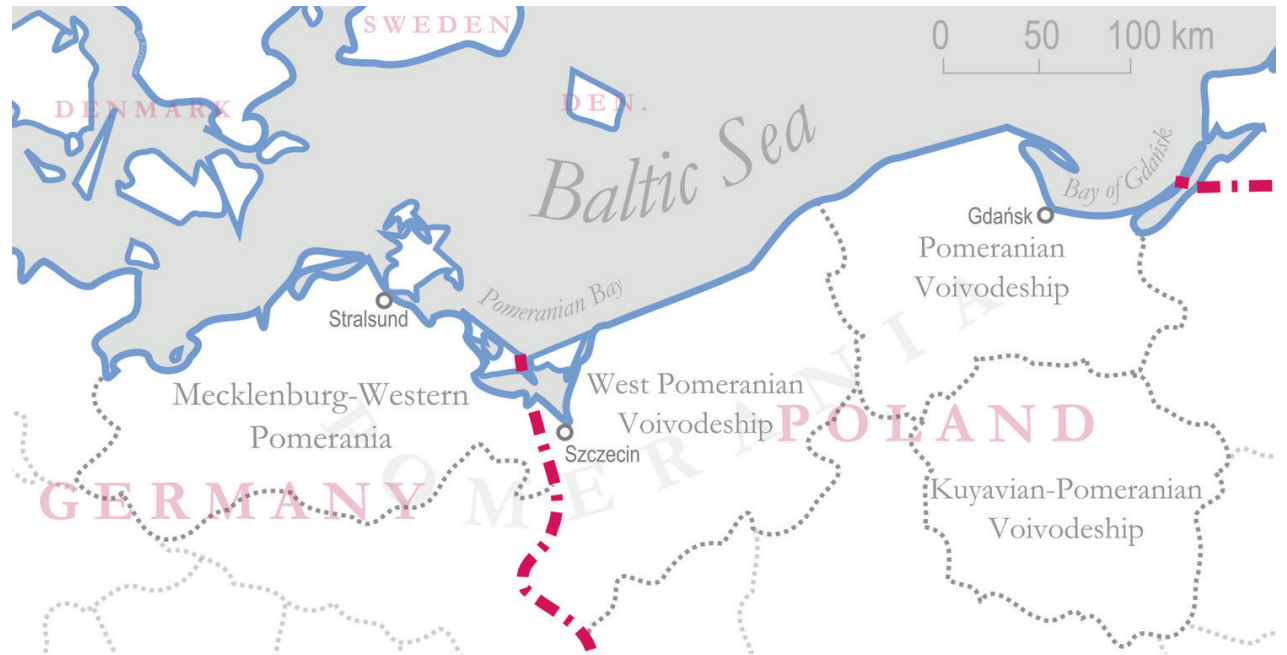
Pomerania is a historic region along the southern Baltic coast. The geography of the area is characterized by land relatively favorable to farming. Today, Pomerania is divided between Germany and Poland, but the German and Polish populations have few factors in common that might serve to unify them. Nevertheless, in some respects the region is gradually becoming more interwoven.

After World War II, most of the German population was largely relocated from the former East German regions – including Pomerania – to Germany. Others fled from the Red Army and thus ended up in Germany. These Germans left the homes they had lived in for generations, and Poles moved in. Some of the people driven from what is currently Polish Pomerania settled in German Pomerania (*Vorpommern*).

TODAY 200,000–250,000 people reside on the German side of the border and 600,000–700,000 on the Polish side. Szczecin, the historic center of Pomerania, lies on the Polish side 12 km from the border and has a population of nearly half a million inhabitants.

The German part of Pomerania is hardly a thriving region. Unemployment and depopulation are high and right-wing extremists have a foothold here. The flow from the German side to the Polish side is mainly a matter of short shopping trips, sometimes just to the bazaars right across the boundary. Also popular is a form of nostalgia tourism by the Germans and their descendants with roots in the region, who visit their old homes and childhood environments. Many Germans from the former eastern parts of the country have formed associations to preserve and strengthen their common identity, history, and traditions. They see themselves as displaced and are directly and indirectly represented even politically through their ties to the Christian Democrats (CDU), and through lobbying (up until 1990 even against Germany's final recognition of its eastern borders).

SUCH IDENTITY-PRESERVING measures can hardly be found on the Polish side, where identity is rooted in being Polish and Catholic. However, more and more



Poles are also traveling to the German side. One trend is for more and more young middle-class families to sell their apartments in the city of Szczecin and move to nearby German villages, where they can buy a house and have access to German childcare and schools for their children.

Interestingly, this border region exhibits exactly the opposite relationship between Germany and Poland than that which prevails at the national level – an asymmetrical relationship where Germany has the stronger economy and possibly even a stronger administrative capacity. The relationship is also asymmetrical in Pomerania, but to Poland's advantage, even though the Polish part of Pomerania is not a strong region within Poland as a whole.

DESPITE HISTORICAL tensions between Germans and Poles in Pomerania, forces and movements are at work that point toward integration. Already in 1991 a German-Polish *Gymnasium* (approximately secondary school level) was established on the German side in Löcknitz. A rather revolutionary step was taken through the completion of a short railway track by a German national railway company-affiliate into Polish Świnoujście in 2008.

While that entire city is situated on one side of the border, the suburbs straddle both sides. To study the development of these cross-border flows, a

series of interviews is being conducted as part of a research project (which involves professor Thomas Lundén, professor Anders Mellbourn, Joachim von Wedel, PhD, and the author of this article) that includes various local researchers and educators, as well as people in administration and the media. The cross-border flows could lead to the creation of a model like the one found in Strasbourg, Basel, and Geneva. Similar trends can be found in Trieste, Bratislava, and Oradea.

ARGUABLY, THE INTENSITY of cross-border contacts will also depend on push-pull factors, which is how interest became focused on Szczecin. The outcome, or rather process, is of course not solely influenced by factors such as geographic location and transport infrastructure, but also by softer, more elusive factors such as local and regional identity. Ethnic identities are often more accentuated, especially in border areas, where they transition between a bridging “hybrid” mentality and a protective “border guard” mentality. Examples typifying the former may be found in Schleswig/Slesvig or Opole/Opeln, and the latter in Saarland or Lubuskie – although the picture is never black and white, as evidenced by West Pomerania.

AS OUR ONGOING research shows, consensus on the need to cooperate

appears at first glance to be unexpectedly strong on both sides of the border. The insight that both regions play a highly peripheral role within their own national systems may to some extent explain this situation. Further collaboration may combine the potential of Szczecin, a large city, with Vorpommern, a mostly empty and dilapidated agricultural region. In theory, this is also consistent with geographer Walter Christaller's Central Place Theory. The above scenario is not entirely uncontroversial (as is the reference to *Pomerania*, the name of a German-dominated historical province), but strong historical awareness must be weighed in light of contemporary reality and the potential impact of close cooperation. ✕

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