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Review Report on the PhD Thesis

Author: Bastian Künzel, MA
Title: *From Openness to Closure. The impact of the Covid-19pandemic on transnational identity at the Polish-German border.*
Thesis within a cotutelage format between Chemnitz University of Technology and the University of Wrocław.

Background information and scientific relevance

The main aim of the presented thesis is to study transborder identification in the Polish-German border regions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The key focus is on transnational identity and especially the European one. The thesis advances our understanding of how crises impact identity formation. The key research questions address the ways in which the border closure was experienced and how it impacted inhabitants' identity. The research question is highly relevant, and the dissertation contributes to the development of scientific research in several dimensions. Firstly, the focus on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, especially a temporary but prolonged border closure, created almost laboratory conditions to observe how the limitation of free border movement affects the ways people experience living in the borderland within the EU and how they react when this free movement is taken away. It is clear, of course, that the freedom of movement is one of the most often raised benefits of European integration. Analysing the reactions to its suspension provides a unique perspective. The

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second important perspective brings to the forefront a border region that has recently raised a lot of controversies with the politicised Polish-German relations. Understanding how local inhabitants perceive the border region can ultimately facilitate a more accurate assessment of these relations and even a broader reflection on the current political dynamics in European integration, which have been shaped by the rise of Eurosceptic, nationalist and sovereignist forces. The thesis is primarily an in-depth case study based on qualitative small-sample research, providing a rich and diverse perspective on identity transformation in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of six chapters and a bibliography. The entire work comprises 187 pages and has been written in English. The dissertation is an original, concise study. The subject area of the dissertation, as well as the methods used and the theoretical and methodological assumptions adopted, position it within the discipline of political science. The dissertation is well-constructed, starting with theoretical considerations, followed by a presentation of the analysed border regions and a methodological chapter. This is followed by empirical analysis and conclusions.

The Introduction eloquently present the background context of the thesis and its key research questions. It also sheds light on the relevance of the research and the key theoretical concept of identity. It also demonstrates the author's strong personal interest in the researched phenomena.

The second chapter provides the theoretical foundations of the thesis. It presents in a concise manner the main approaches to analysing identity formation. It provides a thorough discussion of the key multidisciplinary approaches to identity, focusing on psychological, sociological, and political science perspectives on identity. The author demonstrates a fluency in navigating multidisciplinary approaches to studying identity. The author also presents in the chapter an increasingly popular narrative perspective on identity that aligns well with the selected methods for pursuing this study. The chapter also offers the author's own conceptualisation of identity.

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In Chapter Three, the author describes the research context and focuses on defining border regions, providing an overview of the Polish-German borderland. The author introduces the concept of borderscapes, which entails a broader and more multidimensional understanding of border regions, encompassing the diverse areas impacted by liminality, including social, linguistic, cultural, and economic aspects. The conceptual discussions are followed by the presentation of the general history of the Polish-German border. However, the political aspects of the relations were presented in a limited way. The history, structure and role of euro-regions are presented in detail as are the metropolitan areas at the border.

The methodological chapter is well argued and properly presents a selected methodological approach to this study. It is a small-sample case study focusing on a border region and puts the identity of the inhabitants in the centre of the analysis. The author convincingly argues for a selected methodology that combines three elements in qualitative interviews: ecomaps, biographic narrative interviewing and the twenty statements' test. The author convincingly presents the advantages of such a methodological approach, which allows for in-depth qualitative analysis. The sample selection is presented in detail, assuring that the research subjects were correctly recruited. The limitations of a study based on a sample of 32 interviews are also acknowledged. The author also assures in this chapter that the research was conducted with high ethical standards and with careful management of personal data, ensuring its protection in accordance with legal requirements. An additional value that should be mentioned here is the orderly analysis of the gathered empirical data, which was conducted using software Atlas.ti and employing a rigorous coding scheme. However, operationalisation of the research in the form of the descriptive low-level codes and the high-level coding scheme was not presented in the methodological part, but only in the next chapter presenting the analysis. It seems to me that the key elements of the coding scheme shall be presented in the methodological part of the dissertation under a separate section.

The empirical analysis is presented in Chapter five, which is very long and could be divided into two chapters. In the first part of the chapter, four phenotypes that combine the two dimensions: benefits and ideology, which

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were crucial for analysis, are presented. The chapter starts with a theoretical discussion on how the phenotypes were constructed. This could easily be part of a theoretical chapter since both benefits and ideology are clearly the key dimensions of identity formation for the author. In this part of the dissertation, the coding scheme is also introduced for the first time (which should be rather part of the Methodological chapter as stated above). The four presented phenotypes are then described in detail and illustrated with multiple illustrations from the research. In the second part of Chapter Five, the in-depth analysis of the four exemplary respondents is presented. In the last chapter, the author presents the condensed results of the research and the overall contribution of the dissertation.

The dissertation is very well structured. The individual chapters complement each other well and thoroughly explore the main research questions. The author demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the current state of research in both areas (identity and border regions). There are some minor issues, especially concerning the location of operationalisation of the research, which is only addressed in the analytical chapter, rather than being raised in the theoretical and methodological parts. It is also important to mention that despite the added value of the illustrations in the empirical part, most of the charts were difficult to decipher in the paper version of the dissertation (very small fonts, cryptic technical codes and very pale colours). This shall be reconsidered and improved.

Originality and quality of research

Theoretically, the thesis is grounded in a relational concept of identity, bringing together sociological and psychological perspectives within the context of political science analysis. The author properly maps the key discussions on identity formation and transformation within these disciplines. Specifically, I would like to stress the fluency in sociological approaches that the author displayed in the thesis. The first weakness in the theoretical part of the thesis, in my view, is insufficient attention to the theories of nationalism and national identity. The thesis only superficially tackles the problem of national identity. This concept, however, is crucial in the empirical part since in many cases national identity remains pivotal. It seems that it would be

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useful to provide more reflection on the relationship between national and transnational (and specifically European) identity. Another aspect that could be further developed, given the thesis's focus on the economic aspects of the respondents' transborder activities, is the economic and benefit-driven aspect of identity formation. I would suggest further exploring the link between the sphere of professional activities and safety networks and its impact on identification. Considering such aspects is particularly necessary in the theoretical part, as the four phenotypes that serve as crucial analytical categories in this dissertation rely heavily on perceived benefits and disadvantages. The benefits as part of phenotypes are operationalised in material and cultural categories; these aspects shall have already been discussed in the theoretical part. Similarly, the ideological dimension of phenotypes – indicating the range of views concerning the border – shall already be discussed as part on theoretical reflection. The analysis also discusses the emotional aspects of border perceptions and attachments. That shall also be covered in the theoretical chapter. All in all, it seems to me that the theoretical reflection, as fluently and convincingly presented, could offer the four phenotypes as possible assumptions for further analysis and link them to the existing literature. Locating these phenotypes only in the analytical chapter suggests that they were purely inductively created. It strengthens the impression that the theoretical reflection presented in the theoretical section only partially serves the actual empirical analysis and is not well-linked.

This also has implications for the operationalisation of the research and its coding scheme. The construction and utilisation of the codes for analysis are unclear, despite the analytical procedure being mentioned (very briefly) in the methodological section. The codes presented in the empirical chapter lack clear definitions, and the discussion explaining why these specific aspects were chosen—as a list of benefits and disadvantages—and the ideological assessment of borders are absent from the dissertation. It raises questions: could there be other benefits and disadvantages if the sample were different? For instance, in the codes defining the 'ideology' axis there is no explicit code on national identity mentioned. Why is that? In another place in the dissertation (p. 107), information appears on "low-level codes" applied to empirical material, then "summarized in 13 summary codes" (p. 107). In some

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other instances, the codes only appear on charts. There is no explanation of their status and role in the analysis. It appears that these codes emerged from an inductive coding process that develops themes and concepts without a predefined theoretical framework, serving as ordering categories. If so, it would be beneficial to clearly articulate the advantages of such an approach.

The author puts great emphasis on understanding and presenting the structure and characteristics of the border regions in the Polish-German neighbourhood. This part of the thesis is largely descriptive, and the author provides detailed descriptions of the euroregions and border urban spaces. However, the link of this part with the empirical analysis is less clear. The analysis does not effectively address the perceptions of these regions held by respondents. On the other hand, what might be relevant for the thesis, are general Polish-German political and economic relations that are rather sparsely presented. The Covid-19 crisis happened when the relations between Poland and Germany were highly politicised (at least on the Polish side). At the same time, this was already a period when the radical right-wing party, AfD, was experiencing a significant rise in East Germany. These contexts, that are not addressed in the thesis, could have an impact on how citizens perceive their position in the region and the value of the transborder identity.

The analytical section is well-written and offers a thorough view of the four proposed phenotypes. However, it seems to me that the data allows for even more detailed examination of respondents' identifications, especially the interactions between European, national, and regional levels. These aspects are mentioned, but the reflection does not delve deeply enough. The four categories are very intriguing, but the differences between them are sometimes indistinct. For instance, in the second part of the analytical analysis when individual examples of each category are presented, the transborder harvester is quite similar in some respects to the transborder actualiser. This raises the question of what key indicators differentiated the categories and whether other possible phenotypes could exist. This prompts another comment regarding the demographic information on respondents. The author analyses the professional background and employment sectors, which is logical given the focus on the benefits of transborder activities. The gender aspect is also properly analysed. What I think should also be explored is the level of education. These elements

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are raised in the parts of the engagement with the border, but could be further discussed.

The description of the four phenotypes is supported by various charts and maps. Nevertheless, the charts are not very readable, and there is often no reference in the text explaining what they demonstrate. Additionally, the charts are highly technical representations of the coded material, which, rather than informing the reader about a specific aspect, serve as cryptic references to codes.

In the concluding part, the author interestingly discusses the concept of 'identity potential'. This provides a fresh and engaging contribution to debates on how actual identity (trans)formations occur in contemporary Europe, especially within the transborder context. This shall be emphasised more strongly and developed further in the thesis as a contribution to theoretical reflection on identity.

Final evaluation

Bastian Künzel's dissertation certainly meets the legal requirements for the degree of PhD defined within the Polish system by legal act Ustawa – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce (Dz. U z 2020 r. poz. 85 z późn. zm.). The author has demonstrated adequate theoretical knowledge and the ability to conduct independent research, and the subject of his analysis is an original approach to a scientific problem. I recommend admission of the Candidate to the subsequent stages of the procedure, including public defence. After evaluating the dissertation, I assess it highly and propose a very good assessment because of its scientific novelty, extensive research on a significant topic, very good quality of the analysis and its contribution to the field.

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