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## **Polish-Ukrainian border: relations and present-day boundary evaluation**

**Abstract:** The focus of the article is to evaluate the current shape of the Polish-Ukrainian border and aftermaths connected to its modern-day shape. The main goal is to answer the question how significant were the alterations in mentality and thinking regarding Polish-Ukrainian relations among the people of both nationalities and the impact of the Polish-Ukrainian border on those alterations. The empirical part of this article is based on two polls conducted among both Polish and Ukrainian society members, respectively in the Polish and the Russian language. Both quantitative and qualitative methods help to understand that both communities had tightened their relations which significantly flourished in the past few decades. Polish-Ukrainian border had a noteworthy influence on the relationship of the two nations through the centuries.

**Key words:** border geography, international relations, Galicia, political geography

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### **Introduction**

**D**esignated area of Ruthenia, which is sometimes historically referred to as Cherven Grods, Galicia, or Red Ruthenia, provides a great amount of information and is a superb source of studies regarding border geography domain and dilemmas strongly adhering to it. Although the Polish-Ukrainian border exists for *sensu stricto* 29 years, the region of Western Ruthenia has definitely always been, for over ten centuries, an engrossing and excellent one in the case of carrying culture and border studies. Lands of a buffer zone, drawn around what is now a 526 kilometers long geopolitical delimitation, are home to almost eight million inhabitants distributed equally between Poland and Ukraine (Stokłosa, 2012, p. 247). Whilst, the contemporary shape of the lives of those citizens and their socio-economic status might be, to a great extent, defined by the last three decades, it is crucial to consider historic geopolitical factors. Those have a critical impact on processes of transformation within

the whole region in the economic-political manner; beginning with a fully agricultural focused economy during the early 10<sup>th</sup> century medieval epoch with a diverse religious and nationality structure, through industrialized, still mostly agronomic and nationally homogenous Cold War period, till the modern era still mainly homogenous, yet far more varied within the context of administration and employment structure. The dynamics of present-day alterations have rapidly hastened – along with that, developed some disparities and political friction alike new economical possibilities as well as deeper development and cooperation perspectives.

### **Methodology, research area and aims**

To depict the topic in a more meaningful and broad way both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been included. The main source of empirical data were two opinion polls conducted regarding one's judgment on the above matter – separately held both for Polish (in Polish) and Ukrainian (in Russian) communities supported by detailed analysis, unstructured interviews and subjective observation. As there is a generous amount of academic work that has covered the subject of this study, relevant literature has been used as a source and inspiration.

The selected area of studies (Fig. 1) is a designated zone of approximately 126 000 km<sup>2</sup>, located in close proximity to the Polish-Ukrainian border. Through nearly a thousand years this area had been governed or occupied by plenty of states and duchies, *e.g.* Kievan Rus, Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Kingdom of Poland, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Soviet Union or Ukraine. The selected territory is based on lubelskie, wołyńskie, ruskie and bełskie voivodeships – administrative subdivisions created during Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth area, but kind of continued during Interwar period within the Second Polish Republic; at that time (of Interwar period) whole Western Ruthenia was mostly a part of Poland (aside from early years of that era and turmoil bound up with bolshevik aggression and birth of two independent states of Ukrainian People's Republic and West Ukrainian People's Republic<sup>1</sup> [Olszański, 1993, pp. 43, 83]).

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<sup>1</sup> During that time period a couple of significant military and sabotage actions were taking part in Eastern Europe – especially the Ruthenia region. Conflicts involved several entities *i.a.*: Poland, bolsheviks and two newly created (in the beginning independent from each other but as of January of 1919 unified by Act Zulky)

**Fig. 1. Localization of the designated area of studies**



**Source:** Own elaboration.

The main focus of this article is to evaluate the current condition of the Polish-Ukrainian border and aftermaths connected to its contemporary shape, taking into account people's opinions and their attitude within a span of almost five centuries (since creation of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until today). The aim is to answer the question of whether any significant changes in mindset and mentality regarding Polish-Ukrainian relations among the people of both societies appeared and how the border and history of its fluctuation might have affected their thinking. These relations and thinking might be greatly affected by current politics and diplomacy which resulted in a much more positive reception within Polish-Ukrainian fellowship.

### **Historical background; *Galicia Felix* myth and border disruption**

Being on the outskirts of so-called “advanced” Europe, western parts of Ruthenia had every so often been considered as the outpost of “West-

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Ukrainian states. The situation stabilized after signing the Treaty of Riga in April of 1921 (later added into the Treaty of Versailles acts) which settled boundaries between the Soviet Union with its puppet – Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and Poland giving the Polish side an opportunity to move the eastern border to the shape somewhat remembering its peripheral frontier from nearly 125 years ago.

ern civilization” (Białasiewicz, O’Loughlin, 2002, p. 7) in which plentiful socio-cultural and economic factors blended occasionally creating sharp limits between themselves. Nearly 500 hundred years ago the idea of multi-national and culturally and religiously diverse communities had emerged within the realm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Somewhat idyllic community mainly consisting of Slavic ethnicities with the addition of relatively large Jewish diaspora had been kind of large-scale triumph of Commonwealth authorities and nobles being a well-known “project” among other Western countries. Although this demographical “project” could not last long due to the fact of the partition of the Commonwealth, it had certainly left its mark on the mentality of people living in Galician and Volhynian societies, creating a living myth of its kind – *Galicia Felix* (happy Galicia) – the land of the free, where no disparities and delimitations existed between people of different states, economic status, culture, ethnicity, language or religion. As Luiza Białasiewicz and John O’Laughlin refer to it, this idea would continually live in people’s minds and constantly be brought back as a romantic and patriotic slogan during early uprisings after the historic partition. However, it was not always seen like that by the Ukrainian side – some democratic differences and class disparities led to serious outbreaks, such as the one among the

**Fig. 2. Ilya Repin, Cossacks of Saporog Are Drafting a Manifesto**



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reply\\_of\\_the\\_Zaporozhian\\_Cossacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reply_of_the_Zaporozhian_Cossacks).

Zaporozhian Cossacks which escalated into Khmelnytsky Uprising in the middle 17<sup>th</sup> century commanded by Zaporozhian Host hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky<sup>2</sup> (from that moment one can start distinguishing not only Ruthenian but also Ukrainian national separateness and awareness).

Finally, after nearly seven decades after the final partition and two lost uprisings, the dream of *Galicja Felix* had been reborn. L. Białasiewicz and J. O’Laughlin recall that after 1867 *Ausgleich*<sup>3</sup> (hun. *Kiegyezés*) significant laxity, in a political manner, appeared in Austro-Hungarian Empire structure as “Polish interests were acknowledged by [...] with the granting [...] autonomy to the Poles of Galicia”. At that time three main nationalities inhabited the designated area of study (Fig. 3) – Jews, Poles and Ukrainians. The first two of them were concentrated mainly in urban areas whereas concentration of Ukrainians was dominant in rural districts. It was the crucial factor in creating the happy Galician myth as it was breaking up with unitarian and homogeneous European constructs. Under the Habsburg governance great cooperation emerged between Poles and Ukrainians, though spatial differences later appeared to play a significant role in shaping Polish-Ukrainian relations leading to escalations, conflicts and turmoil.

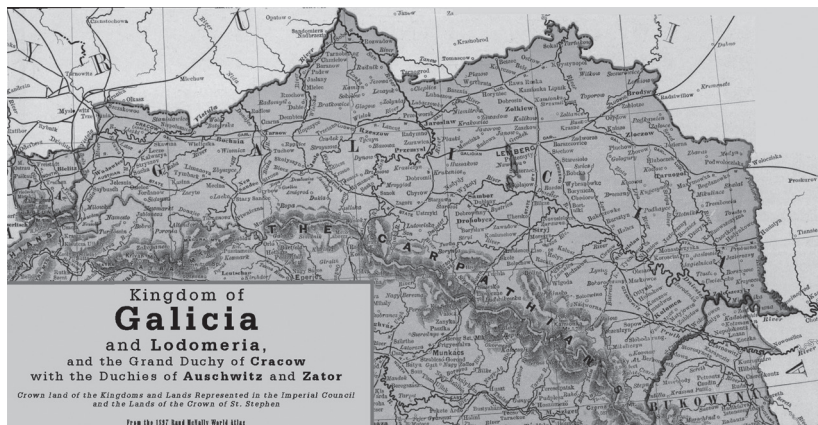
With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the geopolitical situation in Central and Eastern Europe rapidly changed. Due to the First World War a great number of newly independent countries had been created, many of them called buffer states between two powers – the Soviet Union and Germany. Yet, Ukraine without any diplomatic help in spite of trying to

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<sup>2</sup> Bohdan Zinoviiv Khmelnytsky (ukr. *Богдан Зиновій Михайлович*, pol. *Bohdan Zenobi Chmielnicki*) was the leader of Zaporozhian Cossacks Host and the uprising named after himself directed against the Polish Crown and polish magnates (mainly Jarema Wiśniowiecki – the most influential and powerful noble and property owner in Ukraine in that time period). Khmelnytsky Uprising is one of the most bloody and dramatic uprisings within the Commonwealth realms; it ended with a total havoc of the state, its weakening and millions of casualties, yet also led to enfranchisement of Cossacks. Khmelnytsky himself had become the national hero; every so often being brought back during the national events, being commemorated with statues or institution names throughout the whole country.

<sup>3</sup> Austro-Hungarian Compromise – establishment of semi-sovereign Kingdom of Hungary and re-organization of administrative structures of the Habsburg Empire. The whole process also led to applying more liberal policies regarding minorities living in the Empire’s realm *i.e.* giving autonomy to the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria which was the Austrian denomination for Western Ruthenia region incorporated to the Empire during First and Third partition of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

**Fig. 3. Administrative map of Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, 1837**



**Source:** <https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/411164640962759288/>.

proceed and win its independence through national liberation movements – including both socialist Ukrainian People’s Republic and West Ukrainian People’s Republic – could not hold neither Russian hostility nor Polish diplomatic pressure. Ukrainians were divided between Ruthenia in the Second Polish Republic and Central and Eastern Ukraine ultimately ruled by the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic within the Soviet Union; yet once again left without their own sovereign and independent state. During Interwar period, harsh policies targeting Ukrainian people were adopted both by Polish and Soviet sides; those had a significant impact on social tempers, later possibly on aggression, unrest, riots and what was called massacres of Poles and Ukrainians in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia where approximately 100,000 Poles were murdered and around 15,000 of Ukrainians killed in vengeance (Kondek, 2016).

Borders until the end of the Second World War never really fragmented Western Ruthenia. In order to follow the common idea of ethnic stability new artificial border had been realigned (Curzon proposition<sup>4</sup> had been adopted) cutting Ruthenia in half; dividing it once again between Poland and the Soviet Union, this time though with the borderline

<sup>4</sup> Hypothetical demarcation line presented by Lord George Curzon during the Versailles Peace Conference that sets Polish eastern border on Bug river line on south and along the Third Partition of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth east border in the northern part.

drawn far more westwards. Poles along with Boykos and Lemkos who inhabited that area had been resettled by force to Western Poland (Operation Vistula). Ruthenia was cut in half and became a mono-ethnic and mono-religious region. Furthermore, the demarcation line between those cultural factors appeared far more drastic than ever; strictly sealed and guarded, as Katarzyna Stokłosa depicts it. No further partnership between two nations had been possible, as is said “For ten years, the populations on either side of the Soviet-Polish border were entirely cut off from each other” (Stokłosa, 2012, p. 247). Artificial shape of the new border also led to “divisions of towns, villages, estates and forests”.

### **Contemporary condition of Polish-Ukrainian border and relations**

Poland was the first country to recognize the independent Ukrainian state (Draus, 2011, p. 69). Building foundations began with signing the “Treaty on Good Neighborhood, Friendly Relations and Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Ukraine.” in May of 1992 was essential to the Polish-Ukrainian relationship. As Jan Draus firmly portraits it, the intent of this agreement was to tighten mutual relations and amplify bilateral benefits regarding the political, cultural and economic matter. To a great extent establishment of “Bug” Euroregion in 1995 proved to be very beneficial; it has focused mainly on “spatial management, transportation, goods shipment, [...] culture, sport and tourism, preservation [...] of the natural environment, [...] cooperation between institutions and economic entities” (Janicki, 2010, p. 217).

Moreover, Poland has become a spokesman for Ukraine’s European integration processes. Polish politicians and authorities, to the delight of more a progressive part of Ukrainian society, invariably backed pro-european initiatives and democratic keynote, *e.g.* “Orange Revolution” in 2004 was strongly supported by key polish politicians such as Lech Wałęsa, president Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński or Bronisław Komorowski who visited Maidan during these times of unrest by themselves. Similar dealing had been adopted during the second climax on the Ukraine’s political scene – Euromaidan – when polish delegations also had been sent to Kiev and “Maidan” was directly supported by *i.e.* Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) leader – Jarosław Kaczyński.

This very progressive and EU-focused way of thinking among both sides of the relationship had greatly affected the current mentality and

opinions about international bonds. Due to the fact of the abolition of visa restrictions for Ukrainians in June of 2017 approximately million of them moved to Poland. Border is no longer that much of an obstacle for modern West Ruthenia inhabitants (from both Polish lubelskie and podkarpackie voivodeships and Ukrainian Lviv, Volyn, Ternopil, Rivne and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts). Polish and Ukrainian communities once again are being mixed and tight cooperation flourishes. Historical complexities seem to ease and fade.

An example of depicted trends could be seen within the area of the so-called small border traffic. Compared to Poland's other borders with non-Schengen states, the traffic at Polish-Ukrainian border prove to be the highest (Smętkowski, Németh, Eskelinen, 2017, p. 57). The number of registered border crossings has been steadily increasing since 2009 and also exceeding the volume of more than 12 millions annually (Ibid., p. 58). The principal motive of those crossings is shopping. The total retail sales value generated by Ukrainians in Poland is estimated at approximately 1 billion euros – this includes mainly the purchases of building materials, car parts, edibles and household goods (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2014). On the contrary, Poles generate nearly 60 million euros worth of retail sales in Ukraine wherein the main goods under transaction are fuel and excised goods such as cigarettes and alcohol (Smętkowski, Németh, Eskelinen, 2017, p. 59). This regularity might be caused by a variety of factors *i.e.* typically lower excise duties on the Ukrainian side, the possibility of so-called VAT return for Ukrainians or hryvnia and zloty exchange rates, that may be beneficial in certain period of time regarding purchasing specific goods.

### **Opinion polls review**

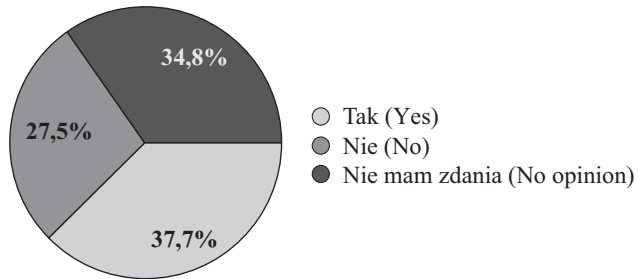
In May 2020 a series of surveys was conducted among Polish and Ukrainian communities. A total of 125 polls have been filled; 69 for Poles in the Polish language and 56 for Ukrainians in the Russian language. Questionnaires were run solely by the author, hence the most abundant representation was a group of people aged 19–34 (65.2% of Polish surveys, 60.7% of Ukrainian surveys [for the sake of simplicity consequent notation will be continued – where numbers from Polish surveys are presented firstly in the brackets, followed by the Ukrainian ones]). Relatively numerous



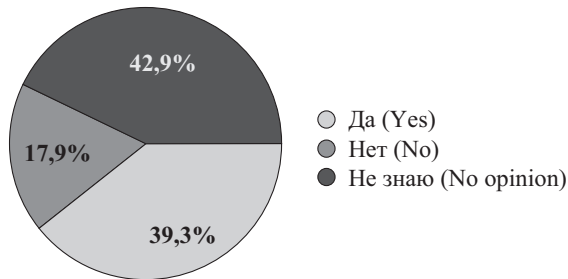
groups were ones consisting of people aged 35–49 and 50–65 (14.5% and 10.7%, 14.5% and 0%) and aged below 18 (1.4% and 25%). The smallest group surveyed in total were people aged above 65 (4.3% and 3.6%). More than half of respondents were women (52.2% and 57.1%), followed by men (44.9% and 42.9%) and individuals that identify as others (2.9% and 0%).

**Fig. 4. In your opinion, does the current shape of the Polish-Ukrainian border fulfills political and cultural needs?**

Сzy według Pana/Pani obecny kształt granicy polsko-ukraińskiej zaspokaja obecne potrzeby kulturalne i polityczne?  
69 odpowiedzi



По Вашему мнению, настоящая форма польско-украинской удовлетворяет сегодняшние культурным и политические потребности?  
28 odpowiedzi



**Source:** Own elaboration.

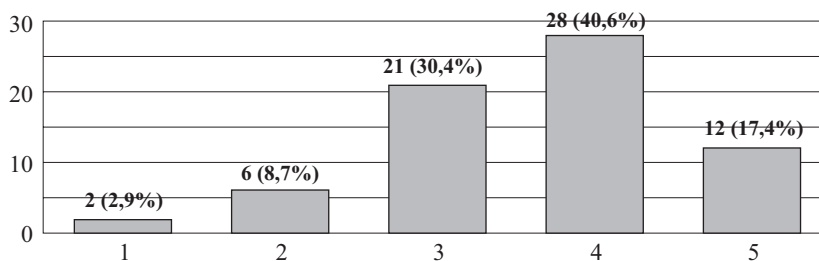
Nearly half of the answerers crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border from 1 to 3 times (44.9% and 50%). People who crossed the border from 4 to 6 times or more than 7 times were represented respectively by 4.3% and 17.9% regarding both sections. Individuals who never crossed the border represented a relatively large group (46.4% and 14.3%). Main pur-

poses of travel and/or migration were tourism and recreation (86.7% and 61.5%), followed by work (7.1% and 15.4%), education (0% and 26.9%), meeting with family and loved ones (9.5% and 11.5%), shopping and commerce (4.8% and 7.7%) and other (7.2% and 15.2%). On a scale from 1 to 5 respondents judged border crossing procedures rather neutrally (on average 3.0 and 3.3). Most of the negative opinions [below the grade 3 (30.4% and 14.8%)] were explained by a long waiting time (sometimes to 10–11 hours) and acts of bribery from the Ukrainian border officers side.

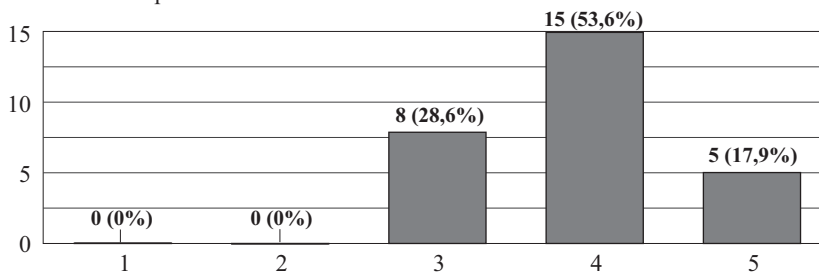
To the question, whether one’s opinion on the contemporary shape of the Polish-Ukrainian border satisfies current needs in a political and cultural manner, individuals answered diversely (Fig. 4). The vast majority of respondents admit that the current condition of the border fulfills the needs (37.7% and 39.3%) or has no opinion on that matter (34.8% and

**Fig. 5. In a scale from 1 to 5, how would you evaluate the perspective of Polish-Ukrainian cooperation within the European Union structures? [1: negatively, 5: positively]**

W pięciostopniowej skali jak ocenia Pana/Pani perspektywę współpracy Polski i Ukrainy?



По пятибалльной шкале, как Вы оцениваете перспективу такого сотрудничества Польши и Украины?



Source: Own elaboration.

42.9%). Rest of them (27.5% and 17.9%) state that the border does not meet their expectations.

Polish-Ukrainian relationship was evaluated rather positively by both communities, on a scale from 1 to 5, with an average of 3.30 by Poles and 3.64 by the Ukrainians. Furthermore, 59.4% of Poles agree that cooperation with Ukraine after its possible EU membership would end up with bettering the Polish-Ukrainian relations (with 24.6% without opinion on that particular matter and 15.9% not agreeing). Ukrainians responded to that question similarly with 60.7% of them agreeing, 28.6% without an opinion and 10.7% of them disagreeing. Overall perspective of such partnership was also described positively, on a scale from 1 to 5, with an average of 3.60 by Poles and 3.89 by Ukrainians. What is more, no negative opinions (below the grade 3) were given by the Ukrainians (Fig. 5).

## **Data analysis**

Less rigorous restrictions on the Polish-Ukrainian border have significantly increased cross-border traffic and overall migration. Poles alongside Ukrainians started to use opportunities provided by all association agreements and their assets, on a large scale and to further extent, which resulted in economic growth and growth of importance of tourism and commerce within the borderlands. Many Ukrainians are taking advantage of the current situation and migrating through the Polish-Ukrainian border to seek new opportunities, both in education and labor fields. Border crossing procedures have improved greatly, yet still some flaws can be observed, *e.g.* bribery acts and long waiting times (mainly during holidays and weekends).

Moreover, several changes in the case of relations and bilateral cooperation can be now distinguished. Young generation had put the historical complexities aside, being primarily guided by pro-european ideas and standards. Some references to UIA,<sup>5</sup> Stepan Bandera<sup>6</sup> and Home Army<sup>7</sup> had occurred among the answers to the opinion poll questions, though they

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<sup>5</sup> Ukrainian Insurgent Army (ukr. *Українська повстанська армія*); military and partisan Ukrainian formation of a nationalist nature, blamed for Volhynian genocide.

<sup>6</sup> Leader of Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and more radical fraction OUN-B, partially blamed for Volhynian genocide.

<sup>7</sup> (pol. *Armia Krajowa*); Polish resistance movement under Nazi occupation, partially blamed for Volhynian genocide.

Fig. 6. Poster (by Polish cinema network Helios) inviting Ukrainians living in podkarpackie voivodeship to attend film show in Ukrainian

**HELIOS**

**“Фантастичні  
звірі:  
Злочини  
Гріндельвальда”**  
з українським  
дубляжем!

**Неділя,  
25 листопада**

**Twoje miasto, Twoje kino**

**www.helios.pl**

Source: <https://rzeszow.wyborcza.pl/rzeszow/7,34962,24217288,seanse-z-ukrainskim-dubbingiem-w-kinach-helios-okazaly-sie-hitem.html>.

were generally alleged by individuals aged 50–64 and above 65. However, what is noticeable, those references were mentioned chiefly by the Poles.

Overall, Ukrainians have a slightly better opinion about the Polish-Ukrainian relationship. Likewise, they show that they have higher hopes regarding further and possible partnership inside the EU structures. This could be an effect of reasoning among both societies that in this situation somehow Poland is seen as a donor as well as Ukraine is seen as a recipient. According to CBOS studies in 2009, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of respondents support

the establishment of Polish-Ukrainian friendship. Similarly to the data gathered in this study, a large part of positive answers to a comparable question came from representatives of a young generation group.

## **Conclusions**

With the rapid escalation and evolution of Russo-Ukrainian relations it is not easy to evaluate the future geopolitical actions that could somehow better the Polish-Ukrainian partnership. Although major changes have been applied to internal and external politics of Ukraine (as Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential election in 2019) some minor discrepancies might be seen from Polish side due to the conservative and anti-european (in not so obvious fashion) policies of the ruling party of PiS (*Law and Justice*).

Yet, there has been a crucial alteration in people's mentality and mindset. Polish-Ukrainian border is not seen as an overwhelming barrier nowadays. People among both societies, to avoid conflicts and tragedy alike Volhynian genocide or Khmelnytsky Uprising, tend to seek more similarities between two and look for common aspects of their cultural, political, economic and social life.

It must be essential for both sides to popularize the Polish-Ukrainian bonds and friendship, showing those bonds in a positive manner. Perhaps a bit of help from Polish authorities in getting Ukraine into the Schengen Area structures might be crucial in tightening those relations. Such action could not only delete the contemporary border but also demarcate the "Modern" European one more eastwards, making Poles and Ukrainians, to a greater extent, linked with each other.

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## Granica polsko-ukraińska: relacje i współczesna ocena granic

### Streszczenie

Tematem powyższego artykułu jest ocena obecnego stanu i istoty granicy Polsko-Ukraińskiej oraz następstw związanych z jej dzisiejszym kształtem. Głównym celem jest odpowiedź na pytanie jak znaczne na przestrzeni lat były przemiany w postrzeganiu relacji Polsko-Ukraińskich pośród przedstawicieli obydwu narodowości, uwzględniając rolę granicy Polsko-Ukraińskiej w tych przemianach. Badania przeprowadzone na potrzeby pracy, to dwie ankiety wypełniane przez Polaków i Ukraińców odpowiednio w języku polskim i rosyjskim. Użyte metody pozwalają zrozumieć w jakim stopniu polepszyły się relacje Polsko-Ukraińskie, szczególnie przez ostatnie kilka dekad.

**Słowa kluczowe:** geografia granic, geografia polityczna, stosunki międzynarodowe, Galicja

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