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FLUCTUATING PASSENGER RAILWAY OFFERS BETWEEN POLAND AND UKRAINE (1991-2025) AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF REBORDERING AND DEBORDERING PROCESSES

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Abstract

The paper aims mostly at a qualitative analysis of the passenger railway connections between Poland and Ukraine offered since the collapse of the USSR. To this end, a four-item periodisation was proposed, based on breakthrough changes in this offer that were referred to a set of selected categories from the scope of border(lands) studies, mainly correlates of the concepts of debordering and rebordering. The analysis was based on railway schedules, expert materials, statistics of the Border Guard and the author's own field observations. Historically, the paper finds that there have been cycles (periods) of debordering and rebordering on the studied area, driven by ups and downs in both nations' mutual interest (shopping, smuggling, labour and war migration); as for the presence, it showcases that intensification of the train links between both states can be observed only at the national level, totally ignoring the borderland dimension. Consequently, the Polish-Ukrainian direction, as compared with Poland's remaining neighbourhoods, is quite advanced as for long-distance connections (macro level) and totally undeveloped as for local-regional ones (mezzo level).

Keywords

Poland • Ukraine • railway connections • neighbourhood • (re/de)bordering

Introduction

Geography, as well as social sciences, have long broadly discussed a close link between meanings of the border and its senses conveyed by social practices (Bauder 2011: 1126). Simultaneously, despite the many undoubted achievements of EU integration, national

borders are still a major barrier to the development of cross-border rail connections¹ (Kołodziejczyk, 2020: 261-262; Majewski, 2023: 96-97), framed as an element of these

¹ Although I do not, as a rule, stress that I am only interested in passenger connections in the article, the proposed analysis indeed completely abstracts away from freight services.

practices. Large deficiencies are particularly marked in Central Europe (Cavallaro & Dianin, 2019) and the situation looks even worse for connections across the EU external borders, like the Polish-Ukrainian one. The lack or underdevelopment of cross-border education and labour market that would generate a network of commuters, metropolitan regions or tourism are among major causes here, outweighing Poles' directing some attention towards Ukraine and bilateral contacts.

Even though the issue of connections between the two countries has lately gained in prominence, it has barely attracted scholars' attention. The dynamic subject situation, along with border(lands) studies only sporadically attempting to combine certain cycles and dependencies (Więckowski, 2025: 2), deliver reasons for this paper to at least partly fill that gap. In particular, the paper seeks to identify general trends in the offer of cross-border train connections between these states in the years 1991-2025 (especially over the last decade), with respect to the borderland and national scales. Within this timespan, I point at some stages (periods), qualitatively describe them and the respective social orders as well as critically embed all these within debordering and rebordering processes taking place in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland viewed more broadly. Thus the overarching ideas here are periodisation and categorization of the aforesaid offer rather than provision of detailed specification of what passengers have had at their disposal over the examined period, which is available in the literature (Beim & Soczówka, 2016: 22-23; Graff, 2017b: 59-61, 64-66; Dębicki, 2020: 185-190). A significant exception was made for the last five years (in particular the time since February 2022), which will be looked at more thoroughly.

The question of railway connections seems to have recently gained momentum in Poland, as it invests more and more resources in this branch of transport, Poles reveal a growing interest in travelling by train, we observe a kind of renaissance of railway connections across Europe (Donat, 2020), with all this

being financially supported by the European Union. Social significance of the paper can also be found in that it seeks to illuminate the underdeveloped issue of international rail links, with state boundaries still treated as barriers to greater cross-border mobility (Medeiros, 2019). Furthermore, it is also Ukraine itself, and its border to Poland (and other EU member states) in particular, that has attracted the EU's attention and funding (Sushytska, 2025), treating this corridor as a pivotal link between the two parties. The present paper may thus be treated as a contribution to a better understanding of the historical and sociocultural meanders of development of this branch of infrastructure as well as the Polish-Ukrainian borderland.

Below, I firstly deal with theoretical underpinnings of the considerations, concentrating on the concepts of national neighbourhood and its levels, debordering and rebordering, and imaginaries that are supposed to account for the processes identified; this section features the methods applied in the analysis, too. Secondly, I set the context of the study: deliver comments on the condition of the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood, including borderland, along with their periodization that tends to be commonly used, and make a note on the specificity of cross-border train connections. Thirdly, I conduct an analysis of these connections, with reference to the aforementioned concepts. And fourthly, I seek to embed my findings against a background of the relevant trends observable in other Polish borderlands, trying to qualitatively illuminate the situation in the Polish-Ukrainian one.

Theoretical underpinnings and methods

While taking the subject question, it is desirable to mention the conception of two levels of neighbourhood and its development. The first (macro) level refers to the abstractly understood neighbourhood of cultures, realised over a large space, and the second (mezzo) one includes two or more ethnic border communities coming into direct contact with

each other (Kłoskowska, 1991: 4; Dębicki & Makaro, 2021: 77-79). Even though scholars rarely employ this category (Dębicki & Makaro, 2020: 349), it comes useful, as in my case, while analysing the options of railway links (long-distance *versus* local-regional), their network or the fare tariff, and, consequently, determining the extent to which states meet the mobility needs specific to both levels of the neighbourhood.

Focusing on the borderland itself, one may also ask whether it is rather of an administrative type (with the border as a line performing mainly or exclusively political, delimiting or filtering functions) or social, the essence of which lies in numerous vernacular cross-border socio-cultural contacts (Kurcz, 2010: 291). It is also worth engaging the category of the so-called borderland man, who is in some way distinct in their behaviours from that of the inhabitants of the interior (Kurcz, 2010: 288-291). The present paper examines these issues with respect to the Polish-Ukrainian train connections.

Since around the mid-2010s, scholars have accentuated the multifaceted complexity, non-linearity, temporality and even unpredictability of the phenomena that shape the ontology of borders (Wille, 2024) that are "constantly refigured as political arenas, sites of contestation and spaces of possibilities – all at the same time" (Laine, 2022: 182). The same can apply to the Polish-Ukrainian border (including the railway border crossings therein), certifying of its emergent nature and variability, e.g. in terms of permeability (Cyrus, 2024: 70-76), and in terms of the variety of functions borders may have, including – as it is the case here – that of a technical/transportation barrier.

Theoretically speaking, the analysis draws mostly on the concepts of bordering, debordering and rebordering, commonly used by scholars (e.g. Paasi, 2005; Newman, 2006), also in relation to the Polish-Ukrainian boundary (Kurczewska, 2009). Bordering can manifest between two states on administrative, legal or collaborative platform (geopolitical dimension) and between societies

and individuals, along with their cultures, identities or needs (societal dimension). The former can be associated with top-down actions taken by states, whereas the latter one – with bottom-up initiatives, realised by local agents and individuals (Bürkner, 2017: 88-89). As this concept, as well as its derivatives (debordering and rebordering) may also be used metaphorically and hence related, for example, to cross-border railway offer (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021), the maintenance of such connections can illustrate top-down dimension of bordering, while travelling abroad and visiting one another – the bottom-up one.

The concept of debordering may be associated with a decrease in the significance of borders and national territories for social life (Popescu, 2012: 69-70). Hence, if either of the actors – the ones at the national or local-regional level – is successful in their endeavours directed at making the cross-border railway offer more attractive, one can speak of an example of debordering. Rebordering, in turn, may indicate "the reemergence of the barrier role of borders" (Popescu, 2012: 70). This role, too, can manifest itself not only in material constraints (walls, barbed wires, fences, etc.), but also through a lack of an attractive offer both in the sense of the categories of connections, their network and the tariffs (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). Consequently, the quality of this offer across the Polish-Ukrainian border can be located on an axis ranging from debordering to rebordering, with these categories being conceptualised by means a set of specific indicators – the number of transboundary connections, tariffs, the venues at which the trains make a stop (which tells us who is and who is not the target group of these connections) or the possibilities of transfer passengers have at the border stations – which thus account for the degree of these two processes.

As for the actions leading to these phenomena, they can be accompanied by narrative means of persuasion, aimed at gaining the audience's acceptance for the objectives to be achieved (Dolińska et al., 2021: 524-525).

Narratives, in turn, can generate specific types of reactions, understood as “coherent sets of ideas, images, symbols, emotions, beliefs and convictions” and called imaginaries (Bürkner, 2017: 93; 2020). These can be either bottom-up ones, as parts of narrative initiatives invented by local actors (journalists, activists, individuals) or top-down imaginaries – produced by the decision-makers at the local or central level, seeking to gain support for their aims (Bürkner, 2015: 34-36). In the first case, we have to do with indicators of these agents’ desire of subjectivity or a demand to order the social reality in which they live, regardless of the rhetorics delivered to them by structures of power or interests. Top-down imaginaries, in turn, fulfil their function when accepted or even overtaken and reproduced by the recipients of given phenomena. Importantly, one can also distinguish between, *inter alia*, social imaginaries, pertaining to the ways in which social relations are imagined and realised, and spatial imaginaries that refer to geopolitics: to the shape of the national territory, to the decision of who/what belongs to a bigger political or spatial units or organizations, etc. (Bürkner, 2020: 160-161).

Referring an imaginary, framed as a theoretical link between the everyday and multi-scalar power relations (Bürkner, 2015: 28-29; Kajta & Opiłowska, 2023: 1322), to the reality of railway debordering and rebordering practices, one finds out a few possible faces of this link. Firstly, certain decisions made at various levels go unaccompanied by any imaginaries; secondly, some ideas are produced, yet not transmitted further down to the grassroot level; thirdly, they are transmitted, yet it is not easy to find them, e.g. because a given question lies beyond the borderlanders’ scope of interest. Consequently, the researchers may just hope to come across these imaginaries while doing their field work.

The paper is based on four types of sources: particular editions of train timetables in Poland (paper and online versions) and Ukraine (electronic version), yet with major constraints pertaining to this source of information (Dębicki, 2019: 115); media reports,

including the expert ones (e.g. the rynek-kolejowy.pl portal); statistical data produced by two Regional Units (Bieszczady and Bug) of the Polish Border Guard; and the author’s own observations made in the field. Thus the present analysis may be said to feature some elements of longitudinal study, however with some serious disclaimers, most of all that the ethnography may have been more intense and deepened.

Setting the context

The Polish-Ukrainian border is 535 km long, and – except for its initial stage – it cuts across predominantly flat areas. At a considerable length, the border runs along two, yet not too wide rivers, so the construction of rail routes here was not a big technical challenge. Nonetheless, both Poland and (especially) Ukraine are relatively big countries in the European scale, the latter being additionally stretched quite far to the east, and most of its biggest cities, including the capital city of Kyiv, are located in the central, eastern and southern sections of the state, i.e. in a relatively big distance from the Polish border. This accounts for the fact that Polish-Ukrainian transboundary trains cover fairly huge distances, sometimes even more than 1100 km.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the following century, the territory which forms the Polish-Ukrainian borderland today used to be parts of two states: Austria-Hungary and the Tsarist Russia, being thus subject to different philosophies and politics of transportation and technical standards. The former two are still visible as for the density of railway network and, consequently, the number of crossings between Poland and Ukraine. As for technical issues, the major difference between both the Austrian and Russian systems regards the track gauge (1435 *versus* 1520 mm), still maintained by the Ukrainian side, although with serious plans to reduce this handicap.

Both parts of this borderland are economically less developed and deprived of more

significant urban centres as compared with other regions of Poland and Ukraine, with an important exception for the city of L'viv, with its more than 700,000 inhabitants in 2022. Even though it is located as many as about 80 km from the border, the vernacular life is somehow influenced by the Polish neighbourhood (Minich, 2020). The border region has some tourism potential, especially in its mountainous (Carpathian) part and in the northern section, along the picturesque meandering Bug river, much better exploited on the Polish side of the border, and the lakes of the region of Polesie. There are also local urban centres of Przemyśl, Hrubieszów and Chełm and the aforementioned L'viv that also have some significance for cross-border mobility, including various forms of tourism.

Viewed in terms of traditions of statehood, the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood, including borderland, is a rather new one: established in 1991, along with the appearance of an independent Ukraine. As regards interethnic relations, however, this neighbourhood dates back to the origins of Poland and Ruthenia at the end of the tenth century (Wojakowski, 2002: 98). Throughout the history, Poles and Ruthenians/Ukrainians have had close, intense, yet uneven and thus difficult relations (especially over the last 150 years). A part of this phenomena was the overlapping of the religious, ethnic and class dissimilarities within each group, making Poles more privileged (Olszański, 1994; Wojakowski, 2002). After the dramatic events of the Second World War (Motyka, 2011) as well as far-reaching constraints on cross-border mobility and mutual interest during the Communist period, since the 1980s (and even more so since the early 1990s) these relations started to flourish. And that is exactly where my analysis begins.

Before that, let us consider how these thirty-five years tend to be periodised in a sense exceeding the railway issue, stemming directly (though not exclusively) from geopolitical events that have regulated the scale of transboundary mobility across the Polish-Ukrainian border. In particular, it is

about both states' functioning in terms of border securitisation (Paasi, 2012), i.e. debordering and rebordering processes.

In line with this, one can point at four phases here. The first one (1991-2003) starts along with Ukraine declaring independence and finishes with Poland one-sidedly introducing the visa requirement for its eastern neighbours, on the eve of its expected accession to the EU and the Schengen Zone (Kurczewska, 2003: 48). Then there is the period of 2003-2009, when crossing the border became more difficult, particularly for Ukrainians (Zhurzhenko, 2024: 6). The third stage (2009-2017) is marked with the introduction of the local border traffic agreement that was supposed to facilitate the Ukrainian borderlanders' mobility to Poland. This phase passed into the fourth one (since 2017), set by the substantial liberalisation of the visa regime for the Ukrainian citizens by the EU, which was followed by a huge increase of their mobility to Poland. Within this timespan one can distinguish the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21), when the border was temporarily closed, and the first months of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine (2022), with the refugees circulating more intensively, yet, legally speaking, there has been no long-term change of regulations.

The railway reality, though subject to most of these breakthrough moments, is ruled by its own regularities. One needs here proper infrastructure (tracks, most of all), rolling stock (locomotives and carriages allowed to enter the other state's territory), or specialized equipment (e.g. track gauge changing facilities). Importantly, all of them can be exploited only in a narrow rail transport sector, which means that the investment decision, competing for financing with the strongly lobbied road transport, must be thoroughly considered. Finally, both states need to sign agreements regulating the tariffs, schedules, ticketing system, etc. All these legitimise that, as for the railway, the whole period be divided in a bit different way than purely geopolitical circumstances would suggest.

Railway connections between Poland and Ukraine: An attempt at periodisation

Below I suggest an authorial, four-item periodisation of the years 1991-2025, attempting to indicate the key factors defining the nature of each stage. Clearly, it is not about the exact border dates of each phase, and therefore, as far as the first two periods are concerned, I refer to full, yet conventionally conceived, decades. The time frames, events and processes constituting particular stages can be arranged in alternative ways and so this article is more of an invitation to a discussion than an exhaustive elaboration.

(1) Debordering: The renaissance of connections (the 1990s). Starting this section, it is necessary to look back to the USSR reality prevailing until the late 1980s. The Polish-Soviet border was then still closely guarded and cross-border contacts, although easier than previously, remained a rationed good. Apart from the transit from Przemyśl to Ustrzyki Dolne (part of the Warsaw-Zagórz connection), which crossed the western outskirts of the Ukrainian SSR, the few accessible passenger services were operated at the time via the Medyka-Mostyska II crossing, e.g. a transcontinental connection from Warsaw to Varna. The underdeveloped market for private cars favoured then journeys by train, yet, roughly speaking, the turnout at the Polish-Ukrainian crossings was not big.

The early 1990s brought a new quality to this neighbourhood. The new social, political and economical reality opened up new perspectives, especially for the borderlanders who could now initiate and maintain direct contacts, among which cross-border retailing was particularly visible. Hence, between 1994 and 1996, three more railway checkpoints were opened: in Krościenko, Dorożuk and Hrebenne, which was treated as a spectacular way of making the border more permeable (Miszczuk, 2002: 267)². New

local-regional courses were launched there (Chełm-Kovel and Sanok/Zagórz-Khyriv) as well as a fast train from Warsaw to Rava-Ruska; the local traffic was represented also by the Przemyśl-Mostyska II connection. There were also a few new long-distance trains launched at this time, connecting various Polish cities (also e.g. Berlin) with Kyiv, L'viv, Odesa and Chernivtsi, among others.

Considering both local-regional and long-distance connections run, or the fare tariff (with the existence of a special offer in border traffic), it is arguable that the 1990s saw attempts to satisfy the railway mobility needs present at both the borderland and the national level of the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood. Interestingly, however, while local-regional, relatively cheap courses – serving border traffic, but also notoriously devastated by smugglers – were addressed mainly to this category of travellers, the second type of connections, a train set of rather expensive sleeping carriages and berths (couchettes), was dedicated primarily to more affluent people, going on longer, perhaps business travels; all in all, there was a lack of proposals for the so-called average travellers (Dębicki, 2020: 182). Still, all these changes, even though rather limited in scale, certify to a specific sort of debordering here, with the borderland becoming more social in nature (Kurcz, 2010).

It is not easy to find out precisely what kind of imaginaries were (re)produced at that time as regards these newly opened crossings and newly launched connections, because this concept was not in use then. However, while investigating the literature on the then Polish-Ukrainian cross-border mobility (Miszczuk, 2002; Bojar & Kurczewska, 2004), one can infer that it was mainly a new set of broadly conceived opportunities that was exploited. This applied, too, to local cross-border railway connections, whose activation was postulated narratively by regional activists and practitioners all over Poland (Kurcz, 2006: 53-54).

² At the same time, in 1994, the aforementioned transit courses (however, of no value for any cross-border

mobility) were eliminated from the timetable, which meant the closure of the section from Przemyśl via Malhówce to Khyriv.

(2) Rebordering: The new socio-political order (the 2000s). The first harbingers of negative changes were observed in the late 1990s, when local-regional connections via Medyka got discontinued. Then, in the first half of the 2000s, there was a suspension of passenger services via Dorohusk and Hrebenne, and, finally, in 2010, the same fate befell the trains cleared at Krościenko. Thus, within a dozen of years or so, the connections (including some long-distance ones, not mentioned above), which until recently had so eagerly been launched, got significantly reduced. Even though one could observe single positive solutions and there were calls for more intensive exploitation of cross-border connections (Miszczuk, 2002: 273), the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood, especially on the borderland level, was in the 2000s subject to a progressive railway rebordering.

Among the indicators of the new social order then one can mention Poles' decreasing interest in Ukraine observable already since 1993 (Miszczuk, 2002: 266; Solecki, 2007: 305), the economic crisis in Russia and Ukraine of the late 1990s (Bojar & Kurczewska, 2004: 105; Solecki, 2007: 306), the deepening decline of the railway transportation in Poland (Trammer, 2019), along with the ever-increasing number of cars bought by Poles. These cuttings, however, for sure cannot be ascribed solely to the border regime Poland introduced on the eve of its EU accession, as the scale of Polish-Ukrainian rail travels had already been decreasing for some time (Graff, 2017a: 43). As the example of Zagórz shows, the local link to/from Khyriv played a minor role in this town's inhabitants' collective awareness already by the early 2000s (Gąsior-Niemiec, 2005: 114-116), and so the introduction of the local border traffic agreement in 2009 could no longer prevent this connection (the last local-regional one in the whole borderland!) from being eliminated soon.

The new socio-political order meant Ukraine's separation from Western Europe in administrative but also symbolic terms that materialized in the spread of unfavourable imaginaries and narratives (Bürkner, 2017; 2020) about this state in Poland (among others),

two of which deserve a special attention here. The first one referred to a commonly shared image of Ukrainians crossing the border as smugglers and retailers, mostly of cigarettes and alcohol (Solecki, 2007). Thus they require stricter border controls which they try to avoid by hiding these excise goods in various parts of carriages in which they travel, notoriously devastating them.³ Coupled with this remains the second imaginary showing Ukrainians as belonging to 'a different, i.e. worse, world'.

It can be assumed that both imaginaries, regardless of the degree of their veracity, if not contributed to the elimination of these cross-border connections, then at least provided serious justification for such a decision, i.e. supported a particular type of rebordering. Moreover, the living memory of these acts of vandalism and the 'worse world' image has impregnated stakeholders against the idea of reactivating these links (the author's talks with local trains' crews). Proposed and implemented at the central level, these imaginaries resonate and find analytical application in the borderland, too.

(3) Almost no bordering: Two connections for the privileged ones (2011-2016).

The consequence of the facts stated above is that 2011-2016 is the period of an almost complete collapse of the Polish-Ukrainian rail passenger transport sector, with only two trains a day crossing the common border: Warsaw-Lublin-Kyiv and Krakow-Przemyśl-L'viv. They did not serve local activities, as they crossed the border at night, and were composed only of carriages with expensive sleeping and/or couchette accommodation, and thus seemed to be an option solely for those who could afford to travel between bigger cities. In theory, such a solution was available: one could make a ten-kilometre long, nighttime journey between Dorohusk and Jahodyn and pay around 80 PLN for it (the author's own observation); in practice, it is hard to imagine passengers interested in such a travel.

³ In doing so, the role played by customs officers searching these carriages is essentially ignored (Beim & Soczówka, 2016: 24).

Noteworthy in this context was the failure to exploit the potential of the wide track from Przemyśl to L'viv, although at the same time more and more connections between these cities were being launched by bus operators (Beim & Soczówka, 2016: 21). The railway's misery was all the more striking as one could already count on the effects of the preparations for the Euro 2012 championship held by Poland and Ukraine, which, however, became apparent only in the following years (Graff, 2017a: 44-45).

The situation described provoked a number of questions. Is two long-distance connections per day all that can be afforded by two large and important neighbours which have a railway infrastructure allowing them to construct a rich transport offer and which are linked by a range of different activities? Why is local traffic maintained across Ukraine's border not only with Hungary (mostly due to a large Hungarian minority living in Transcarpathia), but also with Slovakia, which is said to have paid little attention to its eastern neighbour? Why does the rail offer remain hostage to the activity of the so-called 'ants,' i.e. local petty smugglers (Dębicki, 2020: 186-187), while at the same time the coach transportation market is booming?

The situation described makes one speak here of a full rebordering on the local-regional (borderland) scale of the neighbourhood and not much better on its national level. The major imaginary was then still the one signalled above: of Ukrainian smugglers and petty traders who had dominated the traffic at Polish-Ukrainian border, which thus needs to be securitised (Jaroszewicz & Mrozek, 2020). This imaginary was so strong as to overshadow Poles' rising tourist interest in Ukraine⁴ and a need for a richer transportation offer, i.e. not for businessmen only. This intuition was somehow confirmed in the

following years, but still it is difficult to decide what answers to the questions posed above would have been provided by the reality of the subsequent years, as the period of this near-total collapse was relatively short-lived.

(4) Gradual debordering: expanding the offer and new imaginaries (since 2016 on). Already around mid-2010s, an increased influx of Ukrainians to Poland was noted, generating a circulation of pendulum workers between the two states. It was a consequence of the steadily deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine as well as the annexation of Crimea by Russia and provocation and maintenance of the conflict in the Donbas by this state. As these labour migrations, reinforced by some interest of young Ukrainians to study in Poland, met Warsaw's demographic needs, it decided to expand the possibilities of crossing the common border by train.

In the last week of 2016, the first daily service from Przemyśl to Kyiv appeared. It was attractive in terms of travel, time and price conditions: operated by a modern set of integrated coaches, covering the distance from Przemyśl to L'viv (98 km) within 2h 15 minutes (including border controls by the two parties), for the cost of around 5-7 euro, including a seat reservation (the author's own observation of mid-2017), with the offer from Przemyśl to Kyiv being even more attractive (Jaroszewicz & Mrozek, 2020: 25-26). In August 2017, the second pair of such trains was introduced, complementing the Krakow-L'viv night connection (with carriages that started running to/from Wrocław from a certain moment). Over time, the Przemyśl service was expanded to include courses to Odesa, L'viv and Dnipro, resulting in six pairs of trains passing through the Medyka border crossing daily in 2019.

Consequently, as is showcased by the Border Guard data, in the first years of operation, these connections enjoyed passengers' considerable and growing interest: from 29,500 travellers of the Krakow-L'viv train in 2016, through almost 300,000 checked in the following year, to over 600,000 in 2019

⁴ In 2013, the last year prior to the outbreak of conflict in Donbass, 4% out of all Poles that spent at least two days abroad visited Ukraine, which made it their thirteenth most favourable tourist destination, *ex aequo* with Greece and Bulgaria (CBOS, 2014: 12).

(the last year before the COVID-19 pandemic). This gives an average annual attendance ranging, respectively, from 80 through 800 to 1660 passengers per day, depending on the number of trains operated in a given year (Straż Graniczna, 2025a).

As for the border crossing in Dorohusk, in mid-2017 a train from Chełm to Kovel (soon extended to Zdolbuniv) was launched, and the following year the second such connection was added. The three parameters usually employed in analyses showed this offer was worse than the one between Przemyśl and L'viv: the trains from/to Chełm were operated by less comfortable vehicles, the cost of travel was (while maintaining proportion to the distance) slightly higher, as the ticket from Chełm to Kovel (91 km) cost 5.80 euro, and the time necessary to cover this distance (2h 50 minutes) was longer. The author's cursory observations suggest also that the courses via Dorohusk served local traffic (including commercial activity and smuggling) to a greater extent than the trains from/to Przemyśl did, the latter being destined rather to facilitate mobility into/from the interior of Poland.

Still, as the Border Guard data suggests, the trains crossing the border in Dorohusk, too, saw a clear, though not so spectacular, increase in the number of passengers. While in 2016, it slightly exceeded 34,000 people, in subsequent years it increased to 67,600 (2017), over 116,000 (2018) and 100,000 (2019), which gives an annual average of 93 up to 318 people per day. Polish citizens constituted about 7-15% of the passengers here (Straż Graniczna, 2025b), with Ukrainians presumably constituting an overwhelming majority of the remaining passengers. A similar impression, yet based solely on the author's own observations, regards the Przemyśl-Kyiv trains.

Since June 2019, only the Warsaw-Kyiv train would pass through the Dorohusk crossing again, which was reflected in the reduced number of checks made. The official reason for suspending both recently introduced regional trains was provided by customs regulations stating that the Ukrainian Railways

pay tax on fuel entering Poland in the tank of a combustion vehicle (Fiszer, 2019). This requirement, although realistic in the light of the law, in the context of the reason for the irregularity, seems so absurd that it is thought-provoking in terms of a pretext for purposive eliminating the said connections; it also seems to certify that cooperation between the two countries' railway companies is difficult (Jaroszewicz & Mrozek, 2020: 27). They may have returned to the tracks (the Polish side declared its interest in such a solution), but in the spring of 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, passenger rail traffic across the Polish-Ukrainian border was completely suspended.

Reactivation of connections between Poland and Ukraine took place in the autumn of 2021. In the meantime, the private Czech carrier RegioJet continued its efforts to service traffic on the Prague-Mostyska II route (and further on to L'viv in the future), another Czech company (Leo Express) was interested in connections from Czechia to Medyka.

A new order and an important stage of railway debordering (partly temporal, though) was caused by the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine and the associated intensive migrations. From the first days of the war, the number of trains crossing the border in Dorohusk and Medyka increased, with L'viv becoming the crucial railway hub for refugees heading for Poland (Zhurzhenko, 2024: 32). A freight broad-gauge line through Hrubieszów was opened for passenger traffic, and trains were provided to pick up the refugees from the road border crossings in Hrebenne and Krościenko. Simultaneously, the Ukrainian authorities re-announced plans to modernize the local rail infrastructure leading to the border with Poland: the routes from L'viv to Mostyska and Rava-Ruska, as well as from Khyriv to the border crossings in Nyzhankovychi and to Stariava (Zhurzhenko, 2024: 32). Despite the ongoing war, some of these projects were implemented quite quickly; renovation works on the routes leading to these points were also carried out by the Polish side.

In the following months of the Russian aggression, more cross-border connections appeared, providing people with a relatively safe and affordable means of transport. According to the Border Guard, while in 2016 a total of some 64 thousand passengers were checked at rail border crossings with Ukraine, in 2024 this number skyrocketed to 2.22 million, with demand exceeding supply (Straż Graniczna, 2025a,b). All in all, the years following the COVID and the outbreak of the full-scale war can be framed as a time of ups and downs.

In September 2025, eleven pairs of long-distance passenger trains ran between Poland and Ukraine per day, connecting Warsaw, Chełm and Przemyśl with, among others, L'viv, Kyiv, Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv or Zaporozhye. Four of them crossed the border in Dorohusk,⁵ six in Medyka, and the remaining one in Hrebenne, where regular rail traffic had been restored (after an eighteen-year break) in 2023, thanks to the private carrier *SKPL Cargo sp. z o.o.* Its mission, however, came to an end here in August 2025, and since that time the traffic (one connection per day) is operated by the state-owned company. This train connects Warsaw and Rawa-Ruska, from where it is possible to continue the journey to L'viv and Chernivtsi with a convenient door-to-door transfer formula. Despite the renovation works carried out by both sides on the route and the administrative efforts undertaken, it has not yet been possible to launch connections through two local border crossings on the Przemyśl-Malhowice-Khyriv-Krościenko route.

As for these eleven pairs of trains, there is also the question of the stations where passengers can get on/off them. In the case of each of the three rail border crossings, one

of these stations is located from its foreign counterpart at a distance large enough to make the offer in question in practice inadequate for people (mostly Ukrainian citizens) interested primarily in a commercial, smuggling, family or social nature of the journey.⁶ Moreover, at four border checkpoints (Dorohusk, Medyka, Jahodyn and Mostyska) a fairly long stopover of these trains was planned anyway, but without the possibility of exchanging passengers. It all suggests this offer is not dedicated to the borderlanders (Zhurzenko, 2024: 12); moreover, it did not mean to be so, which was once confirmed by a Border Guard officer in the course of an informal conversation (Dębicki, 2020: 189).

Instead, as mentioned, these connections featured quite attractive travel time, with customs and passport control being carried out in comfortable conditions and in quite tight, strictly defined time frames, sometimes also during the train's run, which is particularly important at the poorly trafficked Polish-Ukrainian border. It is also the cost of travel that seems quite attractive, yet mostly for Poles and those Ukrainians who earn in Poland, but not so much for travellers who would like to get this money back through trade or shopping – the dominating activities of the Ukrainian borderlanders in Poland (Minich, 2020: 12-13), quite significant in their family budgets (Zhurzenko, 2024: 12).

As for the relatively positive narrative context accompanying all these improvements, it was first evoked by Poland's need to manage the growing Ukrainian interest in its labour market (Graff, 2017b: 55, 71), also by providing them with satisfactory conditions of getting to/from Poland, much different from what had been the case at road crossings (Jaroszewicz & Mrozek, 2020). It is also the very annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine that are said to have created a positive narrative climate and

⁵ In practice, it is three trains that cover the Ukrainian section of this route, as the Warsaw/Chełm-Kyiv (Kyiv-Chełm/Warsaw) trains are merged/disconnected at the border. Depending on the station where this act takes place – in Dorohusk or Jahodyn, which is not specified in the timetable – one can say there are four or three cross-border links there. Here it was assumed there are four of them.

⁶ Controversial as some of these activities may seem, it is, however, also them that contribute to the activation of the borderland in its social sense (Kurcz, 2017: 59-61).

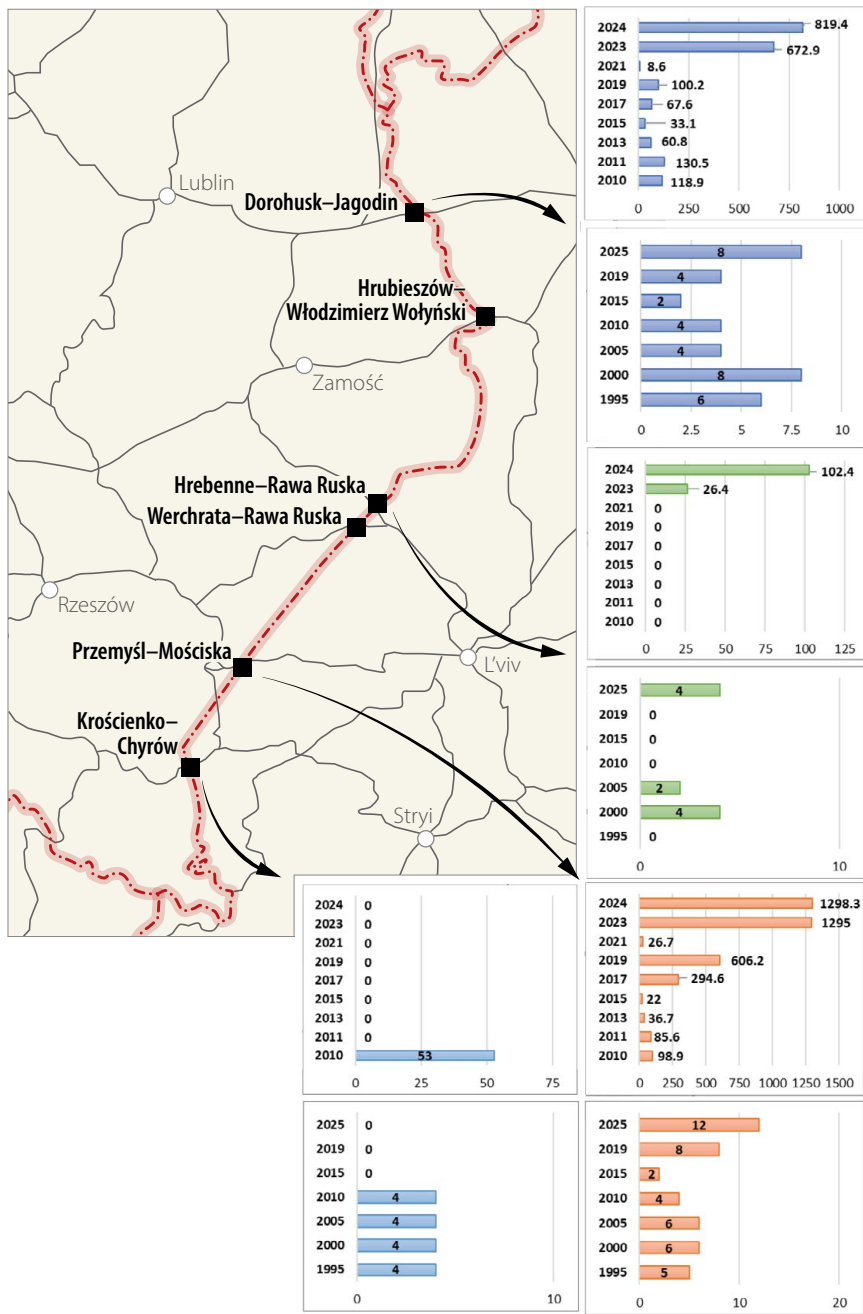


Figure 1. Map of the railway border crossings at the Polish-Ukrainian frontier with the numbers of passengers cleared at particular spots in the years 2010-2024 (upper figures; in thousands) and the numbers of trains crossing the border in the years 1995-2025 (lower figures)

Source: author's own elaboration based on the data from the Polish Border Guard and train timetables in Poland (paper versions – for the years 1994-2012; PKP, 2025).

advantageous spatial imaginaries around Ukraine: as a Russian victim and a natural part of Europe and, prospectively, the EU (Bürkner, 2020: 161-163). The impetus for improving the cross-border offer was provided also by the liberalisation of the border regime by the EU, addressed to the citizens of Ukraine (mid-2017), which can also be ascribed to the imaginaries identified by Bürkner (2020). The Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine only made all these ideas stronger and more convincing so that they could translate on boosting its railway offer to Poland.

For the past ten years we have been observing a substantial increase in the offer under study, both in terms of the number of connections (especially at the crossing in Medyka) and travel costs, even though its subjective value seems to depend on a passenger's economic situation. Thus, with respect to these parameters, one may speak of a definite debordering, which, additionally, has been supported by appropriate narratives. At the same time, however, this improvement can be observed at the national level of neighbourhood only, whereas the borderlanders' needs have still been totally neglected.

Discussion

As there has been a lot going on with reference to the railway connections between Poland and Ukraine over the analysed thirty-five years, the paper suggests distinguishing four periods here. And so, there was the first debordering (the early 1990s) as a multifaceted consequence of a great political change, observed both at the local-regional (borderland) and national scale of this neighbourhood. It resulted in a specific sort of debordering, with the borderland becoming more social in nature (Kurcz, 2010). Then, from the late 1990s to 2010, we witnessed a staggered process of the railway rebordering. It followed from Poles' declining interest in the neighbours, a bit less intensive smuggling and retailing of alcohol and cigarettes, along with the devastation of carriages.

Consequently, in 2011-2016, there were just two pairs of long-distance trains a day operating across this boundary, completely neglecting the borderland level of the neighbourhood, marking the third and the darkest period ("strong rebordering"). Finally, after 2016, there has been the second debordering, triggered mostly by the cross-border mobility of Ukrainian labour and, subsequently, war migrants, for whom mainly long-distant connections were launched.⁷

The railway offer at the Polish-Ukrainian borderland of the early 1990s was a local variation of debordering processes taking place across other Polish boundaries (Kurcz, 2006: 53-54), driven by progressive ideas of intensive cross-border cooperation. This can be framed in terms of the process of Europeanization, both in its bottom-up and top-down mode (Opiłowska 2014: 276), with Poland's eastern borderlands (incl. the one with Ukraine), however, being subject to the latter one. Analogically, folding these (mainly) local possibilities in the late 1990s, contrary to the central authorities' declarations, was also a broader tendency (Kurcz, 2002: 24). The 2000s still featured a poor railway transportation offer all over Poland (Trammer, 2019), whereas the next decade was a bit more diversified with that regard.

As for the early 2010s, it was a bad time not only for the Polish-Ukrainian borderland but also for the Polish-Slovak one: there were just two local train connections, one of which operated only on working days (Więckowski et al., 2012: 86). Already a few years earlier long-distance connections to Slovakia (to Budapest via Bratislava) were directed through the area of the Czech Republic. Since 2012, it has been only the crossing in Zwardoń serving the Polish-Slovak rail traffic (except for a few holiday courses running via Muszyna and Łupków in some years). Interestingly,

⁷ There was a short interlude within this period, evoked by the pandemic-driven suspension of the links (2020-2021), yet it is not legitimate to claim that after 2010, an expansion of connections was noticed here only after 2022 (Bocheński, 2024: 564).

in mid-2010s, the number of international trains crossing this border was lower than the ones crossing the Polish borders not only with Germany and Czechia, but also the ones with Ukraine and Belarus. Moreover, this borderland has the lowest number of railway border crossings (exploited and unexploited) in relation to the length of the border out of Poland's all seven borders (Dębicki 2017: 136-137).

The situation was much better between Poland and Czechia, yet for years it was easier to travel by train between big Polish and Czech cities than locally, i.e. across the very borderland (Kołodziejczyk 2020: 262). The offer started to boost in the early 2010s (Bocheński, 2024), yet this process did not proceed fast. In 2013, there were as many as seven rail border crossings exploited there, with nineteen local-regional links (some of them, however, operating only at the weekends and/or in the summer, some others cut off from the Polish railway network⁸), and eight long-distance ones, useless for the borderlanders (Dębicki, 2014), locating the offer here below the potential of the Polish-Czech neighbourhood.

Briefly speaking, in the early 2010s, the railway offer across the two Polish southern borderlands still did not reflect them being geographically, demographically, economically and infrastructurally much more developed than the Polish-Ukrainian one. And as for the Polish-German rail traffic, it has always been most advanced as compared to the remaining Polish frontiers; this was, however, visible not so much in relation to the trains reaching Berlin as at the local-regional level.

However, the further we move on, the more divergent processes take place in Poland's eastern *versus* western and southern borderlands. While 2011-2016 was the dark period for the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, the cross-border offer to/from Czechia, and even more so to/from Germany, flourished then almost year by year. Consequently, although

since 2017 the number of trains crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border started to increase, the German and the Czech borderlands served as much as over 87% of all Polish international connections then (Dębicki, 2019: 118), the latter, moreover, still having some potential to be used (Kołodziejczyk, 2020). The situation carried on more or less like this in the subsequent years as well, with Ukraine locating at the third position among all Polish neighbours.

At the same time, while talking about the presence, we need to distinguish between the two levels of neighbourhood. In September 2025, the railway offer across the Polish-Ukrainian border on the national level (11 pairs per day) is the same as that with Germany and second only to Czechia (17-18 pairs operated by both the state-owned company and by private operators: Leo Express and RegioJet).⁹ Thus it substantially outnumbered the remaining four neighbours, including Slovakia which can be reached from Poland by two long-distance trains a day only (from Warsaw and Warsaw/Przemyśl) and via Czechia (i.e. omitting the Polish-Slovak border), certifying that even intra-EU boundaries may constitute serious barriers for cross-border mobility (Kolosov & Więckowski, 2018).

As for the local-regional (mezzo) level, however, we have now, on the one hand, much diversified, yet generally speaking quite rich, offers at the Polish-German and Polish-Czech crossing points (with brilliant cases of Świnoujście and Kostrzyn, and quite convenient in Zgorzelec, Cieszyn and Szklarska Poręba, for example), with further trails re-opened across the Polish-Czech boundary over the past twenty years (Szklarska Poręba, Lubawka, Mieroszów, Głuchołazy, Chałupki,

⁸ The case of Głuchołazy, which the town has links in two directions to Czechia, yet no connections to other Polish destinations.

⁹ Moreover, it was only the four pairs of trains from Gdynia to Prague, introduced at the end of 2024, that made this difference in the Polish-Czech cross-border offer. As far as courses between Poland and Germany are concerned, one of them (Warsaw-Munich) runs through Czechia and Austria, another one (Wrocław-Berlin) sets out only on selected weekends, and the remaining ones (9 pairs) cross the border at just the same place, i.e. in Słubice.

Cieszyn) and talks conducted as regards Porajów, Zawidów and Kudowa Zdrój. There is also a rather uneven situation across the Polish-Slovak border, with ten trains to/from Zwardoń and just seasonal connections via crossings in Muszyna and Łupków and no bright perspectives for further improvements. On the other hand, there are no links of this type at all from Poland to Russia, Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine. Altogether, even though there has recently been observed significant debordering across the Polish-Ukrainian boundary, the well-developed offer to Germany and Czechia makes Ukraine occupy still the same position as for the percentage (ca. 6%) that links to/from this state represent of the total number of passenger trains crossing the Polish borders (Bocheński, 2024: 565). Simultaneously, altogether and quite unexpectedly, the rail issue turns out to be another factor distinguishing Ukraine from Poland's remaining two non-EU neighbours.

It is also noteworthy to look at the period analysed through the prism of the events, whose significance as for the cross-border railway transport was different than for the border permeability itself in general, i.e. viewed (geo)politically. As it was showcased, the appearance of an independent Ukraine (1991) was obviously crucial on all levels. Yet, after just a few years, one could observe a decline in (especially Polish) passengers' interest in visiting the neighbours; in this sense, strengthening border control (2003) can be perceived just as a 'belated response' to the cuttings begun already in the late 1990s. Then there was a string of potentially serious events whose importance, however, turned out to be insufficient to permanently influence the vernacular railway offer either way: introduction of the local border traffic agreement (2009), football European championship held in Poland and Ukraine (2012), Poles' growing interest in Ukraine (the early 2010s), the migration crisis (2015) and the COVID pandemic (2020-21). Liberalization of the visa regime, i.e. a geopolitical phenomenon (2017), was indeed a fundamental step to have substantially upgraded the offer in question, the

same as Russia's full-scale hostilities towards Ukraine (since 2022), although it has not been accompanied by any permanent border regime loosening. Simultaneously, both these events were for some time narratively enhanced by imaginaries reflecting generally positive attitudes as for the Polish-Ukrainian relations; the same holds true for the EURO 2012, yet not so intensively and without any impact as for the number of trains.

Thus, a sort of borderlands resilience (Andersen & Prokcola, 2022) comes up here, however, of a different character than at the intra-Schengen borders. For regardless of whether we come this phenomenon down to an attempt at maintaining, metonymically speaking, the area's well-being and adaptive capacities or rather at its acquiring new capabilities (Laine, 2022), the crucial thing will be the different pre-crises conditions and the very natures of these shocks. In Western Europe, the bordering realities from before the migration issue and COVID-19 can be evaluated as at least satisfactory, and therefore these developments are legitimately said to have inhibited co-operation and introduced new national policies, fuelled by unilateralism (Böhm, 2023), whereas for the Kyiv authorities – those were stimuli to push Ukraine towards the EU. In a similar vein, the aforesaid phenomena may have caused Poland's eastern rebordering, generally speaking (Więckowski, 2025: 9), yet as for its rail connections to Ukraine the trend has been different. Thus this dimension of the neighbourhood is subject to dissimilar variables and thus yields a specific periodisation.

The rail connections from Poland to Ukraine can also be considered through the prism of their contribution to the social development of the borderland itself. Framed sociologically, where the key issue is whether borderlanders interact with each other in a relatively intensive way (Kurcz, 2006; 2010), this issue evokes a few questions. Should we include L'viv and Kovel – the first cities on the Ukrainian side (located respectively 85 and 65 km from the border), where the analysed trains stop – in the scope of the borderland?

Do their inhabitants use these trains and in what proportions? And do they direct their activity primarily towards the borderland itself? One surely should not eliminate these cities from the borderland area in social terms just because of their distance from the border (i.e. according to administrative criteria), as long as their inhabitants commute to Poland (Raczyk, 2020: 57). However, I do not have precise data on all these issues now but informal estimations. One of them says that since these connections were created primarily (or even exclusively) for those Ukrainians who reach for Poland as migrants or students, one can presume they experience the borderland (mainly) in transit.

What remains clear is that these borderlanders have since 2011 been deprived of any local-regional cross-border connections, and in this regard they are somehow handicapped as long-distance trains are by definition dedicated to link bigger cities only (Kołodziejczyk 2020: 262). Thus, the areas of Przemyśl, Hrebenne and Chelm "may be located [...] along transcontinental transportation corridors that have the potential to benefit the development of [that] borderland" (Popescu, 2012: 80), yet these benefits can hardly be identified within the context of the local-regional railway traffic there. This, in turn, renders this borderland mainly (exclusively?) administrative in nature (Kurcz, 2010) as far as this sort of transportation is concerned.

We also obtain here a specific representation of the so-called borderland man, who tends to be in a way distinct from the inhabitants of the interior (Kurcz, 2010: 288-291). More specifically, here this man is distinguished (*in minus*) by the lack of access to rail transport with Poland/Ukraine, and hence is condemned (especially in the vicinity of Jahodyn/Dorohusk) to the use of the inconvenient nearby road crossing. For on the one hand, there are comfortable carriages, relatively short travel (and customs and passport control) times as well as better attitudes of the border officers towards the foreign border crossers; on the other hand, i.e. at road

crossings, one faces long queues, crowding, less friendly attitudes of service representatives as well as – in the case of the pedestrian crossing in Medyka – exposure to all weather conditions.

Bearing in mind that the overall reality of these crossings overtly contrasts with the attitude of European services towards migrants from Africa or Asia, one can think here of the concept of a polysemic nature of borders that may convey different senses to different people, depending on their different social statuses (Balibar, 2002: 81-82). In view of the above, the thesis suggesting a sort of segregation (clearly, an informal and implicit one) of those willing to cross the Polish-Ukrainian border becomes justified. Thus, bearing in mind the nature of the Polish-Ukrainian border which is the EU's external border, we are dealing here with people being divided into those who are welcome in other countries and those for whom no one is waiting there (Bauman, 1998; Leutloff-Grandits & Wille, 2024: 18-19). Specific about the borderland in question is that Ukrainians are not separated here by nationality as such, or by race (as is the case with migrants from distant cultures, in comparison with whom, however, Ukrainians are much 'less alien'), but by differences in social and economic status. Such a phenomenon, hardly present at the Polish-Ukrainian border a decade ago, makes one think of its changeability, too (Laine, 2022; Cyrus, 2024).

Having examined and combined certain cycles and dependencies (Więckowski, 2025) of the Polish-Ukrainian railway reality, I have proposed a four-item model of debordering and rebordering processes taking place there (Popescu, 2012; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). As it was showcased, they are subject to temporality (Wille, 2024), tend to be internally diversified and relate in varying degrees to the national (macro) and borderland (mezzo) levels of the neighbourhood analysed (Dębicki & Makaro, 2021). Consequently, this borderland discloses its specificity in terms of the railway transportation: it is of an administrative nature and its inhabitants may legitimately feel inferior to their fellow nationals

from both interiors, thus certifying that the figure of the borderland man (Kurcz, 2010) applies to this border region. It is difficult to precisely determine the shape of imaginaries (re)produced on the occasion of all these changes (Bürkner, 2017; 2020), yet one can observe their variability that partly regulates the Poles' generalised attitudes to Ukraine and debordering and rebordering processes oriented at it.

Conclusions

As the EU external border, the Polish-Ukrainian boundary was for most of the period analysed geopolitically highly experienced, socially untamed and infrastructurally underdeveloped, with its nature being influenced by decisions taken outside this borderland. Recent years, however, have partly intensified thinking about this border, also in railway terms. It is also new forms of horizontal transborder ties – cooperation projects, dense social networks, transnational family relationships, pendulum migration – that have gained importance here and accounted for this border being called 'an almost intimate space routinely crossed, inhabited and accommodated by local residents' (Zhurzhenko, 2024: 37).

As the paper showcases, there is still much to be done with respect to the railway offer within this neighbourhood, especially at its borderland scale, yet much has also been achieved so far, even though this progress is visible mostly against the background of the decline of the 2000s and its extreme form in the first half of 2010s. Ukraine has many times declared its geopolitical turn, and it manifests also in its cross-border railway connections with Poland. Migration has turned out to be a real game changer here and relatively low capacity of the road border crossings has created space for rail transport, which is proving to be very important for passengers, making this neighbourhood be no longer a zone of exclusion.

The area in question still provides us with an interesting analytical context that

demands further investigation. Firstly, the list of current international rail destinations from/to Przemyśl only – Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Graz, Bratislava or Budapest – clearly shows the potential of the mobility of Ukrainians to and via Poland. Secondly, we still have cigarettes and alcohol smuggled across the border, hindering the re-launching of local-regional cross-border train connections. Thirdly, there is a missed opportunity for the activation of the inhabitants of the areas in the vicinity of the route (Majewski, 2023: 97). Fourthly, it is legitimate to ask to what extent the Polish borderlanders are interested in visiting (also by train) the area across this border.

The questions analysed will surely remain vital and thus provoke further analyses. There are serious plans as for the next connections between Poland and Ukraine, but still just the long-distance ones, most of all. The local-regional links from Khyriv to Przemyśl and Zagórz/Sanok have not so far been launched for the reasons (insurance issues, the fares to be covered by the operator) that may be hard to understand for passengers who know that both parties have just spent considerable sums of money to renovate both tracks. It is another argument for the claim that cooperation between Poland and Ukraine continues to be uneasy (Jaroszewicz & Mrozek, 2020), while at the same time more serious problems determining the character of mobility over this border seem to outweigh the railway issues there (Jaroszewicz, 2024). Finally, there is a set of open geopolitical questions that will account for all the developments here, with various scenarios also for this neighbourhood as one of the major European channels of transportation.

Editors' note:

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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