



ARTICLE  
SPECIAL SECTION

*Borders in Globalization Review*  
Volume 5, Issue 1 (Fall & Winter 2023/2024): 125–138  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr51202421523>

# Un/Certain Borderlands: Multimodal Discourses of Border Renaissance in Polish and German Media

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*Since geopolitical crises accelerate migration from warzones or places of forced cultural homogeneity, we can notice an increasing meaning of borders today in a changing society, not only in Western but also in Eastern Europe and in-between. At the same time, findings from interdisciplinary border research emphasize precarious phenomena of ‘uncertainty’ or ‘in-between-ness’ and hybridity, suggesting that borders have a ‘liminal quality’. In the emblematic case study on re/bordering at the German–Polish borderland, traits of a renaissance of the border and territorial un/certainty, mean irritation in space, cultures, and forms of belonging. In developing discursive practices in time such as symbolic and socio-spatial phenomena of demarcation, exclusion, and transformation, this report refers to empirical phenomena like the “Rosary to the border” and “LGBT-free zones” in Poland or the “Willkommenskultur” in Germany. It juxtaposes interpretive reciprocal patterns of borders, like ‘fear’ and ‘irony’ that weave a tapestry of un/certainty. These examples show how the Polish–German borderland is affected by re/bordering practices without necessarily being geographically close to it and therefore show its liminal quality.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Territorial borders are said to be of crucial importance for the political-social order. However, borders are not given but emerge through socio-political and cultural bordering processes that take place within society (Scott 2020, 4). Therefore, we can ask ourselves if, in times of political and social disorder and transformation, borders also become more dynamic, relational or even more un/certain?<sup>2</sup> If we go back in time and look at Central Europe, we can observe ambitious plans for supposedly debordering (Balibar & Collins 2003) after a long period of stabilization and disbanding of borders in the second half of the 20th century. Later, it was the global flows (Appadurai 1996) of people, goods, and (political) symbols migrating across borders that made

the political and social order stagger. It also brought about tendencies of supposedly rebordering processes, as Chiara Brambilla states, analyzing the time of strong forced migration flows: “The processes of change due to globalization have, on the one hand, led to greater integration and global consciousness and, on the other, to a renewed demand for certainty, identity and security followed by the spread of protectionist policies on the economic level and feelings of anti-immigration” (Brambilla 2015, 15).

The path-dependent demand for certainty in time is what can emblematically be observed in German and Polish media discourses in the border region. Especially

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this was the case since the peak of the debordering phase (which started with Poland joining the Schengen Agreement in 2007) when the law allowing for free movement of workers within the European Union in 2014 was enforced (cf. Kahanec et al. 2016). Later, the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 (cf. Grosse & Hettnarowicz 2016) and the coming to power of the national-conservative party PiS ("Law and Justice" (cf. Bill & Stanley 2020) triggered a right shift in the political agenda in Poland (Žuk & Žuk 2022, 2018). But the society responded by dividing itself into two camps of either nationalistic, anti-immigrational, and homophobic groups, on the one hand, and liberal, pro-European groups, open for a diverse society, on the other. Accordingly, in media discourse, symbols of the fronts emerged out of the influence of the Polish Catholic Church, and those associated with the liberal cross-border bridge builders confront each other in a quite unmediated way. The formation of the two groups, leading to opposed discourses, is what shows the multidimensionality of the bordering phenomena. Accordingly, I claim that there is not a phase in the discourses appearing in the two countries in which we can observe tendencies of only debordering or rebordering practices. While transformation and crises have certainly advanced the ways in which we approach and understand practices of bordering, it is equally evident that major discrepancies remain present in conceptualizations of the un/certainty of borders. Furthermore, little consensus seems to exist around its central notions. Building on the approach of Rosa and Reckwitz (2021) of an increasing significance of borders—in both senses of bordering and its multidimensionality—in a changing society, un/certainty of borders can be understood in (at least) two ways. According to the science on risk perspective, we can detect two common streams of uncertainty. First, un/certainty in society as a chance to develop new markets or political and social alliances (Bernstein 1998). Second, uncertainty as a risk, collectively imposed and thus individually unavoidable (Beck 2009, 1989).

Hence, the paper deals with the following questions: From the perspective of the un/certainty of borders, what kind of multimodal discursive bordering constructions can be depicted in German and Polish media in time? How can they be included as elements in the conceptualization of borders and un/certainty? What is the relation between the increase of the importance of borders and the socio-spatial un/certainty of borders? In developing discursive practices such as symbolic and socio-spatial phenomena of demarcation, exclusion, and transformation, I will refer to emblematic empirical evidence: the Schengen Agreement, the law allowing for a free movement of workers within the EU, and the right-wing turn of the Polish government since 2015, including various forms of seemingly rebordering actions. In this empirical case study, I will focus on these empirical evidences as socio-spatial constructions of borderlands in German and Polish media. Therefore, I analyze multimodal discursive practices from 2007 until 2019 in German (*Märkische*

*Oderzeitung, Tagesspiegel*) and Polish regional newspapers (*Gazeta Lubuska, Głos Wielkopolski*) with the highest circulation. Furthermore, I will discuss both complex trends in border studies (Wille 2021) and traits of territorial un/certainty, meaning irritation in space, cultures, and forms of belonging. By building the socio-spatial construction of borderlands, the aim is to weave a tapestry of the discursive and multimodal narrative of both the increasing significance of borders and the un/certainty of territorial borders at the same time and to show how these two border research trends are interrelated. Additionally, the consideration of multimodality of the discursive construction of borders allows for the perspective on also symbolic and semiotic implementations of un/certainty. The multimodal research design based on discourse analysis expands the perspective of border representations within the framework of interpretative patterns that co-determine the process of how borders come into being. This means that border knowledge is (re)formulated by means of these patterns, with the possibility of representing borders through interpretative schemes that co-determine the emergence of borders (Sommer & Bembnista 2021, 436). In concrete terms, the analysis focuses on reconstructing patterns of interpretation that, as discursive constructs, also co-determine the spatial reality of space (Felgenhauer 2009, 261). In order to determine empirical examples of border complexities that display both, the setting of boundaries in a site of struggle as well as the constructions of bordering practices, a multimodal perspective allows to combine the explicit knowledge of images with the 'reading-between-the-lines' approach of semiotic depictions.

In the following, I will first draw the readers' attention to the conceptual approach of un/certainty from a socio-spatial borderland perspective. Afterward, a closer look at the methodological tool of the multimodal discourse analysis serves to understand the constructions of symbolic and socio-spatial phenomena of demarcation in the empirical data in order to bring them back to the relation of border renaissance and un/certain borderlands.

### **Conceptualizing Un/Certainty from a Socio-Spatial Borderland Perspective**

In this part, I will present the growing sense among scholars of border studies that the "territorial trap" is "now even more inadequate for conceptualising the spatial and temporal coordinates' of contemporary political and everyday life" (Brambilla 2015, 17; Agnew 1994) than before. The more complex perspective on borders is the foundation of linking complexity to the concepts of un/certainty. It allows us to draw the conclusion of un/certain borderlands by investigating and exploring alternative border imaginaries that go beyond the border as a line in multimodal discursive constructions.

But first, in order to avoid the territorial trap, I will delineate my idea of space. Assuming a relational and dynamic understanding of space (Paasi & Zimmerbauer 2016, 90; Löw & Weidenhaus 2018), it can be studied in terms of its symbolic and material order (Sommer & Bembnista 2021; Keller 2016). Spaces and places do not present themselves but are represented by power relations expressed in discourses (Richardson & Benson 2003, 18). Border discourses thus concern not only “classical” territorial-political borders, but diverse forms of social bordering (cf. Gerst et al. 2018). A theoretical foundation for these considerations is provided by approaches from human geography, starting with Henri Lefebvre, who provides a starting point for the social construction of space with his essay “Production of Space” (1974). The basic idea is based on the assumption that spaces are constructed through spatial practices (how we act in space), representations of space (architecture, plans, maps) and finally representational space (symbolic references that represent geographical space). To analyze the construction of social space, discourses in the spatial social sciences have increasingly come into focus in recent years. They also include changes in spatial paradigms on, for example, gender relations, explorations of diversity and difference (for example, Bauriedl et al. 2010), political (cf. Glasze 2021; Marquard & Schreiber 2021) and social relations (Belina & Dzudzek 2021), as well as their representations in language (cf. Mattisek 2021), image (cf. Miggelbrink & Schlottmann 2021), and practice (cf. Baumann et al. 2021) in relation to spatial constructions.

At the same time, the disruptive forces of change—whether real or imagined—elucidate the main argument of border studies: that borders are in a constant process of confirmation, contestation, transformation, and re-confirmation (Scott 2020, 4). They are constantly reconstructed and maintained as frames of social and political action, strategies of challenge, survival, and the related patterns of identification and identity politics, as well as symbolic social and cultural lines of inclusion, encounter, difference, and contestation (Andersen et al. 2012).

Hence, borders can be conceptualized as “relational assemblages” (cf. Gerst & Krämer 2017). Moreover, borders are not to be understood here in the sense of a fixed ordering system. A general understanding of exactly one border and its meaning and property is, as Kleinschmidt (cf. 2014) also holds, doomed to fail. Rather, we should be aware of the ambivalent semantics related to borders, which are based on historical and social structures and thus make each border phenomenon individually experienceable. From there, borders should be seen as the result of historical and political processes, but at the same time as producers of order (Eigmüller 2016, 49). In current border studies (cf. Wille 2021), concepts that primarily emphasize the multidimensional character of the border include

borderscapes (Brambilla 2019), bordertextures (cf. Weier et al. 2018; Fellner 2021), and borderlands (cf. Anzaldúa 2012). In their conceptualisations of borders, they all aim at more than just the geographical dividing line or contact zone. Although border discourses do not only concern territorial-political borders, but diverse forms of social bordering that bring together complex phenomena, such as actors, practices, elements, discourses, and material conditions (cf. Gerst et al. 2018), it is worth explicitly mentioning at this point that the multidimensional character of the border refers precisely also, or primarily, to the spatial dimension. By means of the multimodal discourse analysis research program I will present focuses on patterns of meaning. In reconstructing multimodal pattern of interpretation in the Polish-and German-language discourse about the border, I focus on discursively negotiated knowledge about space. Neo-classical categories from border studies like transition zones (Iossifova 2019; Newman 2003, 18–20), spaces of transition (Nekula 2021, 411) hybrid zones (Iossifova 2019), entangled space (Crossey & Weber 2020; Schneider-Sliwa 2018), refer to the existence of the complex and polycontextual perspective of borders. With the border narratives, which will be detected here, I aim to not only determine what statements are being made and by whom but also to contextualize them in the complex meadow of the cultural, linguistic, historical, economic, social, and political sphere of the Polish-German borderland. The narratives show us how far un/certainty is deeply rooted in this borderland and that it perpetuates the emergence of border renaissance.

The complexity of borders helps us to conceptualize the un/certain dimension of borders and the borderland. It is even assumed that we can speak of an “age of uncertainty” (Gagnon 2014). Oliver Dimbath outlines the problem areas of fragile security orders and new threat structures, increasingly unstable patterns of cultural belonging, intensifying social divisions, and the shaking of established orders of knowledge, and institutions in the face of digitalization and technologization (Dimbath 2021). Until now, the un/certain character of borders has been examined rather from the perspective of security, especially by authors from Science and Technology Studies (STS—e.g. Amelung et al. 2022). Also, studies that deal with socio-cultural dynamics in different types of borders in un/certainty dimensions, e.g. airports, are associated with borders (cf. Schmidt 2016; Burrell 2008).<sup>3</sup> The aspect of the deterritorialization of the border is also part of the concept of precarious citizenship and the ‘in-between-ness’ of people (Lori 2017), referring to the structured uncertainty of being unable to secure permanent access to citizenship rights. This approach helps us to characterize the multidimensionality of certainty and uncertainty: “[A]lthough the drive to strengthen boundary enforcement can be motivated by a desire to eliminate undocumented or uncertain legal statuses, it often achieves the opposite, reifying uncertainty in

the legal status of migrant and minority populations" (Lori 2017, 744). In their work on smuggling in daily transit traffic at the Congolese-Rwandan borderland, Doevenspeck and Mwanabiningo (2012) however, highlight the ambiguous character of the border. Examining bordering by keeping in mind the concept of uncertainty, the authors provide precious insights into the relations between the state and the society and an understanding of the state's legitimacy. They argue that people in cross-border transit situations face un/certainty by escaping, at least temporarily, from their own country to another one and, therefore state boundaries are shaped by a range of illicit activities that create opportunities and constitute important (un/certain) livelihood strategies for the border population: "At the border, Congolese encounter their own state, otherwise often invisible, exerting a hybrid of real and symbolic control, as a rare expression of state territoriality. Rwandans use the border to escape, at least temporarily, from their state's "omnipresence". From a conceptual perspective of un/certainty, the authors link the border with risk research in the sense that risk and uncertainty are relative categories and social constructions (Luhmann 1993).

If we follow that idea and dig deeper into the work of science on risk, we can delineate two main streams of concepts on risk and uncertainty: the approach by Beck (1989) on un/certainty as a threatening assemblage and the one by Bernstein (1998) on un/certainty as a chance for a breakthrough. As Pat O'Malley summarizes, "Beck suggests that uncertainty governed by the 'incalculable'. [...] Considered as an 'estimation of the possible', uncertainty is given a rather negative value,<sup>4</sup> for it is made to appear as the poor cousin of risk calculation" (O'Malley 2004, 3) and therefore to be perceived as a threat one has to cope with. In complete contrast to Beck, however, Bernstein highlights the aspect of catharsis of uncertainty (O'Malley 2004, 3): "We are not prisoners of an inevitable future. Uncertainty makes us free" (Bernstein 1998, 229). Accordingly, Bernstein argues that uncertainty appears not as the imprecise fallback technology for dealing with impending catastrophe, but as the "technique of entrepreneurial creativity" (Bernstein 1998, 221) and therefore can be perceived as a chance one can use for the creation of the new.

Prior to applying these approaches to empirical data, I will first discuss the concept of border as a method, which will tell us more about how in border studies we can approach the border in a methodological sense by explaining multimodal discourse methodology.

### **Borders as (Multimodal) Method**

If we want to understand borders in relation to the concepts of un/certainty and want to know how to approach them, we should devote our attention to their

political dimension (Brambilla 2015, 28). As Mezzadra and Neilson suggest in their work on perceiving the "border as method", the crux is to, again, investigate borders from a processual perspective (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, 17). Accordingly, the perspective on un/certain borderlands 'as method' involves the shift from a pure look at the border towards a perspective to investigate bordering practices from the border itself (Gerst & Krämer 2021). This would mean including the vision of a border as a product in the process of becoming, constructed on the political scale within "a space of negotiating actors, experiences, and representations articulated at the intersection of competing and even conflicting tensions revealing the border also as 'a site of struggle'" (Brambilla 2015, 29).

By highlighting the role of borders as 'sites of struggle' where the right to become can be expressed, un/certainty in relation to borderlands allows for an investigation of the multidimensionality of borders. For example, while a government decides to tighten abortion rights in a given country and to set boundaries to live in a democratic and self-determined society, it at the same time triggers women to seek cross-border practices to have legal abortions abroad. Crucial to the study of multidimensional borderlands is applied discourse theory, which focuses on "social structures and processes" in flux as well as on "power relations" (Glasze & Mattissek 2021, 153), but without assuming an immovable foundation. Similar to the concept of dynamic and relational border space, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory considers "questioning the notion of a closed wholeness" (Laclau 1993, 433) and processes of change as the "normal case", which in turn makes patterns of interpretation representing un/certainty easier to comprehend. Further, I will present the most emblematic border narratives to illustrate the constructions of un/certainty for which I used the multimodal discourse analysis. A detailed methodological explanation is presented in the appendix below.

### **Between Fear and Anticipation**

In the following section, I will refer to examples that stem from around the time when, according to the Schengen Agreement from 2007, Poland joined the Schengen Area and border controls were abolished. This dominated the discursive landscape in Polish and German newspapers. In the preceding months, but also in the months following this enlargement of the Schengen Area on 21 December 2007, an ambivalence between anticipation of the border opening and, at the same time, signs of un/certainty can be observed.

The ambiguity was displayed in various multimodal forms, in order to convey the un/certain perspective of new possibilities of free mobility between the two countries. From a socio-semiotic point of view, martial constructions illustrated by wordplays and abstract

imaging could be observed. An iconic example of the pattern of interpretation of the abolition of border controls by means of the socio-semiotic martial wordplays related to the martial invasion into Poland in the 19th century stems from *Tagesspiegel* (Steyer 2007). A headline of an article that appeared there reads: “Now Poland is really open”. This alludes to the saying “...dann ist Polen offen” [...then Poland will be open], which is an abstract form of saying that something huge is going to happen as a consequence of an anticipated practice and chaos will follow. Accordingly, the headline in *Tagesspiegel* refers to the saying which stems from the 19th century. Back then, military forces from the neighbouring Russian Empire and Prussia were getting ready to invade the military-weak and unprotected, hence “open” Polish state, in order to divide its territory between themselves in a rather chaotic way.

Ironically, in this example, it was the Poles who were expected to cause big changes by crossing the border and coming to the economically stronger Germany as economic migrants. This socio-semiotic play of words in the German media is not only used because of its reference to Poland, but also to express the level of chaos and therefore uncertainty regarding the expected massive border crossings of Polish citizens. This, accordingly, could have a negative outcome for the German population, which, for example, could face stronger competition in the labor market. The fact that this kind of a statement is underpinned by an ironic wordplay shows, on the other hand, that there were also certain changes to be expected caused by the migration flows, such as the social system, health care, or the question of housing. The following example will further clarify the ambiguity of fear and anticipation of the consequences of the border opening.

In the context of the enlargement of the Schengen Area of 2007, *Tagesspiegel* headlines talk about a “Friendly takeover. More and more Poles discover [the region of] Uckermark for themselves and refurbish empty houses and restaurants” (Steyer 2008). Here, the migration movement of Poles to Germany after the Schengen enlargement is linked to a revaluation of the socio-structurally decreasing Uckermark, a rural area in Brandenburg. It is presented as a success story despite the reference to the war rhetoric of ‘hostile takeover’—an invasive practice of occupation of hostile forces used in a military context. Socio-semiotically, this formulation comes in combination with the imagery (see Figure 1), which shows vaults in the foreground [DOMINANCE], an old building facade in the background [IMAGE, DOMINANCE, OBJECT], suggesting an image of a real estate object in the crosshairs [ACTOR RELATION]. The un/certainty pattern illustrated by this example can be traced back to the lack of cross-border contact between the two countries during the communist regime. Some states of the so-called Eastern bloc maintained a cross-border relation during the Cold War



**Figure 1. Borderland in crosshairs? “Friendly takeover”.**  
Source: Steyer (2008). Copyright: DPA.

but Central and Eastern countries remained separated until the 1990s and only slowly started to converge political, economic, and territorial systems. Although the Schengen Treaty marked a milestone in European integration processes, the abrupt border opening was often accompanied by mutual distrust and insecurities as new structures for cross-border coexistence had to be established (Mirwaldt 2010).

Strikingly, this discourse of Poles coming over to Germany to revitalize the structurally weak region does not appear in Polish regional dailies. This non-discursive practice can also be observed in the form, that German workers do not take advantage of the opportunity to go to Poland. The spatial image that dominates the German discourse at the time is thus a marching-in at the border crossing, *en masse* but peacefully, which is not to be taken too seriously, as we can depict from the linguistic codes and wordplays. However, the depiction that dominates in articles related to the enlargement of the Schengen Area shows peaceful crowds carrying European flags. This indicates a potential mass-border-crossing of Polish workers, while eyed with respect and a form of un/certainty, is also seen as associated with opportunities—such as gaining new working force. Therefore, Polish newspapers rather convey a chance to go abroad. On the other hand, the un/certainty on the other side of the border is displayed by the dominant pattern of a telephone guide, in the sense of ‘how to find a job in Germany.’ Here, the phone receiver symbolizes not only information flow but also connection to the world, which was left behind in the times when phone calls were the dominant way of telecommunication.

On the whole, this pattern of interpretation shows a polycontextualization of the un/certain bordering practices: on the one hand, we can see debordering intentions and also governmental practices, which try to turn them into practice as forms of European integration. On the other hand, we can see clear traits that borders and (re-)bordering practices are by-products of European integration (cf. Balibar & Collins 2003), which trigger un/certainty. The un/uncertainty that is expressed in constant negotiations of border construction shifts between feelings of respect and fear, but also anticipation and chances, is characteristic of the early times of the eastern enlargement of the Schengen Treaty (Renner et al. 2022, 830).

## Ironic Approximation

In this part, I will present the subsequent discursive milestone in the German and Polish media landscape that could be depicted as a dominant pattern. It addresses the multidimensionality in bordering practices, namely patterns of rebordering in a debordering setting, such as the entry of the law on the free movement of workers within the European Union in 2014. Here, again, a dominant accent in the media is the un/certainty of debordering regulations on the EU level that the media connects with socio-semiotic images related to historical martial patterns between both countries.

As opposed to the previous part, there is now a change of paradigm to be observed: while in 2007 and 2008 dominantly the German media used wordplays, this stylistic device was now rather present in the Polish media. Also, in comparison to the previous milestone on debordering, we can determine two significant developments in the German and Polish media: first, although still illustrating signs of un/certainty regarding a potential mass influx of working migrants from Eastern European countries, the German media did not address the pattern of the martial invasion corresponding to historical incidents between Poland and Germany anymore. On the basis of this socio-semiotic discursive practice, we can once again deduce a playful way in which German dailies deal with the topic of migration from Poland or Eastern Europe. The futile efforts of German politics to compensate for the socio-economic disparity are now presented satirically and ironically. The development of an ironic self-portrayal from the German point of view indicates an economic approximation between the two countries and an increasing mutual perception at eye level. This narrative of an ironic approximation corresponds with the observation by political scientist Jarosław Jańczak. He claims that although in the last three decades, political, administrative, economic, and social interactions along the border intensified, "the German-Polish borderland is still marked by several differences in potential and structural asymmetries" (Jańczak 2018, 518).

The second development involved the fact that the Polish media seemed to respond to the comic elements and wordplays related to mutual historical martial patterns that could earlier be observed in the German media. Emblematically, *Gazeta Lubuska* refers to a collective trauma in Polish society that is connected to hearing commands in German. Hence, in an article, the author refers to the more liberal regulation concerning the cross-border investigations of both the German and the Polish police as a consequence of the law on the free movement of workers. The author claims in a provoking manner, that Polish residents on the Polish side of the borderland would now have to deal with the German police scream "Hände hoch" [hands up], which in Poland is widely related to Nazi officers

from World War II. While the administrative omission of labour regulations for foreigners to EU-member states—hence a therefore 'borderless' EU-labour market—sets the designated borderland in a clearly debordering condition, we can nevertheless observe a rebordering practice of insecurity and uncertainty for Polish citizens, who relate the term 'Hände hoch' with socio-cultural aversions deeply rooted in history. The linguistic use of irony again highlights the narrative of the structural parallel-but-apart-pattern, a narrative strand of bilateralism that has developed from the perceived historical burden of war and enmity that causes un/certainty in the border region.

A more moderate illustrative example from Polish media regarding a socio-economic approximation regarding Germany and Poland from *Głos Wielkopolski* (Kozłolek & Lurka 2014) comes with the headline "A patient is visiting a doctor... and the doctor is German!" In the framework of the law on the free movement of workers within the European Union, the article deals with the possibility of Polish patients using German medical infrastructure and therefore enlarging their private space by using services across the border. The picture in the article shows a board with a signpost in the forefront [OBJECT] and an entrance of the hospital in the rear [DISTANCE].

The arrows might suggest an atmosphere of certainty in the unknown environment with German lettering, so that the message becomes accessible to foreigners, too. The first part of the joke scheme usually consists of the beginning "The patient is visiting the doctor..." and the second part normally inherits a comical socio-linguistic semantical structure of irony or satire. The wordplay with the Polish joke structure addresses the economic imbalance between Germany and Poland, where the standard of medical infrastructure is still qualitatively higher in Germany. In a multimodal way, Polish media tries to provide an orientation to the transformative situation, where Polish society would be able to enlarge its radius of daily action by using ironical imagery of approximation. Yet, by clearly highlighting economic imbalances and relating them to (historical) patterns of fear and excessive demand, it is doubtful that German and Polish media are contributing to an atmosphere of certainty within bordering practices. What is certain is that they contribute to the fact that borders matter.

This pattern of interpretation again showed us the polymorphic character of the un/certain borderlands. Similar to the previous pattern, we can derive that borders are not only lines and walls (cf. Balibar & Collins 2003), but that borders have multiple socio-linguistic and socio-cultural narratives. They can be derived from cultural and historical contexts and discourses. Therefore, even in the context of again, debordering settings, rebordering traits do occur and generate un/certainty.

## Rightward Bordering and the Liberal Way

With the coming into power of the Polish nationalist conservative party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) [Law and Justice], a general rightward turn in Polish politics took over by setting new boundaries in human rights and a very critical foreign policy. Among others, this led to the emergence of rifts between the two countries, again, rooted in historical resentments, for example in the demand for reparation payments by the Germans to Poland due to destruction caused during World War II. Often, these articles were illustrated with photos showing hierarchically high-positioned Polish politicians, on the one hand, to underline the seriousness and on the other hand to show Poland's wannabe hegemonic position in relation to Germany to Europe in general, as in the example in Figure 2.

There, the PiS party leader, Jarosław Kaczyński [ACTOR], is shown at the lectern with the inscription "#PolandHeartofEurope" (own translation, Stańko 2019) [SOCIAL ROLE] with a European flag in the background, which suggests the DOMINANCE of Polish statesmen standing in front (or above)<sup>5</sup> [DISTANCE] of the European law or value system. The spatial construction of hegemonic integrity and demarcation of social movements, such as equal rights for LGBTQI+ communities or abortion advocates, is most evident in reports surrounding the phenomenon of a 'Rosary to the Border.' From the point of view of Polish government representatives, such as the then Prime Minister Beata Szydło, and a not insignificant part of the Polish population, the aforementioned social movements represent 'evil' and are to be attributed to the West in terms of their origin. Poland is then meant to be protected from this evil entering its territory by people physically standing at the border. The government itself supported this act with subsidized train tickets to the border, and the prime minister involved in it, hands-on, on the spot (Oworuszko 2017). Here, the border clearly becomes a site of negotiation of cultural and ideological resentments that need to be defended with physical presence and the use of strong symbols. The religious gesture of folded hands (Figure 3) [ACTOR; MOVES] with a rosary chain [OBJECT] wrapped around them seem to (physically) be in front of the border



Figure 2. PiS-leader Kaczyński sees himself in the "Heart of Europe". Source: Stańko (2019). Copyright: Polska Press.

post [CAMERA; DOMINANCE] and its code of arms covered in national colors [OBJECT\_II], and therefore symbolically protect the territory [DISTRIBUTION].

Criticism is likewise directed at the government's attempts to restrict further the existing abortion regulations, with related demonstrators in Poland and Germany often portrayed and their exclamations and posters quoted, such as: "stop to fanatics in power"—addressed at the Polish governance. Predominantly common is the social-semiotic interpretation of a religious symbol in connection with a woman or a symbol of femininity. In the protest slogan "Take your rosaries off my ovaries", the socio-linguistic image suggests a religious symbol [OBJECT], like a rosary, being on the woman's body [ACTORS; DOMINANCE] in order to dictate, in a paternalized way, [ACTOR RELATION] regulations aimed at the medical service of an abortion. On the socio-semiotic level (see Figure 4), we can observe a very similar though ironic symbol to the religious object on the ovaries: a cross is used as a 'fuck-off' sign in form of a raised middle finger (Tagesspiegel 2016).

As a matter of fact, the multimodal pattern of a rosary symbolizes the polydimension of the bordering practice which can be observed in this pattern of interpretation: on the one hand, we can outline the act of manifesting the territory of Poland by clearing borders with bordering practices, as followers of the



Figure 3. Religious territorialization. Source: Oworuszko (2017). Copyright Andrzej Szkocki.



Figure 4. Territorializing with hate-stickers: "strefa wolna od LGBT" ("LGBT-free zones"). Source: Warnecke (2020). Copyright: Reuters.

movement "rosary to the border" do. Additionally, it is a setting of cultural boundaries established by the symbolical act of strengthening the durability of the border with a human chain, protesting against migrants from Africa and the Middle East. On the other hand, we can depict the visual form of the rosary discourse as a symbol of a protest against the setting of cultural boundaries. Rather, it is a socio-semiotic manifestation of a liberal way against the paternalistic structures in Polish society and government.

Concerning this pattern of interpretation, we can summarize that the dismantling of border infrastructure and the liberal movement between the countries within the Schengen Area had influence on migration flows that has been successfully picked up on by right-wing parties (Jańczak 2018), especially the Polish PiS government (Żuk & Żuk 2022, 2018). The shifting narratives between European integration and "competing sovereignties" (Johnson 2017, 788) thus establish the construction of un/certainty in the Polish and German media.

## LGBT-Schism

The patterns of un/certainty in the multimodal discourses that are focused on the so-called "strefy wolne od LGBT" [LGBT-free zones] are multilayered. In order to highlight the multidimensionality of the opposed movements, I titled to pattern interpretations of LGBT-schism. It was at the end of 2019 when the social movement, initiated by the radical Catholic organization *Ordo Iuris*, on the territorial exclusion of queer and same-sex couples from certain villages in Poland began (newspaper citation). The analyzed media discourse in Poland and Germany reported that the exclusion practices (like protests, official letters/statements, marching-ups, and the use of violence against members of the LGBTQI+ community to leave the designated territory) were manifested by local inhabitants and members of the Catholic Church, as well as mayors of Polish villages and local politicians (newspaper citation). The culmination of these acts of territorialization was reached when the weekly state-supported right-wing paper *Gazeta Polska* enclosed stickers with a crossed-cancelled rainbow flag in the copies of its magazines and the heading "strefa wolna od LGBT" [LGBT-free zones].

The multimodal Polish and German discourse on the stickers suggests an interfering bordering practice. Taking the example of the *Tagesspiegel* (Warnecke 2020, fig. 4), we can depict the OBJECT of the sticker being held into the CAMERA, which, perceiving the cross-cancelling as the dominant layer [DOMINANCE], makes the message [DISTRIBUTION] in this context quite explicit. A bike rider, seemingly slowly passing in the background suggests an atmosphere of a peaceful suburban setting, where radical political acts of setting boundaries seem to be disturbing [ACTOR

RELATION]. The picture represents the dichotomy of the forms of belonging of the two opposing centers: the exclusive-orientated anti-LGBTQI+ supporters and the liberal citizens and pro-LGBTQI+ community. If we now want to direct our attention back to the notions of certainty and uncertainty, then we can acknowledge, that the latter group is the one who would have to face uncertainty. Firstly, a significant part of society is ready to set boundaries to out-territorialize its members. Secondly, they would never know (until they experienced a bordering practice) if they are inside or outside a designated LGBT-free zone. The perception of uncertainty therefore takes place through a spatial inside-outside mechanism. As a supposedly direct answer to the territorialization practices of anti-LGBTQI+ supporters, the project *Atlas nienawiści* (<https://atlasnienawisci.pl/>) [Atlas of Hate] was launched, which shows a digital map of municipalities, cities, and voivodships, where the act of an LGBT-free zone was either enforced, rejected through ongoing lobbyist practices or none of them. Additionally, as opposed to the weekly right-wing press, the analyzed media discourses highlight the pattern of cross-border inclusion practices of the pro-LGBTQI+ community: as we can see in the picture from the *Märkische Oderzeitung* (2022, Figure 5) the activist group marked street lamps at the German side of the border bridge between the Polish city Słubice and the German city of Frankfurt-Oder with pro-LGBTQI+ stickers [OBJECT]. The stickers carry the message "Tu jesteś u siebie" [Here you are at home] and a rainbow flag addressed to the LGBTQI+ community.

The welcoming message is highlighted by the socio-semiotic setting of the sticker at eye level [CAMERA] appearing in a spotlight of the street lamp [DOMINANCE] and Poland, which appears in the darkness of day on the other side of the illuminated bridge, seems to be far away [IMAGE, DISTANCE], which strengthens the impression of a safe space across the border [BRIDGING, ACTOR RELATION]. This designated counter-act of territorialization using stickers to welcome newcomers triggers the perception of certainty on a spatial inclusion mechanism.



Figure 5. LGBTQI+ Activist Poster: "Tu jesteś u siebie" ("Here you are at home"). Image: *Märkische Oderzeitung* (2022). Copyright Frankfurt Słubice PRIDE/MOZ, 2022.



These acts of territorial exclusion pick up on the debate that migratory events of the last decade have tended to spur on populist discourses containing fear of the other (e.g. Aldhawayn et al. 2020), triggering mentions of re-bordering as a means of self-protection (Beurskens 2022, 8). Additionally, we can observe, that the shift of some Polish media to the far right also triggers activist movements to protect actors, who are exposed to these mechanisms of exclusion and hate, which is also noticed by the German media as well.

### Discussion: Un/Certain Borderlands

By daring a closer look at the multimodal patterns in the Polish and German media on topics which one would usually ascribe to systematic debordering practices, we could see how different approaches of un/certainty occurred at the same time. While EU decision-makers were ready to face the un/certain situation for greater market opportunities, references to antagonistic historical approaches reappeared, addressing un/certainty as a risk related to enhanced migration flows. Martial linguistic references in the form of word plays and other socio-semiotic constructions, therefore, highlighted the multidimensional perception of un/certainty related to migrants approaching the border from outside between social integration and place protection.

Furthermore, the multimodal discourse revealed the un/certain space represented by the rebordering practices of the Polish government. Here, e.g., the nationalist rosary movement “różaniec do granic” sought to protect Polish territory by re-confirming the border with a human chain. The collective act addressed the constructed un/certainty the activists seem to face when confronted with the possibility of migrants or queers crossing the border. At the same time, multimodal discursive practices showed us the other side of the coin, namely, the perspective of activist groups with liberal views and their understanding of un/certainty as a chance to show solidarity and unity.

A strong example of the multidimensionality of un/certainty is the answer provided by activists working against the LGBT-free zones phenomenon. They are offering the discriminated LGBTQI+ community shelter abroad or creating a map of safe spaces in Poland itself. These counter-mechanisms which were discussed in both German and Polish media show the intention to use the un/certain situation for LGBTQI+ community to take the chance to escape into designated safe spaces, either across the border of the national territory (cf. Doevenspeck & Mwanabingo 2012) or the inner border of the designated area of hate. Here again, the empirical evidence provides a picture within the dialectic frame of un/certainty related to bordering practices.

It seems that the radical nature of bordering practices— inclusive or exclusive triggering mechanisms of de-

bordering or rebordering—generates a multidimensionality of the perception of un/certainty. Accordingly, un/certain borderlands display the complexity of the interplay of discourses on rebordering and debordering practices that go together with a polymorphic perception of un/certainty (see Figure 6) and thus un/certain borderlands.

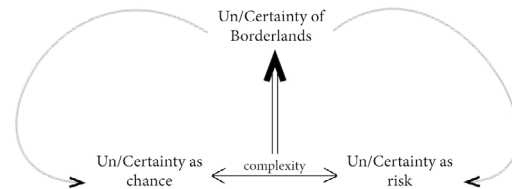


Figure 6. Un/Certainty of Borderlands. Prepared by the author.

Broad societal challenges and multiple overlapping crises in un/certain times have caused a regress towards state-centric thinking and nationalist agendas, and also towards ad hoc border closures (like during the COVID-19 pandemic, cf. Laine 2021). These developments can be viewed as testimonies of the suggested wider social relevance of borders—even in scenarios of debordering, as discussed earlier. Since borders are complex and multidisciplinary assemblages (Gerst et al. 2018), a multidimensional investigation of borders has the potential to make a difference and to help us to better understand and interpret the complex transformations that our societies are facing. By explicitly addressing the leading topos of this issue—i.e. the renaissance of borders—I directly link it to un/certainty of borderlands. Hence, when talking about border renaissance, it is not just about depicting different forms of rebordering, which would be a rather descriptive way of coming to the conclusion that we are witnessing a renaissance of borders. It is more about the way we understand the renaissance of borders from a complexity-driven perspective that tells us about the relationship between un/certainty and renaissance of borders and the interplay of bordering practices. Furthermore, the renaissance of borders can be either understood as a return to borders by perceiving the uncertainty of societal transformations as a risk or as the rebirth of borders by understanding the uncertainty of societal transformation as a chance. Using examples from the German and Polish media, we were able to comprehend the disruption and dynamics of border narratives. Examples such as the Schengen Agreement have shown that ascribed paradigms, as in the case of integration (e.g. Eker & van Houtum 2013), often also cause counter-movements and counter-narratives (e.g. Kramsch 2010) across the media-scape in the borderland (Renner et al. 2022, 826). Beurskens is therefore highlighting that the borderland after the Schengen Treaty was stressed for its integration and cross-border cooperation, but representations of this border have increasingly shifted to portray borders as places of crime and insecurity in the past decade, often using very polarizing and dramatic language

(Beurskens 2022, 2). But what we can also notice is that the narratives draw socio-semiotic signs of hope and solidarity to those who are exposed to mechanisms of fear and hate. The overall picture of the renaissance of borders, therefore, is a very multidimensional and polymorphic one, that includes un/certainty patterns of rebordering and debordering.

In line with the border-as-method argumentation (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013; Gerst & Krämer 2021), I am suggesting not to presuppose a certain idea of the border, as borders are not the end of a territory (Balibar & Collins 2003), but to look from the border at a given phenomenon. Rather, keeping in mind the interference and construction of the borderland under the un/certain conditions is what will help to investigate borders, border narratives, and border materialities with impartiality.

## Notes

- 1 This article is part of the Special Section: Border Renaissance, edited by Astrid M. Fellner, Eva Nossem, and Christian Wille, in *Borders in Globalization Review* 5(1): 67-158
- 2 My thoughts are based on the application for a scientific network on "Un/gewisse Grenzen" [Un/Certain Borders], funded by the German Research Foundation, which I am a member of (together with Dominik Gerst, Christian Banse, Maria Klessmann, Peter Ulrich, Sabine Lehner, Concha Maria Höfler, and Hannes Krämer). Here, I also aim to combine multiple border-phenomena, characterized by attributes such as 'undecided', 'unfocused' and 'uncertain' under the term of 'Un/Certainty'. Certainty and uncertainty appear in an open and dynamic process, which is indicated by a slash.
- 3 Addressed here are both the spatial un/knowledge of such an in-between space (e.g., the question of state affiliation on airport grounds) as well as the un/knowledge associated with the material assemblage of, e.g., visas, passports, laptops, etc., and the related (or unrealizable) border crossings or onward journeys.
- 4 The attribution of uncertainty as categorically good or bad is ambivalent, which is expressed not least in the development of this assessment: While in classical modernity uncertainty was still a dimension of non-knowledge, quite positively charged, in which a frontier to the unknown was discovered and crossed, the understanding of what is 'uncertain' in late modernity has been framed by the loss of orientation and the absence of principles of order (Dimbath 2021).
- 5 For a detailed overview and analysis regarding numerous cases the Polish PiS government has been involved in since it came to power in 2021, including disputes between Poland, the EU, and its neighboring countries, like Germany and the Czech Republic, see Žuk & Žuk (2022, 2018).
- 6 The abbreviation LGBT is the most common term used by German and Polish media, which shall represent the community who considers itself as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersexual, etc. or supports these

communities politically. It is the simplified version for LGBTQI+, whereby 'Q' and 'I' were only added around the 1990s to represent further facets of gender identities—the plus-sign or asterisk are often added as placeholders for other forms. In the following, I will use the term LGBT to represent the discourse in media and the term LGBTQI+ when I express my own analytical conclusions in the article.

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## Appendix – The Multimodal Research Design

The extended focus of an analysis of communication that is not purely linguistic but multimodal makes it possible to (re)construct discursive interpretive struggles (cf. Bosančić and Keller 2019; Schönemann 2016) in relation to the socio-spatial construction of borders on the basis of (German and Polish print) media, as will be shown in the following. If we want to interpret discourse in a multimodal way, the analytical perspective expands not only from language to image or other sign modes, but especially to the interplay and interaction of these. In order to achieve this, a multimodal analysis (of images and texts) is utilized, which adopts the methodological tools from Systemic Functional Multimodal approaches (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996), but enriches the approach by a triangular research design. It combines the research programs of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) with Grounded Theory (GT) and additionally adds image analysis based on the Socio-Semiotic Multimodal Perspective (SSM) (cf. in detail Sommer 2018a; Al-Ghamdi and Albawardi 2020; Sommer & Bembnista 2021) (see Table 1).

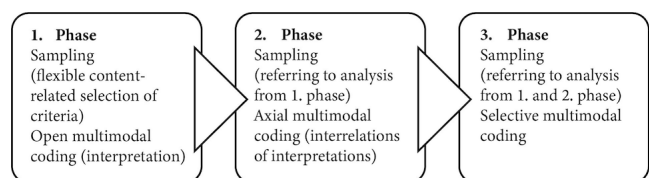
The sense of triangulating these three research processes is revealed by the fact that the SKAD approach here, similar to the GT, is subject to a circular process of analysis. The resulting focus of analysis from the pure ‘what’ to the ‘how’ is told and allows in the last step to assign data to patterns of interpretation. In this way, spatial conclusions can finally be drawn in relation to the constitution of the border, showing to what extent discursive practices in relation to borders are materialized spatially. The basis for the analysis of compiled newspaper articles was the review and, in the first coding step, the assignment of open codes, from which four discursive milestones could be determined:

Method	Elements
Grounded Theory (GT)	circular research process theoretical sampling coding scheme
Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD)	interpretive repertoire interpretive patterns discursive materiality actors and practices
Socio-Semiotic Multimodal Perspective (SSM)	meta functions

**Table 1. Multimodal discourse analysis: triangulation.** Table prepared by the author.

the Schengen Agreement from 2007, the law on the free movement of workers, the right-wing turn of politics of the Polish government since 2015, as well the practices of exclusion concerning the LGBT<sup>6</sup>-free zones.

In particular, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2010) have developed an approach with the purpose of connecting it to the theory grounded coding process (Sommer & Bembnista 2021, 435) (see Figure 7). They form the basic functions that language as action serves, whereby the aim is to order the course of discourse in the form of patterns of interpretation, along which the discourse on bordering practices is told (cf. Egbert 2019; Sommer 2018b, 80). Additionally, the SSM acts as an important complement to the coding process, offering concepts and categories to analytically capture multimodal, discursive communication about borderlands. In particular, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2010) pointed out that it is connectable to the GT coding process. It is based on Halliday’s (1993) Systemic Functional Grammar which understands semiotic signs as realizations of three types of meaning functions. They constitute the basic functions of language as action (Halliday 1993, 112). The first one is the ideational (experience-based) function. It gives an answer to the question of who/what we can see in a given picture. The second, interpersonal one, describes the function of language by pointing out and negotiating the relation between the speakers involved, and stylistically referring to a portrait (camera position chosen accordingly, etc.). The textual function includes the structure and internal order of language. It refers to the relations of power and dynamics on the picture, by including interpretations of distances, distributions, and dominances among actors and objects. In order to conduct a multimodal analysis (Phase 3: selective multimodal coding, Figure 7), the semiotic signs always correspond to textual codes. Figure 8 shows the conclusions drawn from the selective multimodal



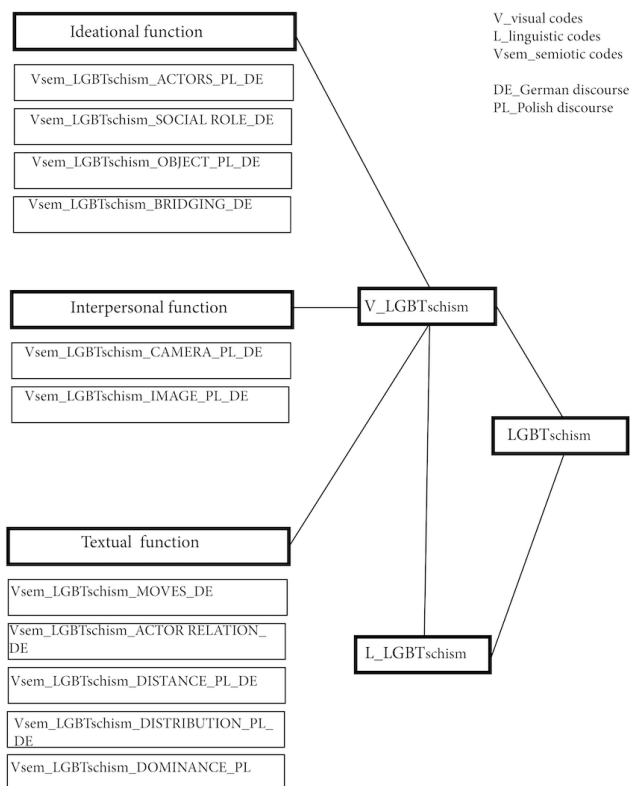
**Figure 7. Multimodal coding process.** Prepared by the author.

coding process by categorizing them according to the framework of the three functions. This leads to the construction of a pattern of interpretation, here the ‘LGBT-schism’. An illustrative example of LGBT-schism (Figure 5), present in the German discourse, shows that not every semiotic code applies to a visual code. From the set of semiotic codes deriving from the ideational function, the OBJECT and BRIDGING codes are crucial, as they categorize the pro-LGBT sticker on a street lamp, the bridge and the bridging situation, meaning the caption that tells us that LGBTQI+ people who will cross the bridge from Poland to Germany will be safe. Also, the arrangement of the image stresses the importance of the sticker being in the forefront [IMAGE, DISTANCE] and at eye level [CAMERA], which can be interpreted as drawing attention to the fact that the space on the German side is a safe space, unlike the one on the Polish side of the border. While this little sample gives us an idea about the methodological approach, I will go more into detail about the analytical outcomes of the patterns of interpretation in the following parts.

In order to differentiate between discourses on un/certainty in the German–Polish borderland, pictures (N=380) and articles (N=1102) from daily newspapers with the highest circulation from Brandenburg (*Märkische Oderzeitung—MOZ*) and the Lebus voivodeship (*Gazeta Lubuska—GL*) are examined, as well as the dailies of the extended borderland from urban centers, Berlin (*Tagesspiegel—TS*) and Poznan (*Głos Wielkopolski—GW*). The starting point is the year 2007, i.e. the year when the Schengen Agreement came into force. The analysis stretches out to the year 2020. Due to a large number of articles, the selection and analysis is reduced to the odd-numbered years, so the period remains long enough to highlight any temporal developments and at the same time to be able to include the impact of the Schengen Agreement.

### Acknowledgment

The empirical data were collected within the research project “Sociospatial Transformations in the German–Polish Borderland” a DFG-NCN-funded project within the Beethoven funding stream, conducted at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) from 2018–2020.



**Figure 8. Multimodal tree: functions of language as action.**  
Prepared by the author.