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## On the Multi-contextual Character of Border Regions

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**39<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Regional Science Association  
23-27 August 1999 in Dublin**

**On the Multi-Contextual Character of Border Regions**

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**Abstract:**

Doing research in border regions means to be aware of different concepts of how to define border regions. Often, border regions are thought of as peripheral regions inside states where daily life is influenced by a state-border. Here, borders are barriers to communication or interaction between two (or more) national border regions.

Instead of this point of view border regions can be defined by multiple and multi-contextual borders (not only state borders) within a border region. The consequence of this point of departure is to look at borders not as borders of different societies or states but borders within several contexts of society which describe different geographical space.

In this paper the multi-contextual character of border regions is analysed by using a sociological frame of reference and empirical research results.

Keywords: border, region

## 1. Borders and Border Regions

Border regions are usually defined by the nation-state border and often seen as peripheral areas to the centre of political power inside a state. This can't be stated in general even if many research findings are based on this implicit view. Furthermore, the transnational character of border regions is often not represented in border studies in a consequent way. Here, the differences between two or more regions localised in different countries are emphasised.

Transnational studies are faced with the analytical problem of interdependences or social relations inside one state and across the border on one hand, and the problem of intra regional relations inside the border region as a *transnational* region on the other. The problem in both cases lies in avoiding the over-emphasis or dominance of state-related conditions. While several conditions of everyday life in border regions are connected to national regulated systems, cross border interaction is also influenced by certain differences *and* similarities between these national systems. Taken the state-border as the ultimate border in all contexts of society, obstacles and barriers as results of border studies can't surprise. Meanwhile, empirical research being done on the basis of public statistical material often implies an aggregation of data from at least two national public sources which is problematic for transnational studies on the regional level. Transnational research being done on the basis of primary data (questionnaires) faces the problem of different meanings, symbols and representations and the possibility to assure comparability.

It can be seen as an residual of research to identify these aspects, or: these contexts, as they must be expected to be different from border region to border region. Nevertheless, border regions regarded as a special form of regions have been a subject of research in several regards, typically in areas, where the border is one constituent as: cross-border commuting, cross-border trade, cross-border labour markets and other. Furthermore, we find typically more general approaches as cross-border *political, economical, cultural or jurisdictional* relations where inner-state conditions act as the background on which the special character of cross-(state-)border relations can be identified.

On the analytical side we find approaches which identify the border generally as an obstacle to interaction or communication. Here, the operationalisation of these obstacles is done by e.g. *distance* or *cost* models where borders are seen as transaction costs. Meanwhile, research being done in human geography showed other viewpoints and focussed on the social element apart from the economic and the political (a good description is to be found in: Newman/Paasi 1998).

In sociology, borders are mainly seen as borders of inclusion/exclusion to social formations which can be *mapped* in a geographical or social space. It lies in the dialectics of borders that they are *including and excluding* at the same time. Whether a geographical space on a map or a social space represented as a network-relation-model is taken, the inside and the outside is defined by drawing a border. In general, space is a category of observation and not an artefact and from a sociological point of view a process of social construction, relations, behaviour or action which in turn influences social formations. Going through sociological literature about borders, regions and space, space seems to act *only* as the place »where things happen« while borders are limiting (and defining) the place.

Raum bleibt immer die wirkungslose Form« (*space remains always as the form without effect*) and here, the receptions of Simmel's writings note at least a weakness of his conception.

At this point we have to take the situation of sociology in the beginning of this century into account. Sociology was a »young discipline«. The main aim was to reconstruct and explain the *social world* as consisting of *social facts*. Simmel's approach - labelled *formal Sociology* - aimed at identifying social *forms* or representations without emphasising the *content*. Simmel aimed at showing underlying social processes which could be generalised instead of doing empirical analyses in cases.

This brought him many critics, especially Durkheim and Sorokin. They stated that his examples lack empirical basis. Anyway, Simmel was an influential sociologist who was member of the editorial board of the *American Journal of Sociology* and one of the founders of the German Association of Sociology and - together with Ferdinand Tönnies - he can be entitled as one of the first sociologists in Germany. The later founder of the Chicago-schools city sociological department, Robert Park, was as well inspired by Simmel as other known sociologists as Georg Lukács, Karl Mannheim, Siegfried Krakauer, Alfred Vierkandt and Leopold von Wiese, who developed Simmel's concept further in several research areas.

The relation between sociology and social space has from the early beginnings of sociology as a discipline a certain focus on society contained in nation-states even if we find already in the manifest of the communist party from 1848 the statement of Marx and Engels, »the bourgeoisie hat durch ihre Exploitation des Weltmarkts die Produktion und Konsumtion aller Länder kosmopolitisch gestaltet« (Marx/Engels 1971: 529). Even if this citation remind us of the actual debate on globalization (by means of imperialism), we find that the debate of state, nation and society in the light of processes of globalization isn't a new phenomenon. In spite of this, most sociological writings have an implicit tendency in seeing society in categories of states. Beck named this underlying order the »container-theory of society« where the state acts as the container for all social processes which constitutes society (Beck 1998: 49). This view can be observed not only in »classical« sociological texts but even in recent literature where sociological analysis follows the nation-state order. By definition, societies are seen as state-societies and to talk about the French, German or Danish society is quite usual.

While Simmel's approach can easily be misunderstood as being focussed on *formal* instead of social relations, these *forms* are consisting of social relations. The analytical problem with »space« is to identify the special meaning or context, space is meant by - or: the context in Simmel 1908: 474). The advantage (and actuality) of Simmel's approach lies in the general assumption that neither space nor borders are exclusively seen as *territory* or *state-borders*. Borders are identified as *sociological functions* which are *formed* in space (Simmel 1908: 467): »Die Grenze ist nicht eine räumliche Tatsache mit soziologischen Wirkungen, sondern eine soziologische Tatsache, die sich räumlich formt. [...]« (The border is not a fact in space, which induces sociological effects, but a sociological fact, which forms itself in space). Again, Simmel is talking about borders in a general meaning. *Every* border in space (e.g. border as the difference between city and the surroundings) is a social *form*, a result of interaction, social action, relation or construction of inhabitants (Simmel 1908: 467).

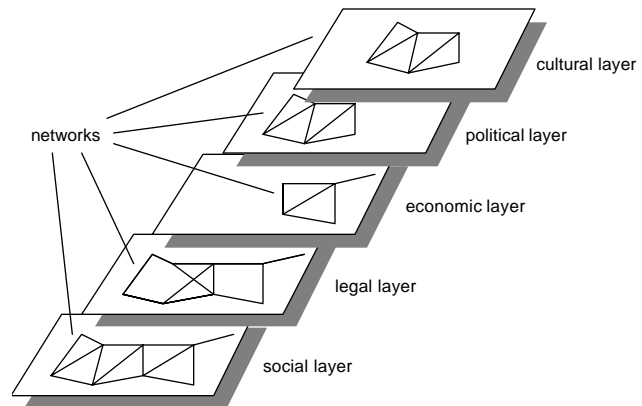
This short reception of one classic sociological text should draw the attention to the underlying concept of borders and space *as* social relations and not only as artefacts which have an influence on human behaviour or social action. As such, borders can be seen as representations of dynamic limitations of social action, interaction or relations. Even if Simmel does not mention *contexts* explicitly, his general approach relates to the actual debate about globalization and locality - *glocality* (Robertson) - and thereby inspires border studies as not exclusively oriented on state-borders.

What human purposes do frontiers serve? The question cannot be answered scientifically, in a neutral way. Frontiers are the limits of permissible behaviour but these limits are necessarily perceived in very different ways by different people (Anderson 1983: 7).

The conception of *transnational space* breaks with the traditional *container-theory of society* where societies are contained by nation-states (Beck 1998: 63). One of the prominent authors who mentioned the *world system* as a general frame of reference is Wallerstein who reconstructs a capitalistic world-society with central places, a semi-periphery and periphery-regions in one universal economic space: the world market. Other contributions are focussing on post-international politics, where the dominant position of nation-states in international politics weakens and international non-governmental organizations, multinational firms and social and political movements are becoming part of the international arena. Rosenau for instance differs between two arenas of global society: one, which is ruled by diplomacy and national power and one, which is best described as the arena of transnational sub-politics (Beck 1998: 69).

The argumentation of Robertson goes in a different direction (Robertson: 1992, 1998). He emphasizes that both, globalization *and* localisation are directions of a development which are interconnected with each other.

This duality or dialectics is to be found in border regions as well. Borders are separating and unifying *at the same time*. Border regions are regions inside a state and in a transnational way. The point which is to be made here, is to identify the context, in which this duality produces *overlapping* social relations and processes in order to qualify border regions as regions of transnationality.



**Figure 1: A layer-model of networks**

### 3. From network to context

Giaoutzi et al. presented a network approach in order to identify the obstacles for communication, stemming from a border. They used an enlightening layer-model where several layers of interaction in different contexts sum up in a complex interaction-structure, defined as the *spatial layer* (Giaoutzi et.al 1997).

Giaoutzi et al. differ between the *economical layer*, the *political layer*, the *cultural layer* and the *social layer*. Together, these layers produce the *spatial layer* as a sum of interaction patterns (Giaoutzi et al. 1993: 105): “The various networks can be thought of as consisting of different layers, each one interacting with the others. In this context we can distinguish, for example, the political layer, the language layer, the economic layer, the social layer, the transport layer, etc.”. The state border crosses these layers and networks and thereby produces obstacles to interaction and to network-building. Borders are, in other words, borders to network-building and interaction. One question arises: What determines borders in spatial/social network patterns? In this model it seems to be the political-juridical state-border which crosses the layers of economical, political and cultural interaction and communication in a similar way.

Meanwhile, the thesis followed in this paper is that every context (represented as a layer) has a border *of its own* and that the border crosses the layers at *different* points. Furthermore, the *spatial layer* is not seen as a representation of a complex network but as the social layer (society). This leads to a slightly modified model (see figure ??) where different missing links of networks on each layer represent a border in a certain context - the context of the layer. This could explain the different meaning of borders in legal, economical, political, cultural and other contexts. At the same time this view could be helpful to analyse the efforts of cross-border co-operation organizations in several border regions.

It is the *quality* of border regions, thought of as transnational regions where nation-state oriented subsystems of society are *overlapping* the state border and at the same time are related to (and produce) spatial patterns. This is *not* identical with *integration* of border regions.

#### **4. Two examples: the distribution of minority schools in the Danish-German border region and a regional media-debate**

In the following examples of elements of integration are presented: the distribution of minority schools in the Danish-German border region and a regional media-debate which arose because of the establishment of a cross-border council. The distribution of minority schools can illustrate one example of the *overlapping* structure of a border region in the context of education and the media-debate can show some aspects of social processes and an example of a *mental* border.

The goal is not to present in depth analyses but to give an impression of possible contexts by the example of the Danish-German border region.

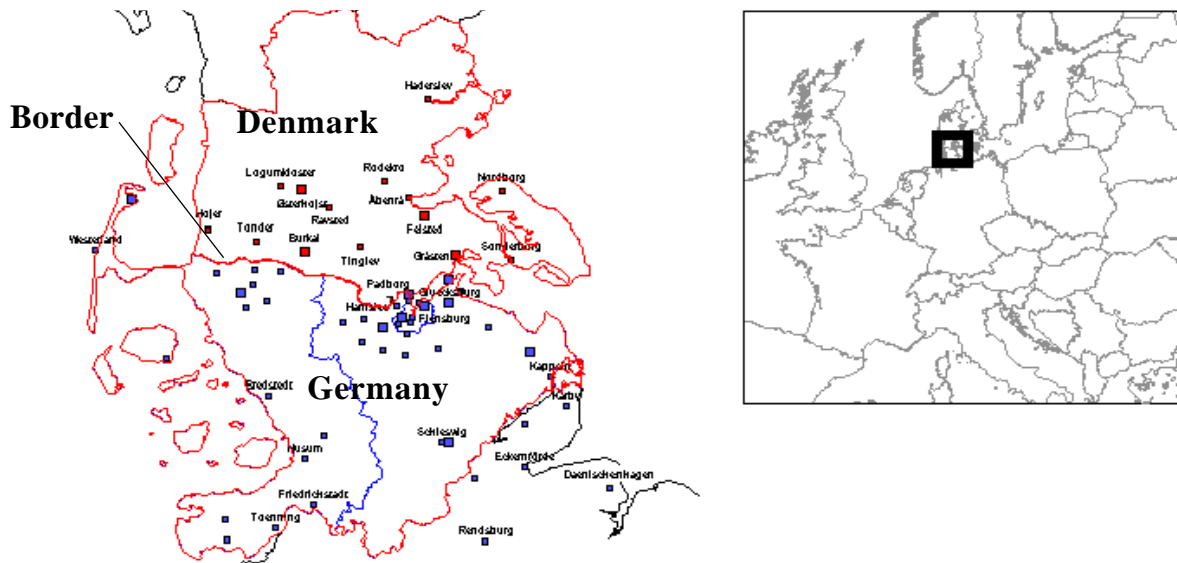
##### **The distribution of minority-schools in the Danish-German border region**

Since 1920 minority issues have played an important role for the Danish-German border region. »In 1920, Schleswig was divided following a plebiscite based on the principle of national self-determination. Since then, North Schleswig with its German minority population belongs to Denmark, while South Schleswig with its Danish population segment belongs to Germany« (Kehl 1998: 7). The changing history of the border region produced many kinds of problems dealing with ethnicity and identity, assimilation, specific traditions, language policy and reconstruction of history. »Today, they [the minorities] possess cultural autonomy and their own socialization-institutions: schools, church congregations and associations of all kinds« (Kühl 1998: 8). Surprisingly, nobody knows the numerical size of the minorities. No statistical data are available and no demographic analysis has been done. It is common to assume that the Danish minority numbers 50,000 and the German minority numbers 15-20,000 people (Kühl 1998: 34).

The location of minority schools follows more or less traditional areas, where the share of Germans (in nowadays Denmark) and Danes (in nowadays Germany) was high in 1920. Today, we find minority schools even in the south of the administrative border region, while the distribution of German minority schools only covers the southern part of the border region on the Danish side. Flensburg, being the biggest town in the border region with 80,000 inhabitants, can be seen as well equipped with minority schools.

In 1995 the Danish minority in Germany got a funding of 71 Mio. ECU (at 1995 prices) from the Danish state and the »Land Schleswig-Holstein«. The German minority in Denmark got 19 Mio. ECU (at 1995 prices) from the German state and from the Danish state. In both cases most of the funding is spent on the minority schools. Compared to the importance of cross-border activities and their financial co-funding of 11,1 Mio ECU (at 1995 prices) from the programme INTERREG II-a for the period of 1994 - 1999 (Hawel et al. 1999) this must be regarded as important to the border region - political and financial.

The cultural settings in the border region are influenced by the fact that minority issues are one important factor for cross-border cultural activities (see for a historical overview: Kühl 1998) The newspapers of the minorities, cultural associations and a well structured organization as well as political representations give an impression of the awareness of cultural elements from the neighbouring country in everyday life.



**Figure 2; Distribution of minority schools in Denmark and Germany**

The question remains if the existence of and preconditions for the minorities are not only a product (and result) of the efforts to make this border peaceful after two world wars but also if the minorities are elements of integration in the border region. The status of minorities is depending on the relation of assimilation and dissimilation. Today, not only people with a dedicated national feeling are using the facilities of the minorities. For example, the schools of the Danish minority are often seen as being better equipped than the *normal* German ones. In general they have to be seen as supplements for the majority, too. These trans-cultural elements are not identical with cross-border integration but may be a part of a longer social process of integration.

Compared to cross-border activities in connection to the INTERREG-programme, not only the financial but also the institutional conditions for cross-border cultural settings especially for the minorities are much better. Maybe this is at least one of the reasons why the establishment of a so called *Euro-region* arose so much attention in the border region. A *real* integration would mean to lose the special status of *minority identity*. This dimension could be defined as a trans-national identity which is not identical to cultural exchange. Here, van Houtum presented a model consisting of *affection*, *cognition* and *action* inside a border region (see: van Houtum 1998). In the context of minority issues, these elements must be regarded as strengthening the border as a barrier.

Especially in border regions minority issues can raise the question mentioned before: the difference between state and nation. People belonging to the minorities do not have the passport from the state their national orientation tends to be. This widely discussed issue in migration research gets another focus in border regions. Here, the national orientation is directed to a nation-state nearby and the political decision to accept a *positive discrimination* is in the end a possible consequence of the difference between state and nation. The state-border is, in other words, the *qualifying element* in identifying minorities (thereby, it is possible to talk about the Russian *minority* in Estonia which represents a big amount of all inhabitants) by defining the legal frame of reference for *nationality* on a certain territory.



The cross-border cultural setting, consisting of tradition, language, education, national history writings, literature or even affinity to national symbols like banners and flags, show *forms* of national self-determination. These are nowadays more or less institutionalized in associations and in the case of the Danish-German border region both states, Denmark and Germany are expending a notable financial support to them. In that way, the conflict of two nations is institutionalized and the territorial conflict of two wars is transferred from the political systems to the cultural area. In other words: the border, which can't be open and closed at the same time inside the political and legal systems, was supplemented with other types of borders, which are not related to a certain territory but which are related to regional cultural settings. Both minorities have got a certain legal and political status in Denmark resp. Germany. In this example, the *cultural space* and state border drawings define different areas.

Taking up the model described before we find networks inside the cultural layer which would *not* exist without the state-border and which create a transnational context *and* a purely national context at the same time. Even in the mid-term evaluation of INTERREG II-a of the three border co-operations between Denmark and Germany we find the comment that the co-operation in projects exist not without frictions and that they maybe relate to *the historical background of this border region* (Hawel et al. 1999: 40). This leads to the second example in this paper.

### **A public debate on establishing a border region council<sup>1</sup>**

In 1997 a debate on a more formalized cross-border co-operation, *Euroregion Sønderjylland/Schleswig*, started in Southern Jutland. During this debate many aspects of the relation between Danes and Germans, the structure of co-operation, the relation to the European Union and aspects of democracy were mentioned. During 1996 - 1997 nearly 1.500 articles and reader contributions were made and mainly published in one regional danish newspaper (*JyskeVestkysten*) and the two minority newspapers (*Flensborg Avis* and *Der Nordschleswiger*). In german newspapers only few articles were published. It was a regional debate in the danish part of the border region which started by discussing the name and which produced in periods more than 25 contributions per day.

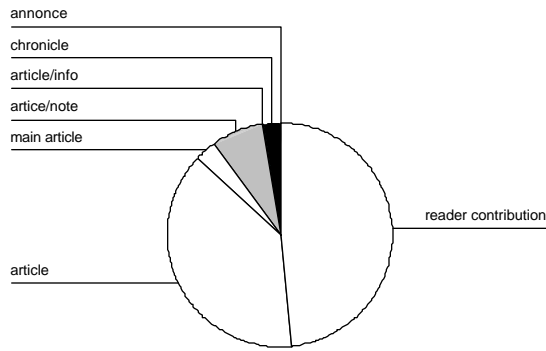
During this phase of discussing the establishment of a regional cross-border council it came to attacks against politicians - even to a death threat - which should not be overemphazised but it was a new phenomenon in this region. The debate is an interesting subject of study because many prejudices and stereotypes - which otherwise are hidden in everyday life - were articulated in the press. It was a big surprise to see to what extent the establishment of a cross-border regional council could evolve discussion because the council itself has very few competences. During the regional elections, two opponents of this council got seats in the regional parliament of Southern Jutland. Their only message was to be against the council and they were elected by protest-votings.

Two interesting aspects can be mentioned to illustrate underlying processes which form the *mental border*. First, about a half of the contributions were *reader contributions*. Second, among the reader contributions the relations to *the Germans* was an often used subject while newspaper articles focussed mainly on the structure of co-operation.

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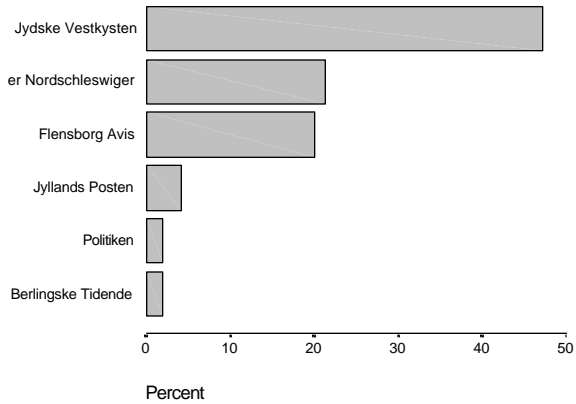
<sup>1</sup>This chapter is part of ongoing research on the perception of the border region.

Category of contributions



**Figure 4: Category of contributions**

Newspapers - all contributions



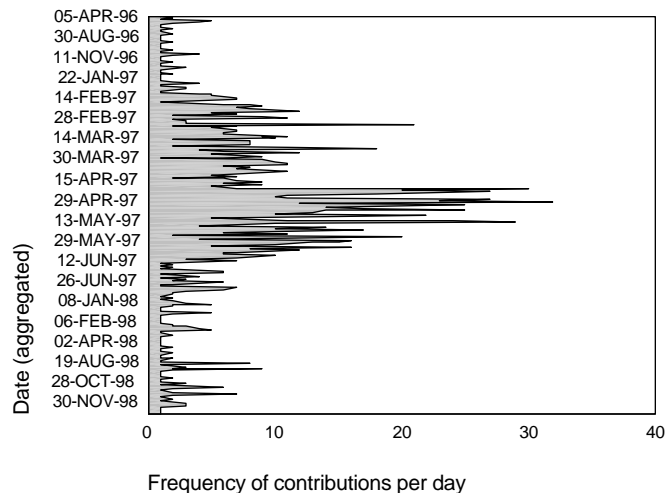
**Figure 3: Distribution in newspapers**

A first analysis showed that six topic groups produced this mass of media discussion, which was never seen before in Denmark (see figure 3). These were related to

- the structure of the cooperation
- nationalistic issues and the relation to “Germany” and “the Germans”
- cultural, historical and minority issues
- questions of democracy and participation
- the European Union
- information about the further proceedings

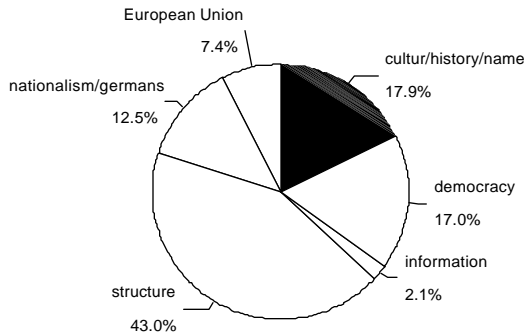
The *structure of co-operation* was discussed in regards to public participation and the way this organization should work. *Nationalistic issues* and the *relation to Germany* and the Germans was mainly focussed on history. *Cultural, historical and minority issues* were discussed by focussing on the territory and involved the question of how long Southern Jutland had been Danish.

Contributions to the debate per date



**Figure 5: Frequency of contributions**

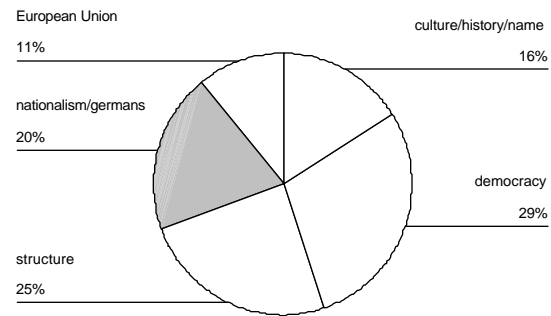
Theme of contributions



**Figure 6: Theme of contribution**

Theme of contribution

- only reader contributions



**Figure 7: Themes of reader contributions**

*Democracy and participation* as a grouping of arguments went in the direction of a general vote on the plans of formalization, also as a reaction to EU-related themes which were directly interconnected with the vote on Amsterdam in 98. Contributions mostly in form of articles which informed about other examples of cross border co-operation were few - it was a debate.

While this debate started, a committee was established (Sønderjyllands Komiteen) by some activists with the aim to avoid a formalization. The fear of an uncontrolled bureaucracy from Brussels, of the Germans and their *problematic relation to democracy* and of losing the national identity steered this group to a large extent. Together with the coming vote about the Treaty of Amsterdam on may, the 28th 1998 in Denmark (the result: 55% yes, 45% no) and the vote for the regional parliament in Southern Jutland in october, 18th 1997 two big events in Denmark in the political context where a part of the debate. The debate itself was a platform for political statements in regard to EU, too. Even around 2.000 people could be mobilized for a demonstration at the Danish-German border against EU and the formalized cross-border co-operation on may, 10th 1997.

It was one regional newspaper (JydskeVestkysten), the newspaper of the German minority in the Danish part (Der Nordschleswiger) and the newspaper of the Danish minority in the German part of the border region where nearly 90% of all contributions (about 1,500) were published (see figure 3). The regional newspaper *JydskeVestkysten* is known for the great amount of reader contributions and this debate had a positive influence on selling it. While contributions in the Danish minority newspaper were mainly directed against the establishment of the regional council, contributions made in the German minority newspaper expressed mainly a more positive attitude to this issue. When comparing all contributions to only reader contributions (725) one significant difference can be observed. The share of themes related to national identity and the relation to Germany and the Germans as well as themes related to democracy and possibilities of participation in this cross-border regional council were discussed to a larger extend.<sup>2</sup> Often these contributions were follow up's to discussion and debate meetings and many of them were an expression of the sceptical view on the aims of this council.

On the German side this was seen as irritating and a big surprise. Nobody awaited this

<sup>2</sup>These findings are a result of a first content-analysis of all contributions.

reaction on the Danish side of the border. German as well as Danish nation wide newspapers published some articles now and then, but always about the debate itself, not about the content. In Germany only few articles were published and the tenor of these dealt more with *the irritating moment* of this debate.

The establishment of a *Euroregion*, following the example of the cross-border organisations in other border regions, is faced with several "problems" in the Danish-German border region. Many of the problems we see in other border regions are solved or not perceived as problems, especially minority issues and issues of coherency. The formal barrier of the border is minimal. There are no unsolved territorial questions and the economical surplus (synergy) can be regarded as minimal. For the people it is simply the question why such an organization or formalization should take place. Furthermore, the *cultural direction of thinking* is directed towards the Danish national centre, while the economical direction is internationalized. In other words: where most other cross-border organizations in border regions initiate most activities this border region haven't the same problems while in cultural or everyday life respects it is more important to emphasize the identity of the (Southern Jutland) region itself, not the border region. This can be explained by historical factors or by the absence of economical development problems where cross-border activities are seen under the aspect of synergy effects. While Southern Jutland is one administrative unit today, the German side of the border region consists of three units which are located on a lower national administrative level and the cross-border activities on the German side must also be seen as one way to gain more importance on the political scene.

This way the very pragmatic and locally bounded way of cross-border co-operation which has a long history in this region and which stands *not* in relation to EU-programmes and the *bureaucracy from Brussels* seems to be a more reasonable way to organise common projects and to solve cross-border problems for many of the people at least in the Danish part of the border region (see also: Hansen/Schack 1997).

The relations to Germany and the Germans are observed very differentiated by the contributors. The history of two world wars, the unification of Southern Jutland and Denmark in 1920 and the occupation by the nazi-regime is a theme which plays an important role - but it isn't visible in everyday life. Germans are tourists in Denmark, and cross-border shopping is quite usual (and profitable) for Danes. One conclusion is that there exists a great difference between the political and economical "reality" and the cultural underlyings. This public discussion was the first time the further developments of cross-border co-operation came on the agenda for a wider public, and here, the question of legitimacy (democratic elements), historical and cultural underlyings as well as the structure of further co-operation were virulent.

## 5. Conclusion

Border region studies are faced with the problem to identify what is *absent* compared to regions inside a state. Which relations are missing and are related to the border? Two main problems arise: 1. How can the spatial formation (social relations in space) *border region* be described? 2. How can border regions be defined without focussing on *state* borders, when understanding border regions as *transnational regions*?

In this paper the state border is seen as one representation of social processes in time and space among other borders. While the state border is defined in a legal and political context it is obvious that elements of national identity and cultural settings can draw different borders. The example of the Danish-German border region, often mentioned as one example of good practise in regard to minority issues and co-operation, shows that border issues and frictions between the two nationalities which were assumed to be solved problems are easy to reconstruct in certain contexts.

The spatial formation *border region* is in other words characterized by multi-contextuality. This can be stated for the second question, too. Border regions can be seen as spatial formations where borders are located on several layers. They are drawn by social practise and not only by a political or legal definition. This could be one important issue to keep in mind when establishing formalized cross-border co-operations.

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