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**Working Paper**

## Chances for German-Polish Cooperation – A German Point of View

Working Paper, No. 30

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS)

*Suggested Citation:* Zillmer, Sabine (2005) : Chances for German-Polish Cooperation – A German Point of View, Working Paper, No. 30, Leibniz-Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung (IRS), Erkner

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## **Working Paper**

Sabine Zillmer

# **Chances for German-Polish Cooperation – A German Point of View\***

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Erkner, May 2005

\* The results discussed in this Working Paper are based on research undertaken in the evaluation project on the German-Polish Phare CBC Programmes 1994-1999 „Trans-Re-Co-Investigation“ funded by the European Commission through the Phare CBC Implementing Authority Warsaw in the frame of EuropeAid.

# **1 Introduction**

Historically and according to economic geographic theory, border regions have disadvantages due to their spatial limitation of market areas. Aiming at opposing these limitations by decreasing transaction barriers between countries, the EU conducts and supports various integration policies. While border regions within the EU 15 have basically lost their peripheral status and partially have even become core zones of economic development with fundamental changes of these regions' functions (Krämer 1999: 11p.), border regions along the former EU 15 external border and between the New Member States are often still disadvantaged regions. Although trade barriers have been reduced between these countries and regions as well, there are other barriers, such as incompatible infrastructures, institutional procedures, disparities in legal systems and mental models which still remain.

Thus, the question can be raised, in how far these barriers are likely to hamper the intensification of cooperation and integration. While many formal barriers, like institutional structures, can be pulled down by application of respective policy measures inducing administrative and political activities, it is much more difficult to reduce mental barriers. If at all, only in the long run, these barriers can be expected to be influenced through policy initiatives. But even for sustainable achievements in this field, sound knowledge about the specific background and history of the respective peoples' mentality is necessary.

Consequently, the paper starts with a discussion of theoretical viewpoints with regard to disadvantages of border regions in general, before an overview on the historical background of the border regions under consideration, especially relating to these regions' mental disparities, is provided. On basis of these theoretical and historical considerations basic hypotheses are developed. Their analysis is central in the then following discussion of the main and most striking results of the empirical analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with an identification of future options for the German-Polish border regions' cooperation.

## **2 Disadvantages of Border Regions in Theory**

From different economic and human geography theories the specific situation of border regions as compared to inner country regions can be stressed and in particular economic disadvantages of these regions can be pointed out. Cross-border

cooperation is thus one means which aims at the reduction of these and other disadvantages of border regions.

For instance Christaller's theory of central places and its further development by Lösch indicate the symmetric extension of market areas. Depending on the different types of goods and services, their market area radius also differs, however, this distance can be assumed to be the same in all directions from any central place (e.g. Hagget 1991: 463pp., Schätzl 1992: 69pp.). Hence, if a border cuts through such a circle, then the market area is artificially reduced, limiting economic returns to the traded goods and services. This market size reduction is the larger the closer a central place, i.e. a city, is located to the border. Below a critical market size the respective goods and services are not provided in the central place closely located to the border but in the next city which is less affected by the border and the reduced market area. Therefore, to allow for an extended supply of goods and services in border towns or cities closely located to the border, they need to decrease the border's dividing influence, i.e. to complete the market circle. If formal border regulations are pulled down, this could be supported by cooperation activities. Furthermore, this admits additional chances of border regions which go beyond pure economic advantages, i.e. like socio-cultural enrichment.

However, depending on the intensity of cross-border interactions, it is possible to differentiate between 4 levels of cross-border cooperation (Deckers 2004: 19). In alienated border regions strict border regimes hamper interactions largely. Co-existent border regions allow for a certain level of interactions with contact possibilities between the citizens on either side. However, interactions are not stable as the formal border still determines contact possibilities. Relations are much more stable in interdependent border regions, which supplement each other economically and socially. In such regions the population has cooperative relations with each other. The highest and most dense level of interactions can be found in integrated border regions. People and goods can move freely between either side of the border and the citizens on either side regard themselves as members of one society. In order to remove the disadvantages of border regions, the European Commission aims at decreasing border barriers and increasing cross-border integration, thus progressively moving in the direction of the latter stage.

### **3 Historical Background of the Borderland Area**

In contrast to other European border regions, in particular, the German-Polish border area has been faced by additional difficulties for cross-border cooperation initiatives which are closely linked with the border setting of World War Two. These are mainly related to the shifts of large parts of the population and a particularly strict border regime between Poland and the former GDR. Due to the border settings and the extensive expulsion after World War Two formerly interior territory became borderland faced in addition with a population without a tradition of border cooperation. People on either side of the border were divided by both language and history and they could not develop a common socialistic community. Mostly, this border has been connected with negative terms and experiences, leading to the division of transport infrastructure, regional connections and even the separation of cities. This background has not only led to socio-economic and historical but also political-institutional and socio-cultural disparities with a fundamental development division along the German-Polish border, which are still present. Due to these polarised experiences of the population on either side of the border, the preconditions for each others' understanding are not automatically given. This hampers cross-border cooperation in these regions (Morhard 2001:154pp.). Furthermore, these developments have also prolonged formal agreements, such as on the foundation of Euroregions, and result in a lack of cross-border contact needs and communication ability of the local population (Morhard 2001: 151, 164).

### **4 Hypotheses Development**

In the context of above mentioned intentions to contribute to enhanced cross-border integration, the European Commission regards the implementation of formal cross-border institutions and management structures as an instrument for achieving cohesion between member countries. However, it has to be asked in how far such instruments can actually actively contribute to European cohesion objectives if they tend to lack the support and interest of the concerned population, which appears quite reasonable in the considered border region as of the specific history.

Hypothesis 1: Formal pursuits and political measures aiming at cross-border cooperation can only develop their expected integration impacts to full extent if they are actively used and permanently fed by the local population rather than being implemented in a more top-down like process.

However, cross-border cooperation and integration is by far more than only a process which can be induced by political activities and institution building. As economic and geographic theories show, there are economic incentives driving international integration once formal barriers are pulled down. Therefore, the analysis of integration achievements needs to differentiate between purely economy driven cross-border flows – which, in the case of strong disparities, might be reduced to utter utilisation of development differentials rather than levelled economic cooperation – and further integration, including social, cultural and mental aspects.

Hypothesis 2: Against above theoretical and historical background, it can be expected that presently and for quite some time to come, cross-border cooperation along the German-Polish border is and will be dominated by the utilisation of economic advantages rather than further and real integration with regard to different societal aspects.

## **5 Aspects of Cross-Border Cooperation in the German-Polish Border Regions**

### ***5.1 Methodology***

Below analysis is based on a survey of residents conducted in German-Polish border regions, which aimed at gathering information on the residents' knowledge about and opinion on the specific border situation, cross-border initiatives and activities as well as cross-border integration in their neighbourhood. Thus, the objective of the survey was to understand the situation of the citizens in German-Polish border cities with respect to chances for intensified cooperation of the regions, where the region in its whole on both sides of the border matters rather than the dividing border.

The design of the survey was strongly oriented on citizens living in spatial proximity to the border. As in this paper a German point of view is presented, only results of the German part of the survey are provided. For this part of the survey the three German

municipalities of the German-Polish twin cities have been selected, namely Frankfurt/Oder, Görlitz and Guben. Most questionnaires were answered in the first two of these cities. However, to gain additional insights into possible influences on the citizens' knowledge and opinions, further questionnaires have also been posed to additional citizens in three other towns located very closely to the border, namely Bad Freienwalde, Eisenhüttenstadt and Forst. This comparison of twin cities' with other border cities' results was expected to show in how far the proximity to and accessibility of neighbouring Polish regions might affect the residents' knowledge and opinions.

Another element of the survey design related to the selection of the twin cities' inhabitants to be interviewed. Respondents were mostly contacted through schools of higher education.<sup>1</sup> Mostly high school and comprehensive school pupils of about 18 years of age as well as their parents were asked to fill in the questionnaires. Quite a number of additional questionnaires were answered by university students and other citizens of different age groups as well. Altogether, the survey conducted in June and July 2003 includes more than 700 questionnaires, of which nearly 2/3 have been answered by pupils and students.

## **5.2 Assessment of Location**

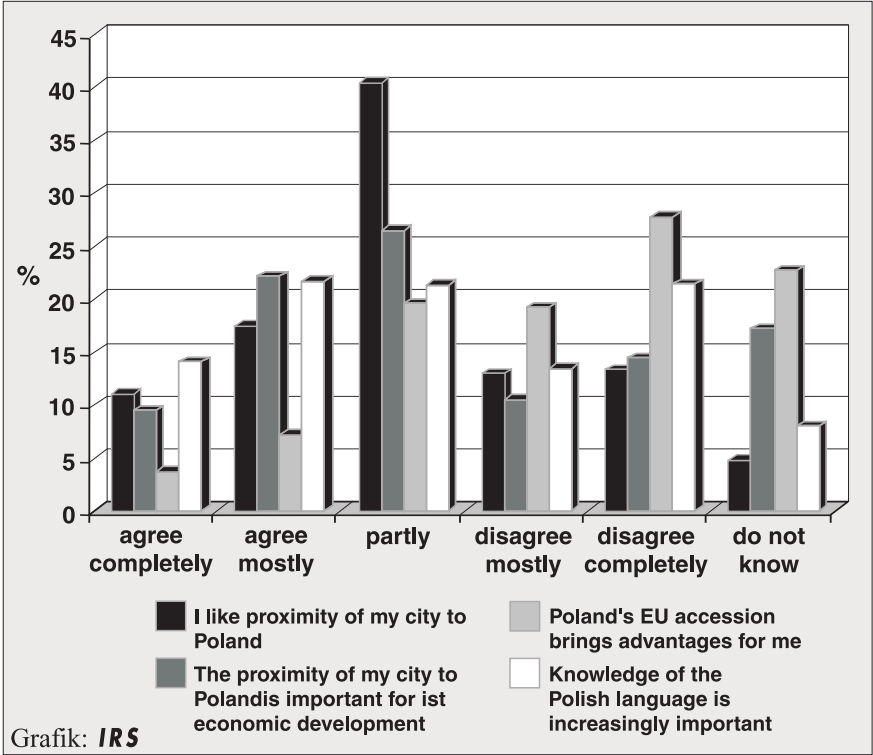
Beside the general assessment of the cities' location – which depends on numerous factors – here in particular attitudes in relation to the specific border situation are analysed. Some of these are summarised in Figure 5-1. The results show clearly the low share of residents with a particularly positive perceiving of their city's proximity to Poland. The judgements of the city's economic development were also quite critical, with little more than 30% of respondents agreeing mostly or completely that the proximity of Poland is important for the German border city's economic development. And even partial agreement was much lower as compared to the liking of the border proximity resulting in quite high shares of disagreement with the respective statement in the questionnaire. This critical way of thinking becomes even clearer, when the question of advantages of Poland's EU accession for the respondent were raised. A large majority of roughly 70% of the respondents either disagreed with the accession of Poland or did not know if the accession had any influence on them or their cities,

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<sup>1</sup> This selection modus was stimulated by the wish to achieve comparable results for the German and Polish parts of the survey and thus determined by a solution practical on both sides of the border.

which left very little agreement with the statement that the Polish EU accession would bring about advantages for the residents. This result verifies the often cited fear of low wage labour to cross the border to Germany and endangering local job holders and indicates the above raised issues of historical burdens.

**Figure 5-1: Attitudes of Surveyed Residents with Respect to Border Specific Characteristics of their Border Towns**



Source: calculated by IRS

However, in all categories students and pupils showed even less positive assessments than the older citizens, which should not be expected in relation to historical experiences. Yet, it can be argued, that prejudices can persist in the younger population strongly as of two reasons. Firstly, they might feel economically more endangered than their parents' generation, in particular in the light of the poor prospects on local labour markets. And secondly, they might lack cooperation and communication experiences with their Polish neighbours on a voluntary basis – which will have to be examined further below.

Correlation analyses emphasise the significant relations between most variables depicted in Figure 5-1. Consequently, mostly only respondents with a positive appraisal of the Polish EU accession also tend to regard the proximity as important for their city's economic development and regard the Polish language as increasingly important for their region. Hence, one negative location assessment tends to coincide



with other critical views concerning the Polish neighbourhood fostering prejudices.

These observations were complemented by further negative impacts of the lowered border barriers as perceived by the surveyed population. Apart from increased traffic – which does not necessarily represent a negative impact – especially increasing numbers of immigrants and criminal offences were related to the opening of the German-Polish border.

Concluding, these attitudes resemble sound reservations against the Polish neighbours among substantial parts of the surveyed German population. Although the awareness of the importance of the Polish language knowledge is higher, still, the significant number of respondents who do not show this awareness supports these conditions, since especially language knowledge could be utilised for individual advantages and could enhance cross-border cooperation.

### ***5.3 Reasons for and against Crossing the Border***

As of the still prevailing prejudices and on basis of above developed hypotheses, it can be expected, that the border has still many dividing influences and is mainly crossed to realise economic advantages.

In total, nearly one fifth of all respondents do not travel Poland at all, whether on regular or irregular basis. Those who visit Poland for one or the other reason do it irregularly, which actually indicates the expected low level of socio-economic integration across the border. This is further supplemented by the particularly low number of people in the survey who cross the border as of professional or educational reasons. Shopping visits are the only travelling reason for which the majority of the surveyed German border residents takes a trip to Poland. Here, differences between German and Polish price levels seem to be the decisive influence, as mostly food, petrol and clothes are purchased abroad. Hence, these findings are very much in line with the expected utilisation of economic advantages rather than real integration.

With regard to the different cities under investigation, it can be noted, that for most categories<sup>2</sup> the travelling rates are the highest in Guben and Görlitz rather than in Frankfurt/Oder or the other non-twin city border towns. This suggests a slightly more

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<sup>2</sup> The survey differentiated between border crossings for 1. professional reasons / training, 2. visits of friends, 3. visits of relatives, 4. shopping, 5. use of services, 6. cultural events, 7. leisure activities and 8. holidays.

intensive integration of these two cities with their opposite cities, especially as relatively more people in Guben and Görlitz visit friends and cultural events in Poland than in the other survey cities. However, as compared to the other twin cities, the lower cross-border integration could be due to different factors. Firstly, cultural and other related supply is relatively broad, so demand for additional offers across the border is low. Secondly, both parts of the twin city do not supply complementary services, which would be attractive for the population on the other side of the border. And thirdly, the local population has relatively strong prejudices.

Albeit most respondents travel to Poland at least to go shopping, also the reasons for the considerable number of surveyed people who do not cross the German-Polish border at all had to be investigated. While the percentage of people who do not like to be in Poland is by far the highest, there is no single other dominating reason. Interestingly, while mostly the percentages did not vary much between citizens and students, in the case of the people who do not like to be in Poland, the share was significantly higher for the pupils and students than for the other citizens. This again supports the afore mentioned observations of relatively stronger reservations among the younger population as compared to other residents.

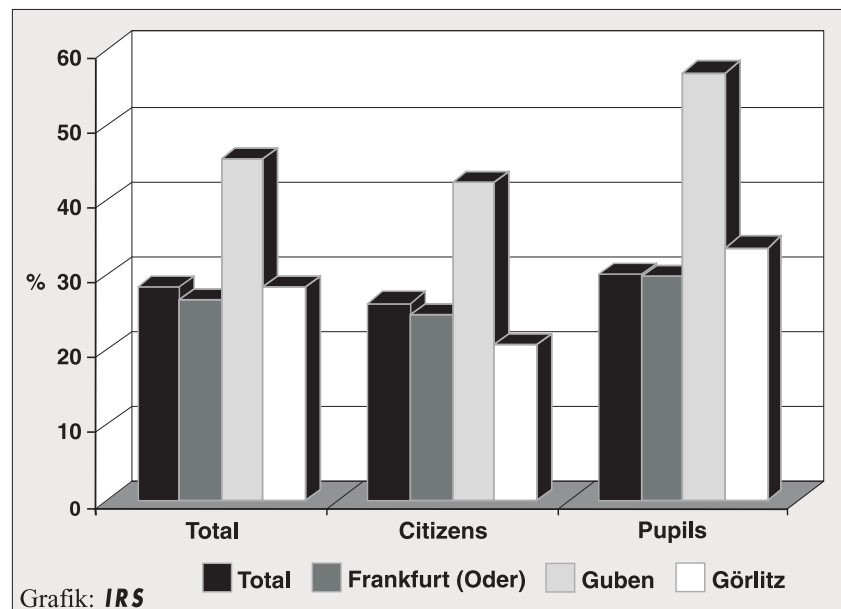
In general, the grounds for the respondents' rejection are various and partially not even known to the respondents. Especially the respondents in Eisenhüttenstadt, which has no border crossing nearby, mentioned the long travelling distance as a hampering factor. This underlines the importance of the spatial distribution of border crossings with regard to spatial integration possibilities. Other reasons related mainly to criminality, low quality products and the support of the local market in Germany. But also language problems and not existing transport options were mentioned next to numerous other explanations. Hence, many of these arguments were in line with the above identified reservations and prejudices, and thus, provided further confirmation of still existing mental barriers.

#### ***5.4 Participation in Cross-Border Projects and Initiatives***

The survey revealed that most respondents are aware of cross-border cooperation projects between their German and neighbouring Polish municipalities. However, corresponding to the less positive assessment of the pupils, fewer of them know about such activities than the older citizens. Correlation analysis indicates a slightly significant relation between the different groups of respondents and their knowledge

about cooperation initiatives.

**Figure 5-2: Participation Rates in Cross-Border Cooperation Projects of Respondents with Knowledge about such Projects in %\***



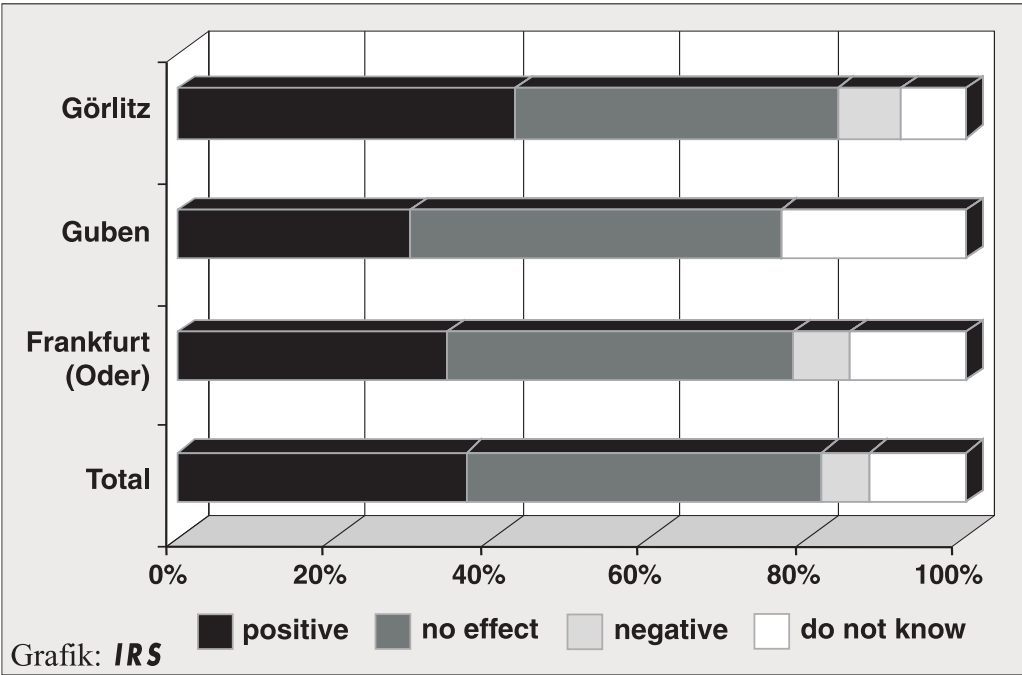
\* Total participation rates also take in the questionnaires conducted in the remaining border cities included into the sample, i.e. Bad Freienwalde, Eisenhüttenstadt and Forst.

Source: calculated by IRS

Nearly 30% of the respondents, who are aware of such projects, have actually participated in one or another activity. Participation rates are certainly the highest in the Guben sample for both citizens and students, as is stressed in Figure 5-2. Higher participation shares of the group of pupils – in contrast to their perception of the Polish neighbourhood – can largely be explained by compulsory school activities, in which whole classes were included.

But even if citizens participated in cross-border activities, it needs to be asked, which effect it had on the attitudes towards Poland. Of the 115 people in the sample who have participated in any such activity, very few had experiences which affected their attitudes negatively (see Figure 5-3). While for the majority attitudes were not influenced by such activities, at least for more than one third of respondents they had positive effects. Hence, the results indicate ways of influencing and in particular decreasing the historically burdened mental barriers.

**Figure 5-3: Effects of Participation in Cross-Border Activities on Respondents' Attitudes Towards Poland in % of Participating Respondents\***



\* Total effects also take in the questionnaires conducted in the remaining border cities included into the sample, i.e. Bad Freienwalde, Eisenhüttenstadt and Forst.  
 Source: calculated by IRS

Overall, a slight majority of respondents supports the view that cross-border cooperation projects are important. Although the opinion on such projects has a highly significant positive correlation with the willingness of participation, less than half of the supporting respondents would actually like to be involved in cross-border activities. And again, for the Guben sample, this latter figure is much higher than for the other cities, suggesting a somewhat more positive attitude of Guben's local population towards the Polish neighbours. As far as the survey sample is concerned, this finding might be interpreted in terms of higher level of integration achievements as compared to other border cities in the region.

**5.5 European Integration**

European integration takes place on different spatial scales. Within the EU 15 metropolitan areas have international networks and other kinds of regions and municipalities are linked with their neighbours, both within their own or neighbouring countries. However, to accomplish a sound basis for cross-border integration, the populace needs to have the willingness to integrate with the neighbours. One indicator for such willingness can be seen in the spatial identification as felt by the

survey's respondents. In the survey, identification is strongest with the national level and, apart of Görlitz, the regional level has accumulated the lowest shares of strong identification among the spatial levels included in the questionnaire. Instead, the importance of the nation indicates that cross-border regions are not strongly recognised among the population, which should be expected to be very different in highly integrated regions.

Finally, to get another view on the achievements of European integration in terms of German-Polish partnership, one question in the 2003 survey asked whether the respondents would vote for or against Polish EU membership if they were allowed to vote. While about as many respondents were in favour of the Polish EU membership as were against, roughly a quarter of all interviewees did not provide any answer to this question. However, shares of respondents supporting the Polish membership differed quite strongly – by more than 15 percentage points – between the cities in the survey with the highest share in Görlitz and the lowest in Frankfurt/Oder. The differences between the different groups of respondents have been even stronger. Whereas votes for the Polish EU membership were particularly low among the pupils and students, more than half of all other citizens supported this membership.

These results again confirm the observations made above in the former sections of this chapter, as they indicate less positive attitudes towards the Polish neighbours in the group of the younger respondents rather than for the remaining citizens in the sample. This is also supported by results of correlation analyses which indicate strong relations between several of the attitudes analysed above and the respondent's opinion on the Polish EU membership.

## **6 Conclusions – European Regions**

Summarising, above analysis basically identifies two groups of respondents. The larger part of the respondents can be assigned to a 'negative circle', which is characterised by cautious and rather distrustful attitudes towards contacts with the Polish neighbours and the effects of the Polish neighbourhood on personal and regional developments. The remainder of the respondents form an opposing smaller 'positive circle', which recognises the chances of cross-border cooperation.

Thus, the findings of the analysis support the above developed hypotheses. The survey has made clear, that cross-border initiatives aiming at socio-cultural integration can only evolve their full impacts, if the population has the willingness to

actively participate. Without the understanding of the involved population even imposed cooperation activities are not likely to sustainably contribute to attitude changes. Furthermore, as the predominantly negative perception of the younger respondents indicate, it can be expected, that these changes of attitudes among the concerned German population along the border will need quite some time. As long as poor economic perspectives dominate the population's perception, most likely historically grown prejudices will remain and further obstruct closer integration.

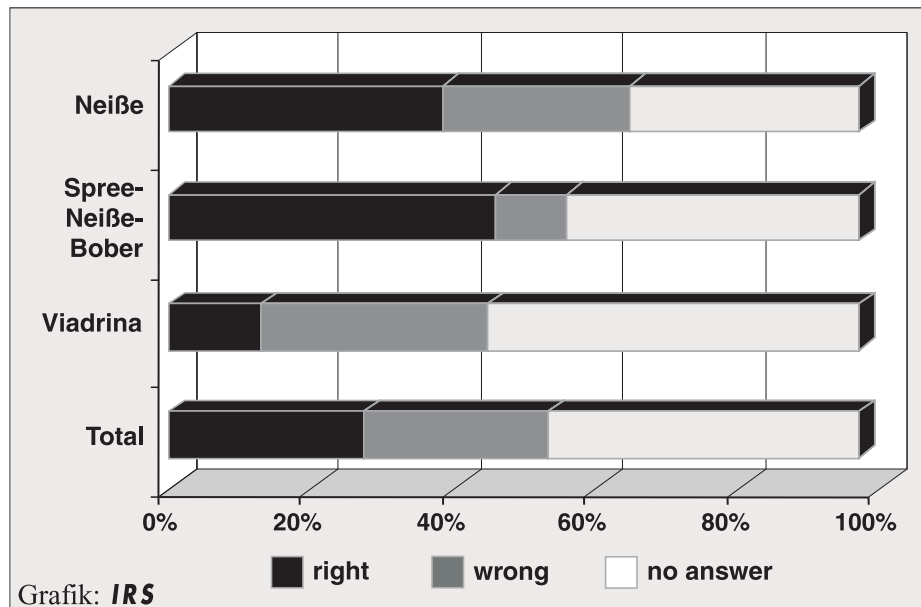
Hence, the survey clearly shows, that the reduction of mental barriers takes longer than the establishment of formal institutions to adjust to new spatial levels of cooperation. When moving 'upward' on the integration levels, the respective achievements need to be sustained first before more steps for further deepened integration can be taken successfully. Furthermore, the survey made clear, that many of the realised achievements in German-Polish cross-border cooperation strongly depend upon individual commitment, which also needs to be enhanced for further improvements in this border region.

Despite the visible achievements, all these results stress the critical situation on the German side of the German-Polish border with regard to sound, still existing mental barriers hampering effective cross-border integration. This raises the question how these barriers can be reduced, or ideally, removed. Point of departure in this context is the option for improvements in the course of participation in integration activities. As depicted in Figure 5-3, a considerable share of the population participating in such activities made positive experiences. And also the results of the school student survey made clear, once they become aware of the possibilities connected with cross-border activities they also tend to become interested in them, or more generally more open towards their Polish neighbours. To improve this knowledge among the populace, public relations efforts of the respective institutions are certainly very helpful.

The probably most important institutions from this perspective are the so-called Euroregions. In the sample only somewhat less than half of all respondents were aware, that their hometown is part of a Euroregion. In Guben, this knowledge was the highest with some 60%, while by far the lowest awareness was observed in Eisenhüttenstadt. Then again, less than one third of the respondents who generally knew about the Euroregion could actually give the right name of their Euroregion. Still, this knowledge strongly differs between the different cities respectively

Euroregions in the sample, as is shown in Figure 6-1. Especially in Frankfurt/Oder the share of correct answers to this question was particularly low, equalling a mere 5% of the total Frankfurt/Oder sample<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 6-1: Knowledge of the Euroregion's Names in % of Respondents who Know that they Live in a Euroregion\***



\* Total figures also take in the questionnaires conducted in the remaining border cities included into the sample, i.e. Bad Freienwalde, Eisenhüttenstadt and Forst.

Source: calculated by IRS

These results suggest for instance quite strong differences between the Euroregions with respect to their public relations and marketing activities. However, the survey results do not put forward spatial differences with regard to relevant information sources. By far the most important information source are newspapers, followed by radio respectively tv and information through friends and acquaintances.

The additional need for a regional identity on the level of the Euroregions is also supported by above results on the respondents' spatial identity, which do not suggest large support for these institutions. In order to improve knowledge about their activities they can, among others, fall back on the most important information sources mentioned above more strongly.

<sup>3</sup> Though the complete name of the Euroregion enclosing Frankfurt/Oder is 'Pro Europa Viadrina', also parts of the name, such as 'Pro Europa' or 'Viadrina' were counted as correct answers.

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