

Telling the Border: Narratives of Water, Work, and Belonging in the Czech–Polish Borderland around the Turów Mine

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Abstract

Everyday experiences of cross-border environmental conflicts are frequently overlooked in legal, institutional, and policy-oriented analyses. Based on a qualitative narrative analysis of interviews, situational conversations, and public texts collected between 2019 and 2022 in the Czech–Polish borderland, this article examines how local actors on both sides of the border narrated the dispute over the Turów lignite mine. Focusing on narratives of water, work, energy security, institutional trust, and belonging, the analysis shows how competing moral economies structured perceptions of responsibility, legitimacy, and normality. The findings demonstrate that while everyday cross-border practices largely endured, the conflict reshaped the symbolic and emotional foundations of coexistence. By approaching narratives as everyday cultural practices rather than strategic rhetoric, the article contributes to ethnological and anthropological understandings of borders as lived and narrated spaces.

Keywords

lived experience, belonging, moral economy, environmental dispute, Czech–Polish relations

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Introduction

Over the past decade, lignite mining at Poland's Turów open-cast mine has become one of the most symbolically charged cross-border disputes between Czechia and Poland. This is particularly notable given that bilateral relations between the two countries are generally perceived as friendly, despite recurring local frictions related to air pollution, shopping tourism and historical territorial disputes. While public opinion surveys indicate relatively positive mutual perceptions at the national level (CVVM 2025; CBOS 2025), cross-border trust remains comparatively low, particularly in the Czech–Polish borderland (Gallup International 2020). Although the immediate trigger for the dispute concerned environmental impacts on Czech border municipalities, the conflict quickly spread beyond its local origins (Kuus 2011), becoming embedded in broader debates on energy transition, national sovereignty, EU governance, and the position of peripheral border regions vis-à-vis political and economic centers (Paasi – Prokkola 2008). Narratives circulated across local, national, and EU domains, reinforcing the symbolic salience of the dispute.

The Turów conflict thus offers a productive lens for examining how cross-border environmental disputes are not only governed politically or legally, but also narrated and morally evaluated in everyday contexts. An illustrative and widely publicized example is the inscription “*We do not serve Czechs*” that was displayed at a restaurant in Bogatynia during the most intense phase of the dispute (Business Insider 2021). Rather than approaching Turów primarily as a legal or policy problem, as seen in much of the existing literature (Žuk – Žuk 2022; Boháč – Łażniewska – Kurowska-Pysz 2023; Polko et al. 2025), this article treats it as a narrative phenomenon. It asks how substate actors on both sides of the border narrated the mine and its impacts, how these narratives organized experiences of responsibility and legitimacy, and how they shaped understandings of justice, institutional trust, and belonging (Somers 1994; Bruner 2004).

From an ethnological and sociocultural anthropological perspective, borderlands are particularly revealing contexts for such an inquiry. They are spaces where historical trajectories, political cultures, and regimes of meaning intersect, and where belonging is negotiated through everyday practices and conflicts (Donnan – Wilson 1999; Wilson – Donnan 2012; Paasi 1996). In the Turów case, the dispute activated deeper layers of collective memory, regional identity, and center–periphery relations. The borderland thus emerged not merely as a site of environmental contestation, but as a lived space in which work, home, and moral normality were renegotiated under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than treating narratives as strategic

public statements, this article approaches them as forms of everyday moral reasoning through which borderland residents make sense of environmental insecurity, institutional authority, and life near the state border.

The analysis focuses on Turów-related narratives, with particular attention to micro-narratives, in the period from 2019 to 2022, during which the dispute intensified and ultimately culminated in a bilateral agreement between Czechia and Poland. Although the agreement formally ended the conflict in February 2022, narratives continued to circulate among the affected communities.

Theoretical framework

Narratives are understood as culturally shared structures through which people organize complex realities into meaningful sequences of causality, responsibility, and moral evaluation (Somers 1994; Polkinghorne 1995). In environmental conflicts, narratives translate scientific uncertainty and institutional complexity into socially communicable stories that render disputes intelligible while legitimizing particular positions and delegitimizing others (Hajer 1995; Dryzek 2013). In borderland regions, narratives may contribute to the symbolic production of the border by shaping how belonging, responsibility, and legitimacy are interpreted in everyday life. They define who belongs, who is held responsible, and which claims are deemed legitimate, thereby framing borders as moral and experiential divides rather than merely administrative lines (Paasi 1996; Wilson – Donnan 2012). Environmental conflicts in border regions thus unfold not only as regulatory disputes but as struggles over meaning, recognition, and everyday normality.

Interpretive policy research shows that such conflicts are rarely resolved through factual clarification alone. Instead, they are structured by competing narrative constructions of risk, expertise, and legitimacy (Hajer 1995; Hochrainer-Stigler et al. 2026). Through narrative processes, specific issues, such as water security, employment, or energy sovereignty, are elevated to existential or non-negotiable concerns. Once framed in these terms, compromise becomes morally constrained and politically challenging. Hajer's (1995) concept of "storylines" captures how condensed narratives link actors, arguments, and moral positions into coherent interpretive packages. These storylines simplify complex conflicts into morally charged oppositions, often involving processes of "othering," in which opponents are portrayed as irresponsible or threatening. In borderland contexts, such dynamics tend to reinforce defensive interpretations of the border.

Narratives differ from frames in that they explicitly organize temporality, causality, and imagined futures, thereby shaping not only interpretations of conflict but also expectations of negotiation, compromise, and institutional trust (van Hulst et al. 2025). From an ethnological perspective, narratives function less as strategic tools than as everyday cultural practices through which actors make sense of political decisions, institutions, and uncertainty (Jackson 2002). Importantly, narratives may persist despite shifts in material conditions, stabilizing particular moral economies (Thompson 1971).

In this article, the concept of “moral economy” is used to capture socially shared expectations concerning which forms of loss, sacrifice, and necessity are perceived as legitimate or illegitimate within a particular community. This framework highlights how actors evaluate political and environmental conflicts through culturally embedded notions of fairness, obligation, and acceptable risk. In the Turów dispute, these moral expectations structured how different actors interpreted the mine’s legitimacy, its environmental burdens, and the responsibilities of the states and their institutions. The conflict can therefore be interpreted not merely as a dispute over environmental impacts, but as a confrontation between partially incompatible moral economies that define what constitutes a just and acceptable order of everyday life in the borderland. Such regions are characterized by historically layered experiences of marginality, industrial dependence, and center–periphery relations (Paasi 2013).

This study analyzes narratives as mechanisms that construct causality and responsibility, legitimize or delegitimize institutions, and shape expectations of coexistence and cross-border relations. Cross-border conflicts typically involve multiple narrative layers operating across scales: deeply rooted meta-narratives (Hagström – Gustafsson 2019), nationally articulated narratives (Bar-Siman-Tov 2010), and the everyday micro-narratives of borderland residents (Doevenspeck 2011). While this research focuses primarily on micro-narratives, higher-level narratives provide the necessary contextual framing. Narratives are thus approached as forms of everyday cultural practice through which abstract issues, such as energy policy or groundwater management, are grounded in locally meaningful contexts of work, home, and moral obligation. In borderlands, where meanings are continuously negotiated across languages, institutions, and historical experiences, narrative analysis offers a particularly sensitive lens for understanding environmental conflict as a lived and moral phenomenon rather than a purely technical dispute.

The Turów dispute and the Czech–Polish borderland region in context

The Turów lignite mine and its adjacent power plant form a tightly interwoven energy complex whose material presence, social meaning, and political salience extend far beyond the mine itself. For many residents of Bogatynia and the wider region, the complex is not merely a workplace but an intergenerational anchor of regional identity and social continuity (Izidorczyk 2022). Employment at Turów has long structured everyday life, family biographies, and expectations of stability. This integration extends into the cultural sphere; PGE GiEK Turów Zgorzelec is a professional basketball club from Zgorzelec whose identity has long been closely tied to the Turów energy complex. The club's name itself reflects this linkage, since its primary long-term sponsor, PGE (Polish Energy Group), is the state-owned energy company that operates the Turów lignite mine and power plant. Through such sponsorship and symbolic association, the club has functioned as a visible sociocultural extension of the regional energy industry, particularly during its successful years in the Polish and European leagues. At the national level, the mine has been framed as a pillar of Poland's energy security, as it supplies roughly seven percent of domestic electricity, supporting state narratives of sovereignty and self-reliance (Żuk – Żuk 2022).

The planned expansion of the open-cast mine exacerbated concerns in neighboring Czech municipalities about groundwater depletion, noise, dust, and the gradual erosion of everyday living conditions (Datel – Hrabánková 2020). While similar anxieties emerged on the German side, the Czech case is distinctive in the way local grievances were translated into political claims, moving from municipal complaints and civil activism to regional mobilization and, eventually, a state-level legal confrontation. This trajectory culminated in 2021 with the Czech government's decision to bring the dispute before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), transforming long-standing cross-border friction into a high-profile international dispute.

Territorially, Turów is situated within a distinctive configuration: the Turoszów Spur, a Polish protrusion bordered by Czechia and Germany, with the pit located less than one kilometer from the Czech border. This proximity makes Turów a paradigmatic example of how extractive activities intersect with borders not as abstract lines but as lived spaces where environmental externalities, economic benefits, and political responsibilities are unevenly distributed. The broader study area forms part of the Tri-border Region, which is centered around Bogatynia, Hrádek nad Nisou, and Zittau, and is embedded within the Euroregion Neisse–Nisa–Nysa (ERN).



Figure 1 Map of the Czech–Polish–German Tri-border Region. Source: own elaboration.

Despite relatively advanced institutional frameworks of cross-border cooperation (Böhm – Boháč – Wróblewski 2023), represented by the ERN and the “Small Triangle” grouping of Bogatynia, Hrádek nad Nisou, and Zittau, the region remains a socioeconomic periphery or semi-periphery of all three states. Its marginality reflects the turbulent 20th-century border shifts, population exchanges, and uneven postsocialist transformations (Stenning et al. 2010). In general, everyday cross-border relations are essentially pragmatic, centered on commuting, shopping, and tourism, while deeper social ties and language competence are limited. Nevertheless, trilateral cross-border cultural activities do exist, such as the local Tri-border Region Festival, and the wider regional Neisse Nysa Nisa Film Festival and the European Centre Memory, Education, Culture. Commuting is an important part of life in the region, driven by economic disparities between the countries and differing employment structures. While Czechs and Poles

frequently work in Germany, and Poles work in Czechia, particularly in the industrial zones of Hrádek nad Nisou and Liberec, the Turów energy complex employs no Czech or German workers, a fact confirmed during the author's discussions with the mine's management.

Within this context, asymmetries between the Polish and Czech sides are pronounced. Bogatynia benefits from substantial fiscal transfers and donations from the energy complex, ranking it among the wealthiest municipalities in Poland, despite the visible infrastructural neglect. On the Czech side, there is no comparable single employer, and the local economy is more diversified, making it harder to compensate for environmental degradation through economic means (Boháč – Łażniewska – Kurowska-Pysz 2023). These asymmetries provide an essential backdrop for understanding why the same mine can be narrated simultaneously as a source of dignity and security in Bogatynia and as an existential threat just a few kilometers away.

Although bilateral negotiations over Turów date back to approximately 2010, they were largely consultative and ineffective. Tensions escalated after 2019, when PGE submitted plans to extend mining operations until 2026, a move supported by the Polish Ministry of Climate and Environment without full cross-border consultations. Czech actors framed this extension as a clear violation of EU law, while the Polish authorities justified it on the grounds of the mine's strategic importance. Turów directly employs roughly 2,500 miners and 1,200 power-plant workers, with an estimated 60,000–80,000 people indirectly dependent on the complex (Żuk – Żuk 2022).

Public mobilization intensified on both sides of the border, as protest actions and symbolic gestures condensed broader tensions into emotionally charged moments. Among the most visible was the “*We do not serve Czechs*” sign displayed at a restaurant in Bogatynia (Business Insider 2021), which became a powerful symbol of deteriorating cross-border relations. Czech civic actors mobilized through petitions and protests, rallying behind slogans such as “*Our water is not for sale*” and “*Coal is not drinkable*” (Pintera 2019). Meanwhile, Polish petition and protest mobilization emphasized employment, energy security, and national sovereignty with mottos such as “*Hands off Turów*” and “*Green Deal, not a grim deal*” (Powiat Zgorzelecki 2020). Cross-border organizations such as the ERN largely avoided active involvement, reflecting their structurally constrained position during moments of open conflict.

The legal escalation peaked in 2021, when the CJEU ordered Poland to halt mining operations and subsequently imposed daily fines for non-compliance. This episode marked a profound Europeanization of the dispute, transforming Turów into a symbol within broader debates on

climate justice, sovereignty, and the limits of supranational governance. A bilateral agreement was reached in February 2022 that formally ended the legal proceedings, which included financial compensation and commitments to undertake monitoring and mitigation measures (Monitor Polski 2022). Subsequent cross-border mitigation and cooperation initiatives have also been supported through instruments such as the Small Projects Fund Turów (Fond małych projektů Turów 2025). However, the agreement and related initiatives failed to resolve the conflict at a symbolic level. Competing interpretations persisted, framing the deal variously as a pragmatic compromise, a political failure, or a coerced concession (Starec 2022).

From an ethnological and sociocultural perspective, Turów thus functions as a narrative node where historical memories of industrial labor, marginality, and center–periphery relations intersect with contemporary anxieties surrounding environmental insecurity and energy transition. While everyday cross-border practices largely continued, the conflict re-coded their symbolic meaning, introducing a level of mistrust and emotional distance that outlasted the formal settlement. The dispute illustrates how cross-border environmental conflicts are embedded in narratives, memories, and moral evaluations that continue to shape everyday life in the borderland even after the legal resolution.

Methodology

The analysis draws on three interrelated bodies of material. First, it uses qualitative data collected within the region on both the Czech and Polish sides of the border. Between February and July 2022, 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants, including representatives of local and regional authorities, ERN structures, non-governmental organizations, entrepreneurs, and local media (15 on each side). These participants were chosen for their direct or indirect involvement in cross-border cooperation or their professional engagement in regional public life, positioning them as relevant actors within the broader field of the Turów dispute. The synthesis of these interviews on both sides of the border provides insight into how actors involved in cross-border cooperation narratively framed the conflict, its everyday consequences, and its institutional handling. These interviewees were anonymized and are identified in the text as IDI CZ and IDI PL.

Additionally, 30 short semi-structured conversations were conducted in July 2022 with randomly approached adult passers-by in the centers of Hrádek nad Nisou (Czechia) and Bogatynia (Poland), with 15 interviews conducted in each town. These encounters, which took place on streets

and squares near shops and cafés, were not intended to capture a statistically representative sample of public opinion, as the respondents were not selected according to predefined sociodemographic criteria. Rather, they aimed to elicit spontaneous, everyday articulations of how residents perceived and emotionally positioned the Turów dispute outside formal political or institutional settings. Analyzed as narrative fragments rather than opinion statements, these interviews reveal how the conflict entered everyday discourse, how responsibility and blame were casually attributed, and how notions of fairness, distance, and vulnerability were discursively negotiated in ordinary situations. These interviews are simply marked CZ or PL. All interviews were conducted in the respondents' native languages, with quotations translated into English by the author for the purpose of analysis and publication.

The two types of interviews are treated analytically in different ways. The in-depth interviews provide more elaborate narrative accounts reflecting socially situated interpretations of the Turów conflict of individuals who were actors or partial actors in the dispute. By contrast, the brief situational conversations with passers-by are approached as spontaneous narrative fragments, not as bases for reconstructing the coherent narrative positions of clearly identifiable social actors, but rather as expressions from the audience of the dispute.

Second, the analysis incorporates publicly available institutional and media texts produced between 2019 and 2022, which include governmental communications, media coverage, and interpretative commentaries related to the escalation of the dispute, the 2022 bilateral agreement, and subsequent debates. These materials are not treated as a dataset equivalent to the interviews but rather as elements of the broader narrative environment in which the conflict's meanings were articulated, circulated, and contested.

Third, selected summaries and analytical reports produced by expert and civil society actors are included as indicators of how the conflict was framed and translated for broader audiences, particularly in relation to responsibility, legitimacy, and cross-border justice.

Methodologically, the article is grounded in an interpretive, ethnologically informed understanding of narrative (Polkinghorne 1995; Riessman 2008). Rather than treating interview responses as isolated data points, the analysis approaches them as situated narratives through which respondents explain, normalize, or morally evaluate the Turów conflict in relation to their everyday lives. This approach is particularly suited to borderland research, where experiences are often articulated in fragmentary and pragmatic ways, embedded in references to work, mobility, neighborly relations, and perceived center–periphery inequalities. Differences in perceptions of envi-

ronmental impacts, employment risks, institutional trust, and cross-border relations are thus interpreted as indicators of distinct moral economies and experiential horizons.

The analysis followed a three-step narrative procedure. First, interview transcripts were open-coded for key narrative elements, including perceived harm, the attribution of responsibility, and expressions of trust or indifference toward institutions and neighbors. Second, these elements were aggregated into recurring narrative constellations that revealed the conflict's dominant storylines, such as water, employment, institutional failure, and cross-border mistrust. Third, Czech and Polish narratives were analyzed comparatively, focusing on convergences and divergences in the moral interpretation of similar situations. While not claiming to represent the full spectrum of everyday narratives, the combined use of interviews, short conversations, and public texts enables a tracing of how the meanings of the Turów conflict were contested and normalized during this period of heightened public attention.

Dominant narrative lines

Across the Czech and Polish material, the Turów dispute is not organized through a single overarching story but through several recurring narrative lines that structure how the respondents interpreted causality, responsibility, and moral legitimacy. During the coding process, recurrent narrative elements were identified within the interview material and public texts. These elements clustered into broader constellations that organized how the conflict was interpreted and communicated. Rather than representing fixed categories, these narrative lines should be understood as analytically reconstructed patterns that capture the dominant ways the dispute was narrated in the borderland. They function as culturally shared interpretive frameworks through which the conflict is rendered meaningful and narratively manageable (Somers 1994; Polkinghorne 1995). In this sense, narratives operate as everyday ethnological practices: they domesticate uncertainty, stabilize the moral order, and translate abstract political processes into experiential terms rooted in work, home, and physical security.

A cross-cutting narrative motif present on both sides of the border concerns the divergence between the conflict's limited impact on everyday practices and its pronounced symbolic effects. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that routine cross-border mobility, cooperation projects, and pragmatic contacts had largely continued throughout the course of the dispute. At the same time, they described a perceptible shift in atmosphere, tone, and mutual sensitivity. The conflict is thus narrated less as a rupture

of everyday interaction than as a symbolic event that subtly re-coded the meaning of cross-border normality, introducing caution, irritation, or emotional distance without dismantling established routines. As anticipated, the opinions of randomly approached people in public spaces were often more raw and radical than the more reflexive accounts of purposively selected interviewees. Similarly, online discourse, whether in media articles or on social networks, operated at a heightened level of emotional intensity and aggression, amplifying simplified and polarized storylines. Against this shared background, four dominant yet internally diverse narrative lines can be analytically identified.

Water and vulnerability

In Czech public discourse, water is narrated as a fundamental condition of life, dignity, and the right to remain in place. The mine appears as an external force disrupting everyday routines and threatening the viability of already fragile border communities. This narrative foregrounds the power asymmetries between local residents and the large energy actors, as well as long-standing experiences of marginalization vis-à-vis distant political centers (Strang 2004).

References to drying wells, uncertainty about the future, and the fear of displacement anchor this narrative in embodied experience, through which environmental harm becomes morally charged. Within this storyline, water is not framed as a negotiable resource but as a shared and vulnerable foundation of everyday normality. Legal escalation to the EU level is therefore narrated as a legitimate response to prolonged neglect and the failure of cross-border responsibility, as illustrated by the following comment:

“Many years of neglect on the part of Poland, especially the Turów mine, accumulated over the years, which ultimately led to the escalation of the dispute at the international level. This accumulation was a consequence of the delaying tactics of PGE and Polish politicians. After that, moving the dispute to the EU level was the only possibility.” (IDI CZ)

On the Polish side, this narrative is frequently dismissed as non-authentic, politically instrumental, or exaggerated. One respondent claimed:

“For many years, there was no problem, or it was not disclosed, and then suddenly it exploded. It amazes me. The escalation of this misunderstanding to Brussels was unnecessary.” (IDI PL)

More radical articulations frame the dispute within conspiracy discourses as a strategic attack on Poland's energy sovereignty. Across these contrasting positions, water ultimately represents the possibility of staying: the ability to continue living an ordinary, rooted life in the borderland rather than being gradually forced out by cumulative environmental insecurity. As one Czech respondent put it:

"We don't have any water in our wells or water lines. My neighbors help me in this regard. The view from my garden is terrifying; I see the moonscape getting closer. The mine is seriously complicating my life here." (CZ)

Conversely, Polish counter-narratives relativize or displace the responsibility:

"The problems with water on the Czech side are exaggerated. They have swimming pools full of water next to their houses. If there are any shortages, they are more likely caused by the sand pit in Hrádek nad Nisou." (PL)

Within this narrative constellation, water functions not merely as an environmental resource but as a moral foundation of everyday life, through which local actors articulate claims about justice, responsibility, and the right to remain in place. Comparable borderland research shows that such narrative polarization often reflects a broader shift from economic differentials to existential concerns under conditions of crisis and heightened insecurity (Zaitseva-Chipak 2025).

Employment and necessity

In Polish discourse, the Turów mine is predominantly embedded in a narrative of necessity. It is portrayed as a pillar of regional employment, social stability, and national energy security, particularly in times of geopolitical and economic uncertainty. Within this context, work at Turów is narrated not merely as economic activity but as a source of dignity, pride, and intergenerational continuity in a region that has been shaped by industrial labor (Mitchell 2011). The continuity of work and routine functions as a counterweight to environmental concerns, framing the mine as a guarantor of social normality. As one interviewee noted:

“The mine and adjacent power plant are vitally important for our region, not only Bogatynia, but also Żgorzelec, Lubań, and other communes. Everything is connected with energy production. Everybody has a relative working in the mine or power plant.” (IDI PL)

From this perspective, external pressure to halt mining is narrated as socially irresponsible or unjust. The 2022 bilateral agreement is often interpreted as confirmation that pragmatic compromise ultimately prevailed. Work at Turów is thus narrated as the essential condition for planning one’s life, sustaining family routine, and remaining rooted in a structurally vulnerable region. Within this narrative, the legitimacy of the mine is grounded less in environmental arguments than in moral claims concerning dignity, work, and the continuity of regional life.

Institutions and moral disappointment

This narrative line cuts across national boundaries and focuses on institutions as moral actors. On the Czech side, doubts persist about whether the state and regional authorities adequately represent local interests and whether compensation translates into tangible improvements.

“The way the dispute over the Turów mine was handled was, in my opinion, completely incorrect, and it is a complete failure of ruling politicians on both sides of the border, regardless of their political affiliation.” (IDI CZ)

In contrast, on the Polish side, scepticism is directed primarily at EU institutions, rather than the regional or national government. EU policy is framed as selective, politicized, and insensitive to local social costs (Misztal 2003; Rothstein 2011). One interviewee claimed: *“The EU does not like Poland because it is a conservative and self-sufficient country.” (PL)*

Narratives vary across governance scales. In Czechia, the local authorities are often perceived as powerless or ineffective, while in both countries the national governments are seen as distant, strategic, or weak (some Czechs criticized their government for a disadvantageous agreement, while some Poles rebuked their government for paying compensation to Czechs). The EU is seen either as legally necessary but a weak enforcer (on the Czech side) or an intrusive external actor (on the Polish side). Disappointment intensified following the agreement, as illustrated by the comment below:

“We were sold out. Our politicians pretended to protect our interests, but now they’re friends with the Polish fossil fuel lobby. They’re either weak or corrupt. I’m furious with the Liberec Regional Government. The amount of compensation should have been significantly higher. It won’t be enough for all the proposed measures. I don’t believe the situation will be better soon. Building waterlines and protective measures is a matter of years, and we don’t have the time.” (CZ)

These narratives reflect broader experiences of institutional fatigue, where formal solutions fail to address lived concerns. Cross-border bodies such as the Euroregion appear narratively marginal or opaque, reinforcing perceptions that the negotiations were conducted elsewhere, away from the everyday realities of the borderland. This institutional absence or ambiguity contributed to a broader sense of moral disappointment, in which formal procedures and negotiations were perceived as having unfolded in isolation from the lived realities of the borderland.

Although interviewees on both sides of the border expressed fear about the future with regard to water scarcity, unemployment, and energy shortages, it is notable that, like most people in the region, they had not been personally affected by the dispute. Instead, they expressed anticipatory narratives that do not always mirror empirical changes. Within this constellation, institutions become central narrative objects through which actors interpret fairness and the credibility of political authority in the borderland.

Solidarity and othering

Finally, Turów has become a site where imaginaries of cross-border relations are negotiated. While some narratives invoke ideals of cooperation, neighborliness, and shared responsibility, others reinforce binary oppositions and stereotypes. The conflict thus risks undermining the “soft infrastructure” of everyday cross-border coexistence built through mobility, social ties, and informal cooperation (Wilson – Donnan 2012; Decoville – Durand 2018). Nevertheless, several interviewees stressed that everyday practices, such as shopping, commuting, or informal neighborly exchanges, remained largely unaffected even at the peak of the crisis:

“Our two countries have a close relationship and people who live in the border areas should have good relations. We need each other. I think Czech–Polish relations were not as heated as the media described. They wanted negative sensations to boost their visibility.” (IDI CZ)

Notably, there were some respondents who indicated that intentional silence was a strategy for maintaining “micro-normality.” This reflects not apathy but an everyday bordering practice aimed at preserving coexistence (Donnan – Wilson 1999). One interviewee remarked: “*We laugh, we talk, but we don’t talk about it. We don’t want to offend them, and they don’t want to offend us. The subject of the dispute did not appear in any of the conversations.*” (IDI PL)

At the same time, symbolic incidents such as hostile signage, protest slogans, and the selective invocation of national stereotypes were recalled as emotionally disproportionate yet narratively powerful moments that condensed broader tensions into recognizable signs of exclusion. Even after the agreement, underlying tension has persisted among certain parts of the population. Furthermore, digital debates condensed these tensions into emotionally charged moments of “othering.” Online discussions (Novinky 2021; Salon 24 2021) were characterized by exalted nationalism and pejorative ethnonyms, often articulated by individuals who lived outside the region. The dispute was evidently re-territorialized into digital space. Solidarity and othering thus emerge not as fixed opposites but as fragile narrative positions, continuously renegotiated through everyday encounters, symbolic gestures, and mediated representations. While cross-border relations have endured functionally, their symbolic foundations remain vulnerable. Overall, narratives of solidarity and othering play a crucial role in determining whether neighbors are perceived as legitimate partners in coexistence or as morally distant actors on the other side of the border.

Discussion and conclusion

The Turów dispute demonstrates that cross-border environmental conflicts cannot be reduced to disagreements over material impacts or regulatory compliance alone. Instead, they unfold as struggles over meaning, moral legitimacy, and the narrative conditions of everyday life in the borderland. In this case, the narratives did not merely accompany political and legal developments; they actively structured how risk, responsibility, and normality were perceived and evaluated on both sides of the Czech–Polish border.

The analysis shows that these narratives transformed environmental and economic concerns into morally charged questions of survival, dignity, and the possibility of remaining in place. Water scarcity, employment continuity, and energy security were narrated not simply as sectoral concerns, but as existential conditions underpinning the capacity to stay, plan, and maintain an ordinary life in a peripheral region. Once framed in these moral terms, compromise becomes socially and politically difficult. Water

ceased to function as a negotiable environmental parameter and instead became a condition of rootedness and dignity, while work was elevated from an economic activity to a guarantor of social normality and regional survival. These competing moral economies of vulnerability and necessity (Thompson 1971; Mitchell 2011) structured both political positions and everyday judgements of fairness and responsibility. For many Czech residents, protecting water resources and everyday living conditions emerged as a morally non-negotiable claim linked to the right to remain in place. In contrast, Polish narratives frequently framed continued mining as a morally justified necessity grounded in employment, regional continuity, and national energy security. The dispute thus illustrates how cross-border environmental conflicts may reflect not only divergent material interests, but also different moral expectations as to what constitutes a fair and sustainable order of everyday life.

From this perspective, the escalation of the conflict to the European level represented more than just a legal strategy; it was a narrative re-scaling through which Czech actors sought recognition and protection against perceived power asymmetries. Conversely, on the Polish side, EU intervention was frequently portrayed as distant, selective, and insufficiently attentive to local social costs, which reinforced scepticism toward supranational governance and strengthened sovereignty-oriented interpretations (Žuk – Žuk 2022; Polko et al. 2025). These divergent narrative orientations illustrate how borders mediate not only institutional competences but also the circulation and reception of moral claims.

Importantly, this narrative divergence did not translate into an immediate breakdown of everyday cross-border practices. Mobility, shopping, commuting, and routine contacts largely persisted throughout the dispute. However, the symbolic and emotional atmosphere of cross-border coexistence was subtly transformed. The narratives introduced caution, irritation, and moral distance into otherwise routinized interactions, effectively re-coding the meaning of cross-border normality without dismantling its practical foundations. This finding resonates with broader borderland research, which shows that crises often reshape the symbolic function of borders, positioning them as sites of both vulnerability and protection rather than eliminating everyday cross-border practices altogether (Paasi 2013; Zaitseva-Chipak 2025).

A key contribution of this analysis lies in conceptualizing institutional trust as a narrative object rather than a stable attitudinal variable. On the Czech side, disappointment was directed primarily at national and regional authorities, which were perceived as unable to translate legal success into tangible improvements in everyday life. On the Polish side, mistrust focused

more strongly on EU institutions, which were framed as politically biased or socially detached (Misztal 2003; Rothstein 2011). Cross-border bodies such as the Euroregion appeared narratively marginal, revealing a significant gap between the formal architecture of cooperation and its perceived relevance in moments of open conflict (Decoville – Durand 2018). This institutional distance contributed to a broader sense of moral fatigue, in which decision-making was experienced as occurring elsewhere, detached from the lived realities of the borderland.

The persistence of these narratives after the 2022 bilateral agreement underscores that legal settlements do not necessarily resolve the symbolic and moral dimensions of cross-border conflicts. Instead, they initiate an “afterlife” of the dispute, in which memories, disappointments, and expectations continue to shape how coexistence, cooperation, and responsibility are imagined (Olick 2007; Reeves 2014). Turów thus functions as a narrative node where longer histories of industrial labor, marginality, and center–periphery relations intersect with contemporary anxieties about environmental insecurity and energy transition. Taken together, the findings suggest that borderland coexistence depends not only on institutional arrangements and infrastructural solutions, but on the fragile compatibility of everyday narratives through which neighbors recognize each other as legitimate moral actors rather than adversaries (Donnan – Wilson 1999; Wilson – Donnan 2012). When such narrative compatibility erodes, conflicts may persist symbolically even when formally resolved, leaving lasting imprints on trust, belonging, and the moral geography of the borderland.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of narrative analysis for understanding cross-border environmental conflicts as lived and moral phenomena, rather than purely technical or legal disputes. At the same time, its scope is defined by several limitations. The analysis focuses on articulated narratives captured through interviews, situational conversations, and public texts, and therefore it foregrounds meanings that are verbally expressed and publicly shareable over tacit or embodied forms of sense-making. Empirically, the material reflects the period of heightened tension between 2019 and 2022 and does not allow for a systematic assessment of the longer-term narrative transformation after the formal settlement. Furthermore, the study does not aim for statistical representativeness.

Future research would benefit from combining narrative analysis with long-term ethnographic fieldwork to capture how such narratives are reproduced, softened, or renegotiated in everyday practices once public attention fades. Attending to narrative persistence across scales and over time can help explain why some cross-border conflicts leave deep symbolic scars while others are gradually absorbed into the fabric of everyday normality.

In this sense, narrative analysis offers a sensitive lens for understanding borders not as static lines or institutional regimes, but as fluid, continuously negotiated spaces of meaning.

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