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National Minorities and Global Crises: Challenging the Notion of the Danish-German Border Region as a Role Model for Europe

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Abstract

Since 2015, a series of high-impact global crises has sent shockwaves across Europe. From the so-called migrant crisis of 2015, through the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, national minorities have, like their majority counterparts, seen considerable changes to their lives and lifestyles as a result of measures taken by the national executives in their host countries. It is possible that significant changes to border control and the increased importance of nation-state action in times of crisis have affected the ways in which national minorities understand themselves vis-à-vis their host and kin-states. By reviewing recent media comments and academic research, this article hypothesises that these international crises have pushed national minorities away from local identities and towards more national and European discourses. As a commentary, this article encourages future exploration of this hypothesis in other minority communities across Europe.

Keywords: *minority; global crisis; migration; Covid-19; war in Ukraine; Europe*

Introduction

The Danish-German border region, comprising the present-day regions of Southern Jutland (or North Schleswig) in Denmark

and the South Schleswig region of Schleswig-Holstein in Germany, has often been cited as a prime example of successful regional integration. Indeed, having moved on from decades of conflict, contested borders and disputes over ethnic, linguistic, cultural and historical differences, it is undeniable that the path from conflict to peace over the past century has been a welcome and positive development. During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the region commemorated 100 years since the so-called ‘reunification’ of Southern Jutland with Denmark and the plebiscites on setting the border between the two nation states. These (mostly)¹ democratic exercises also resulted in the creation of two national minorities on either side of the border, a Danish minority in Germany and a German minority in Denmark. Whilst many of the celebratory and academic events planned for 2020 were cancelled or postponed due to lockdown restrictions, local newspapers and magazines took the opportunity to discuss what the ‘reunification’ meant to them.

The Danish-language magazine *Grænsen*, published by *Grænseforeningen*, issued a special commemorative edition with comments from Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen, and other prominent figures in Danish and border region political life. In response to the question of what she hoped for the future of the Danish-German border region, Queen Margrethe II noted that “...a borderland is a place where there is a bridge and a place where there is a border that separates. There are differences and one should not artificially smooth out these differences” (Bjerager, 2019 [own translation]). Whilst much of the focus of academic studies in recent years has been on regional integration, multilingualism and multiculturalism in the national minorities, the comment by the Danish monarch serves as a reminder that despite globalisation, European integration and complex, ever-changing mixed identities, perceptions of clear differences between Germans and Danes in the region still exist.

This article proposes that such national differences have been brought to the fore over the past eight years as a result of intense recent global crises. With a renewed importance of the national executive in developing a response to these crises, the focus has shifted away from

¹ The plebiscites took place following the defeat of Germany at the end of the First World War. The region was divided into voting zones based loosely on very rough linguistic data, with the Allied powers ensuring that canals and sluice gates were located in predominantly ‘Danish-speaking’ zones, so as to reduce the risk of these falling into the hands of the German state in the event of a future war. This practice could be perceived as gerrymandering, as many towns in Southern Jutland voted strongly in favour of joining the German state but, as they were located in a zone which voted mostly in favour of joining Denmark, they too joined Denmark. For towns such as Tønder, which lie directly on the border, it could be argued that a true democratic exercise would have given scope to adjust the border so as to place Tønder in Germany.

cross-border regional integration, common values, mixed identities and cultural and linguistic pluralism. If it is the case that the Danish-German border region's reputation as a role model for minorities across Europe is starting to show cracks, then this may highlight a need for a new relationship between the minorities and their kin- and host-state national executives.

1. From conflict to cooperation to confusion

The plebiscites of 1920 were conducted in response to the regional conflicts of the nineteenth century, during which residents of Schleswig forced to display national allegiance by fighting for Denmark or Germany/Prussia. Nationalism was particularly problematic for the region in the nineteenth century, as one's mother tongue, cultural practice, place of residence or sense of loyalty did not necessarily correspond fully with either national discourse at the time. Indeed, the crises of the nineteenth century placed a great importance on a sense of national identity, directed and constructed in large by the respective national executives and cultural elites. Prior to 1864, the border between Danish and German state entities (the Danish fiefdom of Schleswig and the German fiefdom of Holstein) was located roughly along the river Eider. Following the Second War of Schleswig in 1864, the border between the two evolving nations moved approximately 150km northwards to the river Kongeå. These movements resulted in the creation of de facto minorities on either side of the border but it was not until the democratic placement of the border in 1920 (at its present location approximately 50km south of the river Kongeå) that clear Danish and German minorities became established. Minority rights were further strengthened in 1955 via the Copenhagen-Bonn Declarations, whilst Denmark's membership of the European Union from 1973, the creation of the Euroregion Sønderjylland-Schleswig in 1997 and the introduction of the Schengen Agreement in 2001 further cemented the Danish-German border region's image as a highly-integrated and open border region, free from conflict.

At the heart of these developments have been the Danish and German national minorities. Due to the open and inclusive definition of minority membership, it is difficult to determine the exact size of each minority. However, estimates put the figure at around 50,000 and 15,000 for the Danish and German minorities respectively. Minority identity has been described as "mixed" or "hybridised" (Tarvet, 2021), partly as a result of the high degree of interaction between the residents of both states, as well as the multilingual and multicultural nature of the schools, which promote the minorities' official languages in class but see a more

mixed linguistic environment during break time. The minority schools, particularly for the Danish minority in Southern Schleswig, have a high uptake of pupils from non-minority backgrounds. The then rector of the A.P. Møller school for the Danish minority in Schleswig gave an interview to *Grænsen* in 2016, in which he estimated that almost 95% of pupils speak German as a first language at home (Bjerager, 2016). Some have criticised this phenomenon as “artificial” maintenance of the minority, yet the subjective nature of affiliation or identification with the minorities allow for exactly this. As such, the minorities find themselves caught between openness and authenticity (Tarvet, 2022), whereby objective definitions of what it means to be “Danish” or “German” (such as language proficiency, ancestry, or culture) are pitted against subjective ideas of self-identity. Indeed, self-identification is a core facet of current trends in other identity-political movements, such as the transgender movement. If identity is to be understood as a negotiation between an individual’s sense of self and society’s expectations of what that identity should constitute, then Danish or German minority identity is a constantly evolving and ever-changing concept. The problem arises with the national component of such identities. It is perhaps useful to conceptualise Danish and German minority identity as distinct from yet influenced by mainstream trends in both their kin- and host-state national discourses. Due to their objective similarities, it could be argued that the two minorities have more in common with each other than they do with either kin- or host-state discourses in national identity. This has been the case for much of the latter part of the twentieth century, however it is clear that recent global crises are challenging this model. As the rise of nationalism and subsequent wars in the nineteenth century brought the nation state to the forefront, so too do the crises of the twenty-first century.

2. Confronting the shockwaves of recent global challenges

Three global crises in particular have provoked strong and unprecedented responses from the national governments in Germany and Denmark since 2015: the so-called migrant crisis since 2015, the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020, and the war in Ukraine since 2022. Whilst other factors such as terrorism and animal migration have elicited a national response in terms of border policies, these factors have arguably had a far less significant impact on minority life and identity in the border region. Furthermore, these factors are local and/or specific rather than global in nature. As such, this article will examine the aforementioned three global crises.

The so-called European migrant crisis, which saw a surge in migration to Europe

primarily via Greece and Italy, began in early 2015 and quickly grew to become a Europe-wide concern. As countries struggled to determine whether to welcome the migrants, facilitate their passage of travel northwards or seal their own borders more tightly, the decision taken by Angela Merkel on the 4th September that year to accept refugees stuck in Hungary resulted in an influx of migration towards Germany (Mushaben, 2017). Many migrants sought to reach either Germany or Sweden due to favourable conditions and this resulted in a number of pinch points across Europe. Whilst several European nations temporarily closed their borders in response to the influx (including Germany), the Danish-German border region gained some international attention as Denmark became a transit country for migrants heading to Sweden. In January 2016, Denmark introduced police checks at the major border crossing points. These checks have remained in place ever since and have been met with significant criticism from border commuters, minority institutions and businesses alike. Nevertheless, these strict measures were broadly welcomed in Denmark, with one poll suggesting that support for continued checks was as high as 55% (Crone et al., 2016). The political decision-making at national level in response to the so-called migrant crisis have had a significant impact on life in the border region and the national minority communities in particular. Leading figures in the Danish minority in Southern Schleswig generally backed the Germany government's approach of welcoming the migrants, whilst their kin-state government in Copenhagen adopted a far stricter standpoint on migrant intake, even for those seeking to travel onwards to Sweden (Klatt, 2020). The trend for members of the Danish and indeed the German minorities to favour the German state's approach was also reflected in a study conducted in 2017, which highlighted positive and welcoming attitudes among members of the minorities towards the migrants. Several of the study participants were also outspokenly critical of the approach taken by the Danish state and accused their kin-state of xenophobia (Tarvet, 2021). Following decades of progression towards openness, regional integration and cross-border cooperation, actions taken by the national executives in Denmark and Germany were encouraging the Danish minority in particular to shift away from the political-cultural trends of its kin-state north of the border.

In 2020, the rapid spread of Covid-19 across the globe similarly prompted governments worldwide to take urgent and strict measures with regards to the control of national borders, as well as other extraordinary and historic restrictions on the lives of their domestic populations. During the first wave in Spring 2020, almost all EU countries closed at least some of their borders. Denmark closed all of its borders on 13th March, whilst Germany closed most of its borders, including that with Denmark, on 16th March. According to Eurostat, approximately 2

million people commute across a border from one EU member state to another each day for work (Eurostat, 2020). In the Danish-German border region this figure is estimated to be around 13,000 (Region Sønderjylland-Schleswig, 2022), although this figure does not take into account those who cross the border for other reasons (visiting family/friends, accessing healthcare, shopping etc.). Indeed, following decades of regional integration, whereby borderland residents had become accustomed to a mostly frictionless border, they suddenly found themselves unable to carry out the most normal of everyday activities. The border closures imposed by the respective national executives, which Medeiros et al. term “Covidfencing” (Medeiros et al., 2021, p. 962), had not accounted for this phenomenon and instead prioritised a state-territorial approach to protection against the spread of Covid-19. Although goods, commuters and the children of separated parents were permitted to cross the border from the beginning, it was not until mid-April that Denmark allowed limited visits for families and established couples. From 18th May, Germany allowed family visits in cases of significant family events.

A study conducted in 2020 documented the views and opinions of members of the Danish and German minorities during this initial phase of the pandemic. Whilst respondents expressed generally positive views regarding the overall national responses, there was a clear split regarding border closures. 45% of respondents felt that the border should never have been closed against 44% who felt that it had been closed at the right time. When asked to score the performance of national governments in understanding the concerns of borderland residents, the German government scored 50 out of 100, whilst the Danish government scored just 25 out of 100. The study also highlighted that the biggest effects of Covidfencing on minority life were the inability to visit family and friends, the impact on a sense of a cross-border community and a sense of exclusion (Tarvet and Klatt, 2023). Once again, this study suggests that drastic measures taken by national executives in response to a global crisis have had a notable impact at local level in minority communities.

Following months of speculation among military intelligence and journalists, Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022. Far from being a localised conflict, the war in Ukraine had almost instant international ramifications. In addition to the massive expressions of financial, military and medical support and solidarity from national governments in the EU and elsewhere in the West, the invasion also resulted in a large outpour of refugees from Ukraine. Unlike the previous migrant crisis of 2015, Ukrainian refugees were generally welcomed by both Western national governments and their respective populations as a whole (Parusel and

Varfolomieieva, 2022). According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of 3rd January 2023, 4,905,293 Ukrainian refugees have registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe, of whom 36,523 are registered for protection in Denmark and 1,021,667 in Germany (UNHCR, 2023). Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russian president Vladimir Putin made repeated claims that the Russian minority in eastern Ukraine was being subjected to discrimination and genocide (BBC News, 2021) and used these accusations, amongst others, to justify military intervention. For the rest of Europe, a similar approach to minority-majority relations could have a devastating effect. In an interview with Danish broadcaster TVSyd, Professor Jørgen Kühl of Europa-Universität Flensburg stated that such an ideology "...can tap into an underlying feeling: Namely that a minority is loyal to the country it identifies itself with, and therefore the majority may come to suspect that the minority cannot be trusted" (TVSyd, 2022 [own translation]). Naturally, such a suspicion would have a damaging effect on the status quo for minorities in Europe although research is yet to be published regarding the extent to which minority identity in other parts of Europe has been affected by the war in Ukraine. However, early indications suggest the war has strengthened a sense of European identity.²

During a seminar of experts and minority leaders at the European Centre for Minority Issues in Flensburg in March 2022, there were mixed opinions regarding the applicability of the Danish-German border region and its minorities as a role model for the peace-building in Ukraine (Grænseforeningen, 2022). Whilst it was made clear that a border plebiscite similar to the one held in Schleswig would be ineffective in light of the current situation, Jens A. Christiansen, General Secretary of the Danish minority's largest association, the South Schleswigian Association (*Sydslesvigsk Forening*), stated that "...the Danish minority is part of German society and we do not wish to promote particular minority-political views in this matter. We react as democratic citizens in Germany who clearly distance themselves from this war" (Grænseforeningen, 2022 [own translation]). It is noteworthy that the German state rather than the Danish kin-state or the European Union is highlighted twice in this statement as the representative key actor in this matter. Harro Hallmann, head of communication at the German minority association the Federation of Germans in Northern Schleswig (*Bund Deutscher Nordschleswiger*) agreed, adding that the German minority should provide support via the relevant local professional bodies (Grænseforeningen, 2022). These statements highlight the

² At the time of writing, a pilot study into the impact of the war in Ukraine on minority identity in the Danish-German border region has already been conducted by the author and should be published later in 2024 in an edited volume by Routledge provisionally entitled "Making a Minority".

limitations of the minorities' political influence and reaffirm the role of nation states in taking action on global matters.

Conclusion

National, regional and transnational identities are negotiated within the confines of their surroundings. As mentioned, the communities in the Danish-German border region were pushed to assume national allegiances throughout the nineteenth century, particularly during periods of war. It is possible that the recent crises of the twenty-first century may have a similar effect. There is, however, a significant caveat to making such a hypothesis. Whilst national identities in the nineteenth century were far more concerned with linguistic, cultural and other factors from one's immediate surroundings, the highly-connected and globalised world of the twenty-first century allows for linguistic, cultural, social and political influence from further afield to play a role in the formation of one's self. It is therefore not surprising that when the world faces common challenges such as a pandemic or mass migration, national responses consider both locally-specific matters as well as international best practice. For minorities in border regions, who are used to a cross-border, transnational lifestyle, it is evident that without authoritative political influence and representation at national level, their lifestyles will likely be forced towards national trends in times of crisis. The crises discussed in this paper are relatively recent and it is yet to be seen whether the short-term shift towards national discourses and identities in times of crisis will be sustained in the medium to long term. In terms of future research, there is scope for researchers of other minority communities across Europe to conduct comparative analysis of the impact of these crises on their respective communities. Beyond the minority communities, a rise in the popularity of nationalist, Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant parties and movements in several European countries since 2015 add to the pressures from the nation state regarding the negotiation of minority identities and this too is worthy of future research in this context.

In 2005, Jørgen Kühl and Robert Bohn examined the question of whether the Danish-German minority communities could be used as a model for the rest of Europe (Kühl and Bohn, 2005), suggesting that the journey from conflict to cooperation via peace agreements, careful organisation and structuring represents a success story. Although this claim is not disputed by the arguments presented in this article, as a contribution to the discussion, it should be noted that the recent emphasis of nation states as the key actors in global issues and the role of

national minorities as not autonomous communities but rather groups subsumed under the nation states has become particularly salient over the last eight years. As such, national minorities should not be seen as displaced nationals or isolated communities but rather as inherently part of the national discourse. In times of crisis, they have sometimes been forgotten and subjected to unfavourable treatment as a result of crisis measures imposed by their respective national executives. These national executives should, in future, endeavour to take border region and national minority communities into account when planning such measures so as to avoid overreach into their community identities and lifestyles.

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