

STUDIES

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Cross-border cooperation across Polish borders: Thirty Years of cross-border Eldorado?

Abstract: The article overviews cross-border cooperation across Polish borders in the last three decades. Deeply rooted in conflictive border legacies and border shifts in the first half of the twentieth century, they quickly became locations of symbolic reconciliation with neighbours and functional cooperation aiming at economic development. The non-linear character of these processes resulted from the changing political environment in the region.

Keywords: Polish borders, de-bordering, re-bordering, CBC

JEL code: H7, H70, I2, I20, J6, J61, R1, R10, R5, R50, Z1, Z18

<https://doi.org/10.32976/stratfuz.2021.30>

1. Introduction

Intensive cross-border cooperation (CBC) is one of the main achievements of economic and political transformation and the European integration process in Central and Eastern Europe. Despite numerous similarities, (sub)regional peculiarities can be detected between specific states, revealing diversified models and modes of interactions across borders. Poland seems to be an interesting case in this context. Its borders have been a matter of decades-long concerns due to their (re)location(s), and symbolised - together with their (final) recognition - new, friendly relations with neighbours being a part of the continental integration process. Currently, her borders are of dual status: some are internal, others are external Schengen borders, which strongly influences processes observed there. While some have been objects of long-lasting de-bordering, other reveal (re)hardening in the last years.

The aim of this chapter is to overview the changing status of the Polish borders in the last three decades in the context of political, economic and social processes in Central and Eastern Europe and framed by the European integration dynamics. It is divided into six sections. After the introductory remarks the historical context of Polish borders is sketched, which is followed by their roles and perceptions after 1989. Further, the impact of the entry to the EU on border relations is presented. The last chapters test a wide spectrum of actors involved in CBC across different Polish borders, which allows a critical border reflection taking also the COVID-19 pandemic into consideration.

2. Borders in Polish modern history

To understand the last thirty years of CBC across Polish borders it is necessary to briefly overview the border legacy and border culture of contemporary Poland. The former can be understood as the history of borders, the latter as a set of beliefs of roles and functions played by borders in its history.

The border legacy of contemporary Poland shall be traced back to the reappearance of independent Poland and as a result of the First World War and territorial debates framing this process (*Went-Ilies* 2014) – the question of whether her new spatial shape shall follow the Jagiellonian model (a multi-ethnic empire located in the eastern part of the continent) or the Piast model (an ethnically and culturally homogenous nation state placed more in the western part). The

interwar territorial shape integrated both, but Polish independence was marked with border conflicts with almost all of its the neighbours and the strong presence of ethnic minorities in border regions (Ślusarczyk 1996). Consequently, Poland fought “border wars” with Germany in the west, Czechoslovakia in the south, the Soviet Union in the east and Lithuania in the north. The two peaceful (but very remote and short) pieces of the border were shared with Romania and Latvia. The Second World War brought Poland external decisions of shifting the borders westwards and causing enormous population replacement. Poland lost its eastern provinces (called *Kresy* – the Borderlands) and was offered German regions in the north, west and south as compensation. The German population escaped or was expelled, the space (officially labelled as *Ziemia Odzyskana* – the Regained Territories) was filled with Polish refugees and expellees, mainly from the lost eastern pre-war outskirts (Ślusarczyk 1996). The communist period was characterised by generally closed borders, concessioned and limited cross-border contacts and an official rhetoric of “friendship boundaries”. With regard to its three neighbours, the Polish-Eastern German border was closed (except from the 1970s), and a fear of Western German territorial revisionism was present even after the official recognition of the border line in 1970. Until this time, the feeling of “temporality” had been dominant on the Polish border side (Sakson 2001). Poles and Germans were generally isolated and official Polish communist propaganda stressed “eternal enmity” between the two nations alongside with “communist friendship” between communist Poland and Eastern Germany. The Polish-Czechoslovak border was the most permeable and the less sensitive one, with existing cross-border contacts strengthened by linguistic proximity. The Polish-Soviet border remained generally closed and its history and location was largely eliminated from the public discourse, similarly to the pre-war legacy of the Polish eastern provinces.

Border culture can be understood in the above described context as a set of beliefs related to borders and present in the Polish cultural and social discourse. At least two shall be recalled: fluidity and the defender syndrome. The former is related to frequently changing border location and associates Polish national territory with the place where Poles currently live, and not necessarily with specific space (Eberhardt 2004). The latter gives an interpretative context to understanding the role that Poland plays with regard to borders – the role of defender. Being historically located at the edge of the western civilisation, Poles see their eastern border as a barrier for protection against external threats – Mongols (Bojko 2020), Turks or Bolsheviks trying to invade the West. This narration was shortly reversed after 1945 when Poland became a flank protecting the Eastern Camp against the imperialist west, but its traditional meaning reappeared in the modern manifestation with the entry to the EU and the Schengen area.

3. Borders of Poland and the collapse of communism

The collapse of communism brought internal freedom to Poland, but regionally and continentally resulted in drastic changes in the Polish geopolitical situation and border relations. One major factor is that Germany was reunified and this strongest European state became Poland’s direct neighbour (the 467-km-long border follows the Neisse and Oder Rivers). Poland was pressing on “final” recognition of the common border as it was afraid of German territorial claims. This materialised soon in the form of the treaty in 1990 and the German policy of being a peaceful and reliable pillar of the European integration. In 2013 Czechoslovakia disintegrated, giving Poland two neighbours in the south (796 km of the border were shared with Czechia and 541 with Slovakia – both in mountainous areas), similarly to the Soviet Union, where the old territorial order was replaced by borders with Ukraine (535 km), Belarus (418 km), Lithuania (104 km) and the Russian Federation (Kaliningrad Region - 210 km). The change in international politics was assisted by domestic political and economic transformation. The former resulted in decentralisation, the creation of authorities at local and regional levels equipped them with numerous competences, including cooperation with foreign partners. The latter introduced the free-market economy, which led to booming private initiative (this was the only way of creating

income for many individuals under the circumstances of complete breakdown of the previously dominant centrally planned system).

The new situation had significant consequences for borders. First of all, at the state level, it resulted in a long-lasting tendency of de-bordering by softening border regimes – allowing individuals to cross the borders and (more and more) freely circulate across them. Second, a group of local and regional institutional actors (local and regional authorities) became very active in creating cross-border contacts. Third, individuals became one of the most visible elements of the border landscape, especially with regard to local cross-border trade, smuggling, economic exchange, etc. Most of the border crossing points were quickly covered with so-called “bazaars” – open-air markets attracting millions of visitors and customers from the other side of the border. All those tendencies initiated the process of transforming the Polish borders from remote and underdeveloped edges of the national territory into dynamic and intensively developing bridges to the neighbouring states and communities. The boundary form started to change into a frontier form (*Kristof* 1959). This was realised the most intensively with the European Union’s enlargement in 2004.

4. Polish borders and the European integration

Polish borders and CBC in the 1990s were very quickly influenced by the pro-western dimension of the Polish foreign policy, materialised in attempt to join the European Union. This was visible at several levels:

First of all, prioritisation of the “horizontal” over “vertical” cross-border links. Trying to be the bridge between both parts of the continent, Poland focused on infrastructure, emphasising – especially economically – western and eastern borders. This changed only in the 2010s.

Second, the most obvious way to join the western structures was “through” Germany. The Polish-German border became the most significant border in state politics. Building successful CBC on this specific border, established in the context of continental integration, was meant to prove reconciliation between both states and nations and serve as an example of new, cooperative and peaceful relations between former enemies. At the same time, it was a test for economic cooperation, using existing asymmetries in production costs and unemployment level to achieve a synergetic effect. Consequently, enormous stress was put on two types of cross-border initiatives: social-cultural (bringing previously separated Poles and Germans together, teaching their neighbours’ language, building trust and creating human contacts), and infrastructural (creating cross-border infrastructure enabling individual and business actors to operate across the border).

Third, a more general tendency to establish cross-border cooperation was also visible on the southern and eastern border, especially in the context of openness towards the new neighbours. This process was driven especially by local and regional institutional actors, as well as by individuals.

Forth, the initial de-bordering was deepening on the western and southern border, but over time, the process turned into regress at the eastern border. On the west and south, together with the eastern enlargement of the EU on May 1st 2004 and Schengen zone enlargement on December 2007, the border regime softened and border controls were eventually eliminated. At the same time, however, progress in integration was limited by tightening the border regime on the Polish eastern border, being the external border of the EU. This resulted in gradual re-bordering and complications in CBC development (*Branka et al.* 2020). The situation changed only when a visa-free regime was introduced for some of the neighbours.

Fifth, the role of European Funds has been crucial for development of CBC on the Polish borders. Starting from the EU accession moment, it was the INTERREG programme that fueled joint projects over borders and involved various types of actors. However, the foundations had been laid even earlier, together with the PHARE programme and its CBC component (*Dotzblasz-*

Raryczk 2010, 36), serving not only as a source of financing but first of all a source of CBC know-how. For many local actors it was the period of creation and institutionalisation of the first contacts across the borders and taking advantage of the western experience. The reports presenting Polish participation in the INTERREG programme in the years 2007–2020 outline a very interesting picture. The component A (*15 lat 2020*) has been divided into six operational programmes, between Poland and Mecklemburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg, Saxony, Czechia, Slovakia and Lithuania. Additionally, the programmes Poland-Belarus-Ukraine and Poland-Russia support these borderlands from the European Neighbourhood Instrument. Over the years, almost 0.5 bln. euros were spent on the Polish border side on numerous projects. Two categories (23% of the total budget each) seem to dominate among the supported projects: cultural and historical legacy, and transportation infrastructure, symbolising the (re)construction of human connections and mutual accessibility. Further 9-9% were spent on tourism development and security by each, 8% each on environmental protection and regional institutional cooperation, 7% on education and labor market, 6% on small project facility, 4% on cooperation networks and local initiatives, and finally 2% on competition and entrepreneurship.

Probably the most significant institutional aspect of this phase of CBC development on the Polish borders was the creation of Euroregions. They very quietly covered the entire borderland and became the most important form of cooperation, remaining so today.

Table 1. Euroregions along the Polish borders

No.	Euroregion	Est.	Border
1	Nysa	1991	Poland/Germany/Czechia
2	Karpacki	1993	Poland/Slovakia/Ukraine/Hungary/Romania
3	Sprewa-Nysa-Bóbr	1993	Poland/Germany
4	Pro Europa Viadrina	1993	Poland/Germany
5	Tatry	1994	Poland/Slovakia
6	Bug	1995	Poland/Ukraine/Belarus
7	Pomerania	1995	Poland/Germany/Sweden
8	Glacensis	1996	Poland/Czechia
9	Niemen	1997	Poland/Lithuania/Belarus
10	Pradziad	1997	Poland/Czechia
11	Bałtyk	1998	Poland/Russia/Lithuania/Sweden/Denmark
12	Śląsk Cieszyński	1998	Poland/Czechia
13	Silesia	1998	Poland/Czechia
14	Beskidy	2000	Poland/Czechia/Slovakia
15	Puszcza Białowieska	2002	Poland/Belarus
16	Łyna-Ława	2003	Poland/Russia

Source: Author's own work

Euroregional cooperation (*Table 1*) was initiated on the Polish-German border in 1991 and in the following decade spread to the southern and eastern borders, forming one of the most visible manifestations of the Europeanisation process. After their establishment, many of the Euroregions (especially on the eastern border) entered into the phase of silencing, sometimes even for a longer period of time.

Another advanced form of CBC is the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) (*Table 2*). Despite initial skepticism of the central authorities, the relevant EU regulation was introduced into the Polish legal system in 2008 (*Dolżbłasz & Raryczk 2010, 201*). Four of the EGTCs in the EU were established on the Polish borders in recent years, exclusively on the

southern border, developing further previous Euroregional ties (e.g., CETC-EGTC Ltd. involves partners from Sweden, Hungary and Croatia and is aimed at the construction of a transport corridor) (*Skorupska 2017*).

Table 2. EGTCs along the Polish borders

No.	EGTC	Est.	Border
1	European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation TRITIA Limited	2013	Poland, Czechia, Slovakia
2	UWT TATRY z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością EZÚS TATRY s ručením obmedzeným EGTC TATRY Ltd.	2013	Poland, Slovakia
3	Central European Transport Corridor Limited Liability European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation (CETC-EGTC Ltd.)	2014	Poland, Sweden, Hungary, Croatia
4	European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation NOVUM Limited (EGTC NOVUM Ltd.)	2015	Poland, Czechia

Source: Author's own list based on the List of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (2021)

Border twin towns form another interesting phenomenon on the Polish borders. They are understood as smaller urban settlements placed on one side of the state border directly next to a similar urban structure on the other (*J. Jańczak 2018, 396*). In case of Poland, their existence is influenced by the setting and shifting of borders (as a result of the First and Second World Wars) and dividing towns into separate ones. They are often described as European integration laboratories – spots where the European ideas can be tested on a micro scale (*Gasparini 1999–2000*).

There are five pairs of the border twin towns on three Polish borders, namely: Frankfurt (Oder)–Słubice, Görlitz–Zgorzelec, and Guben–Gubin along the German (all of them divided in 1945); Cieszyn–Český Těšín at the Czech (divided in 1920), and Terespol–Brześć at the Belarusian border (divided in 1945).

The towns located on the Polish-German border became very quickly central spots of local dimension of the relations between both states and nations. They were previously separated (also with regard to ethnic homogeneity on both sides), but they started to boom economically after 1989, especially because of the significant differences in labour costs and prices of specific services and products. This process very quickly contributed to the emergence of cross-border commuters (Poles working in Germany) and cross-border customers (mainly Germans doing shopping in Poland). Similarly dynamic fields of cooperation were culture, education and social issues, which were designed to bring the inhabitants of the borderland together. This resulted in numerous cultural projects (festivals, celebrations, etc.), as well as institutional cooperation in the field of education. Moreover, civil society continually developed across the borders.

The towns located on Polish-Czech border, Cieszyn–Český Těšín, also mirror the attempts of intensive cooperation. In this case, the involvement of central authorities was much lower (as the southern dimension was not prioritised over the first two decades after the collapse of communism). Furthermore, the presence of a Polish minority on the Czech side, as well as local Silesian identification, combined with cultural and linguistic proximity, facilitated bottom-up interactions of individuals, alongside commercial contacts and local authorities' cooperation.

The towns Terespol and Brześć, located on the Polish-Belarusian border, represent another dynamic. The commercial character of cross-border contacts is only partly developed because of political tensions between both neighbouring states and existing normative and institutional differences.

5. Border actors and CBC

To understand the dynamics of CBC on the Polish borders over the last three decades, a brief overview of the involved actors seems to be crucial. Following the concept of cross-border governance, the exclusive competences of states with regard to external relations have been partly delegated to four groups of actors: the European Union, local authorities, business and civil society. Assuming that the EU level has been creating institutional and financial framework for cooperation, the other actors fill this context with content.

The CBC policy of the Polish state has been marked with the intention to create good relations with its neighbours. The original focus was placed on the western border followed by allocation of political support and financial resources. The policy of reconciliation with Germany and entry to the European Union resulted in numerous infrastructural projects, especially highway (currently four crossings at the border) and railway connections. Higher education initiatives, especially construction of the Collegium Polonicum (CP - joint academic institution of the European University Viadrina (EUV), Frankfurt (Oder), Germany and the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, which educates students and creates bilingual intellectual cross-border elites) can serve as an example (*Eksperyment* 2016). In 1991, the EUV was (re)established in the German border town of Frankfurt (Oder), bringing an academic spirit to the borderland and becoming the first German academic institution open to students from Poland. In 1998, the CP was established on the Polish side in Słubice, offering several study programs allowing joint education for Poles and Germans. The success and further evolution of both institutions illustrate the changing dynamics of the Polish-German border: exceptional until 2004, they lost potential students' interest and national politicians' attention with the new opportunities and challenges after the eastern enlargement of the EU. The following years resulted in their border-oriented (re)profiling.

The years after 2004 have also been characterised by a relocated focus towards the eastern border (being a part of the Poland-led initiative of the Eastern Partnership) (*Korosteleva* 2014). This resulted in intensification of the cooperation with Ukraine at the beginning of 2010s and the promotion of initiatives leading to introduction of the visa-free local border traffic (implemented since 2009 and applied to residents of a 30-km stripe adjusted to the border line on the Ukrainian side). This was employed also towards Russia (Kaliningrad Oblast) in 2012, resulting in significant increase in human traffic, massive commercial and touristic contacts and booming local economies in the border area resulting from enormous influx of Russian customers (*Piekutowska-Kamiński-Wakuluk* 2014). It covered the entire area of the Kaliningrad Region and specific counties of the north and north-eastern Poland, including the metropolitan area of Gdańsk. The agreement was suspended in 2016 (*J. Jańczak* 2015) (the official reason was security concerns related to the NATO summit and World Youth Day 2016) and the previous status has never been reintroduced, despite vivid and loud protest of local actors, especially local authorities and local businesses on the Polish side. In the case of Belarus, a local border traffic agreement was signed in 2010, but it could not enter into force because of political tensions between the two states.

During the last decade, thanks to the “Central European shift” in Polish foreign policy after 2015, strong cooperation between these states was promoted within the European Union. This resulted in intensification of the infrastructural projects of “vertical” direction – connecting the north with the south of Europe across the Polish southern border. In 2021, three highway border crossings existed there and are to be supplemented with three others that are under construction or whose plans have been prepared.

Regional and local authorities form the next group of actors that created and developed CBC on the Polish borders over the last years. The INTERREG financial support pushed them to create joint projects with partners from the other border side. Again, the most intensively this was visible on the western and southern borders (*J. Jańczak* 2008). The process was labeled as “institutional pragmatism” in the first years, where implementing public investments using European resources

was more important than real outcomes for strengthening cross-border ties. The requirement of creating a “cross-border effect” (*Dolzbłasz & Raryczk* 2010, 73) through joint projects pushed the actors into more border-oriented activities, instead of using the façade of border-rhetoric containing their own objectives. Gradually, joint projects were supplemented with joint policies and institutions.

One of the most dynamic aspects of local and regional cooperation on the Polish-German border is education. Especially the Polish-German border seems to be saturated with educational institutions, offering second language classes, student and teacher exchanges and joint groups and programs at kindergarten and school levels. Local authorities are usually the key actors in creating and managing this offer. At the same time, despite long-lasting efforts and successful promotion of the neighbour’s language, there is a trend that English is preferred by local pupils and by their parents because it might promote global opportunities, hence education is not limited to the local cross-border context (*B.A. Jańczak* 2017). Additionally, asymmetric relations are visible here; namely, slightly over 50% of pupils take German language courses in Polish border regions and under 1% of German pupils take Polish language courses (*B.A. Jańczak* 2017, 152-153).

Business contacts and relations are the most visible and the most immediate effect of border liberalisation. Individuals and companies take advantage of differences in prices and labour costs. The trade boom of the 1990s was altered with the eastern enlargement of the EU. First of all, trade barriers were eliminated on internal EU borders, what resulted in the disappearance of small smugglers (so-called “ants”) who earned their living by circulating several times a day through the border with Germany, Czechia and Slovakia and carrying allowed amounts of specific products. This phenomenon remains on the eastern border today. The free flow of workers resulted in the creation of a visible group of cross-border commuters.

Citizens’ involvement is another component of the creation of CBC processes on the Polish borders. It has been manifested at two levels (individual and civil society) with a different focus on different borders. With regard to the individuals, attempts have been made to create contacts between previously separated communities on the borders earlier witnessing population replacement (especially with Germany, Czechia, and the Russian Federation). Though commercial relations appear to have gone very smoothly, the non-commercial context has been more problematic. In the case of the German border, enormous resources have been invested especially into teaching the neighbour’s language in order to enable individuals to communicate with each other. Still until today, despite several successes in the field, the density of social contacts is often evaluated as only partially successful. Language cleavage is not the case on the Czech and Russian borders, but with regard to the latter, the political situation and tight border regime have resulted in social segregation. On other borders, historical links have often been reestablished (*Babiński* 1997).

The second form is the cooperation of civil society entities across the borders. Along most of the borders, NGOs from both sides intensively cooperate, but this depends on general civil society development level in specific states. On the German border, this cooperation is the most advanced. Two examples of civic organisations, SłubFurt (*Kulczyńska* 2011) (combining the border twin towns’ names: Słubice and Frankfurt) and Gubien (Gubin and Guben), represent the case: CBC activists from both sides decided to tighten cooperation in their border twin towns by establishing twin structures on both sides of the border and involving the border citizens in joint cross-border initiatives (*Musiał-Karg* 2009).

The Polish-German border has been an interesting place of cross-border migration in recent years. Until 2004, Germany was the main destination of Polish labour migration (which later altered in favor of the UK), targeting mainly the western provinces. After 2011, when the transition period ended, numerous Poles started to settle down in the severely depopulating German towns and villages close to the border, usually in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, bringing new demographic and economic spirit there (*J. Jańczak* 2017). At the same time, 122,000 Poles commute to work across the border on an everyday basis (which is one of the highest numbers on the EU borders) (*Eurostat* 2019).

6. Conclusions – Polish border, COVID-19 and the prospects for CBC

The CBC across the Polish borders outlined above has been challenged by the global pandemic in 2020 and 2021. COVID-19 has had significant consequences for borders. The first officially registered case on March 4th 2020 was an inhabitant of the Polish-German border region who had returned from Germany. The first reaction of the Polish central authorities was to close down this border and designate six crossing points for traffic (and several additional ones for pedestrians), as well as suspending public transport connections across the borders. Several-kilometer-long queues of lorries, cars and long queues of pedestrians appeared. This led to protests. At the end of March, a 14-day quarantine obligation was introduced for returnees, which strongly affected border commuters. Poles living in Poland and working in Germany were forced either to resign from/suspend their work or to stay on the German side. The first option could result in undermining the material bases of many families, the second option meant physical separation from them. Massive protests were organised, supported by German regional authorities and businesses employing people from Poland. At the beginning of May, the quarantine obligation was canceled by the Polish government (*J. Jańczak 2020*).

The Polish-Czech borderland also experienced a rapid process of re-bordering that limited not only everyday contacts, but also prevented Polish labour commuters from going to their workplaces on the Czech side. As Hynek Böhm claims, ‘we may expect continuation of cooperation in the context of the divided town Český Těšín/Cieszyn, as there seems to be the sufficient critical mass of borderlanders/regionauts and also cross-border commuters’ (*Böhm 2020*, 85). The interdependence developed over the last decades have contributed to further cooperation because of functional reasons. At the same time, the Euroregional structures are strongly involved in problem solving and local citizens, especially in Český Těšín – Cieszyn, could express their wish to go back to “normality” through reopening the border (*Böhmet al. 2020*).

During the pandemic, the Polish-Ukrainian border represented problems characteristic of external borders of the EU. On March 15th 2020, Poland closed its borders to foreigners. Ukrainians with work permits could enter Poland; however, for some period of time border crossing points were closed down on the Ukrainian side. The situation was discussed not from the perspective of cross-border relations, but in terms of the significance of the Ukrainian labour force on the Polish labour market (*Piechowska 2020*).

The general picture of CBC relations revealed by the pandemic showed that the existing cross-border ties are too significant to be cut off – their suspension (considered by the central authorities as a solution for combatting against the spread of the virus) have been politically, economically and socially painful for local and regional actors. Consequently, alternative forms (especially testing) have been introduced and practiced in the period after the border closing and reopening. The above achievement proves, at the same time, the advancement of the CBC building process across the Polish borders, making the sides hardly separable in most cases.

The above-outlined overview of the changing status of the Polish borders in the last three decades clearly presents significant changes: they moved from “margins” to “bridges” and “new centres”. Strongly embedded in the context of European integration, they have undergone political, economic, social transformations and fluctuating legal and political constraints that have influenced various actors in their cross-border involvement. The question is, however, about the future: what recommendations shall be offered to actors constructing Polish borders in the next decades? It seems that – following the multilevel nature of governing borders – local and regional stakeholders shall be more vocal in Warsaw (and neighbouring states’ capitals) as well as in Brussels with regard to borderlands’ perspectives and interests. The German-Polish border alongside its economic cohesion, needs new institutional and political impetus (for example in the form of an EGTC) as well as more sensitivity about environmental issues; the Czech-Polish,

Slovak-Polish and Lithuanian-Polish borders need further saturation with infrastructure and joint development projects; the Polish-Ukrainian border needs new instruments for overcoming the separating nature of the EU external border; while at the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Russian borders a much better political environment in interstate relations needs to be created to take advantage of their enormous and mainly unused potential.

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