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# Contested River Politics in Europe: The Impact of Polish and German Oder River Protection Networks (1989 – 2024)

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## Contested River Politics in Europe: The Impact of Polish and German Oder River Protection Networks (1989–2024)\*

Anja Hennig.

### Abstract

This paper examines how opposition from within Polish and German civil society has established itself, since 1989, in response to national and bi-national river policies concerning the Oder River. Due to its long history as a political border, the Oder has remained one of the most pristine rivers in Europe. Yet, its shallow riverbed makes it particularly vulnerable to ice jams as well as to flooding and low water levels. The Oder has thus also become a “seismograph” of climate change in the face of global warming. Given the diverging river policy interests concerning economic development measures and environmental renaturation, the paper analyses the dynamics between transnational, Oder-related politics and the actions of Oder protection alliances emerging from civil society. The guiding question investigates the impact which activities of environmental NGOs have had on agenda-setting, on the construction of their own organisational structures, and on influencing political outcomes, as of now. On a theoretical level, the paper argues that two superordinate points of contention determine the success of environmental activism: firstly, the antagonism between “green and growth”, which often prioritises economic considerations over nature conservation; and, secondly, the political divide between right-wing populist and left-green positions (the *GALTAN* cleavage). Conceptually, the paper contributes to the establishment of river politics as a new transdisciplinary field of political analysis. It also adds to social movement research, which investigates the effects of the involvement of civil society in water protection under the conditions of climate change.

**Keywords:** Transnational river politics, environmental movement, German-Polish relations, ecological points of contention, climate change, right-wing populism

### Kurzzusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht, wie sich in Polen und Deutschland nach 1989 eine zivilgesellschaftliche Opposition als Reaktion auf die nationale und deutsch-polnische Flusspolitik an der Oder formiert hat. Aufgrund ihrer langen Geschichte als politische Grenze ist die Oder einer der naturbelassensten Flüsse Europas. Ihr flacher Flusslauf macht sie aber auch besonders anfällig für Eisfluten sowie für Hoch- und Niedrigwasser. In Anbetracht der Folgen der Erderhitzung ist die Oder somit auch zu einem „Seismographen“ für den Klimawandel geworden. Angesichts divergierender flusspolitischer Interessen im Spannungsfeld von wirtschaftlichen Entwicklungsmaßnahmen und umweltpolitischer Renaturierung analysiert das Paper die Dynamik zwischen transnationaler Oderpolitik und dem Handeln zivilgesellschaftlicher Oderschutzbündnisse. Die Leitfrage ist,

\* The working-paper is an extended and translated version of the paper published originally in German: „Flüsse als Orte zivilgesellschaftlichen Widerspruchs. Zur Wirkung von Oderschutz-Bündnissen seit 1989“, Berliner Debatte Initial 35, 2024/4, 442–457.

welche Wirkung die Aktivitäten von Umwelt-NGOs bisher auf das Agenda-Setting, den Aufbau eigener Strukturen und die Beeinflussung von Politikergebnissen hatten. Auf theoretischer Ebene argumentiert das Paper, dass zwei Meta-Konfliktlinien den Erfolg von Umweltaktivismus determinieren: der Antagonismus zwischen „Green and Growth“, der häufig ökonomischen Überlegungen auf Kosten des Naturschutzes den Vorrang gibt; und die politische Spaltung zwischen einer rechtspopulistischen und einer linksgrünen Position (*GALTAN-Cleavage*). Auf konzeptioneller Ebene leistet das Paper einen Beitrag zur Etablierung der Analyse von Flusspolitik als neuem transdisziplinärem Politikfeld und zur sozialen Bewegungsforschung, die die Auswirkungen von zivilgesellschaftlichem Engagement im Bereich des Wasserschutzes unter den Bedingungen des Klimawandels analysiert.

**Schlagworte:** Transnationale Flusspolitik, Umweltschutzbewegung, deutsch-polnische Beziehungen, ökologische Konfliktlinien, Klimawandel, Rechtspopulismus

### Streszczenie:

W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano w jaki sposób po 1989 r. w Polsce i Niemczech ukształtował się sprzeciw społeczeństwa obywatelskiego wobec krajowych polityk rzecznych oraz polsko-niemieckiej polityki rzecznej, dotyczących Odry. Ze względu na swoją długą historię graniczną, Odra jest jedną z najbardziej naturalnych rzek w Europie. Jako rzeka szczególnie płytka, podatna na powódzie i niską wodę, jest ona również uważana za „sejsmograf” zmian klimatycznych. W świetle rozbieżnych interesów w polityce rzecznej pomiędzy celami rozwojowymi a renaturyzacją, artykuł analizuje transnarodową politykę wobec Odry skonfrontowaną z działaniem sojuszy społeczeństwa obywatelskiego na rzecz jej ochrony. Wiodącym pytaniem jest więc, jaki wpływ miały dotychczasowe działania organizacji pozarządowych zajmujących się ochroną środowiska w zakresie ustalania agendy, tworzenia własnych struktur i wpływania na wyniki polityki. Na poziomie teoretycznym artykuł argumentuje, że dwa meta-rozszczepienia determinują sukces aktywizmu ekologicznego: Po pierwsze, antagonizm między „Green vs. Growth”, który często nadaje priorytet rozumowaniu ekonomicznemu kosztem ochrony przyrody. Po drugie, polityczne rozszczepienie między prawicowym populizmem a lewicowym ekologizmem (podział *GALTAN*). Na poziomie koncepcyjnym artykuł przyczynia się do ustanowienia analizy polityki rzecznej jako nowej transdyscyplinarnej dziedziny polityki oraz do badań nad ruchami społecznymi, które analizują skutki aktywizmu społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w dziedzinie ochrony wód w warunkach zmian klimatu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Transnarodowa polityka rzeczna, ruch ochrony środowiska, stosunki polsko-niemieckie, ekologiczne linie konfliktu, zmiany klimatu, prawicowy populizm

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## 1. Introduction

Whether as spaces for recreation and experiencing nature, as waterways, or as habitats rich in fish (Verbrugge et al. 2019), rivers shape the life of humans. In the context of global warming, these socio-ecological systems have become more vulnerable than ever. Around the world, rivers often lack their original alluvial land or tributaries due to structural interventions in recent decades, making them increasingly susceptible to extreme weather events such as heavy rainfall or droughts. This, in turn, poses growing risks to riverine regions and their inhabitants (Boelens, Escobar et al. 2022). The deadly floods in Germany's Ahr Valley in 2021 or in Valencia in 2024 are just some examples of the human-induced destructive power of water. As clean water becomes an increasingly scarce resource and rivers pose threats more frequently, the political task of river management, i.e. addressing issues such as low water levels, pollution, or flood events, presents significant challenges at the municipal, regional, and national levels.

River politics<sup>1</sup> become particularly complex when rivers, such as the Oder between Germany and Poland, mark international borders, requiring bilateral agreements on flood protection, flow regulation, or tourism-related usage. Past disasters underscore

this complexity, e.g. the Oder flood in 1997 or the mass die-off of aquatic fauna caused by a toxic algal bloom in the summer of 2022. Policies involving environmentally harmful interventions have long sparked public protest and opposition from civil society organizations. Prominent examples include protests in the Hambach Forest against its destruction due to lignite mining, as well as opposition to the construction of a bridge across the Elbe River in Dresden, and resistance to the building of the TESLA Gigafactory in Brandenburg.<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of social movement research, it is evident that political measures perceived as unjust, wrong, or threatening—such as those in response to climate change—tend to provoke public discontent and civil society resistance (Tarrow 1998; Rucht 2021). Consequently, protest from civil society against certain river governance projects is increasingly becoming a focus point of largely interdisciplinary academic inquiry. However, studies that specifically investigate grassroots activism for river protection in Europe are only gradually emerging (Vos 2024). Within this research landscape, the analysis of the Oder River case illustrates how transnational civil resistance against the expansion of the Oder—an international river originating in the Czech Republic, flowing predominantly through Poland, and finally forming the Germany-Poland border—has taken shape. This paper investigates the extent to which networks aiming to protect the Oder have been successful in opposing river development plans.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ZEIT online (April 16, 2021; January 15, 2008) and FAZ.net (March 2, 2024), respectively.

Conceptually, the analysis of the Oder River as a site of contestation is situated within the broader field of river politics<sup>3</sup> - a policy field and a research area marked by significant interdisciplinary overlaps, including aquatic ecology, navigation and fisheries, and water justice movements. Due to these overlaps, questions of policy analysis and of dynamics of conflict and problem resolution within this policy field are highly diverse and regionally differentiated. Rivers have primarily been examined as contested natural entities in the Global South, particularly in the context of debates on water injustice and the Rights of Nature. Nevertheless, also the Rhine in Germany has a long and contentious history of struggles over its form and use (Boelens, Escobar et al. 2022).

Thus far, the Oder has predominantly been studied in academic research for its cultural and historical significance as a border river (Schlögel & Halicka 2007; Rada 2005), and as a socio-political borderland exemplified by twin cities like Frankfurt (Oder)-Śluby and Guben-Gubin (Opiłowska 2021). Analyses from social sciences on national and transnational Oder-related politics remain scarce, and where they do exist, they tend to regard these issues as a matter of German-Polish bilateral relations (Hennig 2023; Hennig forthcoming). A recent project in social geography explores how residents have been perceiving life along and with the Oder following the mass die-off of fish in 2022 (Move'n'sense).

Against this backdrop, the present study closes several gaps. This includes analysing the responses of German, Polish, and transnational civil society actors (NGOs and experts) to river political meas-

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the special issue of the Berlin Debate Initial (April 2025): <https://www.berlinerdebatte.de/blog/1371>.

ures, which provides a historical reconstruction of Oder-related politics since the late 1980s. In doing so, this article illustrates how civil society structures aimed at protecting the Oder have evolved over time. Drawing on social movement research, the central research question concerns the effectiveness of these Oder protection alliances—both nationally and transnationally—within the context of political interventions, external shocks, and determining lines of conflict: What impact did the Oder protection coalitions have in the context of tipping points within river politics during the period between the late 1980s and the end of 2024? Following Rucht, three dimensions of impact are particularly relevant: the development of civil society structures, agenda-setting capacities, and the influence on policymaking (Rucht 2021, 72, 73). By focusing on civil society activism, this paper also contributes to recent scholarship examining the interaction between science, as well as political and societal action in contexts of contested river politics.

Methodologically, the paper aligns with so-called *process tracing* (George & Bennett 2005). Through this approach, Oder-related plans and policies as well as the corresponding reactions from civil society are reconstructed and analysed in relation to one another. The analysis is structured around previously identified critical turning points in the trajectory of Oder-related politics since the late 1980s. It focusses on two central areas of river politics with potential for conflict, which reflect the antagonism between “nature” and “economic growth” (Jahn 2016) on a meta-level: first, the issue of river development for both economic utilisation and flood protection, and second, concerns regarding water quality. Its empirical basis includes media reports, legal documents, environmental assessments, and interviews conducted within the framework of a

research seminar at the European University Viadrina (Hennig et al. 2023).

The following section explores ecologically relevant lines of conflict, which—according to the working hypothesis—also shape river policies. The third section explains the methodology applied to assess the impact of civil society protest. The study is centred around a chronological analysis of the dynamic interplay between initiatives to protect

## 2. Current Points of Contention in River Governance

Rivers have long become sensitive indicators—or “seismographs”—of climate change. Increasingly, riverbeds dry out during summer, water levels drop, or entire regions are inundated after extreme rainfall events (European Environment Agency 2018). While rivers across the globe are overflowing, studies indicate that Europe is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change (European Environment Agency 2018). One contributing factor is the absence of free-flowing rivers in Europe, as they have been fragmented by barriers (Belletti et al. 2020). Against this backdrop, what Blühdorn (2011) termed the “ecological paradox” also applies to river politics: Blühdorn refers to the simultaneity of ample expert knowledge and widespread awareness of the urgent need for a radical socio-ecological transformation, alongside an unprecedented level of ignorance and political reluctance to implement such a green transition (Blühdorn 2011, 36).

the Oder and actions in river governance. The final section summarises how protest structures have become institutionalised and have, to some extent, influenced agenda-setting. However, the paradigm shift towards nature-oriented, river-related policies has (thus far) struggled to gain traction within the broader context of the *green vs. growth* cleavage. The paper concludes by outlining research questions which may prove relevant for future studies.

Drawing on modernisation theory, Blühdorn attributes the causes of this inaction to what he theorises as a “post-ecologist turn”, which he characterises as an aspect of a *silent counterrevolution*, in reference to Inglehart (ibid., 41). Accordingly, a lifestyle has become dominant in “Western capitalist growth societies” that relies on unsustainable economic practices and consumption, while continuing to perpetuate these patterns in defiance of better knowledge and despite a certain ecological awareness (Blühdorn 2020, 38). This analysis is grounded in social theory and does not explore the specific factors that lead to this paradox of (non-)action. Regarding river politics, this paper adopts the antagonism between economic growth and ecological sustainability, as outlined by Blühdorn, and further develops it by introducing an additional (party-)political dimension of conflict.

The working hypothesis posits that, in the case of Oder-related politics, Blühdorn’s normatively required, knowledge-based ecological action, and thus also the effectiveness of river protection alliances, have been determined by two major points of contention. The first, following Blühdorn, is the antagonism between a political prioritisation of (the preservation of) nature, as well as one of economic and technological growth (*green vs. growth*, Jahn 2016, 43–49). The second is the antagonism between a green-alternative-liberal-cosmopolitan camp and a tradition-oriented national-authoritarian camp, as described in the *GALTAN cleavage* (Hooghe & Marks 2018). The green position ranges between the *ecologist* perspective, which views nature as a subject worthy of protection and tends to contend economic growth, on one end; and on the other is the *environmentalist* stance, which does not necessarily challenge the object status of nature and remains open to models of economic growth (Jahn 2016, 45). Taken together, this situation results in a double “green” axis of conflict, in which green perspectives are primarily confronted with either economically driven or right-wing populist positions.

Applied to the field of river politics, the *green vs. growth* cleavage manifests in the political prioritisation of structural interventions for economic purposes or cost-effective flood protection, as opposed

to prioritising ecologically sustainable flood protection, which may require more resource-intensive restoration of floodplain areas (cf. Bederke & Nauschütz 2022). This antagonism is institutionally embedded in a special way, particularly when, as in Germany and Poland, responsibilities for water protection lie with environmental ministries, while inland waterway management falls under ministries of infrastructure (bmdv.bund.de). In Poland, unlike in Germany, the authority *Wody Polskie* is also responsible for all aspects of water management, including wastewater and sewage systems (gov.pl).

From a cultural-sociological perspective, these contentions touch on the question of how nature—or in this case, a river—is understood: as an object to be exploited, an object to be protected, or a subject deserving of protection and as a socio-ecological space (Verbrugge et al. 2019). On the TAN (Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) side of the *GALTAN* cleavage, right-wing populist narratives frame “green” politics as a cosmopolitan ideology, an elite-driven project, or an infringement on national sovereignty (Lockwood 2018). This framing is particularly relevant for Oder-related politics, insofar as the right-wing populist party *Law and Justice* (PiS) governed Poland between 2015 and 2023 and implemented a political agenda which also reflected an illiberal stance on environmental issues (Żuk & Szulecki 2020).

### 3. Successes for Civil Society Through Political Windows of Opportunity

Sustainable water management and especially the protection of rivers are central environmental policy issues, championed by all major transnational environmental NGOs such as the *World Wide Fund for Nature* (WWF), Greenpeace, or Germany's *Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland* (BUND, 'German Federation for the Environment and for Nature Conservation'), as well as by smaller advocacy groups. Across Europe, networks have emerged that are explicitly dedicated to river protection, like e.g. the *European Rivers Network* (ERN n.d.). From the perspective of social movement research, the political effectiveness and impact of such movements depend not only on internal dynamics, but also on external conditions. Structural theoretical approaches commonly assume that certain political constellations or conflict dynamics can open up opportunities for social movements to assert their positions (Rucht 1994; Tarrow 1998, 20). In the context of environmental movements, the presence of a green party in government, but also sudden external shocks may create spontaneous windows of opportunity (Rucht 1994, 307). One such example is the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, which led to Germany's decision to phase out nuclear energy under a CDU-led government, thus achieving a long-standing goal of the anti-nuclear movement (BASE 2024). With this in mind, the analysis of the consequences of the environmental and Oder-related protection movement in this paper is structured following the political measures associated with corresponding conflict potential, as well as external shocks, such as the 2022 mass fish die-off or the change of govern-

ment in Poland in October 2023 - interpreted here as political opportunity structures.

According to Rucht, new social movements are generally only partially successful in influencing political proceedings or fully achieving their goals. However, their influence is all the more successful in shaping perceptions of problems in politics and society (agenda setting) and in establishing relatively stable organisational structures (ibid., 73). The following analysis of the activity of Oder protection alliances is therefore structured along the three above-mentioned dimensions of impact: influence on policy outcomes, agenda-setting effects, and the institutionalisation of civil society. Special attention will be paid to the Polish context, given the historically distinct development of environmental movements in Germany and Poland. The Czech perspective, which will gain more relevance through later networking, will not be addressed in detail.

### 4. Analysis of the Impact of the Oder Protection Movements

The afore-mentioned assumption, i.e. that measures in river politics and external shocks can both provoke protest and either hinder or facilitate the success of environmental movements, allows for the identification of six distinct phases. They are critical turning points in the evolution of river politics and have been shaped by either significant external influences or key political decisions. Beginning in the 1980s, the first phase marks the emergence of the Polish river protection movement in the context of the opposition movement *Solidarność*. The second phase corresponds to the socio-economic transformations in the former GDR and Poland, also including heavy industrial activities along the Oder River. The third phase is defined by the 1997 Oder flood, which functioned as an external shock. The fourth phase, beginning in 2015, is characterized by increasing opposition to German-Polish river development plans. The fifth phase is marked by the ecological catastrophe during the summer of 2022, when a mass die-off of fish served as another external shock. This phase persists, yet it is now influenced by a sixth and potentially transformative phase. Its initiation through the change in government in Poland in October 2023 will be interpreted here as a new window of opportunity for environmental mobilisation.

#### 4.1. 1980s: Emergence of the Polish environment movement in the context of political opposition

The *silent revolution* through a shift from materialist to more immaterial values, including a growing ecological consciousness, which Norris and Inglehart have diagnosed for market-based societies since the 1970s, did not unfold in the same way or at the same time in Central and Eastern Europe (Norris & Inglehart 2019). Although 43% of the Polish population reported dissatisfaction with the environmental status quo due to severe pollution in the early 1980s (Szulecka & Szulecki 2017, 8), the communist government's emphasis on economic efficiency and development often led to its strong political rejection of environmental activists (ibid., 7).

With the rise of the opposition trade union *Solidarność* in the 1980s, environmental groups began to form, nevertheless, under the conditions of a non-democratically organised regime in Poland. They drew attention to the massive environmental destruction caused by industrial facilities (ibid.). The fight against pollution of the Oder emerged as a key field of action (Ostolski 2009 in Peters 2023, 402). In the city of Wrocław, for example, demonstrations organised by the *Polski Klub Ekologiczny* ('Polish Ecological Club') and the opposition movement *Wolność i Pokój* ('Freedom and Peace') targeted a steel plant located a few kilometres upstream, which was accused of contaminating the river with

chromium. Due to these protests, the issue of water quality in the Oder became a “national political matter”, which can be interpreted as “the first manifest success against the real-socialist state” since November 1988 (Nuhn 2022).

## 4.2 Years of Transformation and the 1997 Flood

Following the political transition, the Polish environmental movement underwent a process of professionalisation (Peters 2023). Simultaneously, the parallel transformations of economy, politics, and society posed crucial challenges for everyday life. Members of the environmental movement, addressing what were perceived as rather post-materialist issues, were therefore often viewed as elitist (Łoś 2020 in Peters 2023). By contrast, specialised NGOs, which were often co-financed by Western partners, were regarded as valuable collaborators by parts of the political sphere. For environmental organisations in the region, the protection of the Oder was central. The success of protective measures was evaluated not only based on cleaner water and intact riverbanks, but also in terms of a growing public awareness of environmental issues (Nuhn 2022). At the same time, these organisations highlighted that water protection in Poland was and remains a critical problem, given that inadequate wastewater infrastructure has contributed both to persistently poor surface water quality and to the country's increasing desiccation (Olszewski 2022).

The closure of outdated industrial facilities from the former GDR, the People's Republic of Poland, and Czechoslovakia further improved the Oder's water

quality (Buko, Gaziński & Makowski 2022). In order to promote ecological flood protection through the creation of retention areas and near-natural river courses, the WWF followed the political transition and launched initiatives in cooperation with local Polish NGOs in areas, in which the Oder functions as a border (WWF Polska 2017). Anticipating the EU's *NATURA 2000* programme, conservation organisations on both sides of the border also succeeded in designating large areas of high-quality nature reserves under the EU's Habitats Directive, particularly in the Lower Oder Valley (Maier 2021). By establishing the *Internationale Kommission für den Schutz der Oder gegen Verunreinigung* (IKSO, 'International Commission for the Protection of the Oder against Pollution') in 1996, the governments of the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, and the EU were finally aiming at improving the water quality and ecological condition of the Oder, the Szczecin Lagoon, and their catchment areas (MKOO/IKSO n.d.).

However, the Polish government simultaneously pursued river development plans, dating back to the 1970s, by implementing its *ODRA 2005* programme, with the goal of reviving the Oder for navigation (Szyszko 1999). Then, in the summer of 1997, a surprisingly catastrophic flood struck communities on both sides of the river. During this so-called “millennial flood”, the damage on the Polish side was immense, since 700,000 hectares of land had been inundated. More than one hundred people lost their lives in Poland and the Czech Republic, while around 6,000 hectares of land were flooded in Brandenburg. Of all things, broken dikes and inundated floodplains in Poland were what prevented even greater damage further downstream in Brandenburg (Hafemann 2002, 111).

Marked by a multitude of transformation processes, these first two phases spawn a pattern which runs counter to Rucht's assessment of trends: attempts at river protection did in fact prove successful and exerted measurable political influence. Not only this, but public awareness of the problem concomitantly increased and environmental organisations were established. Undoubtedly, the exceptionally poor water quality created strong pressure for action, while the subsequent regime change opened new opportunities for environmental alliances.

## 4.3 After the flood: transnational civil society and plans to expand the Oder

The flood disaster, interpreted here as an “external shock”, had lasting implications for river politics. At the political level, the intention was to give rivers more space. However, the Polish development programme *ODRA 2006*, adopted in 2001, primarily expanded the focus on technical flood protection from the *ODRA 2005* programme from 1999. In terms of economic policy, it also contained expansion plans, some of which dated back to the 1970s (Szyszko 1999) and carried considerable conflict potential, including between Germany and Poland. The aim was to transform the largely shallow Oder into a waterway which would be navigable year-round. A goal, which is yet to be achieved, was to establish the Oder as a major transport corridor between northern and southern Europe through a connecting canal to the Danube (Šiška 2014). In addition, the Baltic port of Szczecin-Świnoujście was to be developed into a major transshipment centre. This implied numerous river straightening measures

as well as the construction of barrages. Yet, studies demonstrated that the planned technical interventions would not only endanger valuable ecosystems but also intensify flood risks in the lower reaches of the Oder (Röttger et al. 2007, 85). In the context of economic transformation, it was nonetheless in Poland's interest to become able to compete with Germany, given that the German side would soon realise the construction of the Oder port at Schwedt,<sup>4</sup> which was suitable for coastal motor vessels (Hafemann 2002, 111). From the German perspective, the economic rationale lay in linking this port to the Baltic Sea, allowing the shipping of products from Schwedt's paper industry (Waldmann 2024a).

Civil society, on the other hand, reacted to these plans with the creation of transnational structures. From national alliances emerged the Polish-Czech-German Oder protection coalition *Zeit für die Oder* ('Time for the Oder'), uniting the goals of ecological flood protection and the prevention of river development projects. However, in the absence of established organisational structures and long-term funding, the coalition's activities gradually ceased (EURENI 2021). In parallel to this, WWF Germany initiated a comprehensive mapping for ecological conservation of floodplain areas between 1998 and 2000. The resulting 'Oder Floodplain Atlas' (*Oder-Auen-Atlas*) enabled Polish and Czech environmental organisations to participate on a much more professional footing. A few years later, together with other Polish NGOs and municipalities, WWF Germany and Poland succeeded in advancing the renaturation of a section of the Oder Valley in Lower Silesia (between Domaszkow and Tarchalice), with-

<sup>4</sup> The Oder port in Schwedt ended up being completed in 2001 (cf. Hafemann 2002, 111).

in the framework of a funded model project on ecological flood protection (Rast & Nieznanski 2012).

At the same time, the German and Polish waterway administrations agreed to jointly develop a river regulation concept, with the goal of restoring the long-neglected regulatory structures along the border-constituting sections of the Oder. The need to ensure conditions for icebreaking operations was a decisive factor, which required localised dredging to facilitate ice flow, as well as the rehabilitation of groynes.<sup>5</sup> The last winter flood to date on the border-constituting sections of the Oder took place in January 2011. Icebreakers reached the area only late, though this was not due to the shallow Oder, but due to the broken ice having refrozen overnight (Steyer 2011).

While environmental groups and scientists pointed out in subsequent years that ice floods would become increasingly unlikely as a result of global warming (Maier & Wolters 2015), the German Federal Waterways Engineering and Research Institute (BAW) presented an expert report in May 2014, updating the German-Polish river regulation concept. Basing itself on the assumption of regularly closed ice covers on the Oder, this report posited a continuous depth requirement of about 1.80 meters for icebreakers (Hüsener 2014; GDWS 2021).

Actors within the trinational coalition *Zeit für die Oder* were motivated by this development to resume their activities (EURENI 2021). From their standpoint, icebreaker operations remained a pretext for legitimising navigation-related expansion of the river. For example, the German side had de-

<sup>5</sup> Note that groynes protruding into the river increase current velocity and thus gradually deepen the riverbed.

veloped “shallow-draft icebreakers” specifically for the Oder. Whereas earlier conflicts had centered around divergences between ecological and construction-oriented flood protection, ice flood prevention as additional justification for development measures now further fuelled contentions among civil society (Maier 2021).

In this third phase, it becomes evident how actors from civil society succeeded in implementing ecological flood protection on a small scale with external funding. Its political impact was then overshadowed by the flood experience, which steered the course toward technical flood protection. Above all, this phase highlights how economic interests in a navigable Oder were articulated and how trilateral structures in civil society emerged in response.

#### 4.4. German-Polish agreement in 2015 and the reactions

In spite of this, on April 22, 2015, the respective Ministers for Transportation and Infrastructure, Alexander Dobrindt (CSU) and Maciej H. Grabowski (PO), signed the “agreement to improve the situation of flow regulation on the waterways in the German-Polish border area” in Warsaw as part of the German-Polish government consultations (Täglicher Hafenbericht 2015). The agreement, described as a “milestone” for the “improvement of flow and shipping conditions” (mdr 2017), incorporated expansion plans for the border-constituting sections of the Oder developed up to that point. A joint concept on flow regulation was intended to enable the repair of the regulatory structures and the deepening of the fairway for ice breaking and ice re-

moval, but also for water management purposes. The connection of Schwedt harbour to the Polish Baltic Sea via the expansion of the Skosnica Channel (*Klützer Querfahrt*) on the Polish side for coastal motor vessels was now also part of the agreement (Bundesministerium für Justiz 2015). This three-kilometre-long arm connects the western section of the Oder with the eastern one (German: *Reglitz*, Polish: *Regalica*) south of Szczecin on Polish territory. In addition to this, it was agreed that Germany would transfer half a million Euros to Poland for dredging the riverbed (Waldmann 2024a).

Parts of the expansion of border-constituting sections of the Oder on the Polish side were incorporated into the *Odra-Vistula Flood Protection Management Project*, organised under the World Bank and co-financed by the EU. The World Bank provided Poland with a loan of 460 million out of a total of 1.2 billion Euros to invest in dikes, dry polders, bank stabilisation, bridge raising, and dredging of navigation channels between Krakow in the southeast and Szczecin in the northwest (Waldmann 2024b).<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of associations protective of

<sup>6</sup> See the project page: <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P147460?lang=en> (last accessed: 16.04.2025). According to the project description, the objectives of the Odra-Vistula Flood Management Project for Poland “are to increase access to flood protection for people living in selected areas of the Oder and the Upper Vistula River basins and to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Borrower to mitigate the impact of floods more effectively.” Among the five components, the first component concerns flood protection of the middle and lower Oder. It aims at enhancing protection against summer floods and winter floods for the cities of Szczecin and Słubice, for the town of Gryfino, as well as other smaller towns along the Oder. The activities will include the reconstruction of dikes and other protective measures (revetments, parapets, etc.), dredging in the Oder, in canals and the harbour of Szczecin, as well as river training works, i.e. the recalibration and (re)construction of groynes and laterally submerged dams in the river, restoration of bends, and protection of banks.

the Oder, the intention to develop the largely unused *Zwischenoderland* (or *Międzyodrze*, ‘Oder midlands’) for flood protection purposes constituted a particularly serious component of the plan. This area was regarded by environmentalists as the core zone of the cross-border protected area network of the Lower Oder Valley (*Schutzgebietsverbund Unteres Odertal*, DNR 2019). The Polish side, however, simultaneously intensified its water management-related plans aimed at making the harbours in Szczecin and Świnoujście suitable for seagoing vessels. This also included the idea to construct the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal as European waterway E30, which the Czech government also ended up supporting (Maier & Wolters 2015).

With the *Law and Justice* party (PiS) taking office, the tone toward Germany and toward Polish civil society changed from the end of 2015. Unilateral action was increasingly preferred over bilateral agreements. Also affected by this were Oder-related politics. Germany was accused of interfering too much in Polish affairs and of seeking to restrain the Polish economy (Forsal.pl 2023). Accordingly, PiS-affiliated circles interpreted criticism of Polish expansion plans on environmental grounds as disproportionate interference (see e.g. Bagiński 2023).

In this context, the *Koalicja Ratujemy Rzeki* (‘Save the Rivers Alliance’) emerged and was founded in Poland in May 2016. By protesting against the World Bank and its funding of the Odra-Vistula Flood Protection Management Project, this coalition of more than fifty Polish environmental NGOs, experts, and private individuals drew attention in Warsaw in the summer of 2016 (Appeal 2016). A year later, the alliance sharply criticised a new law on the use of water from the Ministry of Infrastructure, which came into force in 2018 nonetheless (Bryła 2018). The law,

they argued, contradicted the EU Water Framework Directive, as it did nothing to address the dilapidated wastewater system and served only economic interests, also in view of expansion plans for inland waterway transport (Koalicja Ratujemy Rzeki 2017). On the German side, a coalition of environmental associations was also formed in 2017 under the title of the 'Living Oder Action Alliance' (*Aktionsbündnis lebendige Oder*). According to one of its spokespeople, "it must be clarified [in 2017] to what extent the authorities want to involve German-Polish civil society on the Oder in developments in a serious manner — as has long been the norm on the Elbe (...)" (Maier 2016).

Disregarding any criticism, the governments of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland signed an agreement for the Oder-Elbe-Danube project, in January 2017 (Janzer 2017). In autumn of the following year, the Polish government presented an environmental impact assessment report envisaging two phases of expansion of the border-constituting sections of the Oder, this time with one-sided repair of groynes by 2030 (GDWS n.d.). The World Bank had called on the Polish government to improve environmental protection and strengthen citizen participation, after having received criticism by members of civil society of the flood protection project; and indeed, in July 2019, documents on the environmental impact of the Polish plans were made publicly available (GDWS n.d.). Although this was the case, the Szczecin Directorate General for Environmental Protection gave the green light for the expansion of the border-constituting sections of the Oder on March 18, 2020, under the pretext of it being a measure within the framework of the German-Polish treaty of 2015, despite detailed criti-

cism by environmental associations,<sup>7</sup> particularly on formal shortcomings, such as excessively short response deadlines (statement August 8, 2019, 5).

In September of 2020, the Living Oder Action Alliance and the Green-led Ministry for the Environment of Brandenburg (German federal state in the border region) each filed legal objections to this decision, pointing to the afore-mentioned deficiencies and the failure to adequately consider their earlier technical objections (Binnenschifffahrt 2023). Experts also argued that the icebreaker deployment plans no longer corresponded to climatic conditions given the mild winters (IGB 2020). Nevertheless, at the federal level in Germany, the plans for a concept on flow regulation were further pursued.

Contrary to Brandenburg's stance on environmental politics, the BAW submitted a document at the beginning of 2021 for the so-called scoping procedure intended to prepare the strategic environmental assessment of the concept on flow regulation for the border-constituting sections of the Oder. The Leibniz Institute of Freshwater Ecology criticised the lack of any overarching societal interest that would justify flow regulation aimed at achieving a fairway depth of 1.8 m in the Oder almost daily. Moreover, the Oder was not part of the main network of federal waterways due to its low transport volumes. No investments were planned for secondary waterways either, and there was no reference to flood protection beyond icebreaker operations (IGB 2021). With growing opposition to the expansion plans, including from experts, the transnational Oder protection alliance grew. In March 2021, German and Polish

<sup>7</sup> See documentation of this criticism: <https://www.inspection-panel.org/panel-cases/odra-vistula-flood-management-project-p147460> (last accessed: 16.04.2025).

environmental organisations, scientists, and politicians issued a joint declaration demanding not only from both governments to stop the expansion plans, but also from the World Bank, the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), and the European Commission to withdraw their funding commitments (Saveoder.org 2021).

Funds raised by the Oder protection alliance actors from the European Environmental Initiative (EURENI) in 2020/21 enabled further pooling of resources and professionalisation, aimed at institutionalising the already initiated trinational structures. Stronger networking of the protection alliances from Poland (*Ratujmy Rzeki*), the Czech Republic (*Arnika CEPO*), and Germany (*Netzwerk lebendige Oder*) was intended to raise awareness among NGOs, experts, and citizens in the Oder region about environmentally compatible regional development, as well as risk management, and adaptation options to climate change (EURENI 2021). The transnational protection movement achieved its first significant achievement in June 2022, when the Voivodship Administrative Court in Warsaw ordered the Szczecin Directorate General to re-examine the construction measures on the Oder in light of the lawsuits, and to take action regarding the criticism (Lesser 2023).

The German-Polish agreement also gave rise to new river political plans at the national level. While some of them were supported by international funds, all of them tended toward further expansion of the Oder. Boosted by this, cross-border Oder protection alliances received regional political support in Germany and support from parts of the new political opposition in Poland. Apart from the institutionalisation of Oder protection alliances, the high-profile

lawsuits also increasingly influenced agenda setting.

#### 4.5. The ecological catastrophe – A window of opportunity for transnational civil society?

The issue of the Oder's water quality moved to the centre of attention once again, when Poles and Germans along the banks of the river witnessed a mass die-off of fish and aquatic fauna, at the end of July 2022 (Latz 2022). The rapid bloom of a toxic golden algae, usually occurring in saline waters, was identified by researchers only weeks later as the main cause of the ecological disaster. Highly saline water is a by-product of coal mining which, for decades, has been discharged from Upper Silesia into the Oder via tributaries with the authorities' approval. After conducting water samples, *Greenpeace Polska* was able to name Silesian mining companies as the source of the Oder's salinisation. Under the particular climatic conditions of the summer of 2022, i.e. low water levels and high water temperatures, the elevated salt content of the inland water had triggered an abnormal algae bloom (Elton 2023). Massive damage had been inflicted on the river's sensitive ecosystem by this ecological disaster. While it shocked many, it also had a mobilising force. Various documentaries captured how local residents organised their own monitoring of water quality, investigated what seeped out of wastewater pipes discharging into the river, and how they testified to what the Oder meant to them as a living

environment (i.e. *Lebensraum*, cf. arte.tv 2024; rbb online 2023).

Among these developments, the small Polish NGO *OsobaOdra* emerged, which could be categorised as a Rights of Nature (RoN) movement. Following the example of countries such as New Zealand or Spain (García Ruales et al. 2024), *OsobaOdra* pursues the goal of granting the Oder legal personhood status (*OsobaOdra* 2023b). In this way, a river would be able to defend itself legally (through an appropriate representative body) against pollution. This implies a paradigm shift from interpreting nature as an object to recognising it as a subject, as well as toward an approach to rivers that rejects any intervention at the expense of riverscapes and waters. The small NGO introduced the idea of the Oder as a vulnerable legal subject into the international public discourse with its “March along the Oder” (*OsobaOdra* 2023a). Whereas environmental organisations in Poland were defamed as actors supposedly working on behalf of Germany, particularly during the run-up to the parliamentary elections of October 2023, *OsobaOdra* encountered broad resonance abroad (interview with Rient 2023).

Moreover, the structures of the recently established and transnationally networked Oder protection movements enabled rapid and concerted responses to the catastrophe. Thus, the Living Oder Action Alliance presented an “action programme for the revitalisation of the Oder” as early as the end of August 2022, which called for concrete renaturation measures, a holistic strategy, and the inclusion of civil society (Aktionsbündnis lebendige Oder 2022). Keeping the issue of the Oder’s expansion on the agenda was also ensured. In September 2022, NABU, BUND Brandenburg, and DNR filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Administrative Court in Warsaw

against the expansion plans, on behalf of a broader coalition of associations. As a result, the lower court temporarily suspended the authorisation for the Oder expansion, in mid-December 2022. Nevertheless, only a few months after the fish die-off, bulldozers began dumping rocks for the construction of groynes along the pristine Polish banks of the border-constituting sections of the Oder. On March 7, 2023, the Supreme Administrative Court in Warsaw confirmed the construction freeze (Lesser 2023). Following this ruling – which was also ignored – and transnational pressure from actors from politics as well as civil society, the Council of Europe Development Bank announced that it would freeze funding for the Polish Oder expansion (Kohler 2023). Parallel to this, the Czech government under Prime Minister Petr Fiala withdrew from the extremely cost-intensive Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal project (Maurus 2023).

At the political level, three “Oder conferences” (*Oder-Konferenzen*) followed in Schwedt and Frankfurt (Oder) (bmuv.de 2023). The differing points of contention between demands for renaturation and for expansion, as well as the largely unilateral stance of the Polish government, became clearly apparent at these conferences (interview with Damus 2023). The latter also manifested in the PiS government’s drafting of a so-called “Special Law on the Revitalisation of the Oder”. Pressed by Polish environmental NGOs, experts, and opposition politicians (Pupiec 2023), the law was publicly criticised in June 2023, as it focused on investment-oriented containment of the river rather than on renaturation. The initiative *Zeit für die Oder* also employed creative forms of protest, in order to draw attention to the politically downplayed problem of continuous salt discharges – for instance, by targeting the water management authority *Wody Polskie* (Peters 2023).

Nevertheless, in mid-July of 2023, the Polish government passed the criticised “Concrete Law” (Jurzso 2023). “Flood protection remains to be the central motivation for this law and for rejecting the imposed construction freeze”, the Polish Embassy in Berlin underlined during that time (interview, July 6, 2023). Just ten days before the Polish parliamentary elections of October 15, 2023, also the World Bank froze credits for the expansion, which was a partial success in relation to the legal construction freeze as well as to targeted green lobbying at the EU level (Kohler 2023).<sup>8</sup> However, as later inquiries by the Green Party of Brandenburg and by MOZ on the Polish side to the World Bank revealed, the World Bank did not cancel any credits. The funds were merely reallocated. According to *Wody Polskie*, the groyne construction would now be financed directly from the Polish state budget. Thus, the financial gaps created for Poland remained relatively manageable overall (Waldmann 2024b).

In this phase - again marked by an external shock - the effects of the Oder protection alliances became evident primarily in agenda-setting. Presumably, the Polish government’s expansion plans would have faded from public attention in the face of the ecological disaster, had the NGOs not positioned themselves against them through lawsuits and public criticism. In terms of political practice, however, this changed little, due above all to the dominance of the GALTAN cleavage under the PiS government.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. [https://www.sahra-damus.de/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Weltbank\\_Dossier.pdf](https://www.sahra-damus.de/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Weltbank_Dossier.pdf) (last accessed: 16.04.2025).

#### 4.6. Change of government as a window of opportunity for Polish civil society

After the change of government in Warsaw, hopes were high that measures protective of the Oder would be initiated, as they had been announced in the action programme of the governing Civic Coalition (KO, Kojzar 2023). The German activist alliance Aktionsbündnis Lebendige Oder used the election result as an occasion to demand the reassessment of the German-Polish agreement of 2015 from the FDP-led Federal Ministry of Transport. So far, however, the ministry has adhered to the existing arrangements, though it did stress that necessary environmental assessments should be given the required time (Waldmann 2023).

The Polish Oder protection movement, in turn, seized the new political situation to place its goal of renaturation on the political agenda. For the first time, the structures and expertise developed among civil society over the years encountered a willingness to engage in dialogue and in cooperation on the part of Polish political actors (Time for the Oder 2024). Therefore, in mid-2024, the Polish Ministry of Infrastructure established an interministerial working group (Environment, Transport, Industry, Fisheries) which meets regularly to discuss options for water and flood protection, with the participation of representatives of the ‘River Rescue Coalition’ (*Flussrettungskolalition*, gov.pl 2024). There have also been noticeable developments in the Polish Ministry of the Environment, signalling a shift toward perceiving the river as a subject worthy of protection. According to one activist, the ministry has moved from the economic concept of *revitalisation* toward the goal of *renaturation* of the Oder and thus has “adopted our language” (interview

with Chmielowicz-Tyszko, 2024). The Ministry of Infrastructure remains expansion-oriented, nonetheless, with Wody Polskie as the central actor, as evidenced by ongoing construction measures along the border-constituting sections of the Oder (Waldmann 2024b). A detailed statement by Wody Polskie in response to the surprising ruling of the Warsaw Voivodeship Court in January 2025 also underscores this unchanged position: the ruling confirmed what environmental associations had already pointed out in their lawsuits in 2020/21, i.e. that “(...) European environmental law had not been complied with in the course of the Oder expansion so far” (DNR 2025). Wody Polskie, on the other hand, sees no breach of law. Additionally, they interpret the public discussion, where talk of illegal expansion of the Oder has circulated, as “fake news”. Expansion is continuously justified by emphasising the necessity of enabling icebreaker operations and the argumentation is concluded by referring to the centuries for which the Oder has supposedly already been used for economical purposes (gov.pl 2025).

The governing coalition, however, plans to revise the PiS “Revitalisation Law” with respect to the problem of salt discharges (Kojzar 2024). Since an exit from coal mining is currently not possible, desalination should be considered (Time for the Oder 2024). In addition, hydrogen peroxide is to be applied locally in the event of another algae bloom (Kojzar 2024).

Evidence of intensified exchanges on options for water and flood protection between politics, municipal administration, and the EU was provided by a Polish, Czech, and German expert conference. It had been organized by Zeit für die Oder in Wrocław at the closing of the EURENI project in June 2024. Furthermore, the need for strengthening water-protection-oriented educational measures in so-

ciety was also emphasised by implementing the floating environmental education centre *Odra Centrum*.<sup>9</sup> Representatives of the alliance presented their ‘white paper on Polish rivers’ (*Weißbuch polnischer Flüsse*), addressed to policymakers, which demonstrates the need to reform Polish politics of water governance as a whole, and calls for urgent solutions to the problem of saline wastewater from coal mining as well as for stronger inclusion of civil society (Koalicja Czas na Odrę et al. 2023). Nevertheless, the danger posed by the toxic algae has yet to be averted, as exemplified in August 2024, when tens of thousands of kilos of fish from the valley of the Kłodnica, a right-hand tributary of the Oder, died (Kojzar 2024).

In this final phase, it becomes clear how the successively established structures from civil society for protecting the Oder have proven effective in that their expertise is now actively being sought and that their goals were able to be formulated in a concentrated manner. Without yet knowing the political outcome, it can at least be said that protection actors on the Polish side are more strongly integrated into the political process and have, in part, influenced the way the political problem is perceived. Another success for the environmental associations filing lawsuits is the most recent court ruling, which even mentions the potential recommissioning of previous construction measures (DNR 2025). Yet, here too, it remains uncertain to what extent this legal outcome will actually be translated into political action.

<sup>9</sup> See conference: <https://saveoder.org/pl/odra-dla-ludzi-i-natury/> (last accessed: 16.04.2025).

## 5. Conclusion: What Impact Have Transnational River Protection Alliances Had?

In the following section, the analysis of the impact of the Oder protection alliances will be summarised and discussed within the context of the points of contention outlined above. Based on the assumption that especially controversial measures and external shocks may open windows of opportunity for social movements, the analysis of Oder-related politics has been structured around six turning points. Focussing on the interactions between civil society and actors in river politics has shown that it was not water quality but rather the controversy over the expansion of the Oder for an investment-oriented form of flood protection and waterway infrastructure that lay at the core; at least up to the ecological disaster, and with the exception of the first two phases. Actions and reactions were increasingly affected by the green vs. growth cleavage, following the 1997 flood. It also determined the impact of the Oder protection alliances.

With regard to the influence of *civil society*, it has been demonstrated that stable *structures* and *expertise* were been institutionalised, particularly on the Polish side, as a result of the 1997 flood and especially since the 2015 expansion agreement. Concerning their impact on *political outcomes*, regional Polish Oder protection groups, later supported by German NGOs, were able to contribute successfully to improvements in water quality and to the protection of the Lower Oder Valley, over the course of the first two phases. Attempts to prevent expansion plans on the national level failed, however, specifically on the Polish side, even though Oder protection alliances had successfully filed a legal complaint for

a construction stop. The observation that the illiberal politics (TAN-side of the cleavage) sabotaged the legal gains here, is somewhat relativised in light of the unwavered expansion-oriented politics of the new liberal-democratic government. It remains open whether the recently ruled confirmation of the expansion freeze by the Warsaw Voivodeship Court of January 2025 will have political consequences. Nor has it been possible, yet, to renegotiate the 2015 German-Polish expansion agreement on the German national level. It remains to be seen whether the change of government in Germany in winter 2025 will bring about any shift. What civil society and political Oder protection actors did manage to influence, though, were the international financing plans of the Polish flood protection project. In this case, the ecological disaster indeed opened a window of opportunity. Yet, given the opaque funding regulations of the World Bank, this led only to minor financial losses and not to a complete freezing of construction. This, too, confirms Rucht’s aforementioned insight that social movements rarely manage to truly influence political outcomes.

In terms of *agenda setting*, the first two phases show that parts of Polish society and municipal politics became sensitised to water and nature conservation in the Oder region. While it seemed difficult to place the idea of ecological flood protection after 1997, in light of fears of further floods, the Oder alliances succeeded in urging politicians in both countries to question the flood protection argument and the role of icebreakers (von Löhneysen & Hahn 2022). Overall, they ensured that the question of ex-

pansion measures remained on both the national and international agenda.

Finally, it becomes evident that the breaking open of the GALTAN cleavage after the change of government created discursive spaces in which civil society expertise on Oder protection was received and demanded. A greater awareness of the ecologically most urgent issue has now also been established, i.e. stopping the saline discharges into the Oder. Yet, Blühdorn's observation, that despite better knowledge, little is done in practice for sustainable environmental protection, remains pertinent and also holds true in the case of Oder-related politics. Neither on the level of politics nor on that of civil society has anything been changed substantially, so far. Following the logic of this paper, this hesitation can be interpreted by considering the persistence of the Green vs. Growth cleavage in the form of an economic rationale, as it prevents a swift ecologically compatible and sustainable solution to the problem of mining-related salinisation. According to one conclusion in Polish politics, for a paradigmatic shift toward understanding a river as a subject worthy of protection, societal educational work is currently more important than political lobbying (interview with Chmielowicz-Tyszko 2024).

The shift in perspective toward new ontologies in human–nature relations (Yartes et al. 2017), as sketched here for a part of Polish Oder activism, i.e. an ecocentric paradigm, is not new, especially in certain Indigenous knowledge systems (Linton & Pahl-Wostl 2023). It has also long been debated in philos-

ophy and cultural sociology (Boelens, Escobar et al. 2022). The discussion of the subjecthood of nature and its potential status as a legal person appears particularly prominently, as pursued in numerous scholarly publications on RoN movements. They illustrate the transfer of knowledge from the Global South to Europe as well as how agendas among civil society, strategies, and (cosmo-)visions also inspire sociological research (García Ruales, Hovden et al. 2024). Given continuous global heating, (the question of) humanity's relationship to water will gain even greater importance.<sup>10</sup> Discussions around water and rivers, in particular, will therefore need to be pursued and investigated more intensively in sociology, whether in terms of their ontologies, their perceived threat potential, or their recognition as legal subjects, as demanded by the OsobaOdra initiative.

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<sup>10</sup> See conference: <https://saveoder.org/pl/odra-dla-ludzi-i-natury/> (last accessed: 16.04.2025).

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#### Interviews used:

- Sahra Damus, June 26, 2023, Frankfurt (Oder), Green Party MP for the Brandenburg Landtag
- Robert Rient, July 22, 2023, Berlin–Wrocław Culture Train, founder of the OsobaOdra initiative
- Dorota Chmielowicz-Tszko, June 13 and August 27, 2024, Zoom, Vice Chair of the Eco Rozwój Foundation (Fundacja Eco Rozwoju, Wrocław)
- Polish Embassy, July 6, 2023, Berlin, meeting with an economic and an environmental expert



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