

Borders from Below. Processes of Re- and De-Bordering within the Post-Soviet Space

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Bericht von: Ralph Göring, Institut für Geschichte, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

Almost three decades after the Soviet collapse, many borders at the peripheries and within the post-Soviet space remain that are – in one way or another – closely tied to its Soviet history. Some laid long forgotten and reemerged with newly proclaimed nation states, while others diminished when Cold War politics and the continuities of the Soviet state ceased to exist. Both types provide a wide range of unique cases for the field of border studies and were focused by this workshop.

The workshop tried to access the nature of borders from an agency centered perspective. Coming mostly from the disciplines of geography and anthropology, the contributions stressed the necessity of multidisciplinary approaches. The Soviet heritage of these border spaces makes a consideration of historical perspectives necessary for the field in general, while borderland historians can contribute with their methods in particular.

TATIANA ZHURZHENKO (Vienna) opened the conference with an overview of the field of post-Soviet border studies. Her experiences from researching the Ukrainian-Russian border illustrated which challenges research faces in general: grasping the conflict between the rules and routines of border control regimes on one hand and the everyday practices of border crossing on the other hand.

Before the panels started, introducing inputs by SABINE VON LÖWIS, BEATE ESCHMENT (both Berlin) and CAROLIN LEUTLOFF-GRANDITS (Frankfurt an der Oder) summarized the central questions regarding the field, namely why and how borders appear, disappear and reappear in var-

ious regions of post-Soviet space nowadays. They pointed out the necessity to take the individual as lens to access the different dimensions of borders, because individuals on the ground imagine the borderlines, experience them, and shape them by interaction. If border studies wanted to cope with rising levels of complexity, multiscale and multi-actor approaches needed to be employed, since borders are constantly shifting – not only in spatial, but also in social and temporal terms. To see borders from below is to understand the movement across and the reproduction of these borders by people living with them every day.

In the first panel about contested borders, ANTON GRITSENKO (Moscow) examined the effects from a most recent border change: the transition of Crimea to Russia and the events in the Donbass in and after 2014 changed border dynamics between these regions and both competing nation states fundamentally. By looking at local border communities in Crimea (Dzhankoy and Armyansk) as well as in the Rostov region of Russia (Donetsk), Gritsenko showed that the cutting of economic ties and the rewiring process increased the border traffic between the affected regions and Russia massively. The emergence of the new border to the Ukraine on the other hand resulted in more autonomy for local authorities, because adaption to the new border regimes was mostly left to them. Remarkable were Anton Gritsenko's findings that across all focus-groups of his interviews the hard border between Crimea and the Ukraine was perceived as only temporary phenomenon and expected to become more permeable over the years.

The second case study about the Fergana valley borders, presented by SAODAT OLIMOVA (Dushanbe), exemplified how multiple integration and disintegration processes across borders can take place in a very close area. Multiple conflicts arose at the partially still unmapped border between the post-Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the 1990s. On the local level, the competition about various resources was – at the time of her field work in 2016 – still the main incentive for conflict but also for cooperation across the border. Olimova

showed that smuggler networks as well as NGOs, local employees, international organizations, and religious networks fostered contacts across the borders and integrated cross-border markets in the valley. But her research also showed that additionally to the old conflicts resulting from overpopulation, land shortage and water disputes, new conflicts arose through deindustrialization, unemployment and the decay of the agricultural infrastructure, especially irrigation systems. As of 2016 the relations between the Kyrgyz and Tajik communities of the Fergana valley were rapidly worsening due to the decline of arable land.

While discussing both case studies about contested borders comparatively, several comments from the audience pointed out that in these – like in other cases – informal networks across borders proofed to be more dynamical than formal groups or authorities and can adapt faster to changing circumstances. Local actors seem critical to understand borderland dynamics properly, but also superstructures like the environment across a border region needs to be focused for a proper access to borderland conditions.

These impressions continued with the cases from the second panel about de facto borders. KETEVAN KHUTSISHVILI (Tbilisi) found very strong cross-border networks between the districts of Gali and Zugdidi, where Abkhazia and Georgia are separated by checkpoints. Although this border got well monitored over the years, the effort individuals need to undertake to cross it seems closely correlated to the actual state of affairs between the governments of Abkhazia and Georgia. This border divides an ethno-cultural homogeneously settled region, so strong ties remained across it. Building on relations of kinship, local participants in the border economy were able to maintain legal and illegal trade connections into both districts. Khutsishvili highlighted that there was a wide array from individuals and groups who accepted the border to those who ignore it almost completely. That this range can sometimes permeate even highest levels is illustrated by the Enguri hydroelectric power plant: While the dam is on Georgian controlled territory, the control facilities are located on the Abkhazian side. De-

spite the political conflict the power plant is reliably producing electricity for both sides of the border.

With the next example, the presenters MIKHAIL KLYUCHNIKOV and NIKITA TUROV (both Moscow) confirmed the notion that strong borders can be places of co-operation. Despite contrary statements of the authorities of Moldova and unrecognized Transnistria, there seems to be wide-spread cross-border cooperations between local authorities. The researchers looked at the divided cities of Bender and Dubossary. Even though the Russian-Ukrainian crisis of 2014 complicated the cooperation on this de-facto border, ongoing agreements between authorities and security forces on the local level created a cross-border landscape enabling mobility for the inhabitants that contains the spheres of trade, healthcare, education, social security and housing. Especially in the city of Dubossary Transnistrians enjoyed almost completely free mobility within the city limits and access to public services due to this cross-border cooperation. Both examples illustrated that not every strong border claim needs to result in a strong border on the ground. The intensity and permeability of de-facto borders can vary widely, even in small areas.

The third and last panel eventually focused on external borders. RITA SANDERS (Cologne) looked at new western farmers who acquired cheap farmland in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Fallow land after the privatization of the early 1990s attracted several small investors from various western European countries, who tried to build up farms as newcomers with little to none experience, networks or even language skills. While some failed, others succeeded. Sanders argued that the surrounding border to EU-countries created a unique borderland of insecurities but also opportunities for these attempts. Due to Russian-European diplomatic relations, opening and closing of border checkpoints could quickly interrupt the supply for the borderland farms or their ties to important markets. On the other hand, the borderland location provided comparatively cheap fallows, short ways to European markets and access to cheap spare parts for agricultural machines. Since the border held the risk of

sudden changes, the farmers tried to become as independent as possible from it and secure their own ways, which spurred corruption within the structures of local authorities.

Similar observations were made by TOBIAS HOLZLEHNER (Halle an der Saale) at the Russian-Chinese border near the Pacific coast. Historically, this border has always been fluid. While the legal status and permeability of it changed throughout time, its ecological features and vast topographical dimensions have provided for illegal crossing opportunities and cross-border networks. These crossings and networks were on a low during the times of Chinese-Soviet conflict but reemerged after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. With his ethnographic case study, Holzlehner uncovered numerous details of the informal border regimes in the area. While there is a Chinese poaching and gathering economy on the Russian side of the border, which transfers highly priced ginseng and sea cucumbers into China, consumer goods find their way from China to the Russian border markets. As Holzlehner argued, these transactions are supported by a culture of smuggling on both sides of the border, the origins of which can be traced back over a century of regional history. Informal ties and structures, often cloaked by formal structures of the local authorities, have transformed this border space into an area of economic opportunities for people on both sides of the border.

The final discussion of the workshop gave the participants the opportunity to review the presented case studies and discuss insights that may apply to the field of border studies in general. VLADIMIR KOLOSOV (Moscow) remarked that in all the mentioned cases, the infrastructure in and around a border determined circulation processes and thus affected the permeability of the border. Borders are still places of risks and opportunities, but – despite representing demarcations of (de facto) states – are getting more and more internationalized by various international agents and Non-Governmental Organizations. And almost 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the participants discussed if the analysis of these cases should still depart from the reference to the Soviet state. Although all reviewed borders are in one way or another

tied to their Soviet heritage, the events in the last decades can not only be seen as continuing processes from that time, but share their own distinctions and uniqueness. Even more, recent actors developed their own agency, mostly independent from Soviet times. As most participants agreed, recent research in social disciplines has reached a „post-post-Soviet“ state, leaving post-Soviet border studies to historians.

Conference Overview:

Open Keynote Lecture

Tatiana Zhurzhenko (University of Vienna, Vienna): Between State of Exception and Everyday Banality: Precarious Borders in the Post-Soviet Space

Welcome Address and Introduction

Sabine von Löwis (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin) / Beate Eschment (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin) / Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (European University Viadrina, Fankfurt an der Oder)

Panel 1: „Contested“ Borders

Chair: Beate Eschment (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)
Discussant: Sophie Lambroschini (Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin)

Anton Gritsenko (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow / Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad): Local Actors in Contested Border Realities. Northern Crimea and Russian Part of Donbass after 2014

Saodat Olimova (Independent Research Centre Sharq / Oriens, Dushanbe): Transborder Informal Integration vs. Disintegration. How People Live in the Border Regions of the Fergana Valley

Panel 2: De-facto Borders

Chair: Sabine von Löwis (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)
Discussant: Daria Isachenko (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder)

Ketevan Khutsishvili (Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi): Crossing the De Facto Borderlines between Gali and Zugdidi Municipalities

Mikhail Klyuchnikov (Moscow State University, Moscow): Transnistria. Life despite the

Conflict Borders

Panel 3: „External“ Borders

Chair: Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder)

Discussant: Vladimir Kolosov (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)

Rita Sanders (University of Cologne, Cologne): Farming beyond Borders. Economic Activities, Adventuresomeness and Daily Boundary Crossings of 'Western' Farmers in Russia's Exclave of Kaliningrad

Tobias Holzlehner (University of Halle-Wittenberg, Halle): Subversive Economies. Informal Trade in a Russian-Chinese Borderland

Roundtable Discussion

Chair: Beate Eschment (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)

Participants: Vladimir Kolosov (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow) / Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder) / Sabine von Löwis (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin) / Tatiana Zhurzhenko (University of Vienna, Vienna)

Book Presentation

Chair: Beate Eschment (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)

Vladimir Kolosov (Ed.), Russian Border Regions. Neighborhood Challenges, Moscow 2018 (Российское пограничье: Вызовы соседства, Москва 2018).

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