

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

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The workshop focused on borders and cross-border interactions from the perspective of people living in border regions. Its aim was to analyse various border situations after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to new borders but also to changes in the nature of borders in the post-Soviet space.

The workshop addressed how borders are imagined, perceived, and produced, both by local people living in border regions and by various other actors on different levels. Borders are understood as socially constructed and permanently „made“ (the act of bordering) and changed (re- and de-bordering). Even though the perspective „from below“ was highlighted, attention was also directed towards the perspectives of different actors on other scales.

The workshop was opened by a public lecture by TATIANA ZHURZHENKO (Vienna) which gave a broad overview of the field of post-Soviet border studies with special emphasis on „borders from below“. As an Ukrainian researcher with previous work in the region, the war in Donbass brought up important issues in her research, such as how to conduct it in a region she now has difficulties accessing. She also brought up the question of how to research the new, contested border realities, such as those in the Donbass or Crimea, without legitimizing them. It therefore appears that 2014 represents a turning point in post-1991 border realities, experienced both on the ground and in the field of border studies. Borders that seemed to be stable and uncontested suddenly became ques-

tioned and unstable.

Against that backdrop, the workshop the next day started with research conducted by ANTON GRITSENKO (Moscow) on the adaptation of northern Crimea and the Russian Donbass to the new border realities. To that end, he conducted field research (expert interviews, focus groups) and text analysis in 2017. Focusing on the meso level (cities, regions) in the borderland and on various groups, such as businesses, authorities, and the local population, he provided a detailed and nuanced picture of the situation. In the northern Crimean cities of Armaynsk and Dzhankoy the new border reality led to a massive disruption to nearly all dimensions of life: Businesses were cut from their supply lines and customers, while authorities and citizens had to integrate into a new state. Donbass, a well-connected region even after 1991, also experienced a disrupted flow of goods and transportation. However, due to the emergence of the People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk in Ukraine, the flow of goods from Russia to these entities actually increased. Since the borders remain relatively open (although controls have increased), private entrepreneurs have seized the opportunity generated by this new situation and created new services in transportation and new shops (with products from both republics).

Most instructive are the population's attitudes. Citizens expressed a need or wish for a border between Ukraine and Crimea but also perceive it as obstacle to their normal lives and do not imagine the border to be closed. In addition, feelings towards Ukraine remain complex. Most interestingly, these results were consistent in all groups, irrespective of whether those interviewed were ethnic Russians, Ukrainians or Crimean-Tatars.

While the presentation by Gritsenko already touched on issues of scale, the presentation of SAODAT OLIMOVA (Dushanbe) focused on scale in her presentation about the Fergana Valley at the Tajik-Kyrgyz border in 2016. She states that the higher-level actors, the national governments and international organizations, wanted to increase the states' independence (for example in terms of water or transport) in a highly interdependent region. As a result, this has led to bordering

and disintegration. The international organizations have focused on a strategy of division and bordering to keep the conflicting parties apart. Unfortunately, this has only fuelled conflicts. The disintegrative actions taken by higher levels stand in stark contrast to the practices „from below“. Indeed, cross-border trade, smuggling, and use of land (grazing, irrigation), have created and maintained an integrated region. According to Olimova, peace-building requires a change of policy from disintegration to integration by states and international organizations alike. By contrast, the integrating, debordering activities taken on a local level, which foster trust and interdependence, may lead to a more peaceful valley.

As de facto borders had already been touched upon in talking about the newly established border between Crimea and Ukraine, the workshop analysed other de facto borders in Moldova and Georgia. We understand such borders to demarcate parts of a country that have seceded and built their own state institutions but are recognized by neither the country they seceded from nor the majority of the international community. Both of the following speakers although drawing on different examples, made the case that conflict resolution can happen „from below“ by de-bordering on the local level.

KETEVAN KHUTSISHVILI (Tbilisi) examined cross-border communication at the border of Gali (Georgia) and Zugdidi (Abkhazia). Although temporary disruptions occur, the borders have rather become „a relative barrier“. People cross it on a daily basis to seek healthcare or work, or to conduct business. Such close cross-border relationships are possible because the population is ethnically and culturally homogenous: people just happened to end up on different sides of the border. MIKHAIL KLYUCHNIKOV (Moscow) presented the cases of Bender and Dubossary at the Moldovan-Transnistrian border. In these cases, the border runs directly through urban areas. Despite checkpoints, the borders can be crossed by walking to the other side of the street. In both municipalities, people live their everyday lives across the de facto border, for example living in Moldova but working in Transnistria. There is even what KLYUCHNIKOV (Moscow) calls „dual

authority“ of both states over the same territory (like ambulances operating in both territories, or a Moldovan administration office next to a Transnistrian checkpoint). That has led to diffuse, overlapping borders: a somewhat absurd border situation to which people have adapted their lives. Both case studies show that these „laboratories“ may foster conflict resolution by removing barriers and cooperating on the local level in terms of health care or economic relations. Questions remain as to what extent these cases are „representative“ of the realities along the whole length of the border, which roles actors far-removed from the border, located in the centre and hinterlands of the respective territories play, or to what extent local-level interactions can be blocked by those from higher levels (states), as seen in the case put forward by Olimova.

Moving onwards, the workshops also discussed on uncontested state borders at the Russian far-western and far-eastern periphery, at Kaliningrad and Vladivostok. The speakers focused on the micro-level of border realities and on individuals, their networks, and their value chains. In both locations, individuals have materially profited from the existence of borders and used them for economic benefit. In both presentations, the role of trust and trust-building between actors from different countries was highlighted.

RITA SANDERS (Cologne) explored the ventures of young Western European farmers who have leased or bought farmland in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and started to build up their farms. Driven by both, a spirit of adventure and economic reasons (the availability of cheap land relative to their home countries), they have reached out to the locals to recruit staff as well as to buy and sell goods. The European external borders remain a trade obstacle, but the farmers also face language and cultural barriers. However, as they seek to establish ties with the locals, these farmers contribute to transgressing boundaries on a micro level. Based on economic calculations, different borders are transgressed and benefits are obtained because the characteristics of the border has changed. Due to the emphasis put on the border between the EU and Russia, a number of economic activities have led to

dissolving cultural borders within the Kaliningrad region.

Economic benefits across the Russian-Chinese border around Vladivostok were discussed also in relation to temporal and political changes. In the course of history, the region has experienced various orders and their clashes. Despite all these changes on the international level, the demand for individual, informal cross-border contacts remains stable and high. For instance, facing the hardships of peripheral life, Russians sell natural resources, especially sea cucumber, via middlemen to China, where it sells for a high price. TOBIAS HOLZLEHNER (Halle an der Saale) stressed, that the level of trust required to conduct such informal and illegal business stands in stark contrast to the perception of the state. The state's partly arbitrary trade regulations attempt to weaken trust, but in effect, this proves only to foster informal networks, which coordinate and adapt constantly to the state's actions.

In the final discussion, a number of issues were addressed. While the workshop focused on the post-Soviet space, inquiries were made to compare it with other regions of the world and to critically evaluate the potentially Eurocentric understanding of state borders. Furthermore, the question of what distinguishes post-Soviet borders from borders in other regions was raised.

Secondly, as mentioned by ZHURZHENKO, the developments since 2014 have had a massive impact on border studies. One consequence is that research on conflict resolution has become more pressing. The presentations of KHUTSISHVILI, Klyuchnikov, and Olimova led to the conclusion, that borders as contact zones could lead to bottom-up dynamics, which may have the potential to contribute to solving (border) conflicts and should thus gain more attention.

This relates, thirdly, to theory building and questions of scale. How to understand the interplay of different scales (like local and national levels) has been one of the workshop's guiding questions. The presentations addressed different levels of activity, from local and regional to those on higher levels. In taking the perspective „from below“, borders lose a lot of their dividing character.

Nevertheless, a profound understanding of the multi-layered interplay that accompanies them is indispensable.

Forthly, in their opening speeches the organizers devoted particular attention to the field's conceptual debates. However, given the papers' empirical focus, more general ideas and approaches were discussed. For instance, the Chinese case study sparked a discussion on the Chinese Empire's concept of borders as spaces of declining (or increasing) spheres of influence in contrast to a European understanding of a clear „line“. Such conceptualizations offer new perspectives which should not be sidelined.

Fifthly, the discussion, which ventured to spaces as far as Siberia, challenged some of the participants' normative predispositions. The typical European belief that, broadly speaking, borders are „bad“ and cross-border mobility and cooperation are „good“ was challenged by some cases where borders were actually perceived by people as a positive barriers connected to an imagined higher security. This points to the ambivalence which is inherent to borders: depending on the actors and their interests, borders are desired or not, and they are part of our lives, as is the crossing of borders.

The discussion during the workshop proved to be very inspiring, as it connected researchers from different disciplines but also countries (Central Europe and the post-Soviet space), which also allowed for a discussion of very sensitive topics – such as the de facto border –, driven by the desire for mutual understanding. The reason for this is the perspective of looking at borders „from below“ while not ignoring the geopolitical framework. The combination of researchers from different countries proved especially relevant for the case of Ukrainian borders, the analysis of which being a one-sided endeavour for Russian and Ukrainian researchers, mostly due to the politically difficult situation.

A future challenge will be to connect these perspectives to come to both a bottom-up and top-down understanding of borders. While the topic of the workshop indicated two different processes – rebordering and debordering – and assumed these take place in different places and at different times, the connect-

tion between „bottom-up“ and „top-down“ perspectives on borders shows that these processes can take place at the same time and at the same place.

The events of 2014 came up in the discussion several times, followed by two questions: (1) Are border studies in the post-Soviet space different compared to border studies in other world regions? (2) Do we have to look at border studies in the post-Soviet space differently after the events of 2014?

At the end of the workshop, VLADIMIR KOLOSOV (Moscow) presented a volume on *Russian Border Regions: Neighborhood Challenges*. The volume is the product of a research project funded by the Russian Science Foundation between 2014 and 2018. It embarks on a study of nearly all of Russia's land borders and explores the cross-border relations along them.

Conference Overview:

Public Lecture

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

Beate Eschment / Sabine von Löwis (both Zentrum für Osteuropa und internationale Studien (ZOiS), Berlin) / Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION, Frankfurt an der Oder): *Welcome and Introduction*

Panel 1 – „Contested“ Borders

Moderator: Beate Eschment (Berlin)

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

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

Discussion Input: Sophie Lambroschini (CMB, Berlin)

Panel 2 – De Facto Borders

Moderator: Sabine von Löwis (Berlin)

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

Mikhail Klyuchnikov / Nikita Turov (both Moscow State University): *Transnistria: Life Despite the Conflict Borders*

Discussion Input: Daria Isachenko (Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION, Frankfurt an der Oder)

Panel 3 – „External“ Borders

Moderator: Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (Frankfurt an der Oder)

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

Tobias Holzlehner (University of Halle an der Saale): *Subversive Economies: Informal Trade in a Russian-Chinese Borderland*

Discussion Input: Vladimir Kolosov (Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow / Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad)

Final Discussion

Moderator Beate Eschment (Berlin)

Discussion Input: Vladimir Kolosov (Moscow / Kaliningrad) / Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (Frankfurt an der Oder) / Sabine von Löwis (Berlin) / Tatiana Zhurzhenko (Vienna)

Book Presentation

Vladimir Kolosov (Ed.): *Russian Border Regions: Neighbourhood Challenges*, Moscow 2018.

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