Studying Border Regions in the Post-Soviet Space. Different Methods, Scales and Areas

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The second border workshop[1] brought together researchers from a range of countries and disciplines studying border regions in the post-Soviet space. This time the basic idea was not only to compare different regions, but also to address different methodological approaches and to consider particular ethical problems encountered during fieldwork.

The workshop focused on three questions: To what extent do different methodological approaches contribute to a better understanding of borders in the post-Soviet space? Closely related to this is the question of the scale of analysis, which necessarily influences the phenomena we see. Finally, we considered what the study of post-Soviet borders contributes to the field of border studies and to the field of area studies in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space. What is special about post-Soviet borders, and does their study contribute to a better understanding of the post-Soviet space?

ILKKA LIIKANEN (Joensuu) discussed a number of theoretical concepts in order to address the shifting scales of borders and spaces. He drew on the history of concepts and ideas, the relation between space and time in Reinhart Koselleck's „spaces of experience" and „horizons of expectation", and Quentin Skinner's emphasis on the actor's voice (what is said by whom, where and when) and proposed these conceptual and methodological approaches for the analysis of borders. He illustrated the explanatory value of borders with recent research on the political space of the Grand Duchy of Finland, the representation of Karelia on beer labels or as a symbol used by Finnish skinheads and policies of the Eastern Partnership. The application of these approaches captures the multi-layered nature of borders with references to different border concepts, different spaces and territorialities in different times and involving different actors.

Issues of time and space were also evident in the presentation of SABINE von LÖWIS (Berlin), who introduced the heuristic model of phantom borders with the example of Western Ukraine. Phantom borders are former, predominantly political borders that persist or re-emerge, for example in voting behaviour, social practices or infrastructure networks, and can be observed in numerous places around the world. On the basis of a microgeographical case study of the Zbruch River in Western Ukraine, she showed that there are not only differences but also entanglements and transfers between the past and the present. The reappearance of past borders is characterised by a complex dynamic of institutions, practices and imaginations that are used and applied at different scales. Their reconstruction is linked not only to representations of the past but also to current developments in politics and society at different levels.

The following section focused on methods of applying digital data. ARIANE BACHELET (Paris/Moscow) provided insights into one of her PhD research topics: the borderisation of South Ossetia and detention for „illegal" border crossing. She discussed the de facto border between Georgia and South Ossetia and critically examined the term borderisation, which is broadly used in a Georgian context to describe the bordering process between Georgia and the de facto state of South Ossetia as one of turning the line of contact/conflict into a perceived border. The last few years have seen the appearance not only of boundary markers such as stones and posts, but also fences and barbed wire, dividing villages, fields and infrastructure. People from both sides of the boundary still try to cross it. With the help of the South Ossetia KGB's Facebook page and the interpolation of GIS software Bachelet attempted to calculate the number of arrested border-crossers. Despite some problems, she was able to ve-

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[1] On the first border workshop see https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8200 (16.04.2020).

rify the numbers (206 between October 2015 and 2019) and the preferred place of detention – that is, borderisation – (the southern part of the boundary).

Another form of digital data was analysed by TELMO MENEZES (Berlin), who used geotagged Instagram photos to show how the emerging field of Computational Social Science (CSS) can be applied to border research. The digital sciences are able to analyse unprecedented amounts of empirical data and to produce maps of the preferred places and movements of members of the social network in order to draw discrete multiscale geographical boundaries ultimately inferred from the aggregate of the observable individual behaviour of millions of social media users. He presented data from nine different regions, including Poland, Romania, Ukraine, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The comparison of the visual representation of individual behaviour with borders and boundaries raises a number of questions and opens avenues to an understanding and analysis of individual spatial activities, and thus also to the possibility of understanding and conceptualising space, borders and scales.

NINO AIVAZISHVILI (Bochum) presented the results of her anthropological PhD research in the border area between Georgia and Azerbaijan. She showed how the permeability of the border affected the life conditions of the Ingiloy, the Georgian-speaking Muslim citizens of Azerbaijan. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, people on both sides of the border could manage problems at checkpoints etc. But after the border was closed and tightly controlled in 2003, only the elites were able to profit from it, through corruption or smuggling. This case study clearly showed how a change in the quality of the border and the restrictions resulting from this led to controversial place-based identities and loyalties. The political construct of the border is a representation of the state that is materialised at checkpoints and border controls. Nevertheless, these relate to real people and practices that assign a different image and practice to the reality and practice of the border and therefore to the representation of the state.

MANUEL NEUBAUER (Vienna) introduced a new region and presented a new approach: the Citizen Science project „Talking Borders", coordinated by Machteld Venken, which took place in 2018 in Vienna. The organisers managed to rally sixty-six students (citizens of different states today) from the area of the former Habsburg Monarchy to discuss historical borders and to exchange opinions about border-related issues either among themselves or with border experts from around the world. Analysis of the project is still going on, but the initial results provide interesting insights into a wide variety of issues ranging from personal experiences with borders to contemporary politics or to memories and expectations for the future. Despite certain limitations to the approach, it proved a very interesting and promising way to analyse borders and representations of territories, spaces, identities and experiences.

ALEXANDER KUKHIANIDZE (Tbilisi) gave a keynote lecture on border protection and hybrid war in Georgia, which he examined in a broad historical context. He noted that, after World War II, Soviet border troops were well armed and the borders to Turkey were closed. Following independence, borders were opened again and the well-armed border troops were unable to prevent newly arising problems such as smuggling. As a result, several changes were made in the jurisdiction of border protection in now independent Georgia. These introductory remarks were followed by Kukhianidze's views on the situation in Adjara, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, supplemented by a personal description of his research on smuggling. He noted that border security depends on a country's inner stability, while also pointing out the extent to which Georgia's borders are dependent on external relations, supranational organisations and representations of international security.

Two presentations were on border practices in Central Asia. The basic assumption of ASEL MURZAKULOVA's (Bishkek) research on the Kyrgyz border in the Fergana Valley was that border research has so far been overly focused on issues of nation building and security at the expense of natural resources and the actors in cases of conflict. In the case of the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border, water – the irrigation infrastructure inherited from the Soviet Union

– was the main factor in the conflict. As water flows from the mountains of Kyrgyzstan into the cotton fields of Uzbekistan, both countries had to find a new mode of distribution. The situation has considerably improved since 2016, but it had previously been problematic. The Kyrgyz–Tajik border at the Tajik enclave Vorukh in Batken oblast was not materialised until 2010 – to the benefit of the local population in terms of health care and market access. The fewer possibilities for cross-border contact after 2010 led to impoverishment on the Kyrgyz side. Murzakulova, too, showed how the transformation of the quality of borders regarding previous infrastructural dynamics affects the daily lives of communities within the region. Here again one becomes aware of the extent to which the border as a political construct of the state becomes controversial and interferes in people's daily lives and the former practices of neighbourhoods and communities.

HENRYK ALFF (Eberswalde) showed how the proximity of the Chinese border has affected agriculture in the Panfilov district in Kazakhstan. The main result is that while export of maize to China would be desirable for the district's small-scale farmers, this does not occur due to legal and political barriers. Nevertheless, the district still benefits from the proximity of China, as the border checkpoint and the transport hub at Khorgos, which is linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offers the local population a number of economic opportunities. This has stopped the migration of young people to Almaty, which was still active a few years ago. As with Murzakulova's presentation, infrastructure is seen as a key to understanding developments in the Kazakhstan-Chinese border region. While a big infrastructure creates possibilities for processing cross-border trade, not much takes place. Nevertheless, sustaining it leads to a slight improvement in a peripheral region and allows for a positive image of a rather deprived area.

Following a suggestion by participants of the first border workshop, the floor was then opened for a free exchange on the special challenges of border research and field research in general. The key question was how to conduct border research without harm coming either to the interviewees or to the researchers. Participants discussed personal challenges such as interviewing traumatised refugees, and ethical challenges such as handling information about illegal actions. They also discussed the problem of taking pictures at borders and border checkpoints, which is illegal but an important source of evidence. Researchers from the region complained about unequal access to contested borders. Finally, the discussion moved to more general questions such as data-safety rules and the preservation of respondents' anonymity.

The workshop's principle finding is hardly surprising, but one that is not usually emphasised: the choice of scale and method fundamentally influences the results of research. While almost all papers took a local perspective, this was also contextualised in a broader setting in order to connect the local with higher scales of border drawing and practising. Regarding area studies, the presentations demonstrated the need to look back at the history of border drawing. While this observation is not new, it has been given little attention, and there has been less research on how these borders were performed and practised during Soviet times. The same is true of the current borders of the independent post-Soviet (nation) states. Borders should be considered not only as phenomena between two states, but also at the level of the populations on both sides of the borders, their practices of adapting to new realities. Looking at their life situations, their adaptation to new borders and their problems with divided infrastructures can help to explain many new local border conflicts. To analyse this in more detail, particularly against the background of the growing number of conflicts about and across borders in the post-Soviet space, it is important to focus on border regions in relation to their current challenges and their historically contingent becoming. There is still much to be done in this field.

Conference overview:

Welcome and Introduction
Beate Eschment (ZOiS, Berlin), Ketevan Khutsishvili (Tbilisi State University, Georgia), Sabine von Löwis (ZOiS, Berlin)

Panel 1: Scale, History and Concepts of Bor-

ders
Chair: Beate Eschment (ZOiS, Berlin)

Ilkka Liikanen (Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland): Approaching Shifting Scales and Concepts of Borders. East and West of Bordering (Former) Empires and their Substructures

Sabine von Löwis (ZOiS, Berlin): Phantom Borders – A Heuristic Model to Study how Past Borders and Orders Structure Today's World

Panel 2 – Territorial Dynamics and Spatial Data
Chair: Sabine von Löwis (ZOiS, Berlin)

Ariane Bachelet (University Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne / RAS, Institute of Geography, Moscow): Territorial Dynamics in the Caucasus: the Questions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Telmo Menezes (Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin): Social Media, Networks and Geographical Data

Panel 3 – Talking and Experiencing Borders
Chair: Ketevan Khutsishvili (Tbilisi State University, Georgia)

Nino Aivazishvili-Gehne (Ruhr-University Bochum): Experiencing the Border, encountering the States. The Ingiloy at the Azerbaijani-Georgian Borderland

Manuel Neubauer (University of Vienna): Citizen Science – Potential and Challenges of a New Approach to Border Studies

Keynote speech
Alexandre Kukhianidze (Tbilisi State University, Georgia): Border Protection and Hybrid War in Georgia
Chair: Ketevan Khutsishvili (Tbilisi State University, Georgia)

Panel 4: Border Practices in Central Asia in Face of Political Transformations
Chair: Beate Eschment (ZOiS)

Asel Murzakulova (Mountain Societies Research Institute, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan): Rethinking the Meaning of Neighbourship. Current Dynamics in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands

Henryk Alff (Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development): Development Hubs or Peripheries? Agricultural Change in the Kazakhstan-China Borderlands

Roundtable 1: Ethics in Conflict / Border Research
Beate Eschment and Ketevan Khutsishvili

Final Discussion and Conclusions

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