

# Post-Soviet Borders

A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands

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Lands. An Introduction

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# Post-Soviet Borders

## A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands. An Introduction

*Sabine von Löwis*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This volume aims to survey and investigate the developments in post-Soviet border regions over the past 30 years in order to take stock of the restructuring of space and provide a basis for comparing these border regions. The volume's overarching focus is on the intersection between geopolitical shifts and individual lived experience. Case studies highlight border regions in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. They reveal the great diversity that exists across the vast post-Soviet space as well as provide insights into the situation that has emerged as new nation-states develop in a region strongly influenced by regional and global powers with differing, sometimes conflicting economic and political interests. Our intention with this book is to illustrate how the geopolitical shifts and adjacencies have influenced life, mobility, loyalties, societies and economies in these evolving border regions. To put the featured case studies in context, we provide an overview of geopolitical dynamics in the post-Soviet border regions and describe the development of post-Soviet border studies. This is complemented by a historical perspective on the redrawing of borders in Soviet times and a discursive citizen-science perspective that shows how borders become part of the arguments and reasoning of individuals and how geopolitics are debated in discursive interactions. The book does not cover all border regions but provides well-chosen case studies from different regions that represent most aspects of post-Soviet bordering. The authors of these chapters include researchers from within the region and outside of it; in some cases they even represent the opposite sides of disputed borders.

Thirty years ago, the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of 15 independent states plus a growing number of de facto states and de facto borders. Territorial revisions after the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a new organisation of social, economic, infrastructural, cultural and political networks and spaces. Recent events have shown that this process is not finished: persisting tensions exist due to a history of entanglements within and across the former Soviet republics, and these historical linkages complicate the current situation in the new independent states and unfinished processes of border demarcations. Like a kaleidoscope, the dynamic elements in the newly evolved border regions

are similar yet strikingly different in their juxtapositions, with the appearance of new configurations often dependent on changing geopolitical constellations.

Our focus lies on people's individual perspectives and routines of daily life as impacted by a history of geopolitical shifts. We look at border regions and their ethnic minorities, examining how they are affected by often-contentious territorial reorganisations of states and supranational organisations and the resulting changes in economies, politics and societies. The book also foregrounds issues of scale, noting the entanglement between different levels of decision-making and how individual and local experiences interface with the supra-local. In addition, we look at the interplay of various methods and conceptual approaches in the study of border regions, as well as the different historical periods relevant to understanding the current situation.

### **The interrelationship of geopolitics and everyday life**

Borderlands are dynamic places in many ways. They are, on the one hand, peripheral to a territory, as they mark the outskirts of a state and its sovereignty. On the other hand, they are strategically and militarily essential to the state with regard to security and sovereignty (Brun 2019). This dynamic is influenced not only by political relations between neighbouring states and the overall geopolitical configuration but also by fundamental shifts like the dissolution of an empire or union of states into its constituent parts.

In the post-Soviet space, administrative and symbolic borders turned into international state borders. The political and economic relations between and across states and in the borderlands themselves are not yet stable and depend on internal and external developments. The Cold War opposition between the East and the West was initially consigned to the archive of history. Now, it seems to be reappearing in public discourses. At the same time, new global, national, transnational and regional configurations (e.g. European Union (EU), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), China, Iran, Turkey) – systemic, intended and/or imagined – set the scene for post-Soviet internal and external bordering.

Above all borders are political structures (Casaglia 2020), but the people living in the adjacent borderlands are not necessarily foremost in the minds of state actors as long as the respective border regime seems secured and the inhabitants of said regions are not becoming or considered a security or sovereignty threat. People in the borderlands may turn into contested citizens when they become the strategic objects of passportisation policies (e.g. Russian or Hungarian ethnic minorities in Ukraine) (Lamour and Varga 2020). And in contested borderlands, people are objects of suspicion, as seen in the emerging border along the ceasefire line also known as contact line in eastern Ukraine (von Löwis and Sasse 2021).

How the people who live in or close to borderlands construct, experience and relate to them depends on interstate relations and, to a certain extent, on the individuals themselves. They make use of the border, subvert it or support it, for example, by trading or smuggling across it, depending on the specific conditions and regulations that pertain there. This complex interrelationship of macro-level

state interests and micro-level individual and local needs and routines in border regions has often been neglected, with researchers tending to focus either on state politics regarding borders or on life in border regions. When the interactions between the everyday lives of individuals and the strategies of political elites towards borders are studied (Jones and Johnson 2014), it is based on the notion that the border is everywhere (Balibar 2004; Cooper et al. 2014).

We focus here on the interface of state borders, on individual and local appropriation in different aspects of life in the border regions as such, i.e. in those places where the border manifests itself in symbols, fences, crossing points, border guards and sometimes even in weaponised forms like mines. Borders are barriers as well as contact zones (Pratt 1991); as such, they play an important role in identity building and dividing 'us' from 'them'. They become part of a narrative, or as Anna Casaglia has put it, 'The border is better described as a discursive landscape composed by a normative dimension and everyday experience' (Casaglia 2020, 30). What the border is and how it can be used is shaped by border regimes that regulate the filtering and selecting function of the border (Berg and Ehin 2006). However, the border cannot be reduced to geopolitics or biopolitics, judicial regulations and technology; it is also a product of the everyday acts of appropriating the border (Miggelbrink 2014, 143ff). But how it is shaped in the end very much depends on how it is defined by the state and also on how people living in the border region and crossing the border are handled. Borders are perceived differently on an imagined and practical level. There is a world of difference between looking at a border on a map and experiencing and crossing that same border. Thus, borders are constructed differently in every situation in which they are invoked. This processual and situational shift in border studies has been especially stressed in the borderscape approach (Brambilla et al. 2016).

Based on Lefebvre's concept of the production of (border) spaces (1991), we understand the borderline on the map and on the ground as well as the borderland linked to it as a triadic relation between imagination, experience and perception (Lefebvre 1991; Esch and von Hirschhausen 2017). Taking Lefebvre further, this allows us to conceptualise not only the entanglements between the micro and the macro but also their non-simultaneity and contradictions. Above all, the macro and the micro are not seen as opposite ends of a spectrum but as parts of a complex whole: the everyday practice at the demarcation lines in border regions shows us how individual practices and routines are entangled with the construction and implementation of a territorial border on the ground through state-centred strategies. We do not necessarily conceptualise the examination of everyday life and practices solely as 'local' and 'micro' but as an important general perspective that is usually ignored when looking at border regions (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019).

With regard to the post-Soviet space, the idea of a pre-border past (van Schendel 2005, 57) – and thus the historic perspective – is important for understanding recent developments in border regions. As mentioned above, the borders between the former Soviet Republics had predominantly administrative, sometimes symbolic functions and can thus be considered pre-border spaces. In some cases,

they can be traced back to historical and colonial borders and boundaries. The routines of a pre-border past may be sustained and resist or reinforce a present hardening border (van Schendel 2005, 57). This allows (or forces) us to include a temporal perspective and different scales and to take account of the strategies of different individuals to live with and shape a border. The temporal dimension is key to understanding the realities of borders in the post-Soviet space. They hold memories not only of local border traffic but also of conflict and contestation. Both legacies continue to shape imaginations and practices at and around the border. Agency is, of course, a key concept for linking the individual and the local on the one hand, and the national and transnational/translocal on the other. This is best approached with the concept of 'borderwork' (Rumford 2006, 2012), although the authors in this volume discuss agency using different theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches.

Borderwork or 'seeing like a border' (Rumford 2011) or seeing 'from the border' (Cooper et al. 2014) looks at the border not from a state perspective but from the perspective of the process of bordering itself, as shaped by multiple actors in specific ways at different levels. Borderwork consists not only of dividing and separating but also of connecting practices. Cooper et al. (2014) have recently foregrounded this aspect of borders, which had previously been put forward by different scholars in cultural studies (Pratt 1991) or categorised in border studies in terms of different levels of connectivity (Martínez 1994) or places of engagement and places of dependence (Cox 1998; van Schendel 2005). In the end, we should not forget the function of borders as places of controlled and regulated crossing. Linked to this are emerging hierarchies of who is allowed to cross under which circumstances (Mau 2021).

The contributions to this volume address the linkages and interactions of the individual and local with national and transnational geopolitical configurations, focusing on how debordering and rebordering actually take place and constitute the border as well as the adjacent border region. This endeavour is necessarily related to scale and calls for a concept of how to correlate different scales at, across and with the border. Given the dual function of borders as spaces of engagement and disengagement, scale is helpful as an instrument of articulation between the local and the transnational (van Schendel 2005, 49). In other words, the border can be understood as a space that is neither purely national nor local. The locations of debordering and rebordering can be found in agriculture, infrastructure, ethno-nationalism or land property. The border is the place where scales are especially nested and where scaling and rescaling as well as debordering and rebordering take place. It is here where people might jump between scales and where, based on borders and cross-border networks of different kinds, 'border-induced scales' emerge (van Schendel 2005, 57). This realisation may lead us to revise our current understanding of border geometries and power relations.

### **The everyday border**

The volume and the case studies follow five lines of analysis with respect to the conceptual approaches described above.

***Dimensions of borders in the everyday***

In their inspiring edited volume, Corey Johnson and Reece Jones urge us to place the border in everyday life, where it is actually experienced (Johnson and Jones 2014). This has opened up the field to studies that show that the border doesn't just occur at the borderline itself but is simultaneously reflected in films, art, urban spaces, etc. In our volume, we stay in the borderlands where the border materialises and show how and where bordering and the border take place.

Borders structure everyday proceedings, particularly in regions where they seem to cut through previous nets of contact and exchange. Often, the economic divide they create becomes an economic resource, stimulating cross-border trade between the two sides. Trade is in different ways and for different reasons a recurrent business established particularly across borders. Border regimes regulate the transfer of products; the extent and lacunae of this regime are revealed in the ways people try to cope with, circumvent or exploit non-favourable regulations to trade. But the border may also reside in the use of pastures or irrigation systems, as well as in historical spaces and imaginations of belonging and separation. At the same time, borders may also become the scene for 'borderisation' theatres, when the everyday and the population in contested border regions become objects or exhibits in the service of geopolitical interests (Toal and Merabishvili 2019). So we want to get closer to the everyday life of the border, particularly in cases where it divides a former functionally integrated space. This everyday life encompasses not only the appropriation of the border by crossing it but also adaption to it.

***Actors and scales***

The contributions in this volume shed light on areas where the state and the individual/local collectives interlock (van Schendel 2005). For example, state border guards jump scales easily when they become involved in border trade. Telecommunications or transport providers, too, may contribute to rebordering and debordering and the actual embodiment and arrangement of borders. The same is true of community water experts or international non-governmental organisations in Central Asian borderlands. Despite the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the contestation of the 'contact line', local and state actors still maintain the water and gas infrastructure across it (von Löwis and Sasse 2021). To different degrees, the contributors try to understand the perspectives of these and other actors and their agency linked to the border regions, regardless of whether they shape practices around and along the border from within those regions or from a distance. The focus on actors and scales illuminates the horizontal dimension of the border space and allows us to draw conclusions about border-induced scales (van Schendel 2005, 57). Applying different theoretical and methodological approaches, the contributions reveal the role played by the practices and perspectives of multiple actors.

### *Experiences and perceptions of borders*

The border and its materialisation mean different things to different people (Cooper et al. 2014, 17; Esch and von Hirschhausen 2017; Lohnert 2019). The borderline can be understood and used not only as an ideological divide, a security measure or a barrier to everyday mobility, but also as a sluice gate/interface or a technical, discursive or emotional opportunity. The border and the border region are experienced in very different ways, and the experience and perception of the border change across space, social class/function and time. Particularly around contested borderlines, these perceptions are in flux and strongly dependent on the spatial imaginations of the states and political, cultural and/or economic projects across the borders. They may even be additionally charged with the past spatial orders of former empires or states. This is especially interesting and relevant for the former external border of the Soviet Union, as this border was in many cases sealed and is now in some cases permeable. The case studies show different developments with regard to the establishment of borders between former post-Soviet states and with their former external neighbours, for example, at the Georgian-Turkish border or the border between Kazakhstan and China. Hence, the volume delivers a provisional overview of how experiences and perceptions of post-Soviet borders have transformed.

### *Imaginations of borders or border imaginations*

Different kinds of nationally, transnationally, regionally or locally produced spatial imaginations play a major role in debordering and rebordering processes. Cultural, national, economic and political divides are constructed across the post-Soviet space. People often refer to them as a way of explaining their own behaviour and imagination of the border. The case studies within this volume consider the relevance of different spatial imaginations for the observed bordering processes and determine if and how the imaginations of the role and function of post-Soviet borders have changed, for example, at the border between Kaliningrad and the EU or in the Fergana Valley in Central Asia.

### *Securitisation of borders*

Looking from the Western post-Soviet borders to Central Asia and the South Caucasus, we are reminded of an increasingly bordered world (Newman 2006) and the growing number of contested borders (Brambilla and Jones 2020). Some of the case studies revisit conflicts at different levels and times in the past 30 post-Soviet years, such as those in Transnistria and Crimea. Some borders are theatres of resurgent clashes, like the borderland between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Linked to this are persistent discourses about security and their materialisation in increasing securitisation measures, which intensify bordering effects in everyday life. The case studies show how the global trend of border enforcement and securitisation has arrived at the post-Soviet borders.

***Multifaceted post-Soviet borders***

The book charts a variety of developments in research on post-Soviet borders and in post-Soviet border regions as such. It is divided into four parts. The first part provides an overview of developments in the post-Soviet border regions (von Löwis, Eschment and Khutsishvili) and in post-Soviet border studies (Zhurzhenko), discussing how the former determine the latter. The contribution by Jaschik and Venken presents the new citizen science approach to research on borders and especially on post-Soviet borders. This concept allows us to consider other forms of knowledge in addition to those generated purely scientifically, as the focus lies on the negotiation of border narratives people have adopted. The shaping of past and current spatial borders plays a significant role in the arguments of citizen scientists and contestations about borders in and around the present post-Soviet borders. A historical discussion that asks about the extent to which current problems of post-Soviet borders are linked to the redrawing of borders in Soviet times (Rindlisbacher) was therefore deemed essential.

The following three sections cover developments in different parts of the post-Soviet space and include internal and external borders of the former Soviet Union in Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The main problems of Western post-Soviet borders stem from the border regimes that evolve around EU enlargement, the Schengen area and EU migration policy and the role of the latter in the political, economic and cultural conflicts and diverging ambitions and realities between and across EU and non-EU states. The construction of the other on the political/national level and the (re)construction of political and social orders are changing the way individuals and groups perceive each other. This is exemplified by the concept of trust and mistrust in everyday contacts and representations in the case of Kaliningrad (Sanders). Trust and mistrust also play a role in the contested borders between Transnistria and Moldova (Turov, Klyuchnikov and Pavlyuk). Trust and mistrust are based on individual's experiences and history with their own group and with the other. Yet the line between the two feelings often becomes blurred in personal discourses and justifications: trust in another person across the border does not necessarily result in trust in the adjacent political order.

The borders in the South Caucasus are the product of repeated attempts to divide local populations of different ethnicities and the failure to reconcile the idea of the nation-state with the fact of ethnic nationalities and ethnic minorities that are territorially fragmented across borders. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to an opening of the external border between Turkey and Georgia, the closing of a border with South Ossetia and the temporary unpredictability of the border regime between Azerbaijan and Georgia for the local Ingiloy population. Established economic, social and cultural ties were disrupted, while new ones were created. This is the case for the Ingiloy, a Georgian-speaking minority in today's Azerbaijan (Aivazishvili-Gehne) and for the Georgian minority living on the Turkish side of the Georgian-Turkish borderland (Cheishvili). In a similar way,



yet with the added charge of external interferences, the South Ossetian population is now confronted with extreme boundary and border drawing (Bachelet) as a result of South Ossetian attempts at de facto state-building backed by Russia (borderisation).

While tensions in the South Caucasus can be attributed to the spatial concepts of the nation-state based on ethnic groups and cultural belonging, tensions in Central Asia are ignited by shared human-environment linkages and the importance of infrastructure for the livelihoods of many people across different ethnic groups, especially in the Fergana Valley. This came to the fore once again in spring 2021 with the clash between the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which is seen as a symptom of the complex process of (dis)integration (Olimova and Olimov). The role of infrastructure in state-building processes is also a key factor in the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan borderland (Murzakulova). Border infrastructures also play a role at the Kazakhstan-China border, where they hold the promise of income generation in a publicly sustained agricultural region (Alff). The human-environment complex consisting of roads, pastures, irrigation systems, land-use patterns, ownership, etc. becomes nationalised and engenders problems as the border intersects these systems, corrupting not only functional but also social and cultural networks.

In all cases, narratives and spatial imaginations about past borders and their historical establishment play a pivotal role in justifying or nullifying the current border regimes or bordering in the perspective of people from the local to the state level.

## Note

- 1 As the book has been finished before 24th of February 2022 it does not reflect changes occurring since.

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