

Post-Soviet Borders

A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands

Edited by
**Sabine von Löwis and
Beate Eschment**

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Chapter 1

Dynamics of Bordering in the Post-Soviet Space over the Last 30 Years

*Sabine von Löwis, Beate Eschment and
Ketevan Khutsishvili*

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1 Dynamics of Bordering in the Post-Soviet Space over the Last 30 Years

Sabine von Löwis, Beate Eschment and Ketevan Khutsishvili

Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union into 15 independent states meant the transformation of thousands of kilometres of previously internal borders into international ones, which had to be redefined under international law. In 1991 and 1992, the representatives of the new states agreed that the location of the borders should be retained and that the borders should remain transparent and open (Minsk Agreement 8.12.91; Almaty Charter 21.12.91; CIS Charter 22.6.92). It soon became apparent, however, that these noble aims could not be achieved: border conflicts and closed borders in fact increased. The factors responsible for this – the history of the borders; the geopolitical reconfiguration of the states; new and old nationalisms; economic interests and linkages; ethnic and/or religious diversity; transnational economic, political, and security projects – differ from case to case. Roughly speaking, different dynamics can be identified in the large regions of the Baltic states, the western/European successor republics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Not only did the disintegration of the Soviet Union change the legal and institutional situation and thus the border regimes at the former internal borders, but the new states that emerged inherited sections of the international borders of the former Soviet Union. In most cases, these borders became more open, in contrast to the former internal ones. The definition and demarcation of the former international borders under international law were less conflictual. The contacts across these borders are by no means without problem, but so far, there have not been active conflicts.

The emergence of 15 successor states after the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in 23 new neighbourhood relationships and the restructuring of social and economic relations. The Russian Federation, as the biggest successor state, is the neighbour to eight of these successor states and plays an important role in border dynamics (Toal 2017; Kolosov et al. 2019). In this chapter, we consider the situation at the borders shared by the Russian Federation and its neighbours on a case-by-case basis; indeed, the borders between the Russian Federation and neighbouring states have been extensively researched by others (see Sevastianov et al. 2013; Kolosov 2018; Kolosov et al. 2019). Our aim is to focus on the varying practices, imaginations, and experiences across the states that border Russia and each

other; these variations are due to the unique history of each border region and the specific relations between the bordering states (Liikanen and Smith 2019).

To grasp the dynamics of 30 years of post-Soviet borders, we reflect on how borders were and are experienced, practised, and shaped. Bordering is not only a political process of demarcation (on both the ground and maps) and of organising and shaping institutions to establish and secure a border; it is also about social and political narratives and imaginations of belonging and othering, because this process is shaped by the practices and experiences of people living at and/or across cultural, economic, and political divides (Lefebvre 1991). We consider the history of borders in general (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009; O'Dowd 2010) and that of post-Soviet borders specifically. Internal borders were shaped not only by the founding of the Soviet Union (cf. Rindlisbacher in this volume) but also by historical borders and orders of various imperial pasts, as well as by the contestations of empires (such as Persia, Russia, or Habsburg) over territory (see Jaschik and Venken in this volume). Such borders may reappear in situations of state-building, when historical precedents and territorial borders are used to construct narratives of national or regional identity and belonging in form of phantom borders (Hirschhausen et al. 2019).

To understand the three decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union requires a close examination of the development of 15 new, independent states and new neighbourhood relations in the region. This development has involved a political, economic, cultural, and social restructuring of regional and international relations. Assessing the history of post-Soviet states and borders also requires a consideration of the broader, worldwide development of multiplying borders and an increasing tendency to enforce borders and strengthen their selective functions – something that is not unique to the post-Soviet space (Gülzau and Mau 2021). What is unique to post-Soviet borders is this shared history of once being part of the Soviet Union, yet the Soviet Union's borders and those between the Soviet republics were equally complex and diverse, since they are rooted in divergent historical processes linked to pre-Soviet and Soviet orders.

In this overview, we focus on three perspectives of border regions in the post-Soviet space. First, we briefly address the official geopolitical agreements and demarcations as well as the relevant regional and transnational geopolitical projects, which have an impact on the borderlands to differing extents. Second, we turn to the practices and routines of post-Soviet borderlands, looking at how demarcations and delimitations affect the population. This involves aspects related to demographics such as the presence of minorities, friendship and kinship ties, cultural and economic links, and the interrelation between the respective states and imagined communities. Finally, we consider practices and experiences along and across the border and the institutionalisation and shaping of border spaces, including narratives and imaginings of old and new borders. Russia, for example, regularly plays the 'Russians abroad' card within the wider context of a supposed *Russkii mir* (Russian world) and a 'near-abroad' imagination that is driven by Russian elites (Toal 2017).

Vladimir Kolosov wrote a preliminary overview of 20 years of bordering processes in the post-Soviet space (Kolosov 2011). It was done three years before the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, which has not yet ended. These events, which profoundly irritated and disrupted relations with Russia's neighbouring states – such as the Baltic states, Finland, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and the European Union (EU) – are a reminder that the disintegration of the Soviet Union is arguably ongoing and thus that the establishment of a stable post-Soviet order has not been achieved.

The Baltic states and Kaliningrad

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania reinstated their former borders from the time of the countries' brief independence in the 1920s. Only slight changes had been made to these borders when these Baltic states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as Soviet republics. These slight differences tempted the newly independent Estonia and Latvia to question their borders with Russia that were inherited from the Soviet era, and they attempted to follow a restorationist logic in the negotiations over the demarcation and the agreements of the interstate borders. These strategies were dropped during negotiations over EU enlargement (Aalto and Berg 2002), though official border agreements have yet to be signed by Russia. The EU enlargement of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania in 2004 profoundly influenced the dynamics of the western post-Soviet borders, affecting the perception, practices, and shape of borders in the western post-Soviet space more generally.¹

As a consequence of the EU enlargement of the Baltic states, the crossing of the borders between them did not change and has remained easy, but the crossing of the EU external border between the Baltic states and Russia has presented numerous complications and led to a special border regime, determined by both the Schengen Area and the neighbouring countries. To handle this situation, local border-traffic agreements have been established that allow people living in close proximity to the EU external border to travel more easily between Russia and Belarus, on the one hand, and Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, on the other.

A special case within the Baltic states is the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which borders Lithuania and Poland and is located within the EU Schengen Area – it is essentially a Russian 'island'. The inclusion of the city of Kaliningrad and the surrounding oblast into the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic was decided at the Potsdam conference in 1945, and this decision was confirmed in 1990. There have been no quarrels over the delimitation of Kaliningrad as a Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania. It is now not only recognised as a unique entity (an 'island') within the EU and the Schengen Area (see Sanders in this volume), but it also has specific security functions within the Russian Federation, as it did within the Soviet Union as Baltic Sea port.

The EU external border creates an economic divide, which is exploited for the purposes of small-scale trade and smuggling. It has become a serious barrier to be overcome with special regulations and, at the same time, an economic resource

owing to that economic divide (Miggelbrink 2014); in addition, it has become an imagined divide (Nikifora 2010). The adoption of new border realities requires border-making and border work, as well as the participation of the population (Pfoser 2015; Bruns 2019). Local populations take over the geopolitical discourse that frames the border with Russia as a security measure – and as a constructed civilisational divide, especially when people develop a positive attitude towards being and living in the EU and dismiss former cultural and social ties. At the same time, memories of easily crossing borders during Soviet times, not to mention those of a relatively prosperous life in what are now deprived and depressed borderlands, are still present (Lulle 2016).

Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine

The current borders of *Belarus* trace back to the borders of the Byelarusian Socialist Soviet Republic and have not been an issue of negotiation with any of the neighbouring countries, at least not thus far. All parties have agreed to the status quo and do not anticipate Belarus's borders becoming a source of conflict. Similar to Kaliningrad, Belarus shares the EU external border. Belarus's border with the EU developed into a hard barrier, separating previously quite integrated multiethnic societies living in the regions sharing a border with Poland and Lithuania. By contrast, the borders between Ukraine and Russia remained relatively open and easy to cross for a long time.

The Belarusian border with Poland and Lithuania did, however, turn into a political arena in 2021, displaying, once again, the EU externalisation of migration policy. In 2020, the EU sanctioned Belarus; it accused its government of violating human rights and of repressing civil society in response to mass protests. The EU sanctioned Belarusian enterprises and stopped payments to Belarus. In return, the government of Belarus transported migrants from North Africa and Syria to the Lithuanian and Polish borders, promising them entry to the EU. This violated the Readmission Agreement between the EU and Belarus and displayed the ambiguity of the EU migration policy of externalising internal border controls to neighbouring countries.

The western post-Soviet borders are key to security in regard to migration control for the EU – as in the North African states – as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Lindberg and Borrelli 2021). Belarus and Russia are ENP partners that have no interest in joining the EU. Nevertheless, both are partners for the EU with respect to migration control and its externalisation, though they are not always reliable ones, as the events in Belarus in 2021 have shown.

While borders and bordering for individual post-Soviet states are part of identity-building and creating a sense of belonging, they are also sites of othering. The EU external borders shaped the region tremendously and changed routines and practices, as well as ideas about and imaginations of belonging to Europe (Bespamyatnykh and Nikifora 2015; Filippova 2016).

Moldova shares a border with Ukraine to its east and Romania to its west. The international border with Romania did not change after the dissolution of

the Soviet Union. The border with Ukraine has yielded a few issues that still need to be resolved, but these do not present the potential for major conflict at the moment. The contested borders between Transnistria and Moldova and between Transnistria and Ukraine are a more important and lasting phenomenon of last 30 post-Soviet years. The de facto state of Transnistria developed on the territory of the Republic of Moldova at the beginning of the 1990s as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of nationalist movements in the new and evolving Republic of Moldova, which fuelled a separatist movement on the left bank of the Dniester. Moldova, thus, does not control most part of its eastern border with Ukraine. This situation allowed, and most likely still allows, smuggling across this border, even though Ukraine, in cooperation with Moldova, in 2017, opened a jointly controlled checkpoint at the border crossing Kuchurgan-Pervomaisk, which is on the main road between Tiraspol, the capital of Transnistria, and Odessa, a Black Sea port and the location of one of the largest container markets in Ukraine.² The de facto border between Moldova and Transnistria along the Dniester is controlled solely by Transnistrian border guards because Moldova does not recognise it as a state border. Despite the political and ideological conflicts between the representatives of both territories, the contact between people below the government level is quite lively (see Turov et al. in this volume), a situation that is different from that of other post-Soviet de facto borders.

The border between Moldova and Romania has experienced an oscillating border regime, between an open and a closed border, as a result of EU enlargement, EU association agreements, and the political relations between both countries having to do with ideas and imaginations of a Romania expanded to include Moldova, on the one hand, and that of a neighbourhood of respected sovereign countries, on the other. Depending on the status quo, the frequency of border crossings and the degree of contact between populations varies. In 2014, Moldova signed an Association Agreement that stipulates a visa-free border regime for entering Romania and thus the EU; this makes the EU external border easier to cross and impacts the identities of the borderland populations (Iglesias 2018).

Ukraine borders seven countries – post-Soviet and Eastern European countries. Former international borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania have remained unchanged. Former Ukrainian internal borders with Russia, Belarus, and Moldova were declared national borders based on the status quo of administrative borders of the former Soviet republics. The most ambiguous border was the Russian-Ukrainian one, which is now the most contested of Ukraine's borders. The events of 2014 (Russia's annexation of Crimea and backing of separatist fighters in eastern Ukraine) created two separatist republics – the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics (DPR and LPR) – and three contested borders, including the border between the de facto republics and Russia, which is not controlled by Ukraine (Grinchenko and Mikheieva 2019). These events have led not only to a number of contested borders but also to a fundamental change in the institutionalisation and materialisation of the border between Russia and Ukraine (Zotova et al. 2021). Ukraine demarcated its borders and started the Project Wall to enforce the border with Russia. The border regime has become increasingly

selective and restrictive.³ Local border-traffic agreements were terminated, and local border-crossing points were closed. A borderland that was once relatively integrated in the post-Soviet period (Zhurzhenko 2013) is now witnessing the disintegration of its border region because of Ukrainian and Russian border policies and the perception of the DPR and LPR as a threat to neighbouring Russian regions (Zotova et al. 2021). Similar effects can be observed at the border between the DPR and LPR and at their borders with Russia. The contact line in eastern Ukraine between government-controlled and non-government-controlled territories is difficult to cross and extremely restricted from both sides; for these reasons, it may slowly turn into a political and social boundary between societies on both sides of the contact line (Löwis and Sasse 2021).

The border regions between Ukraine and Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary share similar experiences to those between Moldova and Romania. The integration into the EU and the Schengen Area shaped the practices and perceptions of the people in the region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the development of independent states, the borders were relatively open and allowed contact across a long-closed border; the EU enlargement in 2004, however, made the western Ukrainian border an EU external border and reintroduced a stricter border regime. Upon the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014, a visa-free border regime for citizens of Ukraine was established, and crossing became easier again. Ukraine, similar to Belarus, Russia, or Moldova, now does the EU border work to enable visa-free EU internal mobility, and in return, they are promised security guarantees (Bruns 2019) or, in the case of Belarus and Russia, diverse funds through the ENP from the EU.

The Hungarian and Romanian minorities in the western Ukrainian borderlands – the regions of Transcarpathia and Chernivtsi – date back to pre-World War I (WWI) and interwar spatial orders. These imaginations of past spatial orders are occasionally invoked. Minorities are offended, for example, by a Ukrainian language law that restricts the learning of their native languages, or by being turned into a strategic object when neighbouring Hungary distributes Hungarian passports in the region. Russia has also used this measure: offering Russian passports to citizens of Ukraine who wish to be Russians. To hold the passports of two states is highly debated in Ukraine.

The western post-Soviet borders – the Baltic states as well as Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine – now seem to be fractured because of socioeconomic differences, geopolitical tensions, and securitisation processes, despite their linguistic, historical, and cultural ties. The political and geographical order that emerged after WWI and World War II and that, in many ways, still determines the basic territorial shape of today's nation states developed out of a complex socio-spatial and ethnic order of empires and their breakup. This is especially true for the western post-Soviet states, such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova, but also for the Baltic states and Eastern European states, such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

The dynamics of EU integration and association have affected the relative ease of border crossings. The typical pattern for border regimes in this western

post-Soviet region has been 'easy' to 'difficult' to 'easy' again, as determined by agreements on local border traffic or on visa-free regimes with neighbouring countries or with the EU. Depending on when specific agreements were reached, this pattern has played out differently in each country and for different groups of people and shaped the identities and practices of the border population.

Southern Caucasus

The Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia declared independence in the early 1990s. Azerbaijan borders Georgia, Armenia, Russia, Iran, and Turkey; Armenia borders Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran; and Georgia borders Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey. All three countries shared borders that were once the external borders of the Soviet Union: Georgia with Turkey, and Armenia and Azerbaijan with Turkey and Iran. The de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh emerged in the late 1990s as a result of political conflicts in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and remain unresolved to this day (Samkharadze 2012; Dilanyan et al. 2018; Hoch and Kopeček 2020). The Caucasus is fragmented by different borders that have variable border regimes – from closed to open borders and from peaceful to contested ones in each country.

The political-territorial borders in the Caucasus have a long history of being contested; this history spans the past 200 years and involves multiple empires, nations, and regimes: the Ottoman and Russian Empires, Persia, and later the Soviet Union and its Soviet Socialist Republics, including Autonomous Republics and Regions and other administrative forms of organising interests, power, and cultural and religious diversity (King 2008; Lukianovich 2015; see Rindlisbacher in this volume). The resultant political borders have not necessarily aligned with cultural, ethnic, or religious boundaries (Matveeva 2002). Furthermore, historical and newly created spatial imaginations have played a role in the perceptions of and routines around post-Soviet borders in the Caucasus. Like the western post-Soviet borders, those between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have had issues related to the transformation of former administrative borders into state borders. This is an ongoing process in the Caucasus.

The borders of *Georgia* and *Azerbaijan* with Russia were not in question after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They followed and still follow the lines that were established at the beginning of the 20th century following a number of expansions, integrations, and separations. Nevertheless, perspectives on the location of borders vary according to the states involved. In the view of Georgian officials, its border with Russia follows the former administrative line between the former Soviet republics. But for Russia, which officially recognised the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, its border with Georgia is divided into four sections: the Abkhaz-Russian, Georgian-Russian, South Ossetian-Russian, and (again) Georgian-Russian border.

The former Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) and the Autonomous Region (*avtonomnaia oblast'*) of South

Ossetia (South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast) declared independence in the early 1990s as a result of nationalist tendencies in the Georgian independence movement and military conflicts. The majority of the international community still does not recognise the two entities, which makes them *de facto* states and their borders *de facto* borders. The border between Georgia and Abkhazia was hardened following the war between the two sides in 1992 and 1993, additional eruptions of violence in 1998 and 2001, and during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 (Khutsishvili 2016, 2017; Lundgren 2018). The *de facto* border with South Ossetia is equally problematic; it was closed after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, when a military conflict broke out because of tensions between South Ossetia and Georgia, involving Russian military intervention (Tsyganok 2010; Toal 2017). The location of the border between South Ossetia and Georgia is in a state of flux and is dependent on the one-sided demarcation of South Ossetia with the support of the Russian military; the situation is framed as ‘borderisation’ (Bachelet in this volume). The evolving borders between South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Georgia crucially shape the practices of young people, traders, family members, and displaced persons. The border situation has a strong impact on daily life in the region, contributing to the fragmentation of the South Caucasus and providing a stage for geopolitical performances (Toal and Merabishvili 2019; Venhovens 2021; Bachelet in this volume).

The border between Georgia and Turkey, a former external border of the Soviet Union, is demarcated, delimited, and uncontested. Lively personal and business contacts developed across the border; the border regime is stable, facilitating exchange with Turkey, a strategically important actor in the region (Pelkmans 2012). Nevertheless, a divide persists and is felt particularly by a Georgian minority in Turkey and their kin in Georgia (Cheishvili in this volume). The border between Armenia and Georgia is uncontested and stable, and it follows the former administrative line between the former Soviet republics.

Not yet fully delimited or demarcated, the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan remains an issue for the two countries. Since 1996, Georgia and Azerbaijan have been working on border delimitation, but no real progress has been made to demarcate the remaining third of the joint border. There is potential for recurring conflict along the border, particularly at the David Gareja Monastery complex, part of which is located on the Azerbaijan side of the border but considered an important site in the Georgian national narrative. Despite this, a shared interest in a stable relationship, particularly in terms of economic and energy relations, seems to exist and thus prevent serious border clashes between Georgia and Azerbaijan (Aliyev 2020). A Georgian-speaking minority that lives across the border in Azerbaijan and local and informal border trade have helped maintain many routines and practices that were established when the border was more permeable during the Soviet era (Yalçın-Heckmann 2007; see Aivazishvili-Gehne in this volume).

Azerbaijan also borders Turkey, Iran, and Armenia. These borders have the potential for conflict to differing extents. The border between Azerbaijan and Turkey is very short, and relations between the countries are friendly. The border

between Azerbaijan and Iran is more complex but has remained as agreed upon by the Soviet Union and Iran in the 1950s and 1970s. An irredentist concept of a 'Greater Azerbaijan', which extends to territories in Iran settled by an Azerbaijani minority, cooled relations between Azerbaijan and Iran in the early 1990s. Irrespective of the large Azerbaijani population in Iran (about 20 million, compared to 7 million in Azerbaijan) and irredentist discourses occasionally promoted by political elites, traffic and contacts across the border are lively and active. The border between the two countries has not changed, nor has the border between Armenia and Iran (Hajizadeh 2008).

The border between Azerbaijan and Armenia is highly contested because of the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. It is therefore closed and characterised by tensions between the two countries. In 1988, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict began, which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, grew into the first Karabakh War. Nagorno-Karabakh is a region in Azerbaijan that is settled by Armenians and claimed by Armenia. As a result of hostilities in 1992 and 1993, the armed forces of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, with the support of the armed forces of Armenia, established control over the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (*avtonomnaia oblast'*) and neighbouring regions of Azerbaijan (de Waal 2013). As a consequence of hostilities in the fall of 2020, Azerbaijan gained back territory. The relations between the parties remain tense. Azerbaijan is establishing border-control infrastructure along the border with Armenia. Azerbaijan invited Armenia to begin bilateral discussions on issues of border delimitation and demarcation. Constructive discussions have not yet taken place, and the demarcation continues to be an issue of interstate conflict.

The border between Armenia and Turkey is uncontested but closed, owing to the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey at the beginning the 20th century, which still hinders bilateral relations. The debate on the political level about recognising the genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire and its successor state has kept tensions high between both states and the border closed (Cheterian 2017, 74). The only uncontested border of Armenia is its border with Georgia.

The daily life of the people in the region is affected by a process of permanent redefinition and transformation of the boundaries and a process of adaption to the new borders and, in some parts, to evolving border regimes. Their lives depend on external factors, namely the interests of political elites. The regional pro-independence aspirations of the 1980s found expression in the rise of competing nationalisms. The wars in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia followed, causing population displacement and suffering. The borders between the *de facto* states and the *de jure* states in the Caucasus function as barriers and are contested. They heavily limit people's movements and ability to communicate with each other (Khutsishvili 2016, 2017).

International law does not offer a ready resolution to the contradiction between the territorial integrity of states and the right to self-determination. Meanwhile, political developments have pulled the breakaway entities further from the recognised states (Matveeva 2002, 5). Throughout its post-Soviet existence, the

Caucasus has been a space in which state borders that were de jure confirmed at the beginning of the 1990s are de facto turning into objects of confrontation and aspiration with respect to their modification (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Armenia) or in which efforts have been made to preserve the status quo of borders (Georgia and Azerbaijan). Various aspects shape the border politics in the regions of the Black and Caspian Seas and the Caucasus, including resources such as oil and water, religious and ethnic tensions, and infrastructure projects such as seaports and military bases along the Black Sea coast or railway and Transcaucasian transport routes. Any of these aspects can create an occasion for confrontation or cooperation; for instance, they may contribute to new dividing lines between ethnic and/or religious groups, which can complicate existing borders.

Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have each chosen to join different and, in some cases, opposing integration projects; these include NATO, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the EU via its ENP and Eastern Partnership (EaP). The result is that these three countries in the South Caucasus have chosen different geostrategic paths, which has left the region more fragmented and volatile. Georgia has made becoming a member of the EU and NATO a priority; Armenia became a member of the Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015; and Azerbaijan, meanwhile, has opted not to choose, continuing to try to balance between the West and the different regional actors in terms of its own interests.

Central Asia

The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan inherited borders that were first established after the October Revolution; specific sections changed several times over the seven decades of Soviet rule. The locations of the borders show that they were only theoretically intended as international borders. All this has produced a volatile situation at the borders (Gavrilis 2017).

Although the new, post-Soviet state borders ‘became the most significant attribute of state sovereignty’ (Rahimov and Urazaeva 2005, 17), the governments of the Central Asian states did little in the 1990s to delimit and secure their common borders. Even without officially agreeing on the borders (via legal contracts), the states developed independently of each other, growing apart politically and economically.

The impetus for border negotiations came in 1999, when Uzbekistan took measures to secure its borders after Afghan Islamists spread through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but without formal border treaties, these measures were not secured under international law. The ensuing bilateral negotiations led to a majority of the borders in Central Asia being delimited by treaty and also often demarcated. However, particularly problematic border sections were often excluded from the treaties and, in individual cases, have still not been delimited. The decisive factor

for the speed and success of the negotiations was (and still is) not only the complexity of the subject matter (such as access to resources and the question of which year should be the basis for delimitation since there were frequent territorial shifts during the Soviet era) but also the general relationships between the individual states as well as domestic political factors (Megoran 2004, 736–737).

Of the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan settled its border issues most quickly (with Uzbekistan in 2000 and Kazakhstan in 2001), followed by Kazakhstan (a treaty with Kyrgyzstan was signed in 2001, in force since 2008; one with Uzbekistan was signed in 2001 and 2002, in force since 2003). The border between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation – the longest uninterrupted land border in the world at about 7,000 kilometres – has been regulated by treaty since 2005. Under its first president, Islam Karimov, who held the position from 1991 until his death in 2016, Uzbekistan had tense relations with its neighbours Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which had consequences for border negotiations. Contractual arrangements were pushed forward by Karimov's successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. A border agreement with Kyrgyzstan was signed in 2018. A treaty on the disputed sections, which were excluded from the 2018 treaty, followed in the spring of 2021. However, there is still opposition to this from the local populations living in the border regions of Kyrgyzstan. Since 2018, several agreements have been settled with Tajikistan, and a protocol on demarcation was agreed to in early 2020. The delimitation of the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has progressed the least (only about 500 of 970 kilometres have been delimited), and the situation is highly conflictual. There, the legal and practical problems inherited from the Soviet era have culminated in an exemplary manner.

Most of the conflicts, both at the negotiating table and on the ground between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as previously with Uzbekistan, have occurred in the Fergana Valley, which is divided between the three states. As the most fertile and densely populated part of these countries, the valley is of great importance to all three states. The borders, some of which were revised several times during the Soviet era, can be compared to a patchwork quilt. Ethnicity or identity and state do not necessarily coincide: large ethnic minorities of one state live in another. More than in other places, the new borders in this region were drawn right through villages or even houses and crossed traffic routes; they thus called into question previously shared access to water and pastures, as well as to schools, markets, and cemeteries. Locals on both sides of the new borders felt compelled to potentially break laws in search of practical solutions (Reeves 2014, 245). Border crossings have been frequently closed (because of COVID-19, for example) for longer periods of time. Moreover, Uzbekistan's borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were not only closed for many years but also secured with landmines, which have been defused only since the spring of 2020. Even official border crossings can be nerve-racking and cost time and money – and not only in the Fergana Valley (Turaeva 2018).

The territorial exclaves inherited from the Soviet era proved to be particularly conflictual (Zverintseva 2018).⁴ In the case of some of the smaller ones, the problems have occasionally been resolved by exchanging territories and resettlement.

In the case of the larger ones, other solutions must be found. While Uzbekistan seems to have found a solution with Kyrgyzstan in the case of its exclave Sokh (ca. 80,000 inhabitants) in 2021, the conflicts over Tajik Vorukh (ca. 23,000 inhabitants) and other sections of the border with Kyrgyzstan are in a frightening spiral of escalation. In 2001, local agreements on disputed pasture and water issues were still in place (ICG 2002, 19), but since then, violent clashes between locals and with border troops from both sides have increased in number and intensity (Matveeva 2017; Toktomushev 2018; Kurmanalieva 2019) to such an extent that, in May 2020, the Kyrgyz-Tajik border was described as the most dangerous in Central Asia (Pannier 2020). In April 2021, what had been a localised conflict escalated into a clash lasting several days on different points of the border, with troops from both states confronting each other. There were 55 deaths and 250 injuries (see Buranelli 2021; Olimova and Olimov in this volume). In the autumn of 2021, a tense calm prevailed, with no apparent signs of a solution on the horizon.

In 1991, all the Central Asian states inherited sections of the former Soviet Union's external borders, which presented them with a range of specific challenges. In the case of borders with China, there were disputed border sections that had not been delimited even by the two former superpowers. In treaties concluded in the early 1990s, all three neighbouring states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) ceded small areas to the People's Republic of China (Parham 2017). At the same time, the border with China, which had been closed for decades, became more permeable: members of cross-border minorities, for example, use the newly opened border crossings for personal contacts and trade (Alff 2018). Meanwhile, the Khorgos railway and highway crossing point on the border between Kazakhstan and China were developed into a transport hub with a special economic zone and dry port, particularly for the transit of goods between China and Europe.

The border with Afghanistan is a security problem for its three Central Asian neighbours: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (see the articles in Rytövuori-Apunen 2016; Sharan and Watkins 2021). In particular, the Pamir border in Tajikistan, which was secured by Russian border troops until 2004, is considered permeable to drugs, weapons, and Islamism. Attempts to enable legal contacts between the local populations on both sides of the Vakhsh River at border markets and through newly constructed bridges and crossings (Kuzmits 2013) came to an end because of the COVID-19 crisis and the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the fall of 2021, border crossings were closed for fear of refugees, but trade remains possible.

The Caspian Sea, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union gained three additional riparian zones and territorial waters for a total of five, is a special case in the border regime. The negotiations dragged on for a very long time, primarily because of the offshore oil deposits (Janusz-Pawletta 2015). In 2018, the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed by the five heads of state concerned. It grants jurisdiction over 24 kilometres of territorial waters to each country (Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan), plus an additional 16 kilometres of exclusive fishing rights on the surface, while the rest of the

sea remains international waters; however, this treaty is not yet in force because Iran has not ratified it, which leaves many issues unresolved and many questions open (Garibov 2019; Pietkiewicz 2021).

Membership in various international security and economic cooperation organisations, which plays a significant role in the western states of the former Soviet Union, plays a less important role with respect to the situation on the borders of Central Asian states because there are no competing organisations in the region. The membership of individual states in different economic communities (e.g. the World Trade Organization or EAEU) has complicated border crossings but has, so far, been the subject of transnational conflicts only to a limited extent. The situation at the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan shows that joint membership in an organisation – both states are members of the EAEU since 2015 – is by no means problem-free or particularly unifying. Contrary to the EAEU's fundamental idea of the free movement of citizens and goods, border controls are repeatedly carried out because of security concerns, and the border is also occasionally closed, for instance, because of COVID-19.

Even if hot conflicts have so far mostly broken out at non-delimited border sections, the issue will not be settled for the Central Asian states with the placing of the final border stone. Reliable, regulated border crossings and border regimes are indispensable for smooth (long-distance) trade and for the populations on both sides of the border to live together without conflict. There is still much to be done.

Conclusions

Some post-Soviet states have stabilised, while others have not. Bordering is an ongoing process and constantly in flux. The post-Soviet states and their borders are a vivid example of this. A number of rebordering and debordering processes have taken place, which relate to internal and external political processes and relations that make borders political arenas, sites of contestations, and spaces of possibility (Scott 2020). Borders affect a number of spheres of both individual and collective lives, which must adapt to a dynamic and sometimes unpredictable bordering context – as many cases in the post-Soviet space demonstrate.

A number of post-Soviet borders have not yet been finally demarcated, some 30 years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As a result, border regimes have evolved to regulate the mobility of people, goods, and information. People have adapted their individual routines to new, emerging border regimes. In some cases, the borders became an economic resource, while in others they significantly disrupted previous economic and social routines and practices. In still other cases, the border has become a political resource and involves kin-state activism with divergent effects (Liebich 2019).

Post-Soviet borders should be studied on a case-by-case basis and in the context of their complex histories. They share a common Soviet history that has specificities rooted in a pre-Soviet past. The context of these borders, and how situations at and around them evolved differently, has been shaped by nationalising state dynamics; EU enlargement; NATO expansiveness; national and regional power

dynamics; disentanglement of economic, infrastructural, and cultural ties; and competition over resources (e.g. oil, gas, water, land). In Central Asia, infrastructural entanglements of formerly integrated spaces play a strong role, as do ethnically and nationally constructed conflicts. The establishment of the concept of borders and nation states is especially problematic in Central Asia; it is a source of continuous conflict and problems, contributing to the social, economic, and infrastructural problems of the region.

The western post-Soviet borders have turned from an internal, symbolic tool of state- and nation-building into an international political arena in which ideological and political negotiations take place and modern conceptions of territory and sovereignty play out. They are increasingly characterised by the disintegration and disentanglement of Soviet and post-Soviet ties and networks and a rearrangement and entanglement with new partners; these processes are linked to conflicts of varying degrees of seriousness, which are based on ideological disputes over economic, political, and cultural development and the resulting boundaries. The western post-Soviet borders appear to be the scene of a recurrent discourse of a new Cold War – as can be seen, for instance, in public discourses concerning the Russian-Finish border as an East-West divide and potential line of conflict, understood as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine (Laine and Scott 2019). Another more recent example is the developments in Belarus and the shipping of migrants to the EU external border to put pressure on the EU, which has cut funds to Belarus. This has prompted discussions about a new East-West conflict in the media and political discourse.

Border demarcation and delimitation play differing roles in the region. In the Caucasus, they function as symbols for nation-building; in the western post-Soviet states, they are relevant to security concerns in the context of the European integration project; and in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, they are a problem for past and future infrastructural networks.

For a variety of reasons and to differing extents, border securitisation has become increasingly important in the world and in the post-Soviet borderlands specifically. Discourses of the foreign ‘other’, as based on domestic and international motivations, coincide with measures on the ground: the construction of fences, an increase in the number of border guards, and the technologisation of borders, whether in the western post-Soviet states or in Central Asia, where one sees the militarisation of borders (Jones 2018; Reeves 2018). The intensified securitisation of post-Soviet borders increases divisions and disintegration not just symbolically but also in the lived realities of regional populations, affecting their perceptions of borders and experiences in the borderlands.

Past political, social, historical, and economic orders play a crucial role in the evolving dynamics of post-Soviet borders. For example, they are relevant for problematic border demarcations that were drawn according to the settlement patterns of ethnic populations as opposed to infrastructural or economic structures and routines of the Soviet era. Or, these orders reappear as imagined borders of the past (e.g. the Habsburg empire or the Soviet Union) and as a desire to belong

to various past and future imagined communities (e.g. *Russkii mir*, Bessarabia, or Europe).

Historical processes of debordering and rebordering during or even before the foundation and construction of the Soviet Union and its member states have created a puzzle of borders and phantom borders, which re-emerge as social and political practices, institutions, symbols, and imaginations (Hirschhausen et al. 2019) or discourses (see Jaschik and Venken in this volume). An understanding of these historical processes helps one to assess current internal bordering processes as well as the external aspirations of individual states, such as the case of the treatment of ethnic minorities – Russian minorities in Moldova, or Hungarians in Ukraine, or Azerbaijanis in Iran, to name just a few.

All post-Soviet borderlands, to varying extents, are home to ethnic or national minorities that reside on the ‘wrong’ side of the border in regard to the titular nation. Borderlands can be an arena for international politics and manoeuvring and also a political resource for nationalist populism and strategic claims (Lamour and Varga 2020). Due to the disintegration of empires and states, many minorities have become potential targets and tools of nationalist and other political discourses. The situation of minority groups in the post-Soviet borderlands could be a source of future cooperation or conflict. It is worth further studying discourses and politics with respect to ethnic groups in a comparative perspective across different post-Soviet states and their external neighbours (Lamour and Varga 2020) in order to better understand the role of borders and bordering within these discourses (Liebich 2019; Richardson 2020).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union into independent states has historical precedent in the dissolution of former multiethnic empires (e.g. the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires) into numerous independent states – this is perhaps a fertile ground for comparative research. Another interesting study in regard to processes of bordering could consider the dissolution of Yugoslavia alongside the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former being much more violent than the latter. A comparison of geopolitical dissolutions and their consequences for emerging borderlands through both historical and contemporary case studies could productively decentre the notion of the post-Soviet in order to allow for more general conclusions about the observed processes of bordering and, in turn, a more precise understanding of what is unique to the post-Soviet space.

Notes

- 1 The integration of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that same year also proved significant.
- 2 In addition, a European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) has been working along the Moldovan-Transnistrian-Ukrainian border since 2006.
- 3 Russian men between 16 and 60 years old are not allowed to enter Ukraine, and those who are allowed to enter must present an international passport. Only citizens of Ukraine can enter with an internal passport.
- 4 Kazakhstan has two exclaves in Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan has one in Uzbekistan and several small ones in Tajikistan; Uzbekistan has several in Kyrgyzstan and one in Tajikistan; Tajikistan has the exclave Vorukh and other small ones in Kyrgyzstan.

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