

# Post-Soviet Borders

A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands

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## Conclusion

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# Conclusion

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At first glance, the contributions to our volume paint a colourful picture of the situation along the post-Soviet borders, confirming the metaphor of the kaleidoscope in its title: beyond the fact that all of the studied examples are located on the territory of the former Soviet Union, each case seems unique. The borders investigated here are found in the European part of the former Soviet Union, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia; they previously marked internal boundaries between Union Republics or external = international borders of the Union. In terms of their status in international law and the real conditions on the ground, these borders cover a spectrum from interstate treaty-regulated and relatively tension-free, through not yet delimited and disputed, to *de facto* borders created as a result of status change, annexation or post-Soviet separatist aspirations. However, even across the two *de facto* borders studied by our authors, the situation is different: between Georgia and South Ossetia, there is a barbed wire fence. Across the Moldovan-Transnistrian border vibrant interpersonal and administrative contacts exist. Thus, looking at the new borders from a geopolitical or national perspective does not seem to be enough to explain the real situation on the ground.

With our book, we therefore aimed to move away from this widespread approach and look at how the local population on both sides of the newly defined borders experiences, evaluates and deals with the changes to their immediate environment. We were also interested in how these experiences affect the relationship between the population and the state. Indeed, from the perspective of the border populations, a range of phenomena emerge that contradict the state-centred view and add the important dimensions of imagination, experience and perception to our assessment of the situation at the post-Soviet borders.

The borders between the former Soviet Republics are more closed than in Soviet times. For example, the existing borders on the Uzbek side of the Fergana Valley were completely closed and mined by 2016, even in the absence of open conflict. In most cases, a legal visit to the neighbouring republic is only possible, if at all, at border crossings, which have thus become a symbol of bordering. They make everyday life more difficult for people because they require long detours as well as costing nerves and energy, since crossing the border depends on a decision by border officials that is perceived as arbitrary (Aivazishvili, Murzakulova).

Concrete examples of the complications resulting from new borders include not only the difficulties people experience when visiting the graves of their ancestors (Aivazishvili) or being prevented by border officials from attending a funeral but also economic problems due to the loss of workers who are unable to commute across the border as usual (Murzakulova). It's the unpredictability of the border that appears to be particularly hard to bear in these cases: the possibility of crossing the border depends on unforeseeable decisions by border officials; it can also be unexpectedly denied by the state when it decides to close all border crossings. The new borders, or more precisely border regimes, thus reduce contacts with people on the other side of the border or even bring them to a complete standstill (Bachelet, Olimova/Olimov). And they make it difficult or impossible to use resources and the common infrastructure inherited from the Soviet era (Murzakulova, Olimova/Olimov, Bachelet).

So in general, the borders make the lives of the border populations more difficult. (A participant in Jaschik and Venken's Talking Borders project has a positive overall view of borders and sees them as necessary to prevent chaos.)

According to Bachelet's observations, the local population on the Georgian-South Ossetian border deals relatively calmly with the situation, seeing it as an 'inevitable phenomenon to which they must adapt' (p. 145). In other cases too, the people on both sides of a border have learned (of necessity) to come up with creative solutions to the problems described above: for example, when prevented from attending a funeral, relatives gather within sight of each other on both sides of the border and pray together. The inherited common infrastructure, but especially access to water, makes local cross-border arrangements imperative even at the borders in the Fergana Valley that are conflict-laden precisely because of this common infrastructure (Murzakulova, Olimova/Olimov). Thus, dependence on each other does not just generate conflicts, but also furthers integration: to survive economically, municipal administrators and representatives of the canal management have to talk to each other. But traders, smugglers and drug traffickers also keep lines of communication open across these borders. Local contacts are even more intensive in the case of the *de facto* border between Moldova and Transnistria in the towns of Bender and Dubăsari, where the local population and administration maintain a common infrastructure and lively interpersonal contacts across the officially closed border and even turn the situation to their advantage (Turov et al.).

The biography of the respective borders and borderland dwellers, their feelings of belonging and memories and experiences of the border naturally have a bearing on perceptions of borders. Mental maps can arise that differ significantly from those of people from outside the region or official maps, as Aivazishvili shows with reference to the different terms used for border crossings. At the same time, as shown in the Talking Borders chapter, the perception of borders is situationally negotiable. Two interlocutors from either side of the Polish-Ukrainian border discuss the role and significance of the border dividing their two countries, which has been changed many times over the course of its history, until they reach a consensus. According to Jaschik/Venken, however, this is an exception among

the conversations they recorded. How a border is perceived is also a question of generation, as Murzakulova reminds us. Those who remember the conditions of the Soviet era have a different view of the new borders than young people who only know the new conditions. So perceptions are gradually shifting. Yet the segments of conversations presented by Jaschik/Venken show just how deeply ingrained the imagination of historical borders is and how long they live on in the population's consciousness.

In the experience of the border population, one's own country and the neighbouring state are epitomised by border officials, whose work is usually seen in a negative light. Aivazishvili describes them – also drawing on her own experience – as unpredictable; in Murzakulova's chapter, they deny border crossings with no legal basis, and Olimova/Olimov show how they are frequently involved in conflicts and even characterise them as an 'important factor in the disintegration' (p. 198) of the region. However, as a result of frequent direct meetings, 'locals perceive their encounters at the borderline not simply as encounters with states or remote organisations, but also as personal encounters with individuals who may occasionally deviate from state norms and their allocated representative duties' (Bachelet, p. 146). Border officials clearly play a key role not only as actors in their own right but also in the local population's perception of borders. Understanding this role seems all the more important given the fact that it oscillates, ranging from strict representative of the state to enabler of illegal cross-border trade and corrupt profiteer.

The central government of one's own state or the state on the other side of the border usually plays only a background – but no less negative – role. For example, the population at the Georgian-South Ossetian *de facto* border feels instrumentalised by Georgian and Russian politicians alike. According to Alff, weak state agricultural policy in the Panfilov District in south-eastern Kazakhstan has prevented local farmers from benefitting from the opening of the border with China, which had been closed for decades. And for Murzakulova and Olimova/Olimov, it is not problems directly associated with the new borders that divide people on both sides but rather the development of different economic systems and political decisions on both sides of the border. In some cases, life at the border results in people adopting a negative attitude to their own state, which connects them with the population on the other side of the border.

Sanders shows just how complicated the experience of the borderland situation and the relationship between one's own country and neighbouring states – and therefore also Othering – can be with reference to the Russian oblast of Kaliningrad, which is surrounded by EU member states. The trust or distrust her interlocutors express in Kaliningrad, the Russian Federation and Western states can be attributed to a complex and at times contradictory web of established narratives, personal experiences and creative interpretations.

Incidentally, it should be mentioned that, if at all involved, the international community also tends to play a rather problematic role. Bachelet writes, for example, that the population at the Georgian-South Ossetian border feels like a victim of international players and their geopolitical rivalries. Olimova/Olimov are ambivalent about the role of international non-governmental organisations

(NGOs): while there are some examples of cross-border initiatives, many NGOs favour one side over the other and thus compound divisions.

Contrary to what current media reports suggest, the contributions to this volume ascribe a surprisingly minor role to ethnicity as a factor that furthers division and conflict. In fact, this is particularly true in the conflict regions: Olimova/Olimov do mention historical and cultural differences between Tajiks and Kyrgyz, but they see them as economically complementary and emphasise that the conflicts of the Soviet era were not motivated by ethnic criteria or fought between republics but between villages (e.g. over access to water). The current division of the territories according to the ethnicity of their inhabitants is, in their view, the result of state-driven nation-building. Turov et al. state explicitly: 'The Transnistrian conflict, according to both sides, has neither an ethnic nor religious basis; rather, it is of a political nature' (p. 113). The Ingiloy, a Georgian-speaking minority in Azerbaijan, have seen their hopes of favourable treatment by Tbilisi based on shared ethnicity dashed (Aivazishvili). And although Bachelet has observed in the case of South Ossetia that control over the territory has fostered the development of a distinct national identity among the local population, this does not stoke conflict.

At the same time, the example of the Georgians divided for decades by the Georgian-Turkish border shows that the possibility of cross-border contacts after such a long time leads to feelings of Otherness within one and the same ethnicity. Statements by a Ukrainian participant in the Talking Borders project indicate that Othering within an ethnicity along a border that no longer exists can persist for a long time. Reflecting a widespread narrative, he expresses the opinion that Ukrainians in East and West are still divided in terms of their values, language and culture.

Thus, for all the disintegration that is rightly emphasised today, there are also counter-tendencies directly at the borders. The populations on both sides of the newly defined borders have much in common, not least because they can still, 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, draw on earlier experiences, contacts and structures. The post-Soviet legacy is apparent, for example, in the nostalgic memories of the conditions at Soviet borders and beyond that several authors describe – not because things were actually better then but because the current situation is so depressing (Aivazishvili). This legacy is also clear in the fact that today's conflicts are almost always rooted in the Soviet era, something Rindlisbacher's chapter on Soviet border drawing in the 1920s confirms. We see this especially in the current border disputes in the Fergana Valley and the Caucasus, which can be traced back to borders that were repeatedly redrawn or not clearly delimited in the 1920s or to Soviet infrastructure that was constructed with no regard to the borders between the republics. That this problematic legacy has still not been overcome testifies to the failure of central governments and places unnecessary burdens on the border population, which in some cases result in bloody localised border clashes, as seen at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in spring 2021. Other developments at the borders attract far less attention from governments and the media. Poorly defined borders and infrastructure that can only be used jointly

can also be a stimulus for integration that transcends the border, all the more so when people can build on old connections. The experience of a pre-border past (see Introduction, p. 3) thus proves to be a central, contradictory category for explaining the situation at the internal borders examined here. Whether and to what extent it is also key to defining the concept of the post-Soviet border is an interesting question for future research.

As already shown, the borderland communities have in many cases not merely found ways of cooperating on a daily basis; they are also united by a critical attitude towards the policies and representatives of central governments. Othering takes place not just where it might be expected, along a disputed new border or a border that has been closed for decades, but also beyond that. And while it should be noted that in some of our case studies only one side of the border could be investigated, we can say in general that the border populations have found their own special way of dealing with the phenomenon of the border, which unites them across it. Accordingly, Cheishvili's suggestion that we consider 'the borderland space as one unified, spatially bounded social field within which people on both sides acquire similar experiences of everyday life' (p. 163) also applies to other case studies.

One of the things that cements border communities is a critical distance from the state due to the fact that the latter is primarily focussed on state-building and national security and not on solving practical everyday problems on its periphery. This is something Tatiana Zhurzenko shows in her chapter. However, the ways in which borderland dwellers adapt and maintain contacts with each other cannot be categorised as passive resistance, as Zhurzenko suggests. What our authors describe is not conscious protest against the politics of central elites but the attempt to adjust to new, difficult conditions in order to survive. It remains to be seen whether this will evolve into collective passive resistance. The emergence of these cross-border communities is, in any case, a glimmer of hope with regard to future peaceful relations across the borders. Or at any rate a counter-narrative, since at least in the case of the disputed Central Asian borders, the border population is often portrayed by central governments as an obstacle to solving border problems.

Not all of the observations and explanations described here are unambiguous, logical and clear. What Olimova/Olimov wrote about the border regions they studied – 'Life in the borderlands is contradictory' (p. 201) – ultimately applies to all our texts and findings.