

# Post-Soviet Borders

A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands

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## Chapter 2

### Between the ‘Opening to the West’ and the Trauma of Rebordering

Towards a Genealogy of  
Post-Soviet Border Studies

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## 2 Between the ‘Opening to the West’ and the Trauma of Rebordering

### Towards a Genealogy of Post-Soviet Border Studies

*Tatiana Zhurzhenko*

#### Introduction

Having emerged with the dissolution of the USSR, research on post-Soviet borders has since developed into a dynamic multidisciplinary field. This development has hardly been reflected upon, however. The origins and transformations of border studies in general have been well addressed elsewhere (see, for example, Kolossov 2005; Kolossov and Scott 2013), but the emergence and institutionalisation of post-Soviet border studies have remained underexamined. A broader picture of these developments – beyond academic boundaries and national borders – is largely missing. What were the historical, (geo)political, and academic contexts that made the arrival of border studies in the post-Soviet space possible? To what extent did political and economic transformations, territorial and ethnic conflicts, integration projects, and the dynamics of interstate relations in the post-Soviet space affect and shape this field? Finally, after three decades of development, is there still something specific about post-Soviet border studies and their object of research – the new post-Soviet international borders that emerged from the collapse of the USSR?

The latter question echoes broader ones that are raised again and again in academic debates: Has the ‘post-Soviet moment’ already gone (Buckler 2009)? Or do we still live in the ‘post-Soviet era’? Aren’t we still dealing with the persistence of the Soviet legacy and the common inheritance of the post-Soviet states in terms of political culture, institutions, demographic patterns, and economic structures (Holland and Derrick 2016)? In any case, the events of 2014 in the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands cast doubts on the common belief that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was completed long ago. The political map of the post-Soviet space appears far from stable. It is the persisting Soviet legacies, a specific sociality rooted in both pre-Soviet and Soviet informal practices (see Pisano and Simonyi 2016, 37), on the one hand, and the continuing processes of rebordering of the post-Soviet space, on the other, that make post-Soviet borders an object of enduring scholarly interest and constitute post-Soviet border studies as a specific research field.

For describing the emergence, evolution, and transformation of post-Soviet border studies, a genealogical angle<sup>1</sup> seems to be the most promising. It presupposes

neither a single, innocent origin nor a linear, continuous progress; instead, it takes into account the historical turns and contingent political factors that have shaped this field as a heterogeneous ensemble of approaches, disciplines, institutions, and practices.

A comprehensive genealogy of post-Soviet border studies is yet to be written; in this chapter, I will only outline the contours of this multidisciplinary research field and try to map the main research institutions, projects, and publications in multiple political, geographic, and academic contexts. As I will demonstrate, the institutionalisation of border studies in the post-Soviet context has been closely connected, first, to the new geopolitical imaginaries of the post-Cold War era and, second, to some important paradigmatic shifts in social sciences that arrived in post-Soviet academia in the 1990s. I will identify the main 'schools' of border studies in the post-Soviet space and their origins as well as tackle distinct regional specificities.

### **A fragmented research field in the fragmented post-Soviet space**

To start with, the birth of the new field of post-Soviet border studies was directly related to the dissolution of the USSR and the transformation of the administrative boundaries between the former Soviet republics into international borders. These new international borders provided scholars with a valuable laboratory for studying processes of bordering almost 'from zero'. In addition, the status of the Soviet Union's external frontier, heavily protected and nearly impermeable, changed dramatically in 1991. Its segments became the international borders of new independent states displaying a variety of border-crossing regimes. The general trend along the former Soviet Union's external frontier, however, was a liberalisation of cross-border movement. As already noted by some scholars (e.g. Kolossov 2011), these processes of rebordering and debordering became an object of a new research field – post-Soviet border studies. What has been less discussed so far is that this new field was itself a product of debordering and rebordering, territorial as well as academic.

The liberalisation of the border-crossing regime and the opening to the West that had resulted from the end of the Cold War facilitated the exchange of information, particularly in academia. Like millions of their co-citizens, post-Soviet scholars started to travel to the West and cross borders in a routine way; their Western colleagues were, in turn, discovering the post-Soviet space. The opening of borders thus contributed to the internationalisation and modernisation of the social sciences in the post-Soviet states and helped them to overcome decades-long isolation and ideological dogmatism. Moreover, it is a result of this new openness that post-Soviet border studies have emerged not only as a transnational but also as a multidisciplinary research field. Post-Soviet academia – like the post-Soviet space itself – experienced a dramatic rebordering: academic disciplines that had no place in the old paradigm of Marxism-Leninism, such as political

science or social anthropology, were established and sought their own identity. These new departments drew on Western concepts and methodology and emancipated themselves from the old Soviet *obshchestvovedenie*<sup>2</sup> but often continued to bear many of its hallmarks (such as a primordial understanding of ethnicity and the essentialisation of collective identities). The Western idea of multidisciplinary thus arrived in a field where disciplinary boundaries were still new, and often blurred and contested – as were the post-Soviet borders themselves.

The emergence of post-Soviet border studies in the last decade of the 20th century reflected global political developments and geopolitical shifts. Most importantly, the fall of the Iron Curtain gave way to new imaginaries of a ‘borderless world’ and a ‘Europe without borders’. Aimed at overcoming the Cold War divisions on the old continent, the reunification of Europe framed the research agenda of border studies, as did neoliberalism, globalisation, and sub-national regionalisation. The post-Soviet space appeared as increasingly (re)connected with and integrated into a globalised world thriving on the freedom of movement of goods, ideas, and people.

The opening to the West, the new permeability of the former Soviet Union’s external frontier, and the freedom of movement (albeit limited by visa regimes) as experienced in the 1990s by scholars from the post-Soviet countries came, however, hand in hand with a gradual fragmentation of the common political, economic, and cultural space. With nation- and state-building progressing, the new post-Soviet boundaries inevitably became institutionalised and more present (often omnipresent) in everyday life. The author of this chapter, too, while frequently crossing borders to the West for conferences and research stays abroad, found a new international border emerging at home, just 30 kilometres away from her native city of Kharkiv. The pace and forms of these rebordering processes differed significantly, however. Russia’s borders with the Baltic states quickly developed from internal Soviet administrative boundaries to new geopolitical frontiers, not least due to the accession of these countries to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Other post-Soviet borders were evolving slowly and were long not perceived as full-fledged international borders: when the author started her research on the Ukrainian-Russian border in the early 2000s, it was still largely a non-issue in both public and academic discourse. Yet in other parts of the post-Soviet space, ethnic conflicts and regional separatism led to a securitisation and militarisation of the post-Soviet borders and, in some cases (Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), to the emergence of new *de facto* interstate boundaries, albeit heavily contested and not legitimised internationally.

Thus, it is no wonder that post-Soviet border studies emerged as a disparate and fragmented field. Not only did the disintegration of the Soviet academia along new national borders and the rise of nationalist discourses complicate the communication between scholars divided by real and symbolic boundaries. In a field increasingly affected by securitisation, researchers often found themselves torn between the scientific ethos of neutrality and new national/state loyalties. Cross-border academic cooperation was challenged by territorial disputes including interstate and, in particular, military conflicts in the post-Soviet space (as the Russian-Georgian

and, since 2014, Russian-Ukrainian conflicts). In addition, the distribution patterns of material and human resources, inherited from the Soviet era, privileged scholars from large universities and academic centres of the former metropolises (above all, Moscow and St Petersburg), while scholars in provincial 'borderland' universities lacked resources, contacts, and, moreover, often the very awareness of new research agendas or acquaintance with new conceptual approaches and methodologies. Whereas political liberalisation, the new freedom of public associations, and the arrival of Western donors enabled the establishment of new research centres and private universities, this development chiefly concerned the academic capitals. Western scholars, too, started their exploration of the post-Soviet space from Moscow and St Petersburg. In general, the interest of Western border scholars in the post-Soviet space came after some delay, as the fall of the Iron Curtain, the reunification of Germany, and the rapid transformations at the borders of the East Central European countries captured their attention in the 1990s (Berdahl 1999; Meinhof 2002).<sup>3</sup> It was the EU enlargement to the east in 2004 and the re-conceptualisation of the post-Soviet space as a 'Ring of Friends', a 'Wider Europe', and an 'Eastern Neighbourhood' that shifted the interests of Western scholarship to the EU's new external borders (Wolczuk 2002; Scott 2006; Follis 2012) and to the new post-Soviet borders, such as between Russia and Kazakhstan (Smith 2016).

### **Border studies: an epistemological revolution?**

Research on border studies in the post-Soviet space emerged not only as a result of a geopolitical revolution caused by the collapse of the Cold War order. Another revolution was already underway in the social sciences, which also transformed the field of border studies. The classical geopolitics of the early 20th century, which saw borders as 'organs' of the state that by its very nature is inclined to territorial expansion, had long been discredited as an academic discipline. After World War II, it gave way to instrumentalist and functionalist approaches to borders as sites of international conflicts and peace-making, subordinated to national interests and state policies. Later, borders came to be studied as sites of economic and social interaction; as sites of management of transboundary flows of people, goods, and information; or as sites of migration processes and cross-border cooperation (Kolossov 2005).

These studies, however, in most cases did not transcend the positivist paradigm. What really transformed the field of border studies and opened it up to other academic disciplines beyond political geography and international relations were social constructivism, discourse analysis and the narrative turn, postcolonialism, gender studies, and interest in collective memories and cultural landscapes, in banal and everyday manifestations of nation and ethnicity, and in the performative nature of identity. Borders started to be seen as processes rather than fixed lines, as representations, social constructs, and discursive formations (from political discourse to media, academic, and popular culture). Territorial boundaries came to be studied in combination with other forms of symbolic and social delimitation – ethnic and cultural boundaries,<sup>4</sup> processes of inclusion and exclusion, or 'othering' of social groups.

The arrival of postcolonial theory not only problematised the colonial origins of borders in the Global South, but it also facilitated the rethinking of such notions as marginality and hybridity. The concept of ‘borderlands’ as reinvented from the postcolonial perspective celebrates multiculturalism, diversity, and hybridity,<sup>5</sup> rejecting the traditional view of seeing blurred and overlapping identities in border regions as a challenge for nation- and state-building and as a security threat. Postcolonial studies privileged ‘subaltern voices’ from borderlands: women, illegal migrants, and ethnic and racial minorities (one example is the seminal work by Gloria Anzaldúa 1987); for feminist and postcolonial interventions in political geography, see Sharp (2003). Influenced by gender studies, social scientists became aware that the circulation of people and the making of borders cannot be considered gender-neutral (Aaron et al. 2013). An impressive body of literature at the intersection of migration, gender, and border studies focusing on Africa, Asia, and Latin America (see the review by Donzelli 2013) brought to the fore topics such as the globalisation of care and women’s cross-border migration.

Some of these developments directly influenced political geography, as illustrated, for example, by the emergence of critical geopolitics as a new research domain questioning the monopoly of states and intellectual elites in the production of geopolitical discourses and shifting attention to ordinary people who have to live with the local implications of these discourses (Ó Tuathail 1996). But an even more significant outcome is the growing interest in borders and borderlands outside the realm of political geography and the proliferation of border studies at the crossroads of different academic disciplines. Perhaps not surprisingly, sociologists and social anthropologists have been especially active in research on borders focusing on ‘experiences of people’ and ‘everyday life of border cultures’ and in exploring the ‘adaptability and rigidity of border people and states in their efforts to control the social, political, economic and cultural fields which transcend their borders’ (Wilson and Donnan 2012, 6). Influenced by postcolonial theory, the concept of ‘borderlands’ entered literary and cultural studies, while the narrative turn in social sciences had an impact on conceptualising borders (see, for instance, Eder 2006 on the narrative construction of Europe’s borders). Border studies have thus evolved into a multidisciplinary research field – or rather, an archipelago of research fields, some being only loosely connected. One of the consequences of this rhizomatic development is that searching for a common vocabulary remains an ongoing task.

Let us now turn to the question of what implications this epistemological revolution in border studies has had for its institutionalisation in the post-Soviet space.

## **The institutionalisation of border studies in the post-Soviet context**

### *The Centre for Geopolitical Studies (Moscow)*

It is perhaps no surprise that the first centre specialised in research on post-Soviet borders emerged in Moscow, at the Institute of Geography of the Russian

Academy of Sciences. The Centre of Geopolitical Studies, established in 1993 and since then headed by Vladimir Kolosov, specialises in the political and economic geography of Russia and its neighbouring countries and includes such fields as electoral geography, regional and urban studies, migration, territorialisation of ethnic identities, and integration processes in the post-Soviet space. Empirical research on post-Soviet borders and the conceptualisation of borders and rebordering in the post-Soviet space (Kolosov 2003, 2005, 2011; Kolosov and Scott 2013) have been the focus of the Centre from its very beginning. In its publications, post-Soviet borders have been approached mostly from a top-down perspective, as a function of nation- and state-building and a result of the territorialisation of new national identities. From this perspective, particular attention has been paid to cross-border cooperation, which – drawing on the EU experience – is seen as a pillar of post-Soviet integration projects and thus as a remedy against broken economic and social ties between the new post-Soviet states. Scholars of the Centre have focused on the social and economic dynamics in the border regions of Russia and its neighbouring states; on border-crossing regimes and migration; on cross-border cooperation projects of the regional elites, including such areas as business, infrastructure, and tourism; and on cultural cooperation. Russian-Ukrainian borderlands have been one of the focal points of the Centre from the mid-1990s (e.g. Kolosov and Vendina 2011), and before 2014, quite a number of research projects were conducted in cooperation with Ukrainian scholars. A collection of articles entitled *Migration and Border Regime: Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine* published in Kyiv (Pirozhkov 2002) is a good example of the potential of academic cooperation between scholars from the above-mentioned post-Soviet countries during the first post-Soviet decade. Conducted under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States and key research institutions of Ukraine and Russia, as well as Western donors, it showed a rather limited politicisation of the field of border research. This changed after the Orange Revolution of 2004; in the subsequent decade, research cooperation regarding the Russian-Ukrainian border reflected the ups and downs in the relations of the two countries. It was with the events of 2014 that the securitisation of the border put any kind of cross-border cooperation on ice and made even routine academic contacts difficult.

Scholars of the Centre rely on traditional methods of political and economic geography and employ analysis of statistical data, sociological surveys, and expert interviews. While political and economic geography are rather positivist in their approach, it is through border studies, as the most dynamic and open field, that social constructivism, critical geopolitics, discourse analysis, and other conceptual and methodological novelties have arrived in this discipline. One example is critical geopolitics, which entered post-Soviet border studies through the cooperation of the Centre with such renowned Western geographers as John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail). A number of recent joint publications have investigated the local reception of and popular attitudes to geopolitical concepts and narratives constructed by the elites (such as 'Russkii Mir' and 'Novorossia'), especially in the regions affected by ethnic and territorial conflicts (O'Loughlin et al. 2016, 2017). While unrecognised states and disputed territories

such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia have long been in the focus of the Centre (O'Loughlin et al. 2014), the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine widened the scope of its research and added to its relevance.

The changes in the research agenda of the Centre for Geopolitical Studies thus reflect the evolution of political and economic geography in the post-Soviet space from a Soviet-style academic discipline, instrumental and positivist in its approach, to a dynamic field open to international cooperation and new conceptual developments. Having inherited the former Soviet territory as its object of research, the Centre focuses on the rebordering of the post-Soviet space from a Russia-centred and state-led perspective (Kolosov 2018). During the last decade, however, the growing fragmentation, geopolitical tensions, and open military conflicts in the post-Soviet space have not only complicated empirical research but also re-framed the research agenda from a securitisation perspective. The fierce conflict and information war between Russia and the West have made it increasingly difficult to use the same language for domestic and international publications (for example, on the annexation of Crimea).

### ***The Centre for Independent Social Research (St Petersburg)***

The Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR), led by Viktor Voronkov, is another academic institution that is specialised in post-Soviet borders. It was founded in St Petersburg in 1991 by a group of Russian scholars with the aim to modernise sociology, an academic discipline that in the late Soviet era was dominated by positivism and quantitative methods. CISR quickly turned into a pioneering institution working on a number of newly emerged issues: social movements, migration, diasporas and ethnic minorities, borders and border communities, and gender. Later, with the development of the centre, additional research areas emerged, including environmental sociology, urban studies, and the sociology of law. CISR has seen its mission as introducing a constructivist approach and qualitative methods (e.g. interviews and focus groups, participant observation, and biographical method) into Russian sociology.

In accordance with this academic profile, the school of border studies built up by CISR conceptualises borders as social processes and (micro)systems of social relations. As stated by the CISR website, '[T]he concept of borders is seen by CISR researchers not only as a phenomenon within the physical and political space but also as a key sociological term, indicating processes of social in/exclusion'.<sup>6</sup> The edited volume *Nomadic Borders*, published by CISR in 1999 and drawing on an international conference in Narva, Estonia, organised one year earlier, became one of the first publications that introduced this approach to post-Soviet border studies (Brednikova and Voronkov 1999). For almost three decades, the scholars of CISR have published dozens of articles on borders and the construction of ethnic identities (Nikiforova 2005), borders and memory (Brednikova 2004; Nikiforova 2017), and representation of borders in the media (Brednikova 2007; Brednikova and Nikiforova 2019) and in popular perceptions (Kaisto and Brednikova 2019). CISR has organised a number of summer schools for young scholars



interested in border studies, some of them taking place in the South Caucasus. A special issue of one of the leading Russian sociological journals, *Laboratorium*, includes a number of articles on the Russian-Abkhazian-Georgian borderlands authored by CISR scholars (Darieva and Voronkov 2010). A quick comparison between this publication and the research on the same region produced by the Centre of Geopolitical Studies in Moscow reveals differences in their approaches: whereas the Moscow geographers draw on sociological surveys to map attitudes of the local populations and their perception of 'grand geopolitical narratives', the St Petersburg sociologists rely on extensive fieldwork and participant observation accompanied by a reflection on their own position as researchers.

CISR's long-term focus on border studies was partly inspired by St Petersburg's geographic proximity to Finland and the Baltic states and its de facto status as a borderland city. In the late Soviet era, Leningrad was a 'gate to the West' due to a relatively liberal border regime with Finland – a neutral country friendly to the Soviet Union. St Petersburg's proximity to Finland became even more important from the late 1980s due to intensive cross-border cooperation on various levels. Vice versa, this also corresponds with Finnish academia's traditional strength in Russian studies. Finnish geographers had manifested their research interest in the Russian-Finish border already in the early 1990s (Paasi 1996); shortly thereafter, the Karelian Institute at the University of Eastern Finland in Joensuu established the VERA Centre for Russian and Border Studies, with a focus on the post-Soviet space. It became one of the institutional partners of CISR in border research projects and had a profound impact on the development of post-Soviet border studies, integrating scholars from the region into its research and publication activities (e.g. Eskelinen et al. 2016; Liikanen et al. 2016; Laine et al. 2019).

Of particular importance in creating a professional milieu, a common discursive space, and a network of border scholars in Russia and in a number of other post-Soviet countries were two mega-projects, EUBORDERREGIONS (2011–2015) and EUBORDERSCAPES (2012–2016), funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme and coordinated by the University of Eastern Finland.<sup>7</sup> These projects included Russian, Estonian, and Ukrainian scholars and their institutions. In general, Finnish funding for cross-border cooperation projects in the Finnish-Russian borderlands was crucial for numerous local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and fostered communication between activists and academic experts. This funding was significantly cut in the early 2010s, which, in combination with the notorious Russian law on 'foreign agents' (2012), forced the 'third sector' in Russia to look for domestic sponsors. The nationalisation of the Russian funding landscape affected not only cross-border cooperation but border studies as well.<sup>8</sup> CISR, however, continues its research under adverse conditions: a new CISR project, entitled '*The layered cake of neighborliness: Russia, Finland, and neighboring relations on different scales*' and funded by the Kone Foundation (Finland), addresses conceptual issues of neighbourhood in multiple social and cultural contexts.<sup>9</sup>

The geographic proximity of CISR to the Baltic states, especially Estonia, had rather different, though no less important, implications. These former Soviet

republics were already in the early 1990s well advanced in terms of nation- and state-building. This included the institutionalisation of the new international border with Russia, a process complicated by territorial disputes and by issues around the Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia. The accession of the Baltic states to the EU and NATO transformed the former administrative boundary between Soviet republics into a new geopolitical frontier, with all kinds of implications for border communities (on the Estonian-Russian border, see Lundén 2009; Pfoser 2014, 2015, 2017). The border towns of Narva and Ivangorod, divided by the new international border between Estonia and Russia, became a fascinating destination for border scholars due to the rapidly changing border-crossing regime, complex citizenship arrangements, new social and economic inequalities, and fluid identities. With ‘memory wars’ between Russia and the Baltic states around the Soviet legacy and interpretations of World War II intensifying, the Estonian Narva, as a Russian-speaking city and part of the Russian memoirscape, became a laboratory for CISR border scholars (Brednikova 2004; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2008; Nikiforova 2017).

In 2015, CISR was confronted with the Russian regime’s hardened stance towards civil society. Along with a number of other NGOs funded by Western donors, it was included in the registry of ‘foreign agents’ according to the amendments of the Russian ‘On Non-profit Organisations’ law. This happened despite protests and actions of solidarity from the international academic community. The new status immensely complicated the work of CISR in Russia; one of the survival strategies was transnationalisation: a branch of CISR was established in Berlin.<sup>10</sup>

### *New Eastern Europe beyond Russia*

Apart from CISR in St Petersburg, border studies developed in other parts of the Baltic region in response to the challenges brought by the profound and radical geopolitical shifts in the area over the last 30 years. Research on borders – focusing primarily on Russian-Baltic relations – has been conducted at the University of Tartu, in Estonia, mainly by political scientists specialised in international politics (e.g. Berg and van Houtum 2003; Berg and Ehin 2006; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2016). In the last three decades, Tartu transformed itself from a provincial Soviet university into a regional research hub and one of the European centres of Russian and post-Soviet studies. Most recently, a research team led by Eiki Berg has been studying contested territories and de facto states.<sup>11</sup>

Other post-Soviet borders in the Baltic region were affected by similar developments and also became exciting objects of research. One of them is the Belarusian-Lithuanian border addressed by Olga Sasunkevich (2015) in her book on cross-border shuttle trade, with a particular focus on gender. This is one of the few publications about the post-Soviet space where border studies meet gender studies in an innovative and productive way. Perhaps this has to do with the academic background of the author. Before writing her doctorate in the framework of the ‘Baltic Borderlands’ research training group at Greifswald, she had

studied at the European Humanities University. Founded in Minsk in 1992 as a private liberal arts university with the ambition to introduce conceptual and methodological innovations into social sciences and the humanities, the university came under the pressure of Lukashenka's authoritarian regime and in 2004 was forced to leave Belarus and go into exile in Vilnius, Lithuania. The university has a Centre for Gender Studies, which enjoys a strong international reputation. Moreover, in the 2000s, the university hosted the Center for Advanced Studies and Education (CASE) and its project *Social Transformations in the Borderland: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova*. It offered grants to scholars from the region, published the Russian-language journal *Perekrestki* (along with its sister journal *Crossroads Digest*), and organised conferences and summer schools, with the aim of offering 'assistance to conceptual and methodological renewal of academic research in the region [and] initiation of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialog'.<sup>12</sup> The CASE approached the countries between the EU and Russia as 'borderlands' and made an attempt to rethink this concept from postcolonial and constructivist perspectives. Although it did not prioritise empirical research on borders, it nevertheless contributed to sensitising local scholars to new paradigms in border studies.

Ukraine's western border with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania has also experienced a number of dramatic changes – from the nearly impermeable Iron Curtain to the liberalisation of the cross-border regime in the 1990s followed by the introduction of the Schengen border in 2007<sup>13</sup> and, finally, the EU visa-free regime for Ukraine enacted in summer 2017. Already in the 1990s, pioneering research on religion, ethnicity, and economic transformations at the Ukrainian-Polish border was being done by Chris Hann (1998a, 1998b, 1998c), currently a director at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. One and a half decades later, Karolina S. Follis (2012) focused on the construction of the Ukrainian-Polish border as an external frontier of the EU, while the author of this chapter studied the cross-border politics of commemoration in the Ukrainian-Polish borderlands (Zhurzhenko 2013a, 2014). Some studies have also been conducted on migration and cross-border petty trade at the Ukrainian-Polish border (Iglicka 1999; Polese 2012). On the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, interesting research on performing border identities in everyday practices was done by Jessica Allina-Pisano (2009). Despite this rather vivid international research interest in Ukraine's western borderlands (and despite the persistent discourse of Ukraine as a 'borderland' in both the historical and the geopolitical sense), one can hardly talk about an institutionalisation of border studies in Ukrainian academia.

This is even more true regarding Ukraine's border with Russia, which has attracted the attention of scholars after some delay. In addition to research conducted by the Moscow Centre for Geopolitical Studies (mentioned above) and the present author's research (Zhurzhenko 2010), other work has been done by Kharkiv University scholars (e.g. Filippova 2010, 2016; Kravchenko 2010), some of whom participated in the EU-funded EUBORDERSCAPES project (2012–2016) together with Russian and Finnish colleagues. Before 2014, Kharkiv as a Ukrainian industrial and academic centre not far from the Russian border was presented

by the local political elites as a motor of Ukrainian-Russian cross-border cooperation; a part of the research, especially at the Department of Social and Economic Geography and Regional Studies of Kharkiv University, was instrumental in legitimising and fostering these projects.<sup>14</sup> The deep crisis in Ukrainian-Russian relations, with the military conflict and political destabilisation in eastern Ukraine, led to the securitisation of research on the border with Russia. It seems that the geopolitical earthquake caused by the 2014 events impeded rather than stimulated the institutionalisation of border studies in Ukraine. In this respect, it is interesting to compare Ukraine with the much smaller Estonia, which – being on the safe side of the geopolitical divide and having access to EU resources – was able to develop its own distinctive research profile in border studies.

### ***The Eurasian borderlands***

This chapter does not claim to provide a comprehensive review of border studies in the post-Soviet space, yet it would be incomplete without mentioning the research being done on the South Caucasus (of which some aspects were already touched upon above) and the countries of Central Asia. As for international scholarship, a groundbreaking contribution on the South Caucasus was made by Mathijs Pelkmans (2006) in his ‘biography’ of the Georgian-Turkish border in Upper Ajaria, a region at the frontier of Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Madeleine Reeves (2014) has addressed complex border issues in the Ferghana Valley, where Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan meet, and Nick Megoran (2017) has dealt with the same region, focusing in particular on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the context of nation-building pursued by the political elites in both countries. The edited volume *Eurasian Borderlands* (Bringa and Toje 2016) brings together the newest anthropologically inspired research on post-Soviet borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The term ‘Eurasian’ in the title serves as more than just a synonym for ‘post-Soviet’ or a geographic designation. It signals the authors’ attempt to problematise the notion of ‘post-Soviet borders’ in those parts of the former Soviet space that often remain at the periphery of Europe-centred academic discourse. Like post-Soviet borders in the European part of the former USSR, the new international borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia have emerged as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but it seems that in the latter case, the initial moment of ‘falling apart’ – both in the sense of state collapse and territorial disintegration – has been much more persistent. Moreover, the postcolonial context appears particularly relevant for the new borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia due to the Soviet legacy of social and ethnic engineering (Hirsch 2000), arbitrary boundary making, and voluntarist nationality policies implemented from Moscow without taking local realities into account. Not that there were no examples of such policies in the European part of the USSR, but these regions – due to the extremely complex ethnic demography and the salience of traditional institutions – became particularly conflict-ridden after the collapse of the USSR (Rahimov and Urazaeva 2005). The effects of these colonial traumas paradoxically coexist with a nostalgia for the Soviet era, which is

often associated with social and economic modernisation. Finally, the context of EU integration and enlargement so important for the European part of post-Soviet space is less prominent in the South Caucasus and almost irrelevant for Kazakhstan and Central Asia; Russia's traditional influence has been increasingly challenged in these regions by geopolitical players such as China, Turkey, and Iran.

Consequently, it is little wonder that border studies in (and on) Central Asia and Kazakhstan have, so far, been dominated by two political priorities – to address challenges to national security and to identify possibilities for regional cooperation (Golunov and McDermott 2005; Matveeva 2017; Rakhimov 2018; Amrebayev 2020). This research agenda is determined not only by the pressing issue of unsettled territorial conflicts resulting from nation-building policies, contested border delimitations, and growing competition for natural resources but also by the larger geopolitical setting. If traditional geopolitics has returned to Eastern Europe due to Russia's growing ambition to challenge the hegemony of the EU, the return of traditional geopolitics is even more obvious in Central Asia, as reflected in a volume edited by Helena Rytövuori-Apunen (2016). A product of international scholarship, it addresses bordering practices in the region in the context of a complex interplay of several factors: waning Western military presence in Afghanistan, the Russian attempt to keep its traditional influence in the region, and the Chinese Silk Road initiative. Perhaps not surprisingly, a significant body of research on Central Asian borders focuses on the densely populated Ferghana Valley, with its conflict-ridden boundary landscape: a complex ethnic map, key infrastructure (e.g. roads and irrigation systems) cut across by international borders, and contested access to water resources and pasture lands (Kuehnast and Dudwick 2008; Olimova and Olimov 2017; Murzakulova 2018). Ethnic clashes in 2010, which shook the fragile balance in the region, along with persisting tensions, prove the importance of local arrangements and communication between border communities for the prevention of such conflicts. It is only understandable that most research in the region is security and conflict related as well as policy oriented.

The diversity of the political regimes in the region – from isolationist Turkmenistan and authoritarian Uzbekistan to competitive and open though highly unstable Kyrgyzstan – as well as the different paths taken in reforming post-Soviet academia, creates rather different local contexts for the development of border studies. Among the institutions hosting such research are the national Academies of Sciences, state and private universities, international and local NGOs, and think tanks. Profiting from globalisation, scholars from the region have established academic contacts with Turkey, China, South Korea, and Japan, countries that successfully compete with the West in developing academic expertise on Central Asia.<sup>15</sup>

### **Concluding remarks: post-Soviet border studies as a research field shaped by multiple tensions**

In conclusion, I would like to outline some fundamental tensions that have shaped post-Soviet border studies as a multidisciplinary and transnational research field.

First of all, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the advent of globalisation, with its promise of a 'borderless world', created new horizons for the geopolitical imagination, which had a profound impact on (post-)Soviet academia. Political liberalisation and later the fall of the Communist regime brought freedom of travel and enabled communication with Western colleagues and the exchange of ideas. This sudden 'openness to the West' was a formative moment for the emerging field of border studies. The other side of these developments, however, was the rebordering of the post-Soviet space: the emergence of new dividing lines and barriers, not only political but also economic, bureaucratic, and mental. Former Soviet heartlands turned into new borderlands and peripheries, and the access to a 'borderless world' appeared rather unequal and heavily dependent on geographic location, economic resources, and social capital. During the last three decades, the post-Soviet space has turned into 'the home to some of the world's most impregnable borders' (de Waal 2016). While providing plenty of material for research, they also separate, isolate, and polarise border scholars.

Second, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was perceived by a significant part of the political and intellectual elites in the former Soviet republics – to some extent even in Russia – as an emancipatory and 'anti-colonial' moment. The newly gained national sovereignty and market reforms were associated with the promise of political and economic modernisation usually equated with Westernisation. The idea of a modern nation state as a territorially bounded sovereign polity with a centralised government in control of state borders that largely coincide with ethnic boundaries has been part of this modernisation project. In reality, however, many post-Soviet states have experienced economic crisis, deindustrialisation, and deurbanisation, often territorial disintegration, and even state collapse. For decades, a significant number of post-Soviet borders have remained nondemarcated, poorly controlled, and porous, often turning into sites of a 'grey economy', with its informal rules negotiated between weak states and their residents. In fact, 'modern borders' is what some post-Soviet states, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus, still aspire to. The ideal of 'modern territoriality' has in some cases been further corroded by separatist movements and ethnic conflicts. Whereas political elites in the post-Soviet space often framed their nation-building policies in terms of overcoming the colonial legacy, tendencies towards economic and social demodernisation in the new post-Soviet periphery let the failed Soviet modernity appear in a nostalgic light. As the moment of post-1989 Western hegemony ended, giving way to a multipolar world, the post-Soviet countries have been confronted with alternative 'modernities' and their distinct ideas of territoriality, bordering, and integration (e.g. China). The post-Soviet border studies that have emerged due to the 'opening to the West' and that were shaped by the hegemony of Western academia are confronted with these developments.

The third tension that has shaped post-Soviet border studies has emerged between, on the one hand, state-building and the national security agenda of the new post-Soviet national elites, and, on the other, the passive resistance on the part of 'border people' to rebordering policies. The latter is grounded in the inertia of social ties and networks and the persistence of established patterns of

travel and employment; it also corresponds with the collective geographic imagination shaped by the Soviet education system, media, and popular culture. With the passage of time, the local populations have adjusted to the new borders, or even learned to see some benefits in them; this 're-socialisation' has happened in some places sooner than in others. And yet, in the post-Soviet borderlands, 'spatial and temporal boundaries are closely related: the new border manifests the irreversibility of the post-1991 political and social changes' (Zhurzhenko 2013b, 194); it separates not only post-Soviet states from each other but also the problematic present from an imagined and idealised Soviet Union. The power of this structural 'border nostalgia' could be observed in spring 2014 in eastern Ukraine when Russia used the emotional language of Soviet memory and 'appeared as an imagined homeland for all those lost in the borderlands as the grey zones of the post Soviet transition' (Zhurzhenko 2015, 51–52). This one extreme example helps us understand the persistent tension between the two perspectives – the state-centred expert perspective on post-Soviet borders as attributes of a newly gained sovereignty, on the one hand, and the perspective on borders as experienced 'from below', by ordinary people in their everyday lives, on the other. These distinct perspectives are reflected in two nearly incompatible discourses in post-Soviet border studies – the expert discourse of securitisation and the critical, anthropologically informed discourse that gives voice to ordinary people and local communities.

Finally, the fourth tension that should be mentioned here takes place between, on the one hand, post-Soviet geopolitics based on *realpolitik* and, on the other, 'post-modern' EU geopolitics. While the former treats borders as sites of state power and symbols of national sovereignty, the latter is based on the understanding of borders as sites of communication, networking, and cooperation. According to the logic of the latter, national borders inside the EU are deemed irrelevant for the movement of people, commodities, and ideas. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this 'postmodern' vision of borders promoted by the EU was projected into the post-Soviet space; European practices and institutions of cross-border cooperation were exported to the external borders of the EU and sometimes beyond them. Moreover, while the EU enlargement encouraged new EU members (and some neighbours to the EU) to shift 'hard borders' further east, the EU discourse of 'soft borders' and 'fluid borderland identities' was appropriated by a number of post-Soviet political actors who promoted Eurasian integration projects as an alternative to the EU. This can be illustrated by the creation of several 'Euroregions' at the Ukrainian-Russian border. The developments of spring 2014 demonstrated, however, that peace, stability, and mutual trust between neighbouring countries are preconditions for such 'postmodern' borders and that cross-border forms of cooperation such as Euroregions can only exist under the umbrella of a 'hard' European security. With the return of traditional geopolitics to the European continent, the ideology of the 'postmodern borders' promoted as part of the EU integration project clashed with the 'modern' understanding of borders as 'containers' of state territoriality already popular in the post-Soviet space. And yet, the 'postmodern' EU geopolitics still serves as a normative horizon in post-Soviet border studies.

## Notes

- 1 See Michel Foucault's seminal essay from 1971, 'Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire'.
- 2 *Obshchestvovedenie*, or *obshchestvennyye nauki*, was the Soviet curriculum of social sciences heavily informed by orthodox Marxism. It included dialectic and historical materialism, political economics, and scientific Communism.
- 3 See also the research on the German-Polish border at Viadrina University (Frankfurt an der Oder).
- 4 Fredrik Barth's (1969) seminal work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* had a significant impact on border studies.
- 5 See Zarycki (2014) on Poland's eastern borderlands.
- 6 See the CISR website: <https://c isr.pro/en/research/borders/>.
- 7 See project information at: EUBORDERREGIONS – European Regions, EU External Borders and the Immediate Neighbours. Analysing Regional Development Options through Policies and Practices of Cross-Border Co-operation (2011–2015, 17 countries, 14 partner institutions), <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/266920>; and EUBORDERSCAPES – Bordering, Political Landscapes and Social Arenas: Potentials and Challenges of Evolving Border Concepts in a Post-Cold War World (2012–2016, 17 countries, 22 partner institutions), <http://www.euborderscapes.eu/>.
- 8 I am grateful to Elena Nikiforova (CISR) for this insight.
- 9 See the project website: <http://privet-sosed.tilda.ws/main>.
- 10 See the CISR Berlin website: <https://c isr-berlin.org>.
- 11 See the De Facto States Research Unit website: <https://defactostates.ut.ee/our-team>.
- 12 Igor Bobkov and Pavel Tereshkovich in their introduction to *Crossroads Digest* no. 1, 2006, p. 4, <https://kamunikat.org/?pubid=13459>.
- 13 With the exception of Romania, which is not a member of the Schengen agreement.
- 14 On the Russian side of the border, the Institute of Cross-Border Cooperation and Integration (<http://icbci.info>) was created in 2010 at Belgorod State University.
- 15 One example that has to be mentioned here is the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University, Japan, which publishes the *Eurasia Border Review*.

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