

“US” AND “THEM”

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FRIENDS OR FOES? CHANGES IN CROSS-BORDER PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD NEIGHBORS ALONG THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN BORDER AFTER 2014

Keywords: Ukraine, LPR, DPR, Russian-Ukrainian border, cross-border practices, everyday life, attitudes toward neighbors

This article examines how the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine and the sharp deterioration of official relations between Russia and Ukraine have affected the environment and everyday life of the population of the border towns of the Rostov (Gukovo, Donetsk, Matveyev Kurgan) and Belgorod (Graivoron, Shebekino) regions of the Russian Federation. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with local residents and representatives of municipal authorities, our article studies the dynamics of cross-border practices after 2014, as well as people's attitudes toward the border, the border regime, neighbors, and neighboring states. Our research shows that a radical change in cross-border practices and (formerly good) neighborly relations occurred, which contributed to the peripheralization of small border towns and complicated communication. Such changes have transformed the border from being simply a symbolic line on a map, separating the territories of the two states, into an actual border that is perceived and felt in everyday life. In the localities we analyzed, we found transformations of what had once been an integrated border area into coexisting yet independent sections of borderland. However, these processes took place for different reasons: in the Belgorod region, it was the tightening of the border regime and tensions in Russian-Ukrainian relations; in the Rostov region, it was refugees, the unrecognized status of the LPR and DPR, and fear of war.

This article is a translation of: Зотова М.В., Гриценко А.А., Фон Лёвис С. Свои или чужие? Трансформация приграничных практик и отношение к соседям в Белгородской и Ростовской областях России после 2014 г. // *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie*. 2021. No 1. P. 124–144. DOI: 10.31857/S086954150013601-1

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Introduction

The incorporation of Crimea into Russia and the ongoing hostilities in eastern Ukraine have drawn international attention to Russian-Ukrainian relations. The political crisis has significantly changed the situation along the Russian-Ukrainian border, making it more tangible and creating a new everyday reality for border residents (Grinchenko and Mikheyeva 2018; Fournier 2017). Relations with neighbors have increasingly become determined by mutual stereotypes, which developed under the influence of economic and political, as opposed to ethno-cultural, factors (Babintsev et al. 2016; Sapryka et al. 2019).

The Russian-Ukrainian borderland is arguably among the most studied post-Soviet border regions (Kolosov and Vendina 2011; Besier and Stoklosa 2017). Researchers have considered it primarily in connection with nation- and state-building in Russia and Ukraine and with the adaptation of the population and economy to the emergence of new state borders. A number of scholars have focused on the problems of cross-border cooperation (Kolosov and Kiryukhin 2001; Anisimov et al. 2013), political and economic relations between countries, and the everyday needs of people (Borodina et al. 2009). Others have analyzed the strengthening of sociocultural differentiation across border areas through the prism of the regional and ethno-cultural self-identifications of the population (Krylov and Gritsenko 2012; Zhurzhenko 2006; Bublikov 2019; Sapryka et al. 2019). Research by sociologists has shown that, by the early 2010s, a majority of the population of the Russian and Ukrainian border regions had practically adapted to the emergence of the border and become habituated to its existence (Zhurzhenko 2013). Yet this did not lead to its acceptance by many local residents (*ibid.*), despite attempts to create distinct national identities and different images of a common past (Miller 2008; Snezhkova 2013; Gritsenko and Krylov 2013).

Throughout most of its existence, the Russian-Ukrainian border region developed as part of a single state. The common space and absence of borders in Soviet times encouraged ease of movement across the region: people easily changed their place of residence or moved to the territory of the neighboring republic to work or study. Cross-border relations and social perceptions of neighbors were formed without significant barriers to communication. Widespread and various interaction practices, the particularities of population settlement, and a robust network of transport communications contributed to the formation of close economic, cultural, and social ties across the border region (Popkova 2005); these factors also oriented the population toward large Ukrainian cities – namely, Kharkiv, Sumy, Donetsk, and Lugansk (Kolosov and Vendina 2011).

Although the border became a clear obstacle after the introduction of passport and customs controls, people did not consider such changes onerous (Kolosov and Vendina 2011). Cross-border travel was beneficial to both sides. The price differences allowed people to save on purchases by crossing the border, and the demand for a variety of goods and services stimulated the development of local trade and employment. The new economic opportunities partially compensated for the difficulties caused by the sharp decline in living standards and incomes of the population in the 1990s.

The cross-border practices of the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods laid a solid foundation for the formation of trust and close relationships in the borderland. Thanks to the unpredictable intertwining of human destinies, a strong sense of unity and cohesion between communities across the border emerged. People did not give much thought to the nationality of their friends and acquaintances; a dense social fabric closely linked the neighboring settlements of the two countries. Ukrainian cities served as regional centers for the entire borderland, and Russians were well-acquainted with them and felt comfortable there.

Despite the accumulated experience of residents living together for a long time, the events of 2014 led to the destruction of the usual order of life, the relationships between border communities, and, consequently, cross-border social integration. In such situations, the

change in both the border regime and its perception by residents becomes the main factor influencing people's interactions; it therefore requires the close attention of researchers.

The Theoretical Framework of the Study

In recent years, the field of border studies has undergone a rapid development. One of the key concepts in this research area is the term "bordering," which means not only the formation and arrangement of borders but also changes in their regime, functions, and social meaning, including those influenced by shifts in the international situation and bilateral relations (Kolosov 2005; Newman 2011; Kolosov and Scott 2013). Multidimensional processes of "bordering" occur everywhere, albeit on different scales. They are most noticeable in borderlands, which are zones of intensive international contacts and social interactions, where the political and economic interests of neighboring states collide (Paasi 2009).

Borders are constantly changing because they are the result of sociopolitical development (Berg 2000; Kolosov and Scott 2013; Kolosov 2018). A. Paasi revealed that the processes of social and political disintegration and integration often run in parallel: the social processes work to strengthen national identity and national sovereignty, contributing to the consolidation of borders; meanwhile, the political processes are aimed at finding common interests, liberalizing the border regime, and increasing bilateral contacts (Paasi and Prokkola 2008; Paasi 2009). The discovery of the interdependence between national border regimes and social perceptions has stimulated the study of public and institutional (that is, political) discourses about neighboring countries and regions (Newman and Paasi 1998; Prokkola 2009; Pfoser 2015; Konrad et al. 2019; Scott et al. 2019).

At the same time, the motives for border crossing by local residents, as well as the importance of the neighborhood in the life of border communities, have begun to be studied (Ghosh 2011; Laine et al. 2018; Zotova et al. 2018). According to D. Newman, an analysis of people's experiences and individual and collective narratives related to the border provides a better understanding of the border's role in the lives of local people and their perceptions of its function as both a barrier to and space for social interaction (Newman 2006; Newman and Paasi 1998). By considering how individual and collective perceptions have been shaped by cross-border practices, our approach shifts attention from political, prescriptive discourses to everyday discourses that affirm or challenge "realities" that have been constructed from above (Lamont and Molnár 2002). We draw on work on the anthropology of borders (see Wilson and Donnan 1998, 2012) to consider how the interaction and interdependence of the state, nation-building processes, and people living in border areas lead to changes in the role and meaning of the border in the lives of local people. As Wilson and Donnan explain:

Because of their liminal and frequently contested nature, borders tend to be characterised by identities which are shifting and multiple, in ways which are framed by the specific state configurations which encompass them and within which people must attribute meaning to their experience of border life. (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 13)

Borders are closely linked to state policies, but the actual situation along the border and in the borderlands does not always align with those policies. Indeed, the presence of a state border on a map does not necessarily mean that people, in practice, perceive it as such on the ground. It may have "another life" and may depend on the relations between different actors at the local, regional, and national levels (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 21).

We were interested in the adaptation of people to the new conditions, especially after Ukraine changed the border regime with Russia. It is important to understand how the population perceives the new functions of the border and how those functions affect cross-border practices and the course of everyday life. As Stef Jansen puts it, "The interesting anthropological question is how, when, to whom and to what degree certain things

materialize as a border over time” (Jansen 2013, 26). The purpose of this article is to trace how the transformation of the border regime and changes in the functions of two sections of the Russian border – with Ukraine and with the Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republics (hereafter, LPR and DPR) – have affected the everyday life of people living in the Russian border regions, as well as their perception of and attitudes toward the border, their neighbors, neighboring territories, and neighboring states. We consider the border area not so much in the context of key objective historical, economic, cultural, and political features of development as through the prism of the life of ordinary people, their customs, attitudes, and feelings. By analyzing the everyday experience of residents of Russian border towns, we try to answer the following questions: Do political changes lead to social disintegration? How do borders and their configuration change in people’s minds? How strong is social integration in places where people used to live together? Assessing the shifts in the perception of both neighbors and the border allows us to understand the specific processes of the changing functions of the border in the “disintegrating” sections of post-Soviet borderlands.

In the first part of the article, we focus on the formation of the Russian-Ukrainian border, the gradual change in its regime, and its perception by local residents. In the second part, we analyze the process of strengthening the barrier on the section of the border with Ukraine after 2014 and its impact on the practices and perceptions of the population of the surrounding territories. Finally, we consider how the emergence of the unrecognized republics and changes in the border regime affected the lives of people on the border with the LPR and DPR.

Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative field work using ethnographic and sociological methods of information collection in two the Russian border region: Belgorod (bordering the Kharkiv and Sumy regions of Ukraine) and Rostov (bordering LPR and DPR). We selected towns with differences in economic specialization, levels of socioeconomic development, and living standards that were located on major roads in the vicinity of key border-crossing points: in the Belgorod region, we chose Graivoron (6,400 residents; 8 km from the border) and Shebekino (41,300; 6 km); in the Rostov region, Donetsk (47,000 residents; 3 km), Gukovo (66,300; 7 km), and Matveyev Kurgan (15,500; 15 km). We conducted a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews (1.5–2 hours each) with local residents and representatives of municipal authorities in these towns in January and February of 2020. The interviews were conducted according to a predetermined questionnaire and contained about eighty questions grouped into four interrelated blocks: (1) experience of living in the border area; (2) cross-border practices and their dynamics starting from the Soviet era; (3) attitudes toward the border and the changes in its regime; (4) perceptions of neighbors and the neighboring state. The spectrum of people’s opinions and arguments was of particular interest. In our work, we combined two sampling strategies: theoretical selection and exploratory selection (Glaser and Strauss 1967). First, we relied on known data about the region and tried to cover different demographic groups as much as possible, taking into account the age, gender, and the social and professional characteristics of the respondents, including type of employment (see table 1). For example, in each locality, the sample included representatives of a profession typical of the town (e.g., workers in the service sector in Graivoron and Matveyev Kurgan, and former miners or members of their families who still form a special community in the old centers of the coal industry in Gukovo and Donetsk), as well as state employees (which represented a quite high proportion of employees in all selected towns). Second, the organization of our field work was, in part, shaped by the information obtained during the interviews. Thus, in the selection of respondents, we considered additional criteria, such as residents’ experience with crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border after 2014, their experience of living in Ukraine or the presence of relatives there, and place of birth. With this selection strategy, the sample size could have

been unlimited; it was ultimately be defined by applying principles essential to qualitative research (Ilyin 2006; Kvale 1996): if the necessary information is obtained and no additional information is expected, the researcher has the right to terminate the interview collection process (Merkens 2019, 290–97). This explains the varying numbers of respondents in the selected localities. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality; the names of interviewees are withheld (only general descriptions of individuals or groups will be used as identifiers, e.g., place of residence, gender, age).

Table 1

Main Characteristics of Sample

Number of respondents	Gender		Age bracket (years)			Education			Employment				Birthplace	
	Male	Female	<30	30–50	>50	Secondary	Vocational secondary education	Higher	Public sector	Services sector, small business	Mass media	Other	Local	Nonresidents
Locality														
Donetsk	3	7	3	4	3	2	2	6	3	3	1	3	6	4
Gukovo	4	4	0	4	4	2	4	2	2	3	0	3	5	3
Matveyev Kurgan	2	6	0	6	2	0	3	5	5	0	2	1	8	0
Graivoron	4	3	1	3	3	1	0	6	5	1	0	1	3	4
Shebekino	3	4	0	5	2	0	3	4	2	2	1	2	2	5
Total	16	24	4	22	14	5	12	23	17	9	4	10	24	16

Dynamics of the Border Regime and Political Functions of the Russian-Ukrainian

The state border between Russia and Ukraine has formally existed since 1922. However, the statutes and regulations that form the basis of today's regulation of the border began to be developed after 1991. For a number of years following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the formal establishment of the border, people could still cross it almost unhindered, as they were used to doing (N. D. Borodina and T. L. Borodina 2009):

[...] We moved from Kharkiv to Shebekino in 1994, and in 1998 through 1999 we transported furniture here. The border was already sort of official, but we crossed it through the fields, not because ... [we wanted to defy the law, but], first, because that way was half as long, not the usual 80 kilometers ... and, second, we probably would have to pay [customs tax], and the furniture was old, so what was there to pay for. [...] So, we decided to take the shortcut and bypass the official border. (Shebekino: male, 45 years old)

The bilateral agreements of 1995 and 2006 established 53 checkpoints and 155 local border crossings on the border, with simplified procedures for residents of adjacent border regions. Our respondents asserted that they did not perceive the border at all for quite a long time; they had difficulty remembering how it was established and when the first signs of border infrastructure (posts, checkpoints, etc.) appeared. By all accounts, this process happened between the late 1990s and the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century:

[...] Before 2006, there were no border checkpoints here. [...] The Russians were the first to set up checkpoints, two years later the Ukrainians. First there were Russian conscripts. They had four wooden poles, and they put up plastic sheeting. That was the kind of post [put up]. Then they installed some kind of small cabin, and now the terminal. [...] They tried to dig up the road there, but there were no fences. The fence and barbed wire appeared only three years ago, along with the terminal. (Donetsk: female, 32 years old)

[...] Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the border began to strengthen, its crossing stopped being a formality. [...] Document checks began; there was an impression that each border guard interpreted it however he could and wished. One could pass through calmly or with great nervousness, and by filling out a bunch of some kind of cards in Ukrainian. [...] The biggest difficulty was that we had to stand in queues for several hours. (Matveyev Kurgan: female, 44 years old)

Although an agreement on the delimitation of the border was signed in 1997, its demarcation was repeatedly postponed, and it was only in 2010 that the agreement was actually adopted (see table 2). The demarcation of the border line began in 2012 with the installation of border markers with the coats of arms of the states, but due to the Maidan events in 2014, this work was suspended, and then carried out unilaterally by Ukraine:

[...] My children and I went through the forest through Tavoľzhanka to Murom one day and walked to the border. We unexpectedly came to Ukraine. That is, we were walking and walking through the forest on foot and we came [...] We realized that this was no longer our territory, that we were in Ukraine. [...] It was 2013. Then we remembered that there were post-signs, but we didn't pay attention. (Shebekino: female, 40 years old)

The Border as an Unfortunate Misunderstanding or an Insurmountable Obstacle: The Belgorod Section of the Russian-Ukrainian Border

After 2014, the established way of life in the borderlands changed dramatically. The new conditions for crossing the border introduced by the Ukrainian side were keenly felt by residents of the Belgorod region:

[...] Now it's difficult for us to go to Ukraine. First, you need a passport to travel, and second, you need an invitation from relatives, which must somehow be delivered. However, it is not certain that this invitation will let you cross the border, that is, it does not mean that you will definitely get through. And they don't let men through at all. I was last there [in Ukraine] in 2014 and did not go again after that. (Shebekino: female, 50 years old)

Only one of our respondents continues to regularly visit his parents, who live in a neighboring town across the border. The rest no longer visit Ukraine, citing, among other factors, a lack of good reasons to do so. In their opinion, prices on both sides of the border have practically equalized, and thus it is no longer profitable to go shopping there (while it had been previously). People also thought that the quality of Ukrainian goods had noticeably declined. The main motive for not traveling, however, was fear — namely, fear of what might happen. Many considered crossing the border risky, expecting possible incidents and provocations on the Ukrainian side. Virtually every respondent recounted stories about the troubles people encountered during such trips, but these were always “neighbor's stories,” not personal experiences:

[...] Do I have to get a passport especially for Ukraine? To go to Ukraine ... I won't do it! What for? I don't have relatives there, so there is no need to go. Why would I want to go there, or even take the risk? It's a risk, of course, to go there. [...] It's scary to think what idiots you might run into. There are cases of punctured tires; the car of some people I know was damaged ... in 2016–2017, one of the locals drove there with Russian license plates. They cut his throat just for having Russian license plates. (Graivoron: female, 60 years old)

Table 2

Changes in the Regime of the Russian-Ukrainian Border

Year	Document	Event
1991	Declaration of Independence of Ukraine	Emergence of the Russian-Ukrainian border.
1992–1993	Agreement on the Development of Interstate Relations between Russia and Ukraine	Maintaining the principle of open state borders with the phased introduction of customs control that meets international standards.
1992–1993	Decree on Urgent Measures to Organize Customs Control in the Russian Federation	Borders are no longer “transparent”: the opening of customs controls in Russian towns bordering Ukraine, on highways, on railroad lines, and at airports. The first thirty-five Russian border control units are posted at the border.
1994	Intergovernmental Agreement on Interaction and Cooperation between the Border Troops of Ukraine and Russia	Joint border patrols.
1995	Intergovernmental Agreement on Checkpoints between Russia and Ukraine	Fifty-three checkpoints are set up.
1997–2002	Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and Government of Ukraine on Visa-Free Trips of Citizens of the Russian Federation and Ukraine	Recognition of the borders and territorial integrity of the two countries and the absence of mutual territorial claims; consolidation of the principles of strategic partnership. Securing the possibility of visa-free travel for citizens of Russia and Ukraine with internal passports. Negotiations on the delimitation of the border: definition of the state border with a description of its location and mapping.
2003	Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. State Border Treaty.	Securing the historically established status of the inland waters of the two countries and freedom of navigation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait for merchant ships and warships. Establishing the line of the boundary between the two states.
2004	Special Protocol on the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Ukraine on Visa-Free Trips of Citizens of the Russian Federation and Ukraine	Permission for citizens of one country to stay in the territory of another country without registration for up to ninety days when in possession of a migration card with a border-control stamp.
2006	Agreement on the Procedure for Crossing the Russian-Ukrainian State Border by Residents of the Border Municipalities of the Russian Federation and Ukraine (the agreement on small-border traffic)	155 local border crossings – checkpoints for simplified crossing of residents from adjacent border municipalities – were established.

2010	Agreement on the Demarcation of the Land Section of the Border	Creation of a joint demarcation commission.
2011–2013	Border Demarcation Plan	Opening of the first border marker on the Bryansk-Chernigov section. Beginning of physically demarcating the border.
2014	Statement by the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine on the Unilateral Demarcation of the Border	Cancellation of the agreement on small-border traffic. Closure of all checkpoints and local border crossings (except for Melovoe-Chertkovo). Erection of fences, construction of a control line, construction of ditches.
2015	Proclamation of the LPR and DPR. Decree of the Government of Ukraine on the Termination of the Provisions of Bilateral Agreements Regulating the Crossing of the Russian-Ukrainian Border. Ukrainian Government Decree Banning Russian Airlines from Flying	Introduction of rules for crossing the border between the LPR, DPR, and Russia using internal passports (LPR, DPR, Ukraine, RF) without the need to fill out migration cards.* Ukraine's unilateral introduction of new rules for Russian citizens to cross the border (using foreign passports and additional documents)** and stay in Ukrainian territory for up to ninety days within six months from the date of first entry; restriction on the passage of men aged sixteen to sixty. Termination of direct flights between countries. Russian countermeasures against Ukrainian airlines.
2017	Decree of the President of the Russian Federation “On the Recognition in the Russian Federation of Documents and License Plates Issued to Citizens of Ukraine and Stateless Persons Permanently Residing in the Territories of Certain Districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk Regions of Ukraine”	Recognition in the Russian Federation of documents and license plates issued to citizens of Ukraine and stateless persons permanently residing in the territories of certain districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine.
2018	Law of Ukraine “On Termination of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation”	Uncertainty about all economic and social agreements with Russia based on the Treaty. Regulation of bilateral relations by the basic norms of international law.
2018	Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation “On Increasing the Period of Temporary Stay in the Russian Federation of Citizens of Ukraine Permanently Residing in the Territories of Certain Areas of the Donetsk and Lugansk Regions of Ukraine”	Increasing the continuous period of temporary stay in Russia for residents of the LPR and DPR to 180 days from the date of each entry.

2020	<p>Ukraine's Unilateral Change in the Order of Travel of Its Citizens to Russia.</p> <p>Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine in Connection with the Spread of the Coronavirus Infection</p>	<p>Introduction of new rules for crossing the border to Russia for citizens of Ukraine (using foreign passports).</p> <p>Ban on entry to the territory of Ukraine for all foreign nationals from March 2020 (owing to COVID-19).</p>
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* This is a document detailing information on the entry into Ukraine by foreign citizens; it serves to control temporary stays in the country and is a form to document entry and exit.

** Additional documents may be required: an invitation from an individual or legal entity; paid tourist ticket; a guarantee confirming the intention to return to Russia; proof of financial solvency.

Residents perceived the tightening of the border regime in different ways. In Graivoron, respondents who were born, studied, or worked in Ukraine and who maintained relations with relatives, former colleagues, and friends still in Ukraine were acutely sensitive to the new border reality. At the same time, the severance of ties was not too painful for those who did not have close relationships (of family or friendship) with residents of neighboring Ukrainian regions. They felt that the harsh border regime has only deprived them of the opportunity to save money on purchases and take cheap vacations at the Black Sea coast. The discomfort of having to change established habits was overshadowed by the fear of hostilities. According to respondents, most local residents have already reoriented their activities toward Russian regional centers, such as Belgorod or Kursk, where they now go for shopping, entertainment, education, and medical services. The border has nevertheless become a significant barrier for them, since the obstacles to travel to a neighboring country are considered too high:

[...] Of course, people have noticed that [the border is a barrier]. But it's not really a problem. Well, there's less comfort; things became a little more inconvenient for us. That's all. People lost money on something that was cheaper to buy [in Ukraine]. The disadvantages are big, but we've just readjusted and don't make a tragedy of it, we are not boo-hooing over it. (Graivoron: female, 60 years old)

The events of 2014 contributed to the peripheralization of border towns and caused local residents to feel isolated. This was particularly acute in Graivoron, a town through which many Russians used to travel to Ukraine, including to Black Sea resorts. The town also lost its appeal to residents of Russia's northern regions, who used to actively buy dachas there. Respondents blamed media propaganda for making people in Russia think that the area neighboring Ukraine was now dangerous and for thus discouraging visitors. The word "borderland" (*prigranichnost'*) in the vocabulary of the locals themselves has taken on an exclusively negative meaning, and the perception of the border has intensified.

[...] Life has changed dramatically. Now it is a dead end, an appendix that no one needs. The passage of Russians to Ukraine is effectively closed. And this was a town people passed through. Travelers used to ask to spend the night — people coming from Karelia, St. Petersburg, the Murmansk region, Moscow. People used to sleep in their cars in the courtyard. They were heading south, to Crimea, to Ukraine; many made a stop here along the river. Military pensioners came and bought dachas. As soon as everything happened with the border, they stopped coming here. Their first question: Is there shooting here? The border influenced this. Nobody buys houses now. And this used to be a town people passed through. (Graivoron: male, 50 years old)

The border's impact on the development of the local economy and living standards was also an important factor shaping residents' perception of the border regime. In Graivoron, about one half of the respondents cited changes in the border regime and in the character of their neighborhood as the primary causes of the negative trends and the stagnation of the town's development. The other half considered these simply the unfortunate consequences of the country's general economic situation. In Shebekino, respondents had fewer economic concerns, because the crisis of interstate relations in fact spurred the town's development as a result of the transfer of a number of Ukrainian industrial enterprises to Russian territory. That said, in all the locations we studied, the challenges of 2014 only compounded the preexisting social and economic problems, reinforcing the local population's feelings of hopelessness and frustration.

When discussing relations with neighbors, some respondents emphasized that disagreements were primarily caused by different assessments of political events in Russia and Ukraine (this can be explained, in part, by neighbors existing in different information spaces, or media silos). Many respondents were convinced that they were right and considered Ukrainians' accusations of hostility to be unfair and unjust. They believed that it was the Ukrainians who were "befuddled," "brainwashed," or "deceived" by the media. Residents of the Russian border region seemed to understand and have a sympathetic attitude toward the problems of their neighbors; in return, however, they reported encountering hostility and suspicion.

[...] There are even relatives who stopped talking to each other, who are sure that Russia – specifically, you are to blame for their problems: "You stole Crimea from us, you don't give us gas, and we are cold in our apartments." Relatives in Sumy are categorically against Russia. Some say it's all Russia's fault. They're sure that it is we who are brainwashed, not they. (Graivoron: female, 45 years old)

Respondents told different stories about their relationships with their relatives living in Ukraine. Some said they stopped communicating because of political and ideological disputes. Others said that they maintained relationships but stopped discussing political events and sensitive topics. Still others said that only with those who supported Russia's actions and disapproved of Ukraine's current course did relations not change. The general opinion of respondents was that the situation has gradually started to move in a peaceful direction again, and that calmer communication has replaced aggressive accusations. In short, people reported being tired of conflicts and disputes. Many experienced an acute phase of conflict and managed to maintain a warm attitude toward their neighbors, thanks not only to connections with family and friends but also to an understanding of the community's shared fortune.

Despite negative experiences that have complicated relations with residents of neighboring territories, a large number of our respondents still considered the cross-border region unified. Many of our interlocutors were convinced that people remain united by their language, culture, mentality, and common past. They emphasized that Ukrainian culture is not alien to the local population; indeed, many of them used Ukrainian words in their speech and appealed to their common Slavic roots. Respondents who shared this viewpoint could not draw a hard line separating Ukraine and Russia, and they listed Kharkiv and a number of other Ukrainian border settlements as among the "close" (i.e., kindred) cities where many like-minded people live. Speaking about the prospects of relations between the two states, they expressed confidence that cooperation with Ukraine would resume sooner or later. Ukraine seemed hostile to them only because, in their words, it is governed by "pro-Western, corrupt" rulers who have an extremely negative attitude toward Russia. In general, people believed that once the government in Ukraine changes, life will return to normal.

[...] People in Ukraine have figured out how to live at loggerheads ... Unless they can come up with something else that can make us quarrel again. Those at the top are the ones provoking things – you see what they do. [...] Ten years should pass, and then something good, something pivotal will happen. Every year it's gradually getting better. (Graivoron: female, 60 years old)

New Neighborhood, New Life? – The Rostov Section of the Russian-Ukrainian Border

The border regime between the Russian Federation and the LPR and DPR has not actually changed since 2014, and formally it has even slightly loosened (see table 2). Despite this, residents of the Rostov region began to cross the border less frequently after the end of the hot phase of hostilities in eastern Ukraine and the disengagement of the opposing forces in 2014. The range of motives for crossing the border has narrowed. Visits to relatives are now the most common, although their frequency has decreased. If before, residents visited their relatives at least once a month, after 2014, it was one to two times a year on special “good or bad [occasions]: weddings, anniversaries, funerals” (Gukovo: female, 60 years old). Because of the devaluation of the ruble and the leveling of prices, the number of trips made for the purchase of Ukrainian goods decreased significantly: “They have the same currency now. It makes no sense at all for us to go there” (Donetsk: female, 25 years old). Some people reported making occasional trips to nearby localities for sausage and butter, purchased in small quantities for personal consumption.

All respondents were nostalgic for the old days – when they would visit markets and stores in the neighboring territory – and they remembered Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine as a source of quality products and a variety of goods. Today, residents still make occasional trips to Lugansk (Luhansk), Krasnodon (Sorokyne), and Sverdlovsk (Dovzhansk) for medical services, usually dentistry, which tend to be cheaper and of good quality. At the same time, in Donetsk, Gukovo, and, to a lesser extent, Matveyev Kurgan, new semilegal practices have emerged, such as bringing cheap vodka and cigarettes from Duty Free across the border and then handing them over to resellers. An important change in cross-border circulation after 2014 was the sheer predominance of LPR residents, who became classic *frontaliers*, crossing the border daily to work on the Russian side. This was caused by a drop in wages and social benefits, as well as a lack of decent-paying jobs in the new unrecognized republics.

The military conflict in eastern Ukraine has changed the local population's image of the border. Whether people perceive the border as an insurmountable obstacle or not, they view it primarily in the context of risks and threats. The war in close proximity to the Rostov region has caused residents of Donetsk and Matveyev Kurgan to fear that the military actions could affect them personally. With respect to potential provocations, respondents compared the current situation to that of a powder keg:

[...] Since we are in a border area, if a war breaks out, we would be the first to suffer ... There is a fear that everything could spill over here. Nobody knows what the Ukrainians have in mind. The Ukrainian military was one kilometer away. People here are used to it – you understand that you live near a powder keg, but you have nowhere to run, there's no one and nothing for you. We've gotten used to it. (Matveyev Kurgan: female, 43 years old)

Despite the formal loosening of the border regime, respondents in Matveyev Kurgan, Gukovo, and Donetsk spoke of increased feelings of isolation due to the impossibility of traveling to Ukraine and the difficulty of official cooperation with the LPR and DPR due to their non-recognized status:

[...] When the border appeared, the piece from Taganrog was like a peninsula. There was nothing beyond it. There was a feeling of being cut off. Everything gravitated toward Donetsk. And now our peninsula has moved a little further away. However, the gray buffer zone is not quite complete in relation to us. (Matveyev Kurgan, female, 44 years old)

Immediately following the start of the armed conflict in Donbas in 2014, a stream of displaced persons poured into the border towns of the Rostov region from Ukrainian territory. Despite their fears, local residents provided them with maximum help and support: they housed them, collected food and supplies for them, and dealt with the people arriving at the border. These events still evoke very strong feelings in the local population. Experiences of dealing with the displaced residents of Ukraine varied. Against the background of a significant number of positive stories of selfless assistance to those in need and of gratitude for that help, there was particular indignation over situations in which the migrants behaved in an undignified manner: according to some respondents, the migrants were rude, demanded special treatment, and blamed all Russians for everything that had happened, including inciting war. The disagreements and conflicts that resulted had a negative impact on relations with neighbors:

[...] The attitude toward people abroad changed when we saw how indecently they behaved. Before, the attitude was generally better, so we didn't see it [such behavior], we didn't encounter it so much, [when] there wasn't such a flow of people. In the summer 2014, everyone went and helped. Even people who weren't expected to. Almost every family took in refugees. Then, when they started behaving this way, people saw it and began to have doubts. People did everything they could to help. But the refugees acted like pigs. You can't act like that when people help you without asking for anything in return. Many people let them stay in their homes and paid for their food and drinks with their own money, but they ... (Donetsk: female, 32 years old)

With the distribution of displaced persons across Russian regions and the return of some refugees to the territories of Ukraine, the LPR, and the DPR, the animosities practically disappeared, leaving a noticeable trace in people's memory. In their place, however, other tensions emerged, caused by increased competition in the local labor market. For example, many interviewees attributed the decrease in their own earnings to the mass migration of LPR and DPR residents who were willing to work for less money. Competition from numerous *frontaliers* in Donetsk (the Rostov region) was particularly intense:

[...] People come here and look for work. There are no jobs here as it is. There's more competition. They started driving down wages. A lot of workers came from the LPR and drove down the cost of tombstones and tile laying, including unofficial work. (Donetsk: male, 33 years old)

In the minds of respondents from the Rostov region, Ukraine was divided into two parts: "close," "friendly," "Russian-speaking," and "good" vs. "hostile" and "run by Banderites and nationalists." People contrasted the LPR and DPR to what they perceived as a "Ukraine that had lost its way" and which was trying to restrict the use of the Russian language and force the residents of eastern Ukrainian territories, who were traditionally oriented toward Russia, to follow the pro-Western, nationalist course taken by the Ukrainian government.

Attitudes toward the unrecognized republics are, today, largely shaped by comparisons between life on different sides of the border. Negative trends in the development of Russian peripheral settlements, a lack of jobs, decreased purchasing power of the population, and rising prices correlate with the events in Ukraine. Residents discussed the unrecognized republics and their inhabitants through the prism of their own wealth and risk tolerance, noting that the prices for light, gas, water, and other utilities in the republics were significantly lower. This situation seemed unfair to them because, in their view, the development of the republics was directly linked to Russian support:

[...] The price of food, of apartments has gone up. With their humanitarian aid, salaries have fallen; in 2014, it was twenty-one thousand [rubles], and now seventeen thousand [rubles]. They have lower prices, at our expense, and at the expense of everyone they assisted. Our

taxes are going up, we are paying them. And then they come here and splurge. They have communism there. Everything is cheap: water, gas. Everything is Russian! The rent is mere kopeks [pennies]. (Donetsk: female, 25 years old)

Respondents' opinions of the self-proclaimed republics were quite divided. The non-recognized status of the republics was completely incomprehensible to people. In the everyday speech of residents of the Rostov region, the new entities were still referred to as "Ukraine" and their neighbors as "Ukrainians." Many considered the republics to be a "gray" zone through which weapons and drugs flowed as part of a shadow economy, or a buffer territory separating them from the "hostile" state. Some interviewees (those without close relatives on the other side of the border or who moved to the borderland several years ago) did not support the LPR and DPR's desire to secede and expressed the hope that the republics would join Ukraine. They did not, however, believe that reconciliation between the conflicting sides would be possible because of the blood already spilled and the people killed:

[...] There was no need for war. It would have been better to live as before, as part of Ukraine. [...] The LPR and DPR will not return to Ukraine, so much has happened. [...] It takes generations to get over. [...] It will take a long time to clear up. People can reconcile, but when there is the blood of loved ones between people, it is very hard to do so. (Matveyev Kurgan: female, 44 years old)

Other respondents, who expressed warm feelings toward their neighbors and have close ties with them, hoped that Russia would establish special relations with the republics. In their opinion, either the independence of the LPR and DPR should be recognized or they should be incorporated into the Russian Federation. According to these respondents, obtaining legitimate status or joining Russia would solve several problems at once: First, the population's living conditions, wages, and utility bills would be leveled, competition would disappear, and, as a consequence, the "unfair" (from the point of view of the Russians) contrasts would disappear. Second, the border with the "hostile" state would be moved to the west and provide protection for their relatives. Third, there would be no more lawlessness and chaos in the "gray" zone. And, finally, the actual and psychological boundaries that exist in people's minds would match:

[...] The LPR is going the right way. Many people do not consider them republics. It's more like a separate region that seceded from Ukraine and is fighting for its own interests. They did the right thing, but I pity them: no one needs them, neither Russia nor Ukraine; they fought for something, they stood up for their truth. If Russia had taken the LPR under its wing, they would have been able to support themselves. (Donetsk: female, 25 years old)

In this context, the issuing of Russian passports to citizens of the LPR and DPR is perceived by some residents as a forced yet correct step toward normalizing the situation.

Conclusion

The changes that occurred in the Russian-Ukrainian borderland as a result of the separation and gradual divergence of the trajectories of development of the two states had a noticeable impact on the lives of the local population. In two sections of the Russian-Ukrainian border region, people recounted varying experiences of their interactions with the neighboring country, as determined by their daily practices and habits in relation to the new border regime and the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Our interviews demonstrated clear differentiation in respondents' attitudes toward neighbors and the neighboring state, depending on a person's place of birth and residence as well as the intensity of cross-border practices and personal ideological views. Based on the results of the interviews, we distinguished two main conceptual positions. The first is

that respondents consider residents of neighboring regions to be “close ones” (i.e., kindred), no different from the population of the Russian borderland; they contrast them with all other Ukrainians, whom they call “Ukropians” (a play on the word for dill, *ukrop*), “Banderites,” or “Zapadentsy” (Westerners), and view them as hostile to Russia and Russians. Respondents from the Rostov region consider residents of the unrecognized republics to be “close ones” (i.e., kindred), while respondents from the Belgorod region consider “close” those residents of Kharkiv and the nearest districts of the Kharkiv region, where they still have familial ties, friendly relations, and positive memories. We observed certain variations within this position, such as those associated with people’s residence. The respondents who live in the border towns of the Rostov region have different views on the future of the unrecognized republics. Some people think that only the official recognition of the independence of the LPR and DPR or their incorporation into Russia can resolve the existing tensions and conflicts in the borderland. A number of respondents believe that the incorporation of the republics into Russia would be wrong, but that it’s the only possible solution after the hostilities and bloodshed. Another portion of the respondents, although they consider residents of the LPR and DPR to be close in an ethnocultural sense and distinguish them from other Ukrainians, reacted negatively to the idea of the republics being officially recognized or annexed to Russia. While they accept the new rules and procedures for border crossing, respondents from the Belgorod region do not support the state policy aimed at strengthening the border regime. They believe that as soon as the authorities in Ukraine change, relations with their neighbors will immediately go back to their previous state.

The second conceptual position we identified is a view of all neighbors on the other side of the border as “others” and already “non-natives”; relations with these neighbors have permanently deteriorated, greatly facilitated by the negative experience with refugees during the acute phase of the armed conflict and the Russian-Ukrainian political crisis. Representatives of this group view Ukraine as a different and alien state, currently unfriendly to Russia and its inhabitants, and they consider the territory of the LPR and DPR a dangerous zone with an unclear status, which should be part of Ukraine (as it was before). Tense relations coupled with growing border barriers (the tightening of the border regime in the Belgorod region, and fear of military operations in the Rostov region) led to a significant reduction in or even termination of cross-border practices. As a result, the borderland ceased to be perceived as a common or shared space, and the border became associated with risks. These respondents then began to acknowledge the existing borders with the neighboring state, which has undeniable sovereignty in their eyes.

Against the background of those who “fit” into these two basic conceptual models, a group of “neutral” respondents stands out. These interviewees distance themselves from politics and/or do not discuss political issues with their Ukrainian relatives and friends.

Thus, the daily life of the population of the borderland has changed not only because of the new rules for crossing the border, but also because of the fear caused by the military conflict in eastern Ukraine and contact with refugees from the war zone. People’s feelings of frustration have greatly increased, as threats to their lives and well-being have emerged. They have fears about the “gray” zone of the LPR and DPR, which may in part explain why they want the republics to be officially recognized, annexed to Russia, or returned to Ukraine. Most respondents did not consider any of these prospects ideal, although they all, in the opinion of the interviewees, would lead to the transformation of areas with unclear status into controlled territories, and as a result, would contribute to stability in the region.

The transformation of the border on the map into a perceived and experienced border in reality has led to the double peripheralization of an already peripheral Russian region. O. J. Martínez (1994, 4–10) specifies four types of interactions in border territories: alienated, coexistent, interdependent, and integrated. In a sense, in the two regions we analyzed, we observed a *de facto* transformation of integrated borderlands into coexistent borderlands, but this process has occurred in quite varied ways.

Our research showed the following: People living along the border with Ukraine, in their everyday lives, easily change their sociospatial practices in order to shop, find work, recreate, and access education and medical treatment. This leads to a change in their perception of space and, in particular, the recognition that they live in a region bordering another state. Residents constantly encounter the border's existence and discuss sociocultural similarities and differences among themselves and with their neighbors. In a sense, we can characterize what is happening as a process of nationalization from the outside or from above. Residents see that Ukraine uses the border as a powerful instrument to express its sovereignty, for example, by tightening border control; however, this does not necessarily mean that the Russian border population perceives itself as "different" socially and culturally.

At the same time, everyday life in the Rostov region (Gukovo, Donetsk, Matveyev Kurgan) is largely determined by the neighborhood of war-affected territories, as well as by the non-recognized status of the LPR and DPR and the influx of refugees. The latter has led to reduced employment opportunities and lower wages. All of this has also contributed to a change in cross-border practices and the local population's perception of the border.

Thus, the events of 2014 have led to changes in everyday life in the borderland and the transformation of previously friendly relations between neighbors. These circumstances marked the beginning of the process of people recognizing that they live in the territory of two adjoining states, which are not only demonstrating their sovereignty but also making it acutely tangible for the people living there. Despite the multidirectional nature of the bordering processes, the sentiments of residents of the section of the border with Ukraine and with the LPR and DPR proved to be similar in many ways.

Notes

¹ The population of the towns doubled for a time, including through the opening of temporary settlements.

² At the same time, informants from the border settlements of the Rostov region talked only about the neighboring LPR and DPR and the border with them; they did not think about the situation in the Kharkiv region or other border regions of Ukraine, with which they are not familiar and have little contact. Interviewees from the Belgorod region, although they were aware of events in Donbas, did not think about the trajectories of future development of the LPR and DPR.

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