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## II. FRONTIERS

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### **Between Europe and Russia: Is “Borderland” a Useful Designation of Post-Soviet Societies?**

#### **Abstract**

Situation of post-Soviet societies remains quite difficult to conceptualize. Among other approaches some Belarussian authors (Pavel Tereshkovich, Igor Bobkov, Olga Breskaya, Oleg Breskiy and others) offered a concept of the Borderland for designation of post-Soviet societies. By the Borderland they mean situation of coexistence of borders of different nature on certain territory (region of Belarussia, Ukraine and Moldova). In the article this approach is considered and its applicability to public sphere is analyzed.

**Key words:** Borderland, cultural center, border, social change, legitimacy, perceptions

#### **Introduction**

The article deals with an attempt to use the concept of Borderland that was offered by Belarussian authors (Pavel Tereshkovich, Igor Bobkov, Olga Breskaya, Oleg Breskiy and others) within the framework of activity of The Center for Advanced Studies and Education (CASE) on Social Transformation in the Western Eurasia Border Region – Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. We will consider this point of view only and will not address a broader set of other theories of borders.

In their papers the authors offer this concept (along with its interpretation) for designation of the situation of post-Soviet region laid between Europe (Eastern EU borders) and Russia. They claim “Borderland” to be a good concept not only as an academic tool but also as an instrument for region’s self-description and identity. But for the latter “the idea of Borderland” should meet acceptance beyond academic discourse. That is why the main aim of the article is to consider the essence of the concept proposed and applicability of the idea of Borderland in existing conditions.

#### **Post-Soviet Changes**

The search for the most appropriate theoretical approaches and models for conceptualizing and analyzing reality is a continuous process and this is quite normal for any branch of knowledge. Socio-humanitarian knowledge is a particularly wide field of existence and coexistence of different concepts due to the complexity

of the reality studied, as well as a result of its volatility. It is logical that the ongoing social, geopolitical, value, etc. changes provoke a rethinking of existing approaches and cause new ones to appear.

Becoming a capitalist society brought into life its interpretation as being a “modern” one in opposition to the old “traditional” society. Its “modernity” was associated with different characteristics. But attention was paid mainly to reducing the role of subsistence farming in the “production of material goods” and the fostering of industry as the main driving force of social development (Karl Marx, for example). Extending this interpretation, from the mid second half of the twentieth century, society began to be treated by theorists as post-industrial and/or as an information one. It was emphasized that the main factor was the production of knowledge and services instead of industry (Daniel Bell, Alvin Toffler, Peter Drucker, Yoneji Masuda and others).

Another option is the definition of the current society as a postmodern one in contrast to the preceding modern society. The faith in the unlimited possibilities of the rationality and the power of “metanarratives” – coherent and rational descriptions of the (social) world and coherent and rational projects of its reconstruction are believed to be a key point for the era of “modern society” (Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and others). “The Modern” culminated not when it began to show up controversy, but when the rule of rationality led to the most rationalized way to destroy those who hinder the implementation of the “modernist project” (Lyotard’s metaphor of Auschwitz).

The interpretation of contemporary society as a global one can be considered as a variant of such conceptualizing as well. “Global society” is considered as unified and integrated, with different variants of replies on “the challenges of globalization”, usually suggesting attempts to maintain a local identity by cultivating their own uniqueness (Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells and others).

A number of variants of the conceptualization of modern society can be extended. In addition, the features of individual societies’ development expand the list of possible theoretical interpretations. One of the most important subjects here is the destiny of post-Soviet societies. Their own specific character is intertwined with a global context, causing the necessity for new interpretations and approaches.

The post-Soviet social changes were a particularly fertile ground for theoretical research and empirical studies. Among other things, these changes caused doubts in the viability of concepts used previously for the descriptions of social reality, as well as their underlying theoretical assumptions. For example, the assumption of existence of certain, definite stages of social development was the basis for transitory and other modernization models. Since the post-Soviet societies have ceased to correspond to any of the analytically described steps, it was assumed that they are in transition from one stage to another (market economy, democracy and civil society – what was assigned to the concepts of a “democratic transition country”, a “country with a transition economy”, etc.). Only at the threshold of the centuries was there formed the understanding that such interpretations are untenable and

the conceptualization of reality should be based on a consideration of the existing situation (albeit not corresponding to some models any more).

### **Conceptualization of the Borderland**

One of the variants in the conceptualization of the state of post-Soviet societies within the European part of the former Soviet Union is their interpretation using the concept of the Borderland. Some of the most prominent theorists of this approach (Breskaya, Breskiy) have paid attention to the inconsistency of transitological models and called their book “From transitology to the theory of the Borderland”. This point is also emphasized in the preface to the first issue of the journal “Crossroads”. The authors of the preface state, “In our opinion, the state that in the short term appears for the region to be a problem (or problems) of transition, is seen in the long term as a situation of a «borderline»”.

The necessity of the conceptualization of this region is associated not only with the search for theoretical interpretations, but also with its (region’s) “external” reassessment. The enlargement of the European Union to the East provokes a re-thinking of the concept of Eastern Europe. In his paper “Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment” Larry Wolff states that it is Western Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment, that invented Eastern Europe as its auxiliary part. It was understood as a bridge between Europe and Asia, between civilization and barbarism. In the twentieth century, following Winston Churchill’s example, Eastern Europe began to be understood as a part of Europe, located on the other side of the “Iron Curtain”.

If we recall, citing Edward Said, the invention of the “East” by the West and, relatively speaking, the “post-imperial” state of the former Soviet societies, it would be logical to try to use postcolonial theory (see the special journal “Ab Imperio” or a number of articles in “Crossroads”).

In any case, the exclusion of the region from the “true” Europe actually leaves it within Russia’s zone of geopolitical, cultural, etc. influence – a situation that did not cause much joy equally to the representatives of the region as for a number of international players outside of it. This provokes a desire to identify the region on its own. For example, theorists of the Eastern European borderland write: “The most important thing in the construction of regionality – finding the name”, “Finding the name – one of the aspects of the mission of our project, which will be followed by understanding the cultural self-worth and self-sufficiency of the «boundary» existence”.

One of the ways of conceptualizing the region is an appeal to Western concepts of border studies, postcolonial and post-imperial theories, ideas that use concepts of frontier or boundary. The focus of interest included theoretical interpretation of the regions adjoining to the (administrative) borders, to be exact – of the new social, cultural, etc. formations that were formed in connection with the border (in various senses) interaction, in particular those, who aspired to gain the status of independent social, cultural and political entities that are not absorbed by any of the “bordermaking centers”. The Borderland is conceptualized in this context. It is

understood as a space which is “largely fragmented and these fragments correspond with different wholes at the same time”.

Thus, the concept of the Borderland can be used in different contexts. In the most general form it is understood as something that lies between the recognized cultural and geographical (civilizational) centers. This understanding is based on the distinction between geographically localized cultures (civilizations) that are recognized as some (often stereotyped) “patterns” (such as, for example, “Western culture”, “Eastern culture”, etc.). Accordingly, the borderland is treated as a territory which does not relate well to any of the “centers” (land between) and, therefore, has a number of features. Interpretations of these features, in turn, can be very different, both academically and in public and political discourse – from attempts to join one or another “center” or from isolationism to the zone of conflict and ideas of the “melting pot”.

### **Boundaries: Interaction, Legitimacy, Mobility**

According to the definition of Breskaya and Breskiy, the Borderland is a term that signifies the state of social and political space, formed by the interaction of the boundaries of a different nature. It is more than logical to talk about cultural, values, linguistic, religious, ethnic, etc. boundaries in the context of the Borderland due to the fact that they actually interact in the study area (the authors restrict the analyzed region to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova). But is it appropriate to talk about the interaction of political borders (the administrative borders of the state, given that they are found ready-made and specified in advance and their change a priori depends on the decisions of “centers”)? How do political borders interact?

If we take into consideration the territorial and economic factor, the “interaction of boundaries” (Eastern and Western ones) can be viewed in the context of the transit – mostly Russian raw materials to Europe; labor force, including illegal immigrants from Russia and/or Asian countries and the inhabitants of the region directly to Europe and/or Russia; drugs, weapons, human trafficking, etc. Generally this interaction can be realized by international treaties. In particular, relatively speaking, about what steps should be taken on the eastern borders of the region, to avoid problems in the West. However, these issues are closer to being the subject of “traditional” border studies, rather than research into the Borderland.

The subject of cultural cooperation, “provoked” by the interaction of cultural boundaries is closer to the focus of interest. In this sense, the area bounded by the national borders of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova can be considered as a ready platform for such cooperation, as a place “designed” to carry it out.

In the post-Soviet context, which, in fact, constructs borderland region, it is appropriate to base oneself on the question of the legitimacy of existing borders. It is helpful to recall, that, according to Max Weber, legitimacy means the recognition of the correctness, legality of something. Ideally, it should be the basis of legislative enactments (legality), but in reality it often does not coincide with the latter. And in our case this difference could not be more explicit.

The relative novelty of the present state borders and the habit to take them as no more than nominal, which they were in the Soviet Union, leads to the fact that the current borders are problematized in minds – people remember that the situation with the borders can be different, which causes nostalgic feelings about the absence of problems with their intersection in the past and the views that they are not “closed” enough, which can lead to realizing the external (real or imaginary) “threats”. In both cases, the region’s borders are still (potentially) “mobile” in the minds of local inhabitants. In countries neighboring Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova to the west, the border issue sounds slightly different, because a simplification in the crossing of borders with desired neighbors has already occurred in the enlarged European Union and attempts to protect themselves against threats from its neighbors usually do not involve the idea of possible revision of borders in the East.

The idea of the possible mobility of borders arises due to the frequent appeals to history for legitimization in current attempts to build nations – actually, to the various histories. Whichever of the current borderland states we may take into consideration, the version of the history is usually more than one. Generally, they can be reduced to two – a “nationalist” history and a “Soviet” one. The “nationalist” logic will proceed from the idea of the existence of a “nation” (or ethnic group), which needs their own state within borders that are considered “fair” to protect their “natural” interests. That is why those historical periods and events that indicate the existence of “the nation” and its achievements, in particular – nation state buildings, will be considered as important.

The “Soviet” version of history in the post-Soviet context is unlikely to have significant links to the actual ideas of struggle for liberation of the working class and the victory of communism. But surely the Soviet times as a time of greater social fairness and better opportunities for self-realization and life in general will be emphasized.

Thus, the actualization of different versions of the history, depending on the political needs of the initiators, again (each time) problematizes the borders, keeping them on the move.

### **Prospects of Legitimization of the Borderland**

As already mentioned, the interpretation of Borderland as a state of social and political spaces, formed by the interaction of boundaries of a different nature, distinguishes this conception from traditional border studies, for example, where the borders are understood only politically and administratively. The authors insist on the insufficiency of such an interpretation and propose them to be considered as a boundary (Lamont 1992; Bradley 2006) – as the limit of the influence of an actor. This means that the agents form border by spreading their influence and their impact can be not only political.

It is obvious that it should be the capacity to spread its own influence. Taking into consideration that the social world cannot be reduced solely to objectivity, but also supposes the existence of the external recognition of something as the existing one, as the first indication of the existence of an “influential actor” (that faces

submission to its influence – Max Weber) is a representation or presentation of itself outward. Breskaya and Breskiy use the concept of “subjectability”, that means an “actor’s capacity for producing presentations in public sphere”. Applying this interpretation of the boundary, the authors emphasize the formation of new actors in this region and the formation of the region itself as the actors that map their own borders and are conceptualized as the Borderland.

“Giving the name” means the formation and manifestation of the “subjectability” of the region. By naming, claiming the name, we hereby appeal to the existence of what is called by that name (Pierre Bourdieu’s “the power of nomination”). The win in the struggle for name recognition means the creation of the reality that lies behind the name – “the idea that takes over the masses becomes a material force” (Karl Marx). In the same vein, we can recall, for example, Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” – communities that exist primarily because they are recognized as the existing ones.

That is why “finding its own name” by the Borderland is not only an attempt to define what exists in reality, but an attempt to construct it. The author of the idea of the Borderland, as we see, is well aware of it, emphasizing that the conceptualization of the Borderland will not only extend and/or open up new opportunities for the academic study of the region, but also give a basis for understanding its uniqueness and self-sufficiency, that means – for the possibility to identify oneself with this place.

The prospect of such a design is connected, in turn, not only with the formation of a “place” in the classification system. It is necessary to consider the conditions under which its name can be legitimated. On the one hand, referring to Pierre Bourdieu, one could say that it depends on the capital – economic, political and cultural – of those who perform this attempt. It means that in our case the idea of the Borderland should be shared not only by intellectual enthusiasts, but also by people who possess the academic authorities, politicians and public figures, possibly, government representatives, interested business structures and external (material and ideological) sponsors. Meanwhile, it is difficult to talk not only about popularity, but also about the presence of the idea of the Borderland in the majority of these groups, although the situation can be changed by virtue of any circumstances.

On the other hand, the masses should be ready to assimilate this idea. For this aim, first, the proposed idea should promise a resolution of any – preferably essential and urgent – problem. Secondly, there should be a cultural, historical, etc. background – i.e. the tradition of considering themselves in the way proposed by this idea.

I am afraid that nowadays one does not go about solving the problems of the population of the region by new conceptualization and new identity. But the background seems to be favorable – it is near a constant state between any of the forces and the local people’s habit to consider themselves in a similar way within the geopolitical context. But two opposing trends resulting from this situation should be noted – an attempt to isolate themselves from external influences (declaring or not itself as a “center” of anything), or – to join the “desired” center (Europe or Russia, for example). None of these alternatives have become completely dominant yet,

which, however, is understandable: the interests of local elites and foreign representatives of “centers” need to preserve both ideas in order to be able to maneuver in the implementation of their policies. In other words, despite the possible high-profile declaration very few of the local politicians are really interested in the final decision because of periodically received support from one center or another.

## **Boundary Identity**

We can agree with the idea that borders cannot be studied in isolation from issues of identity – identity with a social and/or territorial group. This is true because the spatial boundary is an expression (the cause and/or effect) of the boundary between “us” and “strangers”.

For psychology more than for sociology it is typical to pay attention to the fact that identification is important from the point of view of self-esteem and good emotions that are an important part of an individual’s mental health. That is why we can say that one of the reasons for self-identification is the necessity to maintain self-esteem, self-worth. And it is achieved by comparison with others, whether they exist now or existed before, whether they are real or not, etc. It is important to correspond to the pattern, or simply to differ *favorably* from the others. In other words, the identity should be positive for the emergence of the desire to apply it to a person – especially if it concerns newly constructed identities.

Beside the psychological component, it may be noticed that identity can be considered as a position within a classification system – in case of society as the position of a group of some perceived structure – perceived by the external observer, whether an academic or an ordinary person. Then the question of identity refers to what it means to be a representative of a social group that occupies a certain position in society – what does it mean to have a certain identity? what are the criteria that distinguish a representative of one group (the carrier of one identity) from another? The answer to this question is connected with the explanation of the behavior and consciousness.

In our case, the identity of the Borderland will mean a set of features that allow a distinction of it from others – a kind of “ideal type” of representative of the Borderland. In other words, an external observer as well as a borderland inhabitant should be able to discern that someone has some distinctive features (language, behavior, lifestyle, type of activity, etc.), but someone else has not and therefore can not be considered as a representative of the Borderland. Do any distinguishing features of those for whom the Borderland identity is constructed exist – is a question that requires special research.

## **Perceptions of Borderland**

Another important point is that there are different variants of the representation of the idea of the Borderland within the social consciousness. The spatial (as well as temporary) location of the region can be understood very differently. For someone the Borderland will include post-Soviet space, for someone – Eastern Europe, for someone – states between Europe and Russia and for someone else – a part of

her/his state which borders with Europe or Russia, etc. The question about local inhabitants' identification with the Borderland in realizing their perceptions within their activity (by producing "borderline" practices or not) remains important.

In addition, it seems that people do not particularly like to interpret themselves and their life situation as border ones, especially in the long run. This is caused by the presence of a "center-periphery" pattern of viewing the world in the idea of the Borderland where "borderline" means "peripheral", "marginal", "provincial" – which is often seen as unworthy, undesirable to identify with. The opposite interpretations are possible as well though. They underline uniqueness, originality and therefore self-worth (something which is very flattering to associate oneself with) by "borderline".

It is also important to notice what set of criteria is the basis for a definition of "borderline" – the variants are also quite different here. There can be the perceptions about a prevalent system of work and employment (for example, in a coordinate system "the rich industrial North – the poor, agrarian South"), about the language being used (with a few in use), the ethnic "affiliation" in the region, history, etc. The ideas not only about the past and present, but also about the future are significant – what values, geopolitical, cultural, etc. models, "Centers" are desirable to strive for (for example, the EU, NATO, etc.). The existence of the various models and the lack of unanimity in these subjects provoke an appearance and reproduction of "place" that can be interpreted as the Borderland – both within academic, socio-political discourses and those of mass consciousness.

### **The Idea of the Borderland in Mass Consciousness**

We had the opportunity to evaluate some of our ideas in the empirical research conducted in 2009 within the project "Perceptions of the Borderland and practices of their use". This project took place thanks to a collective research grant from the Center for Advanced Studies and Education of the European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania). Participants in the project were O. Filippova, G. Grinchenko, V. Kravchenko and O. Musiyevdov. Here are only the most general conclusions – a complete description of the project results will be presented in the book which is being prepared for publication by the Center.

The perception of the Borderland was studied on the case of first-year students of higher educational institutions of Kharkiv, Ukraine. While this group certainly does not represent the views of all people in Ukraine as a whole, or for that matter of the Eastern region in particular, there are several arguments that the data really can be considered an important indicator of social consciousness in the region:

Firstly, young people will realize their own vision of the situation; it will determine the development of society in the future. So we study this („perspective") vision.

Secondly, in possessing higher education students will have the best (intellectual and institutional) opportunities to disseminate their views. This especially concerns students of the humanities and social sciences – in fact, possible future ideologues. So we find out the views with the potential of distribution.



Thirdly, up to 38% of the respondents – people who came to Kharkiv to receive higher education – came from other regions of (mainly Eastern) Ukraine. This is why the results are not restricted to the representatives of Kharkiv only.

Fourthly, Kharkiv is a border city both administratively and culturally. This is an argument for the statement that its residents may be considered as a kind of experts on the borderland subject.

These assumptions allow us to interpret the data as really valuable material, in particular from the point of view of its methodological conclusions.

In a survey 790 first-year students at 8 universities of Kharkiv were questioned. A two-stage sample was used: at the first stage the largest universities (with the greatest number of students) were selected, followed by a randomly selected student group, who were continuously surveyed.

Based on the fact that the Borderland (East European borderland, including Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova) refers to a territory under the influence of Europe on the one hand and Russia on the other hand, we devised the images of Europe and Russia. Russia is described as the closest country to Ukraine, a friendly partner but a neighbor, a separate state, while Europe is described in terms of comfort – quality products, higher living standards and living conditions. Unlike Russia Europe is a desirable place to live. Europe is less interpreted as a center of high culture and spirituality than a comfortable place to live. At the same time the respondents are not inclined to stereotypically oppose Europe (the West) and Russia.

Ukraine is confidently considered as a part of Europe. “The border element” stands out quite confidently as well: “Ukraine is a country on the crossroads between East and West” and “Ukraine is the borderland between Russia and Europe”. At the same time the individuality, self-sufficiency of Ukraine is noted as well. A pro-Russian Ukrainian interpretation is present, but an explanation of the reasons for such an interpretation is not available from the research materials.

The borderline of Ukraine is interpreted in terms of the simultaneous and multi-directional (sometimes conflicting) political and cultural influence of Europe and Russia. At the same time Ukraine is considered as an independent state within Europe, which is culturally closer to Russia than to Europe. From the point of view of the prospects of the situation, respondents tend to believe that Russia is a powerful actor in the region and Europe should only become such a player.

In answering the direct question as to whether Ukraine is a border between Europe and Russia or not, the majority of respondents agreed with this statement.

In interpretations of the Borderland itself, the cultural uniqueness that manifests itself in the form of cultural interaction and contact with neighbors (including conflict), is evaluated as less significant than the political and geographical senses and interpretations of the territory as a field of divergent cultural and political influences. It should be noted that variants of interpretations of the Borderland in terms of closeness, underdevelopment, neglect, etc. do not enjoy substantial support. The option of “better opportunities for personal development” was also unpopular though. Respondents that clearly recognize the borderline of Ukraine emphasize the “cultural communication” component, while those who absolutely do not – the “territorial and political” one.

The understanding of the Borderland was specified on the example of the historical and cultural “Sloboda Region” – the East-Ukrainian region with its center in Kharkiv. Sloboda Region fits well into representations of the Borderland, at least between Russia and Ukraine. At the same time Europe is not evaluated as a significant center of cultural influence for the Sloboda Region. The majority of the respondents highlighted the joint Ukrainian and Russian cultural space of the Sloboda Region. These data can be interpreted as a significant argument in favor of the possibility of applying the concept of “Borderland” to this region.

For the Sloboda Region the leading interpretations emphasize its uniqueness. At the same time it is recognized that this region is a part of Ukraine but it experiences the cultural influence of Russia. The Sloboda Region is not considered as an economically and politically autonomous region and is not a part of Russia in any case. Apparently the focus on the cultural and political uniqueness of the region is connected with the idea of the necessity to defend regional interests against the existing (bureaucratic) centralization of Ukraine.

The majority of respondents agree with the statement that the Sloboda Region is a Borderland between Ukraine and Russia; Europe does not have much influence on the region.

Because the Borderline of the Sloboda Region between Ukraine and Russia is recognized to a greater extent than the Borderline of Ukraine between Russia and Europe, we can say that the interpretation of the Borderland on the example of the Sloboda Region is more indicative than those conducted in case of Ukraine. The Borderland is interpreted here primarily on the consideration of geographical space. Secondly, the key point in the interpretation of the Borderland is the openness to different influences, rather than its own uniqueness. That is, the Borderland is determined “externally”, not as a result of its own specific features and capabilities.

Assuming the possible existence of a Borderland identity and its relation to regional identity, the latter was analyzed in the research. It is reasonable to talk about its existence because the perceived connection of people with the territorial and regional communities is quite high. However, the research explored no connections between regional and Border identities (as well as with others analyzed in the research). That is why we can assume that the Borderland is a separate subject, unrelated to the “usual” list of possible identities.

We can state that the idea of the Borderland itself has some basis for the admission and dissemination, but it is not very popular (yet). To be acceptable this idea has to be based upon awareness about the necessity to defend regional interests against external actors (1), should include the emphasis not on “territorial and political” component but on “cultural communication” one (2) and relate to accepted identities (3).

## Conclusions

Thus, on the possibilities of using the concept of the Borderland the following conclusions can be made:

The search for new concepts to describe the situation of post-Soviet societies should be recognized as a fairly fruitful process for the necessity of more accurate analysis. In this context, the concept of the Borderland really opens up additional opportunities for the theoretical understanding of these societies.

However, the research shows that the concept of the Borderland is not associated with the uniqueness of a certain territory, but expresses its dependence on external definitions and influences within the public consciousness. This provokes the interpretation of borderland territory as secondary, peripheral, marginal, backward, etc. Therefore, we can notice the absence of political will and public interest in the application of this concept for the identification of the local inhabitants themselves. This gives ground to assert that there are minimal chances that the concept of the Borderland will be used outside of academic discourse itself.

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### **Streszczenie**

Sytuacja społeczeństw post-radzieckich wciąż z trudem poddaje się konceptualizacji. Jednym z wielu podejść do tej problematyki jest propozycja białoruskich autorów Pawła Tierieszkowicza, Igora Bobkowa, Olgi Brestskiej i Olega Brestskiego, aby zastosować do post-radzieckich społeczeństw koncepcję Pogranicza. Przez Pogranicze badacze rozumieją sytuację współistnienia granic o różnym charakterze na określonym terytorium (region Białorusi, Ukrainy i Mołdawii). Autor analizuje to podejście oraz rozważa możliwość jego zastosowania w sferze publicznej.