



# Everyday Life in the Russian Borderland

Maria V. Zotova, Anton A. Gritsenko and Alexander B. Sebentsov

## Abstract

In connecting people's expectances and reality, border crossing has certainly a considerable impact on human behavior and mind, especially in case if this act becomes an individual's regular practice and/or a mean of existence. In this case, borderland can be transformed into a space of everyday interactions between the people and radically changes their life. The authors try to summarize the definitions of everyday life and theoretical approaches to its study used by different experts. The hypothesis is that everyday practice does not simply show distinctions or similarities of the people living close to the boundary on its both sides but allows understanding the shaping of different socio-cultural spaces and the differentiation of border regions as a whole. The authors estimate the opportunities and constraints created by the boundary and motivating its crossing, analyze its reasons and directions at all sections of Russian land borders. They focus on the socio-economic and socio-cultural discrepancies, and the features of neighbouring areas stimulating specific practices distinguishing borderlands from the rest of the state territory.

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M. V. Zotova (✉) · A. A. Gritsenko · A. B. Sebentsov  
Center for Geopolitical Studies, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy  
of Science, Moscow, Russia  
e-mail: [zotova@igras.ru](mailto:zotova@igras.ru)

A. A. Gritsenko  
e-mail: [antgritsenko@igras.ru](mailto:antgritsenko@igras.ru)

A. B. Sebentsov  
e-mail: [asebentsov@igras.ru](mailto:asebentsov@igras.ru)

A. A. Gritsenko  
Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad, Russia

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The state border • Everyday life • Social practices • Russian borderlands

Borderland belong to those few places where governmental policy and a low ranker's life are closely intertwined, and cross-border practices become resulting output of the activities of social systems at different levels—from the state and society as a whole to near-border or cross-border communities. When socio-economic order is stable and firmly established, the life of borderland communities complying with worked-out formal and informal rules is equally well-ordered. But what happens when routine order collapses? How local people adapt to arising changes which re-determine the character of interaction with neighbors across the border?

Foreign-policy developments and (geo)political shifts in the relations between Russia and neighboring states had an immediate influence upon people's cross-border practices changing their intensity, character, directions, and re-determining for Russia's borderlands inhabitants the balance between benefit and cost, border-crossing motives and impediments.

The ambiguity of processes going on at the border, when rivalries force to cooperate and the cooperation is performed “over the barriers” (Vendina and Kolosov 2007), makes it necessary to focus on everyday life, to study details, causes of border crossing, labor migrations, shopping and leisure practices, etc. We interpret cross-border practices as human activities relating to border crossing in a broad sense including habits of people, their behavior and agendas. A task of the paper is to describe as far as possible the diversity of social practices emerging near the state border, to find purposes, motives, and factors of cross-border movements in different places, and to determine their significance for the life in Russia's border areas. The paper is based on the materials of numerous field studies conducted in 2010–2017 in border regions of Russia and neighbouring countries resulted in more than 600 interviews with experts.

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**Living Conditions Near the Border and Cross-Border Practices**

The state border is intrinsically dialectical. On the one hand, the border guarantees security; on the other hand, it attracts criminality. Functioning as a filter, the border should theoretically prevent distribution of “negative” practices (illegal migrations, contraband, criminal activities, etc.), in reality, however, it rather encourages them. Besides that, the border is simultaneously characterized both as a barrier and a contact zone. Any border is a limit or barrier dividing territories. The presence of a border inherently complicates interactions, transportation of people and goods, economic relations because its crossing costs much time, energy, and financial resources. The interest of local communities in maintenance of good neighborhood,

cross-border links to friends, relatives, and business partners obviously conflicts with many border functions ranging from provision of state sovereignty and security to formation/maintenance of national identity.

At the same time, the border due to its properties not only entails restrictions but also creates some opportunities and everyday practices which use advantages of neighborhood and are not characteristic of the country's inner regions. Everyday life of people who live near the border undergoes transformations under its influence. The social life in border areas develops to a large extent thanks to the existence and nearness of "neighbors" (Brednikova 2008). The borderland is a changeable, flexible space where governmental and private issues, "us" and "them" overlap each other, where social processes go on in different directions and ambiguously.

Reasoning on the influence of border upon everyday life not always is possible in distinct terms of restrictions and opportunities, because just their fusion creates specific conditions of cross-border activities and determines problems to be resolved. A demonstrative example is the realization of common projects in border areas with the participation of both sides. Their proponents and active participants are doubtless beneficiaries of border openness which brings them both financial and moral dividends. However, there would be no need of such activities, if there were no problems and restrictions generated by borders.

Farther, let us consider what opportunities and restrictions the border creates as well as what cross-border practices emerge under the influence of its properties (barrier and contact functions, regime of functioning) and of the properties of neighboring countries' adjacent regions and mutual relations between them (differences in prices, business rules and conditions, population distribution patterns, etc.). By the example of various situations on Russia's borders, three main spheres (those that unify practices resulting from similar factors and the same motives) are considered in details: (1) market of services; (2) labor and unreported employment; (3) commerce and leisure.

*Market of services.* One of characteristic features of borderland is its peripherality and remoteness from developed markets of services. The topology and transport connectivity of territories have frequently such parameters that for many border areas the nearest economical and cultural centers are situated abroad. It is more convenient and quicker for inhabitants of some border districts of Smolensk *oblast'* to come to Vitebsk or Mogilev than to Smolensk as well as for those of Bryansk *oblast'* to Gomel'. In Kalinigrad *oblast'* such an alternative is provided by capitals of nearest voivodeships in Poland while in Pskov *oblast'* by capitals of municipalities in Latvia. It is more convenient for border areas inhabitants of West Kazakhstan Region to travel to Orenburg or Samara while for those of Atyrau Region to Astrakhan. This is obviously inappropriate but could be less time-consuming and less expensive than to resolve emerged problems in one's own country. Border crossing becomes a method to compensate costs. For example, international airports of Gdańsk, Tallinn, Riga, Vitebsk, Heihe, Harbin, Ulaanbaatar accommodating low coaster flights, are used by many people from neighboring border regions.

High-level medical services, especially in the spheres of cardiology, surgery, endoprosthesis replacements, and dentistry, it is difficult to receive in middle and small border towns. Their inhabitants are in a dilemma where to go: either to one's "own" medical facility or to a foreign one. The choice depends upon many private reasons including inherent dangers and fears, but it is a fact, however, that people of Kaliningrad, Smolensk, and Pskov *oblasts* seek medical services in near-border centers of Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, and Poland increasingly frequently. Even such a term as "birth tourism" has appeared here. Another variety of medical tourism—dental one—develops near the border with China where dentist's services are less expensive and of higher quality (Ryzhova 2013). At the border between Russia and Kazakhstan, it is common to go to Russia for medical services (births, open heart surgeries, diagnosis and treatment of oncological diseases). According to researchers of Orenburg State University, only the Vision Correction Center in Orenburg receives for treatment about 4 thousand Kazakhstan citizens annually.

Russia's citizens realize actively the opportunities to study abroad at neighboring European universities, and recently also at Chinese ones. Higher education institutions beyond the border attract by their closeness to home and moderate tuition fees. Offering "good education" from the point of view of local people, they are quite able to meet competition with Russian universities situated in large scientific and educational centers or capitals. Their advantages are: (a) closeness to home (possibility to see parents frequently); (b) education and accommodation costs affordable for the parents of a student; and (c) less severe admission requirements. According to many local experts, such a choice is a lot of "weak" school-leaving certificate holders and children from low-income families.

There are also other purposes. For example, school leavers from Karelia enter the universities of Kuopio, Mikkeli, Lappeenranta, Imatra, and Joensuu increasingly frequently while people from Kaliningrad choose higher educational institutions of Gdańsk and Sopot and not those of their own city. According to our interviews with students in Kaliningrad, their striving to move to another country are not determined by actual difficulties and poor perspectives at home, but is a result of expectations to find later a well-paid and interesting job in the profession there, where, as they think, this is "guaranteed for all". University studies in the EU countries are regarded as a first step in this way. Availability of a diploma recognized in Western states seems to be a starting condition for a fruitful career and life as a whole.

The situation in Russia-Kazakhstan and Russia-Belarus border areas is opposite. People from Kazakhstan and Belarus traditionally come to study to neighboring Russian cities (Omsk, Orenburg, Smolensk). According to local experts, the number of Belarus citizens, who study in three Smolensk's leading higher education institutions, exceeds 1500 (70% of them came from Vitebsk *oblast'*, and 20% from Mogilev *oblast'*) while there are over thousand Kazakhstan students in Orenburg and Omsk state universities. Education of children in large centers of the neighboring country becomes one of multipurpose long-term life strategies of population.

*Labor market and illegal employment.* Liberalization of border regime at some Russian boundaries, especially the introduction of practice of local border traffic (LBT) and simplification of visa-issuance procedure, has provided for border areas residents new earning opportunities ranging from *legal employment* at large plants abroad to smuggling as a form of self-employment.

At the border between Finland and Karelia, due to differences in resources availability and conditions of economic activities, a trans-border production complex has emerged which includes logging at the Russian side and subsequent timber conversion in Finland. Despite the fact that such cooperation was asymmetric in its character, it created jobs in peripheral areas of the Republic of Karelia and exerted a profound influence upon its economy and social life.

In the Far East the Chinese labor force is widely used in the economy, first of all in construction and agriculture. Chinese businessmen establish their firms in the Russian territory (Mishchuk 2016). The Chinese business is characterized by a high degree of isolation and closeness, it creates labor market mainly for its own people. Russian residents have practically no access to such enterprises.

After the USSR disintegration, labor links between closely situated border towns and regions began to be weaker rather quickly. At the borders with the Baltic states, the strengthening of boundary regimes, long waiting at border crossing points as well as difficulties with legal employment of foreigners resulted in the situation when permanent jobs were replaced by unreported and seasonal employment. Some cases of cross-border employment remained at Russian-Ukraine boundary up to the recent time. Residents of Ukraine worked on a massive scale at sugar plants in Kursk *oblast'* as well as in coalmines in Rostov *oblast'*. Up to the early 2000s, workers from towns of neighboring Lugansk *oblast'* commuted daily to the coalmines of Gukovo where salaries were higher than in Ukraine. "Delivery of foreign labor force" was minimized because of administrative difficulties (Kolosov 2016).

After the events of 2014, one-way crossing dominates at the border between Russia and Ukraine: about 80% of those who cross the boundary are Ukrainian citizens coming to Russia to earn money.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of labor migrants settles in Belgorod *oblast'* within the areas most developed economically. Ukrainians as a rule, prefer temporary jobs, because they plan to return to Ukraine while Russian citizenship and official registration would make travels to homeland significantly more difficult.

Informal kinds of labor activities, such as shuttle trade and shadow economy, are also widespread at the border. They include deliveries of cheap alcohol and sweets from Kazakhstan, seafood—in the Far East, vodka and cigarettes—from Kaliningrad to Poland and from Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic to the Russian Federation, as well as unofficial procedures of timber export to China.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Head of the Department of International Relations and Border Cooperation of Belgorod *oblast'*, January 2016.

Despite a notable harm to the economy of border areas and damage inflicted to some local enterprises especially in the field of food industry, shadow business is the source of income for a significant part of local population. This is not only a personal “safety bag”, but also a factor providing socioeconomic stability in borderlands, self-employment of population, and maintaining of habitual living standards. All this forces local administrations to turn a blind eye on those things, which are regarded as unwarrantable by regional or federal authorities. This motivation concerns also numerous intermediary services for completion of various paperwork including international certificates of insurance necessary for visits to neighboring country; consulting and legal services for businessmen who start up; interpreting and translation services (especially at the Russian-Chinese border); services of realtors for purchasing real estates in neighboring country (mainly in Finland and Estonia).

The border diversifies and modifies labor market creating jobs for local residents (border guard, customs) and attracting people from abroad, from border areas of neighboring states. While generating cross-border labor market, the border stimulates also local labor market which results in the development of the objects highly demanded under specific conditions. Thus, it is very notable that at the border with the EU countries there are significantly more pharmacies and filling stations than in other borderlands.

*Consumption and leisure.* The life near the border changes the consumption character of local people notably. Difference in prices permits to cut down expenses, and rich assortment increases satisfaction with life. Consumptive tourism became one of the most popular motives for border crossing, especially at Russia’s boundaries with the EU countries and China (Ryzhova 2013). According to the opinion of local residents, goods bought in Europe possess higher consumptive qualities than their Russian equivalents. People in Kaliningrad *oblast’* believe that sausages sold in a Polish discounter contain more meat than those in a local shop. Unlike Russian citizens who think that European products are better than domestic ones, the Finns and the Poles, however, do not believe in the quality of Russian food (milk, meat) and the appropriate level of sanitary control, that is why even the difference in prices does not contribute to the increase of consumptive demand from their side. At the same time the Kazakhs and the Chinese underline the high quality of some Russian products (beer, chocolate, sweets) while comparing them with their local equivalents. The Chinese think that Russian food contains less pesticides. Besides that, many Russian goods (flour, dairy produce, condensed milk, yogurts) are highly demanded by the Chinese who regard them as exotic.

Directions of cross-border shopping traffic depend very much on economic situation and exchange rate fluctuations. Thus, before 2014 when not only the Ukrainian crisis has broken out but also oil prices dropped entailing subsequent fall of the rouble, there were mainly Russian citizens who made shopping tours abroad, but the end of 2014 was characterized by a sharp increase of traffic to Russia from many neighboring countries, first of all China, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Azerbaijan,

and the Baltic states. In Blagoveshchensk the number of Chinese shopping tourists went up two-and-a-half times during the first half of 2015.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time the flow of Russian borderlands residents to the neighboring regions of the EU and China has decreased notably but not cardinally. Well-established habit for consumption abroad took over. Even the abolishment of LBT regime by the Polish side in July 2016, resulting in additional difficulties with visas for the Russians and a fall in consumer demand in near-border supermarkets for the Poles, did not lead to a cardinal change in the situation. The expenses of Kaliningrad residents for shopping on the other side of the border dropped as little as by 15.3% in the third quarter of 2016 in comparison with the same period of 2015 (Razowski 2017). At the same time, the number of the Poles coming to Kaliningrad *oblast'* to buy fuel has declined sharply. It is a clear example that strong motives stimulate to overcome obstacles while not very strong ones inspire to search for alternatives.

Economic motives for combination of shopping and relaxation can principally differ on both sides of the border. Thus, feeling the need to change their environment, the Russians go to Finland or Poland mainly to spend money while the Finns or the Poles go to Russia rather to save it taking into account significant difference in services costs (Izotov and Laine 2012). For the Russians economical reasons become more essential at the borders between Russia and Kazakhstan as well as between Russia and China (Simutina and Ryzhova 2007). These differences in behavior as well as the very image of tippy people wasting money for bagatelles, on the one hand, and of misers who count pennies, on the other hand, generate negative ethnic stereotypes among *experts* in the field of contacts with neighboring countries and later among all others.

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## Conclusion

The border transformation from a line (stripe) dividing states into the space of intensive contacts and interactions of people changes their life cardinally. Residents of borderlands on both sides of the boundary begin to make profit of the neighborhood, namely of the difference in prices, opportunities, and life standards. Even those, who in no way participate in cross-border movements, exchanges, and communications, receive their small part of border-related profits which are redistributed from commuters to their closest circle members as well as to other spheres of local economy.

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<sup>2</sup>Rambler finance (2008) Glava Primor'ya: chislo kitayskikh turistov v kraye uvelichilos' v 2,5 raza (The head of Primorye: the number of Chinese tourists in the province increased by 2.5 times). <https://finance.rambler.ru/news/1676585/https://finance.rambler.ru/news/1676585/>. Accessed 10 November 2017.

Lack of incentives to cross the boundary can be significantly more important than obstacles to overcome while crossing state borders. When motivation is weak, the abolition of barriers does not change anything, whereas strong incentives force to include the border factor into the set of inevitable social costs.

Spontaneous speculative transactions (“to buy cheap—to sell at a high price”) “sewed” together transected areas and maintained the achieved living standards of local people. This kind of transactions typical of the first post-Soviet decade was later replaced by more diverse interactions related to the development of small business, services, and tourism. Nevertheless, the difference in prices continues to be an important incentive for cross-border interchange at both “old” and “new” borders of Russia. The changes in practices based on family, friendship, and professional ties were equally strong. The generations, bound by the common Soviet past, studies in universities, work at industrial facilities, lose their consolidated positions and quit the scene as they become older. Their successors are driven by other motives and interests, they are oriented at other emotional and pragmatic landmarks. This type of cross-border interactions, however, continues to be important as before thanks to intermarriages and new waves of migrations to neighboring countries. The social practices, which compensate the deficiency of quality services and create a kind of symbiotic relationships between borderlands communities, remain most stable.

Despite all the diversity of situations at Russia’s boundaries, the cross-border practices form a common background uniting all borderlands. On the one hand, these practices are *very flexible* and can change quickly in dependence on international situation and bilateral relations, the state of economy in adjacent countries and regions, exchange rates, prices, customs duties, transport tariffs, etc.; on the other hand they are *very stable*. They are so well-established in the life of boundary communities that people can not live anymore without realizing advantages of their near-border position; even significant changes in border regime does not exert a notable influence on them.

Crisis developments and acute international conflicts do not entail a total stop of cross-border interactions. Daily living needs of people, requirements of economy, and positive cross-border cooperation experience accumulated over the previous years facilitate maintaining of critically needed level of contacts. The attitude to a “good neighbor” is subject to situational changes to a lesser extent than the attitude to a neighboring state which alternates from plus to minus easily.

Partnership between countries creates certain prerequisites for activation of local cooperation, but does not always lead to the growth of its intensity. A characteristic example is the border between Russia and Kazakhstan where the processes of boundary “banalization” are significantly less prominent than in Russian-Polish or Russian-Chinese borderlands. The causes are: low density of economic activities, long distances between large cities, poor infrastructure, and low mobility of population.



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