

Review of Sabine von Löwis and Beate Eschment (ed.) (2023)
Post-Soviet Borders:
A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Land.
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Routledge Publishing issued an interesting edited volume in 2023 that aims to investigate the phenomenon of post-Soviet space and borders. The main research target of the book is the emergence, development and re-bordering processes that have been present since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that generate significant economic, societal and geopolitical impact.

The edited volume is divided into four major parts that jointly involve twelve chapters. Object of the first part is the analysis of the dynamics of bordering in the Post-Soviet Space, like the process of 'opening to the West', traumatic effects of the re-bordering and the dialoguing borders. The second part orients its research attention to the Western part of the post-Soviet space, i.e. the issue of Kaliningrad and Transnistria. The third part looks at the South Caucasus, namely the Azerbaijani and Georgian borderland, borderisation of South Ossetia and the Turkish-Georgian borderland. Finally, the fourth part analyses the region of Central Asia, like the meaning of the neighborhood in the Fergana Valley, conflicts in the Isfara Valley, and the relationship between Kazakhstan and China in the post-Soviet space.

The edited volume basically attempts to grasp the phenomenon of our contemporary world, namely we are the eyewitness that the pendulum of borders has been shifted from the idea of a borderless and open world to a much more bordering one with closing and less permeable borders. Borders, especially in the post-Soviet space, gain more and more attention and significance for everyday life. As Ariane Bachelet (p. 148.) notes, “*Borders have not disappeared; on the contrary, they are increasingly prevalent in today’s world.*”

Beate Eschment (p. 221.) aptly underlines the existence of hard border structures and their negative impact on people, specifically “*The borders between the former Soviet Republics are more closed than in Soviet times. (...) They make everyday life more difficult for people because they require long detours as well as costing nerves and energy, since crossing the border depends on a decision by border officials that is perceived as arbitrary.*” Moreover, the book makes effort to present the ordinary life in the selected borderland spaces, where border can be a barrier for cooperation, but also a possibility for cooperation itself, “*Life in the borderlands is contradictory. The border zone is both a barrier and a buffer, a territory of exchange and cooperation among various economic, political, military, cultural, and criminal forces.*” (Olimova – Olimov, p. 201.)

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical shift with significant and wide-scale changes. First of all, it unleashed a dramatic re-bordering process in the Soviet geographic and geopolitical space, the nominal boundaries of the USSR were transformed into thousands of kilometers long state borders. Subsequently, 15 independent states appeared from the ashes of the Soviet Union and all the emerging new republics started to define their political boundaries, political system, social order, ideology and they developed the idea of national identity and ethnicity. Besides of the internationally accepted states and borders, there is a growing number of so called 'de facto states' and/or 'de facto borders' which further complicate the multifaceted geopolitical settlement. These officially recognized post-Soviet states and the emerging new 'de facto states' have generated huge borderland areas with impact on everyday life of millions of people and major impact on economy, wellbeing and infrastructure possibilities.

The wide-scale changes also altered the major institutional constellation in the border zone, reshuffled the positions of individual actors, namely the former party authorities and leaders (e.g. leaders of state companies, state farms, bureaucratic state institutions, etc.) disappeared and a new network of authorities came to power, like politicians, businessman, farmers, smugglers, mafia-bosses and drug traffickers with fully new interests and wishes, thus feeding the instability of the post-Soviet space.

These borderland areas, although in different scale, are home to national, ethnic and religious minorities who have suddenly found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the border in regard to the titular nation, hence minorities are often in position of potential 'targets' and potential 'tools' for the nationalist and populist narratives. This means that the major and alarming problem is that people living in borderlands may be categorized as contested citizens, they can become the strategic objects of control policies (e.g. passport, education, labour, etc.) and/or they can be even identified as an issue of national security. Consequently, these difficulties and unsettled tensions easily generate obstacles to everyday life, like difficulties during visiting the graves of the ancestors, attending funerals, economic and societal problems, impoverishment of the borderland spaces and/or the arbitrary and unforeseeable behavior of the border officials. What is more, border issues either make it difficult or in some cases impossible to utilize the resources and the common infrastructure that was built and subsequently inherited from the Soviet period, this further increases poverty of the borderland areas.

According to the book, the fundamental root of the current border problems in the post-Soviet space go back to the late Russian Empire and the early Soviet Union. Especially during the latter one, nationalities and ethnic groups were established and institutionalized through the Soviet politicization of ethnicity (a system of administrative hierarchy and titular nationalities known as *korenizatsiia*). Beate Eschment (p. 224.), puts this issue in the following way, “*today’s conflicts are almost always rooted in the Soviet era (...) We see this especially in the current border disputes in the Fergana Valley and the Caucasus, which can be traced back to borders that were repeatedly redrawn or not clearly delimited in the 1920s or to Soviet infrastructure that was constructed with no regard to the borders between the republics. That this problematic legacy has still not been overcome testifies to the failure of central governments and places unnecessary burdens on the border population, which in some cases result in bloody localised border clashes*”. In other words, the post-Soviet space has inherited the unresolved problems and tensions which have accumulated during the decades of the governance by the Soviet Union.

The book brilliantly explains, if we want to understand the post-Soviet space and its formation, there is a serious need to understand and to reflect on the early Soviet State which preferred national delimitation. As Stephan Rindlisbacher (p. 56.) notes, “*Bolshevik politicians (...) saw the nationality question as an opportunity to enlarge their own power base.*” Establishment of the Soviet socialist republics, as part of the joint Soviet Union, and their nominal borders did not go hand in hand with the ethnic and linguistic borders. This settlement logic rather could be explained by the fact that the Bolsheviks identified themselves as 'marxists' with significant attention of (dialectic) materialism, thus they interpreted the economy as the most important factor for social progress. This materialist and economic logic generated a practice that the nominal borders of the Soviet republics were rather structured around economic rationales, especially with attention to electrical power production instead of ethnic, national and linguistic criteria. Besides of that, the nominal borders between the individual soviet socialist republics were formed also by the interests of the Politburo, politicians and Bolshevik leaders.

Moreover, the Bolsheviks did not define the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic 'nationally' and this was done because the 'Russians' were understood as a fully developed nationality which was not in a need of an assistance from the party to make further social progress. Consequently, Moscow was undecided in ethnic questions and it offered only broad or even vague provisions. The party and the highest state leadership often choose not to be involved in the nationality and ethnic questions and feuds because it could have absorbed too much energy, attention, personnel and funding at a time when the Soviet Union needed to concentrate all its energy to industrialization, arms race and socialist revolution elsewhere in the world. Subsequently, the nationality and ethnic issues were delegated to regional and local functionaries who either followed their own specific interest and/or were incapable for the task.

What is more, industrial, economic, raw material accessibility and geopolitical conditions often overshadowed the ethnic realities, hence huge parts of different ethnic and linguistic groups found themselves in different administration. For example, the predominantly Russian-speaking population territories were transferred to Ukraine on the basis of economic argumentation and because of the idea of better governability of the region; however, this economic based management of regions fundamentally accumulated tensions that led to the current Russian – Ukrainian war with potential to launch an even bigger conflict with possible destruction of civilization.

Other realities further blurred the border and borderland issues, like Moscow gave only very slight instructions in question of territorial issues in some areas, like in the South Caucasus; some exact boundaries between the republics remained unclear, while some areas belonged simultaneously to two republics and some areas belonged to no republic; the very flexible management of pastures between the republics and disruption of their use by collectivization policy which caused that nomadic and semi-nomadic people had to settle down in various areas, hence the new administrative management of borders seriously disrupted the historically old approaches to the pasture areas. Stephan Rindlisbacher (p. 60.) describes the vague definition of borders in the following way, “*large sections of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan remained unsurveyed and unmarked. The ZSFSR was dissolved in 1936*

along with these uncertain boundaries. This was the status quo until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ill-defined boundaries between the South Caucasian republics continue to pose problems today.”

Furthermore, the volume gives an insight into some important border conflicts in the post-Soviet space. One of the remaining relics of conflicts is the tension between Moldova and the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) which is still an unresolved issue. People on both sides continue their lives and interactions with each other in spite of confrontation between the authorities. There is an informal cooperation in the sphere of medicine, education and the students from Varnița often study at colleges in Bender, while most young students from the PMR continue their university education at Moldovan universities. Furthermore, well-established transportation links exist between the separated parts of the city of Bender. The center of the city is linked with the northern district by bus routes, the transfer is quick, while the border control is rather implemented as a mere behavior of formality. Even more, the bus fare can be paid either in Transnistrian or in Moldovan currency. Many prohibitions and restriction between the disputing territories are not applied and/or they are simply bypassed, hence the border is de facto in a permeable mode. Although, the COVID-19 crisis and the health care measures seriously complicated the daily lives. As Nikita Turov et al. (p. 113.) write, “*The Transnistrian conflict, according to both sides, has neither an ethnic nor religious basis; rather, it is of a political nature. Addressing the tensions in the divided cities can be an important step towards a resolution of the dispute.*”

Another serious conflictual site is the borderisation issue of South Ossetia and (the rest of) Georgia. The former is often labelled as a 'de facto' state that seceded after an armed conflict, while the latter considers the territory as its integral part. Today, the bordering line is extremely hard and de facto impenetrable, thus almost nobody can travel between South Ossetia and Georgia. This borderisation has generated deep effects, namely it disrupted the rural practice and agriculture of the area, causing serious impoverishment of families in the region. The new strict boundary line disrupts the local sacred practices, because it prevents the access to the cemeteries and church; however, these are the organic elements of everyday rural lifestyle. The real problem is that both sides interpret the territory of South Ossetia as indivisible and both express morally and legally legitimate rights; therefore, their positions are irreconcilable in these days. As Ariane Bachelet notes (p. 149.), “*borderisation directly impacts the daily lives of the inhabitants of the border zone and commuters and has shown that it is through the forced reorganisation of their spatial practices that Russia and South Ossetia have managed to produce a new ‘interstate’ border.*”

The collapse of the Soviet Union has fueled the emergence of frozen conflicts, as the conflict between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. Object of this conflict is the ancient Fergana Valley, which was a single geographic and political entity for a millennia, inhabited by tribes and peoples with different language and different life-style, like the Turkic-speaking Kyrgyz nomadic pastoralists and the Iranian speaking Tajik sedentary farmers. The Fergana Valley space was sometimes a part of empires and kingdoms, while sometimes it was an independent political entity. Although, the Soviet era, together with the policies of sedentarisation and collectivization, altered the conditions of the space and pushed the region towards a more fragmented and ethnically/nationally demarcated structure. “*Border conflicts are indicative of a complex post-Soviet nation building process in Central Asia, major changes in the border areas, as well as the emergence of a completely new set of problems in the region, such as heroin trafficking and smuggling.*” (Olimova – Olimov, p. 189.) In other words, the ethno-nationalism in Central

Asia is a certain result of the Soviet nationalities policy. In April 2021, a conflict between the local people quickly deteriorated into an armed military confrontation with involvement of heavy military equipment. This moment was important because, “*the April clash on the Tajik- Kyrgyz border was one of the largest border incidents in Central Asia and the first interstate armed conflict in the region.*” (Ibid. 187.) There are parallel reasons for the conflict between the two republics. The first is the mutual accusation of seizing the disputed spaces; the second is the transport infrastructure; the third is the water distribution question; and the fourth is the question of pastures and their access. Nevertheless, important to note that the problem is not due to a lack of water, but it is influenced by the outdated irrigation methods, irrigation systems and the improper management of the water system.

What is more, border issues are fueled not only by internal factors, like nationalist and ethnic claims in the post-Soviet space, which have been partly already described, but the external ones are also important and they play key role in the (in)stability of the post-Soviet space. These external factors might include the effects of international politics and geopolitical interests of the great powers, thus the post-Soviet space and its borderlands are often aggravated by the international community. Individual states and their borderlands are victims of geopolitical rivalry of either regional players and/or the great global powers. Furthermore, many NGOs are also active in the area; however, they often support the two sides of the borderland area in an unbalanced way; consequently, one side is overrepresented over the other which might cause power shift. Membership in different international security and economic cooperation organizations also cause significant tensions and pressure on borderlands, e.g. Georgian and Ukrainian attempts to receive membership in the European Union and/or in the NATO structure have fueled hard military conflict with Russia; or membership of the post-Soviet republics in different and competing economic communities (WTO or EAEU).

The most important messages of the book are twofold. On the one side, the chapters aim to articulate and prove that the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath is definitely not over. Rather, it is an unfinished process and it is in a constant flux because of entanglements within and across the former Soviet Republics. The events around Crimea in 2014 and the Russian-Ukrainian territorial conflict are explicit and palpable signs that the disintegration is an ongoing process and the post-Soviet space is far away from being a stable geopolitical space. As Olimova and Olimov write (p. 200.), “*we continue to live with these historical processes of economic and social reconstruction.*” On the other side, the conclusion of the book grabs one of the most fundamental problem of the post-Soviet space and its relation to the borderland areas, “*One of the things that cements border communities is a critical distance from the state due to the fact that the latter is primarily focussed on state building and national security and not on solving practical everyday problems on its periphery*”, while “*The emergence of these cross border communities is, in any case, a glimmer of hope with regard to future peaceful relations across the borders.*” (Eschment, p. 225.)

To sum up, the edited volume of Sabine von Löwis and Beate Eschment, ' Post-Soviet Borders: A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Land ', offers a very interesting reading about the borderland areas in the post-Soviet space. The edited volume aims to explain the origins of the border conflicts, bordering and rebordering process over the last 30 years in the post-Soviet space. The book is primarily recommended for the academic community, historians, students of political sciences,

international relations and for those readers who are interested in the topics of the post-Soviet issues, border studies and in the Self – Other identity building nexus.