Borders and identity in theory and practice of the Eastern Baltic Region
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BORDERS AND IDENTITY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE EASTERN BALTIC REGION

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At the present stage of social development in Europe and Russia, studies analyzing and evaluating ethnic and national borders are of increasing relevance. Over the last three decades, the state borders in the Baltic region have been stable, which is not the case in Europe in general. The author believes that the key reason behind the current crisis in Russia-EU relations is the conspicuous neglect of Russian interests in the neighboring countries that formed after the disintegration of the USSR. However, escalation of the conflict was historically and geographically predetermined. The political borders of post-Soviet states do not coincide with the ethnic ones and, therefore, the attempts to consolidate states through ethnic mobilization meet corresponding resistance from groups with a different identity. In the Baltic region, these processes have not reached the Ukrainian scale; however, there are prerequisites for ethno-political conflicts of this type. The post-Crimean political debate in the Baltic states has shown that that hardliners of a strict assimilation model of state identity prevail in Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn.

This study sets out to analyze the political consequences of the conflict between the existing models of ethnopolitical identification in the border areas of the Eastern Baltic region. The main result of the study is that it has proved the existence of a special type of identity characteristic of border regions of the Baltic countries. In the context of this identity, the classic postmodernist dilemma of "us and them" is insufficient for a proper scientific analysis, and even more so for a political forecast. The formation of a special "double" or "transitional" identity in the border areas can serve both as a tool for strengthening of states and intergovernmental relations and as a ground for large-scale conflicts with hardly predictable consequences.

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The state border issues cannot remain on the fringes of public policy simply because a border is a mandatory feature of any state. Both global and European research carried out by geographers and historians, ethnographers and internationalists have drawn a lot of attention to these issues. In the 20th century studying border-related issues became particularly popular. This interest was fuelled by four principal disputes/events. We would like to note that three of them are directly related to the Baltic region:

1. Postwar borders (World War I).
2. Postwar borders (World War II).
3. Collapse of the colonial system.
4. Collapse of the socialist bloc and the USSR.

The problem of dichotomy of the state and ethnic boundaries was most actively discussed within the framework of the territorial and political delimitation resulting from the two world wars. In the wake of the First World War in the Baltics, some border-lines were drawn with no account for the ethnic factor. This was true of the German-Polish, Polish-Lithuanian, Latvian-Soviet and Estonian-Soviet borders. It is characteristic that all they were a source of instability, wars and underwent radical revision after the Second World War. They were adjusted in accordance with the ethnic factor. New German-Polish and Polish-Soviet borders were drawn taking into account the strategic and ethnic considerations. If the strategic factors were in conflict with ethnic boundaries, these were the ethnic boundaries that got adjusted, by such methods as deportation, among others. Political and legal assessment of some related events is subject to contoroversy but, typically, the new boundaries would be based on the coincidence of ethnic and political lines that were both stable and rooted in the political and economic systems in which they were created.

We would like to note that in the USSR, the research on boundaries was extremely limited. The study of boundaries in the Soviet Union was seen as 'a bourgeois pseudoscience and geopolitics'. A small monograph by an ethnographer and a small-circulation collection written by geographers from the Moscow State University became practically the only available volumes on the issue; both became a rarity immediately after the publication [1; 2]. Of course, after 1991, the situation started changing rapidly, and the number of papers dedicated to limnological issues began to grow rapidly. Before we review current theories, we should admit that the long isolation of the Soviet science led to the fact that after 1991, the Russian scientific school was unable to offer any original theoretical insights, and focused more on the study of specific borders and regulations on the access to border areas.

Let us consider the foreign policy aspect of the problem posed in the title of the article. The stability, status and type of boundaries depend on the general nature of relationship between the states or shared public associations. In 1999, one of the leading Russian experts in the field, A. Makarychev wrote, 'Russia has established its new attitude toward the West from the geopolitical point of view pretty quickly but the West remains in the intellectual confusion and has no constructive ideas to be guided by in the policies towards Russia' [3, p. 3]. Time was lost; Russian perception of European

policy changed and expectations gave way to disappointment. As a result, in 15 years, having overcome the 'intellectual confusion' and promoting the 'Eastern Partnership', the collective 'West' confronted a tough response from the Russian government. The statements made over the past 20 years emphasising our priority interests in the CIS countries and the protection of compatriots evolved into a real policy.

The political processes, which have rapidly unfolded since the autumn of 2013 in the former Soviet Union, or, more precisely, in the Ukraine, helped raise a number of complicated issues that require explanation of the situation. In the Baltic Sea Region (including the Baltic States, Poland, Finland and Germany), a massive debate over the genesis, forms, methods and prospects of the Russian foreign policy was initiated. One of the key elements of the discussion was a new insight into border issues in Eastern Europe and Russia in particular. We should note that many of the issues discussed among the colleagues have long ceased to be new for Russian scientific and expert community, although they are still relevant.

Consideration of the Russian Federation borders within the currently existing borders shows remarkable continuity on the boundaries. The Russian state has existed in these lines since as early as the end of the 16th — beginning of the 17th century. The fact that Russian current borders (especially in the European part of Russia) are almost identical to those of the Russian kingdom 400 years ago is very significant. Of course, the full comparison of the geopolitical position of Russia in the late 20th century and Russia in the 16th/17th centuries is questionable primarily because the border is not the only factor that determines the state's geopolitical characteristics. Nevertheless, the main geopolitical factors influencing the policy of Russia in the Baltic region in the 16th/18th centuries were as follows:

1. Russia's lack of reliable access to the Baltic Sea and as a consequence, the lack of either military or commercial fleet, and limited foreign trade opportunities.

2. A considerable number of Russians and Orthodox Christians living in the countries adjacent to Russia, who have been subjected to national, cultural, linguistic and legal discrimination by the states where they lived. Naturally, politically this population leans towards Moscow.

Thus, Russia and her president, Vladimir Putin, faced the dichotomy of the ethnic and national boundaries similar to that experienced under Peter the Great. However, the borders near Belgorod, Bryansk and Ivangorod lead to logical questions as to why both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, having established all the prerequisites for the creation of six national states in Eastern Europe, collapsed leaving a large part of the population identifying themselves as 'Russians' outside the Russian border. As S. V. Kortunov notes, 'You can not equate the Soviet Union as a state and the country which has historically been Russia' [4, p. 11]. The USSR collapsed but historical Russia persevered, and not always the official boundaries of Russia coincided with the boundaries of the so-called "Russian World". In the Baltic Sea Region this problem has also existed although obviously is not as

acute as in the Ukraine. We would also like to note that, despite the massive forced displacement of the population, the ethnic and political boundaries of the "Polish World" do not match either, for example.

The recent developments in Ukraine have clearly shown that in the states that have not been subject to any adequate political and economic modernisation, the geography of boundaries can go from the theoretical level to a practical one. This requires certain conditions. An inefficient state is one of the reasons; no less important is the history of boundaries, ethnic and ethnocultural composition of the population — especially in border areas.

The key issue related to the state borders of Russia in general and Russia in the Baltics is the duality and inconsistency of the ethno-cultural and territorial-political identification. That is why the events in Ukraine are so carefully monitored by Latvia (the Latgale problem), Estonia (North-East) and Lithuania (the Vilnius district). 'In the border areas the category 'identity' appears in several interrelated perspectives: first, the identity as boundary (the boundary between identities in the geographical space), and secondly, as the mutual impact from formal boundaries (primarily the state ones) and identities' [5, p. 131].

These processes, as rightly pointed by K. Segbers are quite clearly geographically referenced: 'In Eastern Europe, where since 1989 a nation building process had taken place, and new states used to come out, their role seemed to be increasing. But in fact, since the 1990's it (the nation building practice — *N. M.*) has been structurally and essentially weakened' [6, p. 69].

The significance of research into the dichotomy of the ethnic and national boundaries lies in the large-scale revision of European borders in the post-Stalin period. It should be remembered that the 'two world wars have very much changed the map outline for different countries. 54.2 % of the borders in Western Europe were established after 1910; 24.3 % are dated l910—1924, and 29.9 % occurred after World War II' [7, p.11]. These figures refer to the "anxious" year of 1989. Today, given the collapse of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, these figures have grown. 'Globalisation has eroded the 'Westphalian cartography' along with clear dividing lines between the area' [8, p. 483—484]. Border as a boundary and barrier gradually evolved towards the development of a contact function, but it was taking place in difficult conditions: '... the collapse of the Soviet bloc... the break-up of the Soviet Union... again put Europe in the focus of conflicts and tensions' [9, p. 25]. These lines, written 22 years ago, are a testament to the fact that the current problems were predicted in a timely manner — but they were not heard. The crisis and destruction of Yugoslavia, Moldova and Georgia did not receive any adequate conceptualisation in research. For example, in 1990 Joseph Camilleri pointed to the theoretical component of the emerging problems: 'We live in a period of transition to a new form of civil society, in which there are no clearly defined boundaries, based on the principle of national identity' [10, p. 35].

It is difficult to argue with this formula but it is not clear why military conflicts arise and boundaries are revised in the context of identity transit. The thing is that the struggle for national borders, while remaining at the

forefront of global politics, is not the only political opposition 'front' between countries. Now there is a fight at the 'second front' without any not clearly determined boundaries, and the processes of ethnic and cultural identification, self-identification and reidentification are being steadily politicised. As noted by V. Tishkov, 'identity is not only the ever-changing concept that there is a group; that is always a fight for control of the representation, definition, for what constitutes the group's main features and values. And the fight is not only a political one. It is in the field of science and religion, the language relations, symbols, historical and territorial ideas etc.' [11, p. 37].

The phenomenon is understood in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn. From the point of view of the Baltic political elite the ethnic form of social identity is the most important for the development of national identity, which in this case becomes a national identity. However, the imposition of the nation-state identity encountered stubborn resistance from non-titular nations. That has actually resulted in assimilation under the guise of integration and patriotism, which is why the issue has received so much attention. Fighting against the Russian language in this context is quite logical as the current national identity is based on language as its key formal characteristic. Religious identity gives less opportunity for the nation-state identification. In the case of Lithuania and the Polish minority, this factor does not work at all. In Estonia and Latvia the religious identity factor historically has never been a high priority. However, the persecution of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in Estonia shows the ruling elites' attention to this factor of creation of a national identity as well.

The national identity lays the foundation for modern territorial and political education burdened with a lot of historical 'memory complexes'. It is formed by the interaction of elements of two types:

1) the original elements of the political and cultural matrix (national mentality, stereotypes, archaic forms of identification, unconscious elements of social beliefs of an individual about his own group membership etc.);

2) the state coercion, i. e. the ability of the state to influence the processes of identification through the use of ideological, economic and political measures.

At present, along with the official boundaries, there appear some fuzzy and/or shifting boundaries, which are formed in different ways in different strata of society. In particular, we can talk about the so-called "boundaries of identity". The state border of Russia is not homogeneous, it can manifest as:

— a limitation on the territorial 'security space' (boundaries);

— a transition line to the adjacent territory (borders);

— a peripheral line (margins);

— a line of contact with neighbours (frontiers);

— an area which has its own specificity generated under the influence of close cooperation with its neighbours and multiculturalism (borderlands) [12, p. 3—4; 13, p. 15].

Russian borders in the Baltic region serve all of these purposes. A combination of factors — including shared history, modern security systems and

economic cooperation in the region — account for a somewhat post-modern character of borders with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Russian-Polish border, which was created as a barrier, is rapidly developing its contact functions associated with the so-called 'simplified mode'. It should be added that, with the Russian-Polish border, the impact of the contact on the speed of "contact zone" development is quite significant. Without the 'simplified mode', as it is in the case of Russian-Finnish border, only decades of the cross-border relations could provide such an effect, i. e. the transformation of the type of contact with neighbours in the area, which has its own special characteristics acquired under the influence of multiculturalism and close cooperation with the neighboring regions. When one is considering the reasons for this phenomenon, it is easy to assume that the resulting multi-status nature of the boundary is strictly dependent on the general climate of bilateral relations.

However, the historical component is also important, especially in cases where the new state borders conincide with the old administrative boundaries. According to Michael Emerson, Russia is the 'reluctant ex-empire' that has lost most of its influence in the former Soviet Union, but still remains a strong centre, while the EU is the 'reluctant empire', which is gradually growing though further European expansion. Since these two empires exist in the same geographical and political context, the interaction between them is inevitable. If there is a centre, then there will be peripheries. The problem in the case of Russia and the European Union consists precisely in the fact that the peripheries partly overlap. In accordance with the Emerson's gradation, the 'regions of border Europe' are divided as follows [14]:

• Clean-cut periphery (i. e. the areas where there is a 'watershed' between the two 'empires', and there is no uncertainty about the status of an area). Probably all the legal (Lithuania, Latvia) and actual (Estonia) borders with the Baltic states can be attributed to this type today.

• Integrated periphery (i. e. the states that seek to integrate with one of the two 'empires'). Until 2004, those were the Baltic States.

• Divided periphery (i. e. the states that maintain communications with both 'empires'). In the Baltics, there are no examples, and that is certainly Ukraine on the western border of Russia.

• Overlapping peripheries (i. e. the entities where communities identify themselves as part of one of the 'empires', are located on the periphery in the other 'empire'). That is the north-eastern part of Estonia, a part of Latgale.

Which concepts may help explaining the situation there? A number of questions in the identity cross-border research theory have been comprehensively analysed by V. Popkov, so we will only mention those factors that have not been considered in his seminal work on the subject [15]. We agree with the position of V. Popkov on the role of the 'cataclysm diaspora' theory [16] and with his idea that it is best to study it within the new borders of the former Soviet Union. The existing approaches and concepts of 'transmigration' have limited application as far as the dichotomy of the state and national borders goes [17].

Some additional features are mentioned in the works of scholars who prefer transnatsionalist approach to international relations, where international relations are understood as 'all interactions between the state-based entities across the state boundaries [18, p. 284]. Transnationalism explains the crisis of internal borders within the EU and in other integrative associations. Border built as a barrier are the institute that distorts the logic of economic and political decision-making in the state. Transnatsionalists therefore believe that in terms of the rationality of decisions the states lose non-state actors [19].

According to the constructivist tradition, cultural, or, more precisely, ethnic boundary is determined by the result of internal social construction, both individual and group-related. In 1969 F. Barth used the category of 'border' to determine the ethnic group in his book, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Cultural Differences. F. Barth and his co-authors note that the presence of ethnic groups inevitably involves spatial boundaries, since ethnic communities tend to have spatial localisation. In this context, we point out an important observation made by Barth in the introduction to the volume:'boundary maintenance is unproblematical and follows from the isolation which the itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity' [20, p. 11]. Thus, in accordance with the classical approach of F. Barth, ethnic boundaries reflect the outcomes of internal social construction or organisation of cultural and psychological differences in the interaction of a given ethnic group with other groups. Indeed, if the boundaries set the differences between ethnic communities, then the gradient of the differences would be greater, since each side might identify itself as a bearer of fundamentally different values and symbolic meanings and images [21].

Postmodernism as a research strategy draws special attention to borders, both symbolic and real. With regard to the study of borders, one of the most important theoretical inputs of postmodernism is the study of border transformation. Postmodern approach has some limitations, particularly in its focus on informal borders to the point of disregard of formal boundaries, so one can only partially agree with the mission statement of postmodernists, 'A distinctive feature of a border zone is the transcultural nature and presence in the cultural space of many others, the presence of a variety of borders and the forced border crossing practices' [22]. While this cannot be true of all cases, in the Baltic Sea area, and, more specifically, in the eastern part of the Baltics, this approach is quite applicable.

The way cultural identity is practiced in the border areas is not only an admission, but a sign of complete awareness of the boundaries of a cultural and political phenomenon, its norms and practices. Sometimes, however, a boundary is used as a multi-purpose marker of cultures. That is the way the Russian-Chinese border used to look like in the past. Such a boundary is transformed into a 'milestone', a multi-faceted 'limit'. Because this border exists, it is possible to identify culture around it.

The question then arises, what happens if similar, rather than different, ethnic and cultural groups are separated by a boundary? In other words, what happens to the cross-border ethnic identities on the borders between Ivangorod and Narva, Braslaw and Daugavpils, Pskov, Pechora and Tallinn? In cases like these, cultural and ethnic markers are close [23]. Moreover, it looks as if an ethnic identity was shaped regardless — and often in spite of the border.

This thesis is particularly relevant in the Baltic region, where the issues of boundary stability have been recently revised. Yet in Europe as a whole, this issue is addressed even more rigorously. National regionalism of the new Europe implies a possibility (but not a necessity) of several alternatives of regional ethno-political identity for each community. For the Baltic Sea region, it is still unclear whether we are looking at an auxiliary identity based on two 'reference cultures' or at one reference culture and an auxiliary one (as is the case with the border areas in the North-East Estonia and Daugavpils, for example).

It should also be noted that the categories of "Self" (friend), "Alien" (foe), or "the Other" so frequently mentioned in the post-modern discourse cannot fully and comprehensively meet the objectives of the identity studies for border areas. In the Baltic region, either mixed or transitional identity models are created in some cases.

Let us consider the situation in the city of Narva, Estonia. Can we really describe people who live there in these terms? They speak Russian at home and Estonian at work. They have a Russian passport and an Estonian ID card. With their Russian passport they can go to Vladivostok, with their Estonian ID — to Lisbon. They have two SIM cards — one for a Russian network, one for Estonian. They did not have to serve in the Russian army, because they have lived in Estonia all their life. They did not have to serve in the Estonian army, either, because they have a Russian passport, and with it — a Russian citizenship. They work in Narva, at the border, and their firm's headquarters are in Tallinn. Their partner's business is based in St. Petersburg. They do not care for either Protestant or Orthodox denominations. And so the question remains — how do we classify this person in relation to either Russian or Estonian culture? We may not know the answer yet, but, unfortunately, both Moscow and Tallinn have long chosen to regard such people as "foes". Now, given the rising tensions between Tallinn and Moscow, the issue is growing hotter and hotter.

Summing up, we should note that the political visionaries of the 19th century were already talking about expanding the boundaries of the state in the context of the unified boundaries of ethnic identification (self-identification) and the state borders.

In 1872, Otto von Bismarck, who was familiar with both Russia and its Baltic provinces, was quoted as saying, 'I would not accept the Baltics even if Russia presented it to me as a gift'. Unlike his successors, this German Chancellor was well aware of the fact that economic and political control over the territory was not enough to ensure its full integration into the

German Reich, i. e. into the 'German World'. Such an approach means that attempts to execute territorial and political control by force while ignoring established territorial identities cannot be successful in the long run.

On the other hand, the experience of the Baltic region shows that an unbalanced national policy creates potential threats and a possibility of a revision of national borders.

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