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A Border Regime in the Making? The Case of the Contact Line in Ukraine

Sabine von Löwis & Gwendolyn Sasse *

Abstract: *»Ein Grenzregime im Entstehen? Die Kontaktlinie in der Ukraine«*. The central aim of the paper is to analyze the ceasefire line in eastern Ukraine, widely referred to as the "Contact Line," as an evolving border and a potential social and political boundary. We conceptualize the ceasefire line both as a special type of border that divides conflicting parties and a formerly integrated population and as a border regime managing different forms of mobility. Our mixed method approach combines ethnographic and survey data. The analysis of the formal border regime regulating the access to the divided territories is broadened by a perspective that foregrounds the local residents' practices and perceptions. The article highlights different mobilities and the informal variations in the border practices along and across the ceasefire line as well as the social and political identities accompanying these practices.

Keywords: Border, border regime, ceasefire line, Contact Line, Ukraine, Donbas, practices, perceptions, identities.

1. Introduction[1]

Borders drawn amidst an ongoing war neither fit traditional conceptualizations of stable interstate borders, nor do they describe a reality where the salience of demarcation is secondary. Conceptually and empirically, such borders remain underexplored. This paper addresses the tension between a rather fixed border and its malleability through an empirical focus on the so-

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[1] This article is, in parts, based on research conducted in the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script" (EXC 2055, Project-ID: 390715649), funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy. The survey research was funded by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS). The authors gratefully acknowledge the local fieldwork conducted by Yuliya Abibok and research assistance provided by Alice Lackner.

called “Contact Line,”[2] the ceasefire line in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, a result of the peace negotiations culminating in the Minsk Agreement in February 2015. The war in eastern Ukraine belongs to the almost 50 percent of incidents of violent conflict around the world in the period from 2011 to 2015 that occurred in the near vicinity of international state borders (Simmons 2019, 262). At close to 70 percent, the share of violent conflicts in Europe/Central Asia was the highest worldwide in this period, underlining the significance of border disputes in the aftermath of the end of socialism and the Soviet Union in particular (Uppsala Conflict Program Data; see http://ucdp.uu.se/ [Accessed 27 September 2021]).

Local movement and interaction is, to some extent, made possible through the institutionalization of the Contact Line. At the same time, mobility is also severely restricted and controlled, reinforcing the realities created by war. At an institutionalized ceasefire line, the “filter” function of borders (Simmons 2019, 264) is enhanced, allowing for very limited crossings. The “connectedness” is strongly shaped by measures of “control” in regard to who may cross the line when, how, and for what reason. Control is accompanied by efforts to “display” authority, namely the authority of a newly formed de facto statelet – and, in this case, the influence of the Russian state. Control along the Contact Line is primarily exerted through a very small number of border crossings, some of them badly demolished and dangerous to cross, rather than a “protective architecture” along the whole border.

The role of ceasefire lines and how they eventually turn into borders in divided (and dividing) societies has been studied with reference to a range of empirical cases. One prominent example is the Green Line between Israel and the Westbank (e.g., Newman 2012). The demarcation line between Cyprus and Northern Cyprus – also called the Green Line – is another prominent case that has been studied, for example, from the perspective of contested borders (e.g., Peristianis and Marvis 2011) and with reference to how ceasefire lines become part of everyday life in an ongoing conflict and a process of Europeanization (e.g., Strüver 2020). Research on the border between South Ossetia and Georgia has also highlighted aspects of “borderization” and affective politics (Toal and Merabishvili 2019), while aspects of the political economy of a ceasefire line have been analyzed in more detail with regard to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia (e.g., Weiss 2012; Oltramonti 2013; See also Kolosov and Zotova 2021, in this special issue).

From a border-migration nexus perspective, borders are primarily interpreted as a “zone of conflict” (Hess and Schmidt-Sembdner 2021) or “sites of struggle” (Brambilla and Jones 2020). Mobility and permeability are central dimensions of borders, but the manifold intersections of borders, violence,

[2] In public and official discourse, the ceasefire line in eastern Ukraine is widely referred to as the “Contact line” or “Line of Contact,” with reference to the contact between the conflicting parties along the frontline. We use both terms interchangeably in this article.

and conflict deserve more attention. Ceasefire lines combine a traditional focus on security and control with considerable variation along the line with regard to institutions, actors, and practices shaping control and connectedness, and they therefore add a new conceptual and empirical focus to the study of borders and border orientations and, possibly, conflict dynamics.

We conceptualize the ceasefire line as a border that not only separates violent parties and intends to stop violence but also divides former socially and functionally integrated areas. This focus raises the question to what extent practices and perceptions turn this border into a social and political boundary and ultimately a new social order. Following the approach of (ethnographic) border regime analysis, we conceptualize borders not as lines on the ground, but as differentiated zones and perforated systems that enable or hinder different forms of mobility. This approach involves an analysis of the formal regulations set up to organize the passage across the line as well as the informal variations characterizing everyday life (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010).

We focus on the functions, the mode of governance, and the degree of openness of the border regime (Berg and Ehin 2006, 55ff; Simmons 2019). The ethnographic regime analysis points to a differentiated and evolving border regime based on the practices of those living in its vicinity (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Hess and Sembdner 2021). This bottom-up perspective reveals the borderwork, understood as the ability of ordinary people to construct and deconstruct borders (Rumford 2012, 897), and border practices related to the experiences or routines of crossing and control as well as local residents' perceptions of the line.

As borders are also tools of identity formation (von Löwis 2015), the question arises as to whether the Contact Line, institutionalized as a temporary border, shapes expectations and identities, and whether these effects change over time the longer it remains in place. The ceasefire line divides contested entities and might underpin a new social and political order (Cooper and Perkins 2012).

After an initial contextualization of ceasefire lines in the comparative study of borders and a discussion of our mixed-methods approach, we present evidence on border crossings from our original surveys, ethnographic research in four places along the Contact Line, and survey data on identities and attitudes about the future status of the contested territories demarcated by the ceasefire line.

2. Ceasefire Lines as Border Regimes in the Making

Borders can be conceptualized as practices of bordering that are not tied to territorial demarcation. Institutions, such as passports, citizenship, and border control practices, describe dynamics of inclusion and exclusion playing

out at different spatial scales from the local to the global level. Borders cannot be reduced to a fixed and separating line but should rather be conceptualized as shifting and in flux (Johnson et al. 2011). In recent years, the concept of "borderscapes" has received attention in border studies. It is a less static and less state-centered concept that draws attention to the actors and factors continuously (re-)shaping the space and power relations around borders drawn by conflict (Brambilla 2015).

Borders are often a result of wars, state formation, conquest, and contestation (Anderson and O'Dowd 1999; O'Dowd 2010). A ceasefire line highlights the processes of creation and disruption around a border and by a border (von Löwis 2015) and reflects the founding violence of sovereign power or a sovereignty claiming power (Brambilla and Jones 2020). It is an extreme case pinpointing the connection between the two functions of a border: separating territories and populations and regulating mobility (Mau 2021; Gülzau and Mau 2021, in this special issue).

A ceasefire line agreed as part of peace negotiations is a special type of border. It is characterized, first and foremost, by security issues. This logic corresponds to a traditional perspective of borders. However, in the context of war and attempts at conflict resolution, the security of civilians takes priority from the perspective of peace negotiators. Demarcation lines resulting from ceasefire agreements cut through settlements and often divide historically, socially, or economically integrated communities. Individuals and whole communities may feel that they have been left on the "wrong" side – and not just the individuals fleeing from the war region. Both previous linkages and war-related pressures necessitate border crossings. A ceasefire line entails the installation of a border regime that regulates the movement of people and goods across the line. This regime is critical for the security of the population on both sides of the line. However, by demarcating separation, it can also have imaginative and performative effects (Cooper and Perkins 2012) that can result in a new social and political order for the local population.

Since ceasefires are routinely broken, ceasefire lines are not absolutely fixed. They include a grey zone of areas and places that both parties claim. These grey zones are especially ambiguous places, as both sides lay claim to them but cannot fully assert control over them (Green 2010). The people living in a grey zone find themselves in an "in-between" space, and the actual line of the border remains contested.

Ceasefire lines are also characterized by buffer zones and different levels and spaces of demilitarization. Moreover, a ceasefire line is conceived as a temporary border until the conflict is resolved. It remains a continuous object of contestation, both at the level of the parties to the conflict and the population that has to negotiate it on a daily basis. Local experiences are entangled with geopolitical agendas. Local and regional elites shape the line in interaction with external actors (Baud and van Schendel 1997), and it is modified

through everyday practices (Wilson and Donnan 1998). As an extreme case, a ceasefire line allows us to study processes and dimensions that escape from view around stable state borders, for example, the extent to which borders create a sense of difference – in people's daily lives and imaginations as they turn into markers of belonging.

While we know a lot about the violence resulting from conflicts over contested borders or migration across borders, there is little systematic research as of yet on the creation of borders in the midst or as result of a (violent) conflict and how such borders are perceived and shaped by those directly affected by the conflict (Parker et al. 2009; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012; Brambilla and Jones 2020). In an attempt to go beyond the predominantly negative connotations of border control, Brambilla and Jones have contrasted the "politics of fear" with the potential for a "politics of hope" crystallizing in borderscapes (Brambilla and Jones 2020). The distinction builds on the notion of borders as a "locus of possibility" linked to "the potential for alternative forms of political arrangements" (Vaughan Williams [2009] 2012). Similarly, when discussing illicit flows across borders, van Schendel (2005) highlights transborder arrangements and – with reference to spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement (Cox 1998) – frames them as spaces of engagement where different actors and scales interlock.

This duality also helps to understand and conceptualize a ceasefire line as a Janus-faced border: it is a more or less fixed territorial divide that aims to limit or end violence, ensure the safety of civilians, and eventually facilitate peace; but at the same time, it violently separates people who have not been divided before and represents a spatial structure of fear. People cross the line officially and unofficially, simultaneously asserting and subverting the separation agreed to by the contesting powers. The potential for spaces of engagement across the evolving border, however limited, could also prevent the ceasefire line becoming a permanent border and contribute to conflict transformation.

Simmons and Kenwick have conceptualized the extent of authorities' commitment to display their authority and capacities to control entry and exit at a (national) border and the values these measures reflect as "border orientation" (Simmons and Kenwick 2021). The concept describes the "public, authoritative, and spatial display of its capacities to control the terms of penetration of its national borders" (ibid., 1) and captures a functional and a symbolic dimension. They operationalize "border orientation" at three levels: the state level, country-pairs, and individual border crossing sites. The emphasis on state borders is limiting and does not fit the context of new borders being created by war. Nevertheless, the concept and its operationalization can be adapted, in particular, by emphasizing the physical environment and different border crossing sites along the line drawn by war. By definition, "border orientation" is extremely high in a conflict setting, but even along a

highly securitized border like a ceasefire line, there is variation that this paper sets out to explore. We are still dealing with a border critically shaped by states – Ukraine and Russia – even if it is a new and possibly temporary border within Ukraine that is also shaped by new local separatist authorities.

3. The Contact Line in Ukraine – Zones and Regulations

The war in the Donbas began in the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. To date, it has claimed over 14,000 lives and left about 1.5 million people internally displaced, with about 1 million fleeing to Russia. This war is not an internal or civil war in Ukraine – though it is presented as such in official Russian discourse. Although the southeast of Ukraine is predominantly Russian-speaking, the distinctions between Russian and Ukrainian ethnicity or language have not been politically salient cleavages motivating war (Giuliano 2018). These distinctions do feature in separatist or war rhetoric, but in reality, many people have a mixed Russian-Ukrainian background and are, to varying degrees, bilingual. These blurred lines have not been conflict-prone in everyday life and continue to exist amidst war (Sasse and Lackner 2018). Separatists in the "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic," referred to here as the non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs), have been financially and militarily supported by Russia from the start. Russia's interest in maintaining leverage over Ukraine severely limits the scope for conflict resolution.

The heavily industrialized, historically grown Donbas is made up of two administrative regions: Donetska oblast (region) and Luhanska oblast (region). Although an older notion of a unified Donbas region is being invoked by the reality of war and in public discourse in Ukraine and abroad, a new internal border in the shape of an unstable ceasefire line that does not coincide with the former administrative borders now cuts across the wider Donbas region.

The so-called Contact Line is a compromise between preventing the escalation of war at a critical moment in time and acknowledging the outcome of war. It has remained in flux since it was first agreed upon in the Minsk Memorandum in 2014. In point 2 of the Minsk Memorandum, the conflict parties[3] demarcated the frontline as of 19 September 2014. According to the agreement, lethal weapons of more than 100 millimeters had to be moved back 15 km in each direction to allow for a buffer zone of about 30 km.[4] However, due

[3] Russia insists on not being called a party to the conflict and defines its role in these negotiations as that of an "observer."

[4] In response to numerous ceasefire violations and continued fighting, the Trilateral Contact Group agreed in 2016 on the establishment of a much smaller demilitarized zone of 2 km on both sides of the Contact Line.

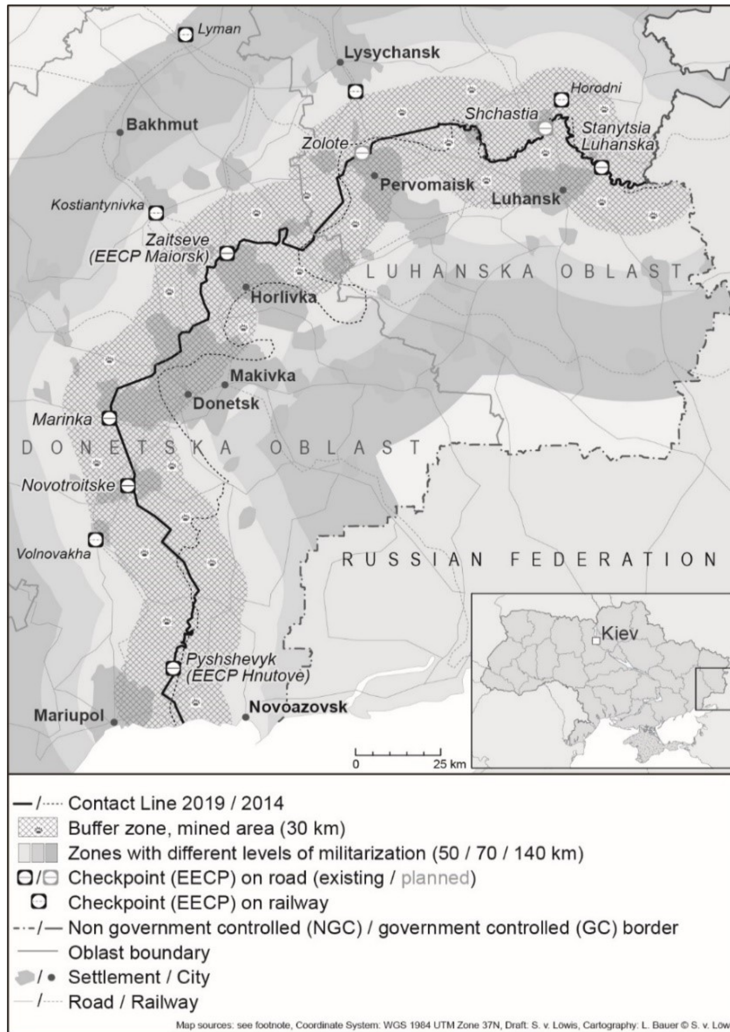
to numerous violations and attempts to gain or regain territory on both sides, the ceasefire line has been in flux (See map 1). Entire villages and parts of settlements remain disputed and form part of a grey zone with restrictions on the local populations and a location in-between the contesting powers. Following the summit in the Normandy format (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, France) in December 2019, the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk tasked with the details of the negotiations reached a new ceasefire agreement in July 2020. Ceasefire violations decreased temporarily, only to become the norm again in spring 2021. At the end of April 2021, a large-scale Russian military build-up close to the Ukrainian border led to a further rise in tensions.

The Contact Line is far from being a border characterized by "mutual acceptance and a lack of contestation" (Simmons 2019, 267) or cooperative border management, but it rests on a partial or temporary acceptance of the political reality on the ground and the wish to reduce the level of contestation. In this sense, demarcation is seen by international institutions like the UN or the OSCE as a way of safeguarding human rights tied to the right of access and confidence-building measures. The line establishes a minimum degree of human rights and welfare – the terms used by Simmons to describe the functions of borders that require more scholarly attention.

Along this 450-km-long line there were five checkpoints (until 2020) – the so-called Entry/Exit Crossing Points (EECP) from the areas under Ukrainian control (government-controlled areas or GCAs) to the NGCAs and vice versa: Stanytsia Luhanska in Luhanska Oblast, and Maiorsk, Marinka, Novotroitske, and Hnutove in Donetska Oblast. Contact was, thus, only allowed at five specific locations along the line, one of them a pedestrian crossing (Stanytsia Luhanska) and the other four pedestrian and vehicular crossings. Two new checkpoints agreed upon at the Normandy Summit in Paris in December 2019 – Zolote and Shchastia in Luhanska Oblast – were not opened as planned in November 2020. They were meant to relax the situation at the other checkpoints, especially in Stanytsia Luhanska and Maiorsk. There are also illegal, often dangerous routes across the Contact Line, which, although we consider them an important part of the border regime in the making, were beyond the scope of our research (NAKO [The Independent Defence Anti-Corruption Committee] 2017; Slyvka and Zakutnyska 2020).

The checkpoints are open every day – in the summertime they are usually open from 6 am to 8 pm and in the wintertime from 8 am to 5 pm, though this can vary depending on local regulations. After closing time, nobody is officially allowed to cross. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most checkpoints were either closed or only opened infrequently.

Map 1 The Contact Line and Checkpoints in Eastern Ukraine[5]



[5] Map Sources: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/ukraine-administrative-boundaries-as-of-q2-2017; https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/; https://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/ukraine/; https://www.unocha.org/ukraine; REACH_Donbas_overview_map_PD_LoC_19JUNE2019_AY_A0 Minsk II Agreement (https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/UA_140919_MemoImplementationPeacePlan_en.pdf; Accessed 27 September 2021).

The Contact Line is not just a line, but a conglomerate of different zones. People living close to the Contact Line usually have to pass several additional checkpoints to leave or return. Coming from the GCAs, people first pass Ukrainian border guards to whom they have to present their papers. They then get checked by the Ukrainian State Financial Agency. Other state services are present around the checkpoint, such as the police, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), and the State Emergency Management Service. Finally, they pass the last position of the Ukrainian armed forces – the so-called "block-post zero." Soldiers are usually only present at night. Beyond this block-post zero people pass through a corridor, the grey zone or no-man's land, that is not controlled by either side. Subsequently, people pass the corresponding checkpoint for controlling papers and goods on the side of the NGCAs. The distance between the checkpoints in the grey zone varies between 300 m and 1.2 km (in Hnutove).

The checkpoints are a world onto themselves. Their "quality" varies considerably. The most modern checkpoint can be found in Novotroitske, which reopened in December 2020 after renovations. It consists of several modern buildings offering medical services, rooms for mothers with small children, a bank, civil administrative services, postal services, etc.[6] The quality of the infrastructure has an impact on the people who are dependent on crossing the line and need to adjust their routines according to the regulations. One official from Stanytsia Luhanska described the situation in an interview as follows: "We are abandoned, we only exist because of the EECP" (Interview 5, local official, Stanytsia Luhanska).[7] Many destroyed buildings, streets, and other infrastructure have not been rebuilt, and there are no job opportunities. In Stanytsia Luhanska, for instance, the local doctors left when the hospital was destroyed. The actual checkpoint is usually the only infrastructure that remains, is developed, and receives some attention in national and international politics. It stands out as a display of authority in an area that is lacking in infrastructure and is struggling with the consequences of war (Simmons 2019, 264).

In order to leave from the GCAs for the NGCAs, people are required to have a Ukrainian passport and a permit (*propusk*). Since summer 2015, they need an electronic permit, which they can receive within the space of two weeks. It needs to be prolonged every year. Children under 16 years are included in the e-permits of the parent they travel with. They can cross with a birth certificate and passport together with a parent providing a power of attorney

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[6] A video presents the new infrastructure to be established in all EECPs at the Contact Line. International guests visit the checkpoint and praise its infrastructure. The Polish representative even jokes that it would be great to have such infrastructure at the Polish-Ukrainian Border. На КПВВ "Новотроицкое" открыли сервисный центр - YouTube (At EECP "Novotroitske" opened a Service Center; Telekanal Dom; Accessed February 27, 2021).

[7] All translations of the interviews into English are our own.

from the second parent and a valid e-permit.[8] As of May 2021, children aged between 14 and 16 years need a domestic or international passport to cross the Contact Line (OSCE 2020). On the side of the NGCAs, the entry requirement is a Ukrainian passport or passports of the DNR/LNR. People with special needs are entitled to priority treatment at the EECPs. The OSCE reports that vulnerable persons may use priority lines at the checkpoints of the NGCAs, something that was confirmed in our interviews in Maiorsk (OSCE 2019). The authorities in the NGCAs have a vested interest in hindering people from leaving, fearing a decline in the population in "their" territories. Ukraine, in turn, tends to impose strict controls on crossing into the NGCAs, as it does not want to support or legitimize them. Both sides regularly change their regulations on what can be taken across.[9]

Several places and administrative districts (*raiony*) that have been cut in two by the Contact Line are under Civil Military Administration (CMA). They are restricted in their self-government, as mayoral and local council elections have been suspended. The CMAs are controlled by the Ukrainian Anti-Terror Centre of the Security Service of Ukraine. This complicates civil control of local authorities, hinders the emergence of local political leaders, and enhances mistrust and disappointment among citizens (Goda, Jilge, and Novykov 2020). Until the end of 2019, there was an extremely high military presence along the Contact Line. The negotiations in late 2019 led to a partial withdrawal of troops, which, however, increased local fears of a new escalation.

Part of a border regime is its visual and material appearance. There is new infrastructure around the checkpoints, including minibus stops, cash machines, toilets, teahouses, post offices, and small markets. The symbolic bridge in Stanytsia Luhanska is a prominent example of the bad condition of roads and bridges. Minibuses, taxis, private cars, and wheelchair transfer services are offered for a fee. The delivery of goods is also organized: carriers and courier services by bike and *tachka* (small wagon) bring packages to the other side after crossing the line from the NGCAs and vice versa. Near the bigger EECPs, like Stanytsia Luhanska and Novotroitske, and in nearby cities like Bakhmut and Kramatorsk, locals offer rooms where people can stay the night when they do not manage to get back on time. Local people also queue at cash machines to offer their place in the line in return for a small fee. This is important for people who have come from distant places in the NGCAs and queued for six hours or more at the checkpoint to collect their pension from the cash machine in the GCAs. Regular surveys conducted by UNHCR and the

[8] Security Service of Ukraine Temporary Order No.222 "On the Movement of Persons through Line of Contact in Donetsk and Luhansk Regions."

[9] For an overview of the current regulations, please see the OSCE Thematic Report of December 2020.

interviews we conducted as part of our research point to much longer waiting hours at the checkpoints in the NGCAs.

Life close to the ceasefire line brings additional restrictions on mobility. The areas along the Contact Line are some of the most heavily mined places in the world (Fischer 2019, 31). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a complete or partial closure of the checkpoints, with some opening just a few days a week (OSCE 2020). The pandemic increased the scope for manipulating control measures along the Contact Line and once again changed the local border regimes. However, these recent developments are beyond the scope of this article.

4. Methodology: Studying a Border Regime in the Making

We combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in our empirical study of the border regime of the Contact Line. This allows us to capture different dimensions of the ceasefire line as a separation line in a formerly undivided society, a marker of belonging and a marker of becoming – a site that is continuously negotiated and renegotiated by different actors (Brambilla and Jones 2020, 289). Original survey data of the population on both sides of the Contact Line from 2016 and 2019 provides insights into the personal linkages across the ceasefire line, both in terms of the frequency of physical crossings in both directions and other forms of cross-border contacts between families and friends. Moreover, the surveys tap into the resident population's imaginations and preferences regarding the future status of the divided region. Survey data on those living in the NGCAs are rare. Particular methodological challenges are associated with surveying the population in a region characterized by war, but on balance, ignoring the perceptions and preferences of those most directly affected by the war is not a satisfactory option either.

The Donbas surveys were part of a project funded by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS). The surveys were conducted by the international agency R-Research in December 2016 and March 2019. In the government-controlled areas, 1,200 face-to-face interviews were conducted, split evenly between Donetska and Luhanska oblasts. The interviews were based on a multi-stage quota sample, with the age, gender, and educational attainment quotas of the urban and rural populations taken from the latest available official statistics.[10] Due to difficulties of access and potential

[10] In the GCAs, settlements and routes were selected randomly; a quota sample (age, gender, urban-rural) was drawn at the level of the respondents. The response rate was just below 40 percent in the GCAs and therefore comparable to other surveys. In the NGCAs, the same quotas

security concerns on the part of the respondents, the interviews in the NGCAs (1,200 people) were conducted by telephone (CATI based on existing databases and random dialing). Telephone interviews have advantages and disadvantages. From extensive pilot tests and our first round of surveys in 2016, we knew that respondents in the region most affected by the war value the higher degree of anonymity and personal control the method provides. A sensitivity bias in a politically difficult war setting cannot be excluded. However, nonresponses after establishing contact were mostly related to not meeting quota targets. Many survey questions revolved around the respondents' daily lives. Moreover, the results of the 2016 telephone survey were much more diverse on a range of political questions than the assumption of a fear of local or Russian oppression would have led us to expect. These results encouraged us to carry out a second survey in the NGCAs. In both surveys, phone calls across were made from Kharkiv, a city in eastern Ukraine bordering Russia, in order to ensure a degree of cultural similarity and mutual trust. The telephone questionnaire had to be shorter and simpler than the one used in the face-to-face interviews, but the key questions remained the same across both populations. Despite obvious inherent methodological challenges, we regard these surveys as one important source tapping into the attitudes of those most directly affected by the war, about whom little is known due to the difficulties of accessing the NGCAs.

In order to obtain a more nuanced view of the reality of the border regime on the ground, we conducted an ethnographically oriented study with local researcher Yuliya Abibok in four places along the Contact Line in October/November 2019, including three of the five checkpoints (Stanytsia Luhanska, Zaitseve [EECP Maiorsk], Pyshchevyk [EECP Huntove]) and one place (Zolote) situated right on the Contact Line without a border crossing. The inclusion of institutionalized checkpoints allows for insights into border practices and variations in the regime set up to manage entry and exit. The selection was also informed by safety and accessibility concerns and was conceived as a test of what kind of research is possible in such a tense and risky setting. Zolote, Stanytsia Luhanska, Zaitseve, and Pyshchevyk in the GCAs are separated from parts of their former administrative community and currently find themselves under Civil Military Administration (CMA) and allocated to new regional centers in the GCAs. By contrast, while the *raion* Volnovakha is also under CMA, its main village, Pavlopil (with the attached

were applied in 2016 as in the GCAs, as no reliable official data on the current resident population in the NGCAs existed and no apparent biases materialized. In 2019, a mixture of official and unofficial statistics were used as a baseline. In the NGCAs, the contact rate was about 40 percent and the response rate 5–12 percent (rural/urban), with about a third of the contacted people refusing to take part and others not meeting the required quota criteria. Given the situation on the ground and the methodological approach chosen, these numbers offer as much validity as deemed possible. Across both territories and years, 20 percent of the interviews were cross-checked by supervisors.

villages of Pyshchevyk and Chernenko), still has its own local council, which, however, has not been re-elected since 2010 (it was excluded from the local elections in 2015 and 2020).

The local researcher was familiar with the region and had visited before. Her aim was to conduct narrative interviews and ethnographic observations in four places along the line. Where allowed and possible, she took photographs around the checkpoints and the corresponding settlements. It was only possible to visit the checkpoints from the GCAs and impossible to cross into the NGCAs. The local researcher was provided with an interview guide developed by the authors but encouraged to adopt a flexible approach and adjust to the situation on the ground. Whenever possible, we kept in touch through regular email exchange if questions arose regarding the field trip and particular local situations. The aim of this research, conceived as a pilot study, was to gather information about local border practices through in-depth interviews in addition to the researcher's protocols of her own observations and comparisons with her previous trips along the Contact Line. The objective was to interview a range of people with different profiles (age, gender, profession, nationality) and, where possible, to include (local) officials. The checkpoints are not welcoming places for either the individuals crossing or for researchers. The conditions in the autumn of 2019 were, moreover, particularly harsh. Overall, 20 interviews were conducted with locals with different crossing habits.[11] In Pyshchevyk (EECP Hnutove), Zolote, and Stanytsia Luhanska, it was possible to talk with an official. The interviews capture a particular moment in time, but they convey a strong sense of the practices around the checkpoints and along the ceasefire line. The observations and interviews contribute to what can be called an ethnographic border regime analysis that reveals how people (not) crossing the line interact officially and privately with border personnel (police, guards, customs, etc.), perceive and experience the controls at checkpoints and block posts, and implement regulations, etc. Individuals and their networks take center stage in ethnographic border regime analysis. We apply this method as a complement to the state-centered analysis of regulations that set the rules for crossing and living with the Contact Line.

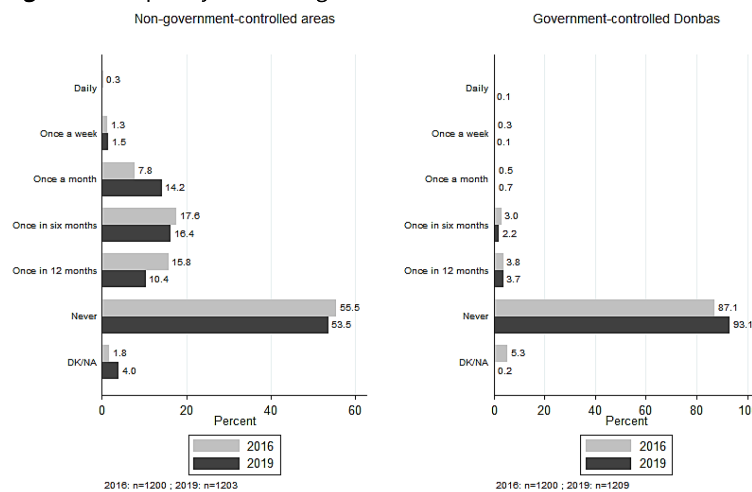
[11] In Zolote, five interviews were conducted but, in three of them, one or two further individuals joined in, bringing the overall number of participants up to ten. In Stanytsia Luhanska, five interviews were conducted; in one of them, another person was present, bringing the overall number of participants to six. In Zaitseve, five individual in-depth interviews were conducted; and in Pyshchevyk, another five individual in-depth interviews took place. In sum, 26 people took part in the interviews (14 men and 12 women). The interviews were conducted in November 2019.

5. Actual Contact Across the Contact Line

The checkpoints are of particular importance for pensioners in the NGCAs, who come to the GCAs regularly to register and receive their pension in person. They also make the trip for a variety of other personal reasons, such as family visits, medical treatment, checking on premises, and small business or smuggling activities. According to UNHCR statistics, each month about a million people cross the line (UNHCR 2020). The distance people travel to and across the Contact Line from the NGCAs is considerable (20 km and more), whereas individuals traveling in the other direction usually come from a radius of about 6 km from the Contact Line.[12]

The continuation or disruption of personal ties across the ceasefire line and personal experiences of crossing the line shape border practices and the scope for imagining a shared space. The experiences of crossing the Contact Line are thus linked to the question of whether the ceasefire line is becoming a new social and political boundary. Our surveys asked respondents how often they crossed the line between the government-controlled the non-government-controlled territories (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Frequency of Crossings from …



There has been greater mobility from the non-government-controlled areas. In both years, about half of the respondents in the NGCAs said they had never

[12] See statistics from a UNHCR survey conducted in January 2020; out of 2,175 people surveyed, 53 percent travelled more than 20 km to the Contact Line.

crossed into the government-controlled areas. The regression analysis[13] shows that those never crossing the line are more likely to be younger, less educated, from rural areas, and with somewhat higher incomes (the latter having only a weak statistical effect; see tables 5 and 6 in the Online Appendix).[14] By comparison, 16 percent in 2016 and 11 percent in 2019 said they crossed the line about once a year. Furthermore, 18 and 17 percent respectively visited government-controlled areas once in six months. Education and being from an urban setting are the sociodemographic controls positively correlated with these occasional crossings. Lastly, 8 and 15 percent respectively crossed into the government-controlled areas once a month, and about 1 and 2 percent respectively crossed the line as often as once a week. Older and more educated individuals were more likely to cross the Contact Line more frequently, and the trend between the two survey years points to an increase in more frequent line crossings. In 2019, respondents were almost three times more likely than in 2016 to say they crossed the border once a month. This reflects a certain sense of normalization amidst a protracted war and risk calculations based on a stable but low level of fighting. In line with this trend, the likelihood of respondents crossing the border once a year or never fell by 31 percent and 34 percent, respectively, between the two survey years.

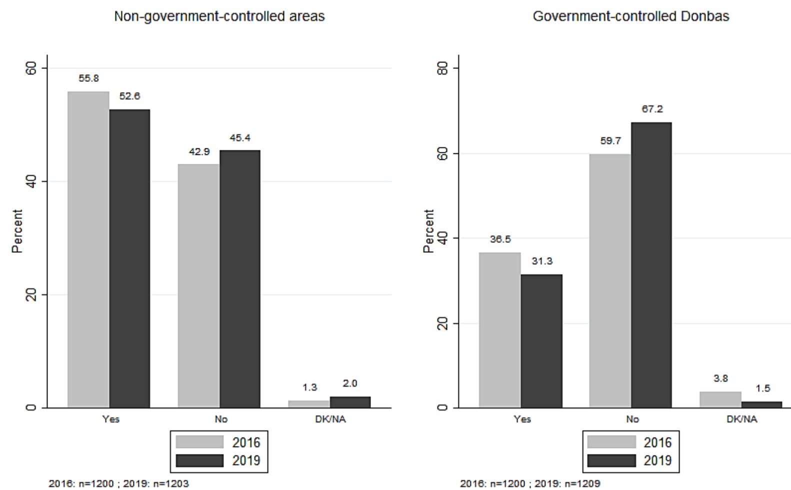
Mobility from the GCAs across the line is very limited; here there were no significant changes over time: a large majority of the respondents – 92 percent in 2016 and 93 percent in 2019 – said they had never crossed the Contact Line. In both years, only around 4 percent crossed the line once a year, and just 2-3 percent once in six months.

A second survey question asked respondents whether they had relatives or friends on the other side of the ceasefire line (Figure 2). In the government-controlled Donbas, 38 percent (2016) and 32 percent (2019) said that they had friends or family in the NGCAs. In 2016, 62 percent had no personal ties across the ceasefire line, while in 2019, 68 percent reported the absence of such ties. This difference was statistically significant. In 2019, the chances of respondents saying that they had relatives in the non-government-controlled areas were about 25 percent lower than in 2016. Thus, deep personal ties across the frontline have been decreasing, most likely as a result of displacement, despite an increase in the more frequent crossings from the NGCAs.

[13] For the logistic regression analysis, the crossing practices were coded into three groups: “never,” “occasionally” (a combination of the answer categories “once in 6 months,” “once in 12 months”), and “often” (a combination of the answer categories “daily,” “once a week,” and “once a month”). Standard sociodemographic controls were added (age was categorized into five groups: 18-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-100).

[14] The Online Appendix “HSR Trans 34” is available at https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.trans.34.v01.2021.

Figure 2 Relatives on the other side of the Contact Line



Crossing the line does not require personal links and can be motivated by socio-economic needs. Nevertheless, a higher share of respondents in the NGCAs has personal connections across the ceasefire line: more than half of these respondents reported having relatives or friends living in the GCAs (57 percent in 2016; 54 percent in 2019), while about 44 and 46 percent respectively had no such ties. None of these small differences between the years were statistically significant.

6. A Ceasefire Line Turning into a Border

A ceasefire line is meant to be temporary. The longer it is in place, however, the more it turns into a border and a border regime. The making of the border regime is characterized by variation. While authorities regulate the behavior across a border, the conditions on the ground, the agency of the people crossing, and the fluctuations in the relations between the conflicting parties at different political levels also shape it. Additionally, the legacies of the pre-war social and economic relations within the region continue to influence border crossings and the perception of living close to the border.

In our research to date we can only include interviews conducted on the side of the GCAs about practices, perceptions, and daily life at the Contact Line more generally. While crossings from the NGCAs to the GCAs are

primarily motivated by Ukrainian pension payments, crossings in the other direction are shaped by the legacies of social and functional relations.

Four variations of an evolving border regime emerge from our ethnographic data:

- "Closed border and isolation" (Zolote)
- "Ever-changing trade regulations" (Stanytsia Luhanska)
- "Experiences of flexibility" (Zaitseve, EECP Maiorsk)
- "Local (cross-) border traffic" (Pyshchevyk, EECP Hnutove)

These variations within the emerging border regime demonstrate the importance of local specificities, in particular the nature of the checkpoints and their former functional integration with places on the other side of the Contact Line. Certain regulations and practices are universal, but there are local variations with regard to how they are applied and the importance attached to them. Weiss refers to "differential permeability" to point to "the fact that in the everyday life of 'borderlands' different categories of people have different opportunities to cross borders and consequently can also resource on borders to different degrees" (Weiss 2012, 215, her referring to Reeves 2008). The ethnographic research at the checkpoints shows that for want of other options to earn a living, many people take advantage of the inadequacy of the checkpoint infrastructure to make money. While most interviewees voice their discontent with the separation of functional, cultural, and social links in the region, at the same time they are glad the Contact Line exists, as it makes them feel safer despite continued shelling and ceasefire violations.

We start with the presentation of impressions from Zolote, which captures the general situation along the 450 km Contact Line as a rather closed border across a formerly strongly interconnected region. We will then discuss how crossings are regulated and practiced at three checkpoints and how people living close to the Contact Line use and perceive the border (regime) in their everyday lives. We have categorized the variations on the basis of the frequency of the crossings and the motivations behind them, as well as people's experiences of crossing or living close to the line with its grey zone, the CMAs, and other consequences of the war.

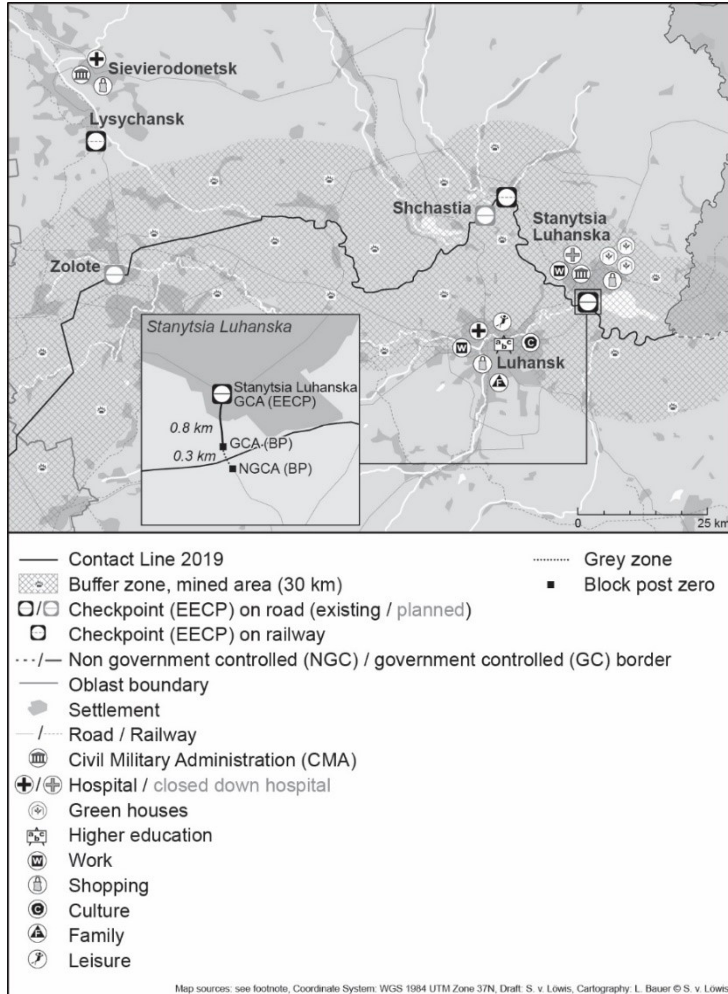
6.1 "Closed border and isolation" (Zolote)[15]

Zolote represents the typical case of the closed border along the Contact Line. It has about 14,000 inhabitants and used to be organized around several industrial enterprises and coal mines. The Contact Line cuts through the settlement structure of Zolote and separates former administratively,

[15] In Zolote, our local researcher talked to ten persons in individual and group interviews: seven of them women (in medical, technical, or logistics-related jobs) and three men (active miners). Their ages and places of residence within Zolote varied. Some of them were engaged in local NGOs to organize the distribution of humanitarian aid.

economically, and socially connected communities (Slyvka and Zakutynska 2020). Zolote consists of five villages (Zolote 1–5), all of which had very close links to Pervomaisk, the nearest bigger city and regional center now located in the NGCAs. Zolote 1 to 4 have been reallocated to the regional center of Popasna in the GCAs while Zolote 5 is located in the NGCAs.

Map 2 Zolote[16]



[16] Map Sources: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/ukraine-administrative-boundaries-as-of-q2-2017; https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/; https://www.openstreetmap.org/

Economically, Zolote and Pervomaisk are traditional mining towns that already started experiencing a decline in the late Soviet period. There is only one remaining active coal mine, "Karbonit" (in Zolote 2), which used to belong to the coal-mining enterprise "Pervomaiskugol."[17] The Contact Line cuts through a medium-sized coal-mining enterprise and a cluster of related companies in decline. The miners are afraid that "Karbonit" will be flooded like many other mines, which would mean the loss of the last remaining job opportunities, as well as an ecological catastrophe, for the region. The mine is the last hope and job provider in Zolote, even though the miners go unpaid for months. They do not feel that anybody is looking out for their interests and describe a power vacuum that makes them feel unsafe and insecure:

> We feel a lack of power. [...] They [the CMA] removed the mayor, [...] and for several years – we had neither a mayor nor a CMA head. Even though the CMA was made for us – we were without them [the CMA]. We got a CMA head who was later also removed. Therefore [...] yes, we have no power [local authority]. And, it feels like there will never be one [local authority]. (Interview 3 with two miners and the wife of one of them, who works in a shop in Zolote)

The four settlements of Zolote on the GCA side have been left with very limited infrastructure, including bad roads and public transport. Leisure, medical treatment, education, social gatherings, and public transport used to be centered in and around Pervomaisk. The current formal administrative attachment to Popasna as the regional center in the GCAs has not compensated for the loss of former links to Pervomaisk, and no serious efforts are being made to change this. This variation of the emerging border regime is characterized by isolation from the previously close linkages to areas now located in the NGCAs. The feeling of having been abandoned by the Ukrainian state is very strong. The CMA shows no interest in or capacity for dealing with the residents' local needs. This sense of isolation is being reinforced by personal experiences at the checkpoints. A number of block-posts control movement towards the line. A woman living in the vicinity gets checked every time she moves between places. She does not understand this level of control, even though there is no official crossing point in Zolote:

> And, of course, it's humiliating in the end. [...] This is wrong. We, the citizens of Ukraine [...] This should not be the case for Ukrainian citizens. And we have no road anywhere [...] from the occupied territory. (Zolote, Interview 4)

People report that they feel like "strangers" or "the other" no matter where they are. This sense is being reinforced by a ring of barbed wire around Zolote 4 and the uncleared mines in the surrounding woods and fields. People are

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#map=8/47.726/38.740; https://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/ukraine/; https://www.unocha.org/ukraine (Accessed 27 September 2021).

[17] http://miningwiki.ru/wiki/Первомайскуголь (Accessed 27 September 2021).

thus severely restricted in their personal movements. The sense of isolation not only relates to the impossibility of crossing the Contact Line, but also to the perception of being abandoned within the GCAs and the "grey zone" near the line.

6.2 "Ever-changing trade regulations" (Stanytsia Luhanska)[18]

Stanytsia Luhanska is a town of about 10,000 people located 20 km northeast of Luhansk (NGCAs). Officially part of the GCAs, it is the only public checkpoint in Luhanska Oblast between the GCAs and NGCAs. Compared to other checkpoints, Stanytsia Luhanska has the biggest share (about 28 percent) of people crossing the Contact Line (294,016 out of a total of 1,067,899 in January 2020).[19] Structurally, it used to be a "sleeping town" of Luhansk: People went to Luhansk for work, leisure, and medical treatment. They continue to do so for medical treatment as it is closer and cheaper for them and still has a better reputation.

In contrast to other "sleeping towns," which are usually characterized by multi-store apartment blocks, Stanytsia Luhanska consists of single detached houses with gardens. As early as the 1980s, the residents of Stanytsia Luhanska developed small businesses. They grew vegetables and fruit in green houses and sold them at the markets in Luhansk. Thus, the many regulations about the transfer of products across the line directly affect their livelihoods. Not only do people continue to try to earn money by trading fruit and vegetables, but they also rely on others to transport packages across the line.[20] A man who has been involved in this business since the late Soviet times complains:

> In all those years we traded cucumbers and tomatoes, we went every day from April to September. We carried our vegetables and were allowed to do so. This year it was forbidden to carry our own products. It was impossible to get through. At the checkpoint they put pressure on us when we were carrying goods. (Interview 1 Stanytsia Luhanska)

The people involved in this local trade cluster complain about the changing regulations that restrict their business, making it too expensive and uncertain. People eagerly await the lists of products that form part of these regulations, but the frequent changes naturally cause disruption as well as

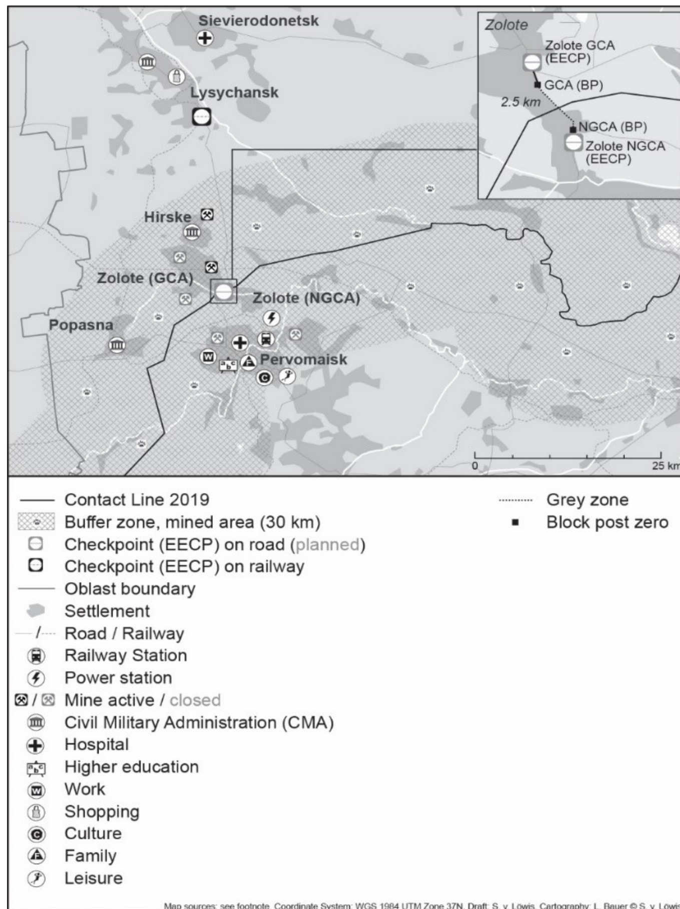
[18] In Stanytsia Luhanska, five interviews were recorded with four men and one woman. Some of the men were involved in cross-border trade. They had been growing vegetables and fruit since the 1980s and sold produce on the markets in Luhansk. Most of them were locals from the region with several jobs. For example, the interviewed woman was an accountant and at the same time engaged in growing and selling fruit and vegetables. All the interviewees report that they now travel less frequently than in the past and some have stopped growing vegetables and fruit.

[19] UNHCR Crossing the Contact Line: January 2020 Snapshot.

[20] An 82-year-old woman reported that she had received 300 Hryvnya to carry a package across the Contact Line. This is a respectable sum given that a pension amounts to 1500-2000 Hryvnya (less than 50 Euro) a month.

corruption tied to how the regulations are interpreted. Instead of specifying the products that could be traded, the regulation of November 2019, for instance, included a list of products that could not be taken across the line. This change reduced the margin for interpretation and was meant to limit corruption. The checkpoints can also suddenly declare that no products at all can be taken from one side to the other. This happened, for example, at the beginning of 2019.

Map 3 Stanytsia Luhanska[21]



[21] Map Sources: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/ukraine-administrative-boundaries-as-of-q2-2017; https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/; https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=8/47.726/38.740; https://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/ukraine/; https://www.unocha.org/ukraine (Accessed 27 September 2021).

The changing regulations reflect different political agendas. The blockade of March 2017 was an attempt to cut links from the Ukrainian side as part of the political strategy pursued by former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Local business activities were labeled "financial terrorism." President Voldymyr Zelenskyi, who won in the 2019 elections, promised instead to focus more on the needs of the local population in the Donbas, including the non-government-controlled areas. The new regulations are part of this strategy, but do not always have the intended effect.

There are no local market alternatives for the local population; some people have tried to reorient themselves and sell their products in other regions and towns as far as Kyiv. The new regional center for Stanytsia Luhanska is Sievierodonetsk. To reach it, you have to pass five further checkpoints and pay 150–200 Hryvnya for transportation. Thus, on the local population's mental map, but also logistically, it is far away. By comparison, Luhansk feels closer despite the difficulties at the Contact Line and therefore remains the main focal point and market, not least because produce can be sold there at a higher price.

In sum, local residents struggle with the arbitrariness and ever-changing nature of the trading regulations and the lack of alternative sources of income or trade networks. Our research in Stanytsia Luhanska shows that the people who live here continue to trade across the Contact Line, in one example of the on-the-whole less frequent crossings from the GCAs to the NGCAs. The interplay of different actors (re-)makes the rules and resulting practices: people transporting their produce across the line cut deals with the local guards and include them in their business, and the government uses the trade regulations as a strategy for dealing with the conflict at large.

6.3 "Experiences of flexibility" (Zaitseve, EECP Maiorsk)[22]

Zaitseve is a town at the Contact Line in the GCAs with about 3,400 inhabitants. Before the onset of the war, it was a suburb of Horlivka, an industrial town of about 244,033 inhabitants that is now in the NGCAs. Zaitseve is located about 11 km north of Horlivka (NGCAs), 21 km from Bakhmut (GCAs), the new regional center, and 49 km from Donetsk (NGCA).

The checkpoint Maiorsk[23] is located in Zaitseve. It has the second biggest share of crossings after Stanytsia Luhanska. In January 2020, 252,883 crossings of the Contact Line were registered here (24 percent of a total number of

[22] In Zaitseve, three women and two men were interviewed. All were older and had been working in different jobs, ranging from working on a farm, as a cook, or as an artist. Some were originally from different regions in Russia but had been living there since the late 1960s/1970s; others were locals. They all received pensions and tried to improve their financial situation by growing fruit and vegetables and keeping goats or chickens to live on and sell. All the interviewees have family and premises on the other side of the line, whom they visit quite regularly.

[23] The name of the EECP Maiorsk is derived from the train station near Zaitseve.

1,067,899 crossings).[24] Similar to Zolote and Stanytsia Luhanska, Zaitseve has been cut off from its former center of work, education, medical treatment, and life in general in Horlivka. Horlivka was a typical industrial Donbas town with coal mining, a machine-building industry, a chemical industry, etc. People from Zaitseve still visit Horlivka to visit family members, go to the local hospital, attend church, and some look after their properties. Like the situation in Stanytsia Luhanska, it is easier and cheaper to go to Horlivka rather than Bakhmut. However, Horlivka is no longer a shopping destination, as the prices in the NGCAs are now comparable with or higher than those in the GCAs.

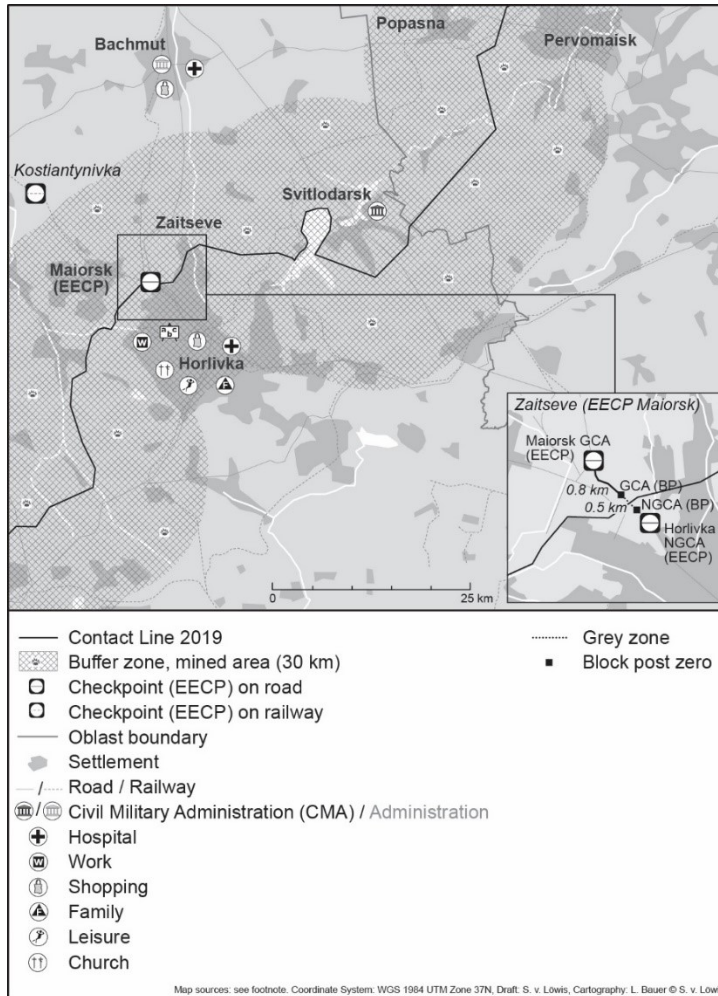
As in Stanytsia Luhanska, foodstuffs are carried across the line mostly for personal consumption. The locals do not seem to have the same business interests or dependencies as the people interviewed in Stanytsia Luhanska. Most of them cross the line for other personal reasons. Some may be involved in jobs related to transfer activities, but they do not provide details in the interviews. Even though people complain about the long queues at the checkpoints, they are aware of the times when crossings are somewhat easier and faster. Usually, they cross over into the NGCAs early in the morning and return very late in the evening just before the checkpoint closes. The interviewees also talked about a special corridor for locals and about not being controlled when they are known to the border guards on duty. One interviewed woman even reported an exchange of goods with the border guards:

> The boys behave well. Sometimes they come to me and ask, "Oh we really would like to have something homemade." I gave them pickled cucumbers and tomatoes. And I see them looking for nuts. "Let us give them to you" they say. (Zaitseve Interview 3)

However, she has not had much success convincing the border guards on the side of the NGCAs to make the crossings easier. Even though Maiorsk has the second biggest share of crossings, locals are afforded some flexibility when crossing. Overall, Zaitseve represents a variation of the emerging border regime that exhibits a degree of flexibility in the management of border crossings by locals despite the overarching tense relations with the Civil Military Administration.

[24] UNHCR Crossing the Contact Line: January 2020 Snapshot.

Map 4 Zaitseve, EECP Maiorsk[25]



6.4 "Local (cross-) border traffic" (Pyshchevyk, EECP Huntove)[26]

The small village Pyshchevyk used to be the southernmost EECP for exiting and entering the "Donetsk People's Republic" and crossing the Contact Line.

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[25] Map Sources: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/ukraine-administrative-boundaries-as-of-q2-2017; https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/; https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map =8/47.726/38.740; https://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/ukraine/; https://www.unocha.org/ukraine (Accessed 27 September 2021).

The line here follows the Kalmius River. Until 2015, the village belonged to the *raion* Novoasovsk, which is now part of the "Donetsk People's Republic." In December 2015, the village returned to the control of the Ukrainian authorities and is now part of the *raion* Volnovakha in the GCAs.

The official name of the EECP is now Hnutove. Hnutove is a village about 7 km south of Pyshchevyk, where the EECP was located until 2016.[27] The local interviewees view it as a success that the EECP has been transferred to Pyshchevyk (with the EECP name "Hnutove" remaining intact), because now the village no longer belongs to the grey zone, a location that would have made it comparable to Zolote. Apparently, the local head of the community of Pavlopil convinced the head of the Civil Military Administration in the region to shift the EECP to Pyshchevyk, a village of about 20 inhabitants.

Compared to the other border places discussed above, the EECP Hnutove has the smallest share of entries and exits along the Contact Line. According to UNHCR, in January 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Hnutove registered 87,234 (8 percent) of 1,067,899 crossings at the Contact Line.[28] Passing the EECP and also the checkpoint between the EECP and Mariupol is comparatively easy. Even our local researcher was not checked on her bus trip from Mariupol to the EECP because the guards remembered her from previous visits. When talking to locals in a shop near the EECP, people did not report delays and some mentioned that the border guards knew them and allowed them to cross even after the checkpoint officially closed. This is a clear difference from the other EEPCs, where people report being forced to stay on the other side when they arrive after the official checkpoint closing time. A male interviewee (Interview Pyshchevyk 1) crosses the line almost every day. His family lives in the NGCAs close to the Ukrainian-Russian border:

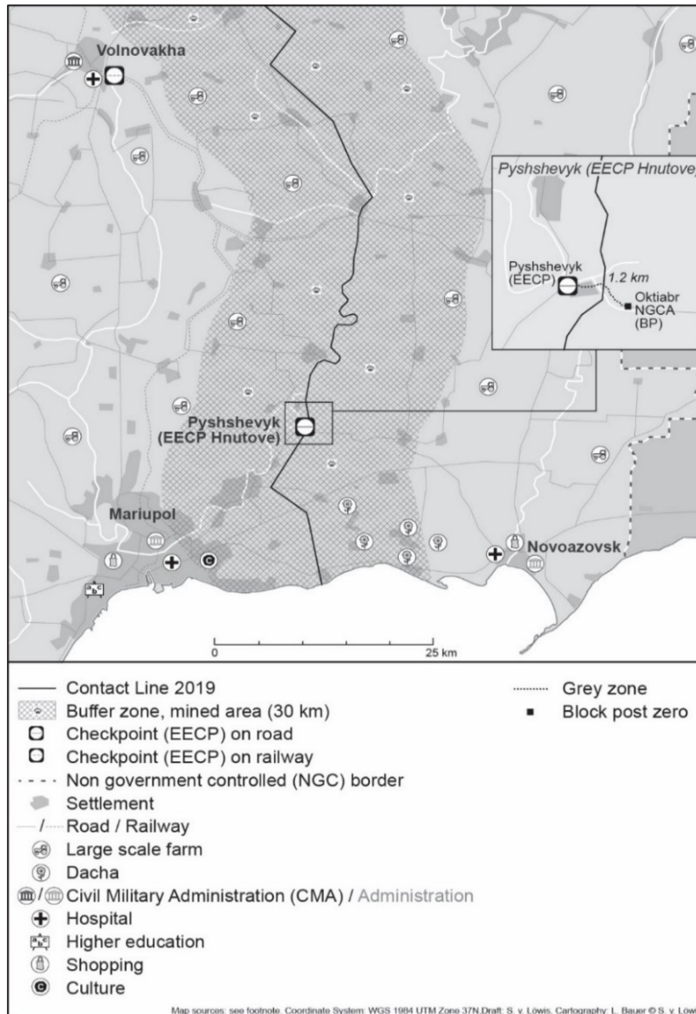
> Well, sometimes we were late. Well, they approached us, talked. I showed the passport, that I really live here. (Interview Pyshchevyk 1)

[26] In Pyshchevyk, five men were interviewed. One of them was the mayor of Pavlopil. The other men were either born in the town or had moved to the village from Luhansk. Some of them explained that they did not cross the line but knew about the conditions for crossing from family members who cross regularly for shopping and family visits. The men were educated as miners or technical workers on a Kolchoz. Now they were also growing vegetables and keeping animals.

[27] The local head of the community convinced the CMA to transfer the EECP from the village of Hnutove to Pyshchevyk in 2016 on the provision that the old name, Hnutove, be retained.

[28] UNHCR Crossing the Contact Line: November 2019 Snapshot (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/r2p_eecp_report_nov_eng.pdf).

Map 5 Pyshchevyk[29]



Our researcher also observed how border guards and locals talked like friends in the local shops. For the locals, the presence of the EECP provides a sense of security. However, the partial troop withdrawal after the last Normandy Summit seems to have altered the close relationship between locals

[29] Map Sources: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/ukraine-administrative-boundaries-as-of-q2-2017; https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/; https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=8/47.726/38.740; https://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/ukraine/; https://www.unocha.org/ukraine (Accessed 27 September 2021).

and the border guards. One man describes, for example, that there are now more random checks on men of all ages. Before, only young men were routinely checked:

> It was like this – randomly they controlled, especially when they saw a young man. But not (those) older than 50. But now everyone up to 60 years and older is being registered – since the moment of troop withdrawal. (Interview Pyshchevyk 1)

Although it has been relatively easy to cross the EECP, only two of the five interviewees had actually crossed it. The reasons given for not crossing varied: One interviewee had been tortured in the NGCAs by military units for not following orders instantly. He said that he would never go there again but still has a number of friends he meets up with in the GCAs. Others do not have relatives to visit or other reasons to go. Overall, the social and functional connections with the surrounding settlements on the other side of the line have never been very strong and the population density is low. The region is more agricultural and was characterized by large collective farms that continued to operate as big farms after the end of the Soviet Union. An interviewee explained that the lines are usually longer around the end of the week as people from Mariupol head to their weekend houses on Fridays and return at the beginning of the following week.

Another notable feature of this location is an agreement on maintaining the gas connection across the line. The village of Pavlopil receives gas from the NGCAs. A private individual collects the gas fee from local residents and brings it to the other side. In the spring of 2019, the pipeline was destroyed by Ukrainian shooting. It was repaired and has been functioning again since December 2019. This deal is remarkable and, as far as we know, the only one of its kind along the Contact Line. While several agreements on water and other infrastructural connections across the line have been negotiated at higher political levels, there are no others based on comparable local agreements.

Even though only a few of our interviewees actually cross the line, we classify the situation at this EEPC as "local (cross-) border traffic." The agreements about the delivery of gas are based on local and individual negotiations between the two sides. Moreover, the degree of familiarity with the border guards and the flexible crossings even after the official checkpoint closing time indicate an informal and localized practice.

Overall, the different experiences and practices show that despite the minimal level of security the ceasefire line provides, locals perceive it as an obstacle to maintaining social and functional relations. People feel peripheralized in several ways: located on the periphery of bigger industrial centers (such as Luhansk, Donetsk, Pervomaisk, or Horlivka) from which they are now cut off. Moreover, they suddenly find themselves living along a border, which they either have to overcome to get to a former center or travel long distances to new regional centers in the GCAs at considerable expense. The

former social and administrative order has been disrupted and a new one has not yet been established. The interviewees express a sense of living in a liminal space.

From an analytical perspective, the local variations of the emerging border regime reveal an imbalance between formal regulations and their effects on the local population. The research points to the ambivalence of a border regime oscillating between security dynamics and the daily needs of those residing in the region. The local variations demonstrate the scope for measures that would improve the situation on the ground and could enhance trust building in the region, e.g., by re-introducing local administration and elections in villages and towns currently under CMA, instituting reliable regulations related to crossing the line, improving social and technical infrastructure, and removing minefields. On one end of the spectrum, the case of Pyshchevyk illustrates what might be possible if people on the ground are involved; on the other end, the case of Zolote shows what needs to be done most urgently for the local residents to make this border regime more reliable and predictable.

7. From Ceasefire Line to a Political Boundary?

The Contact Line with its variations of a border regime in the making is bound to shape the attitudes and identities of those living in its vicinity. The performative and imaginative elements of the border regime can become part of a new social and political order developing over time on both sides of the not so temporary ceasefire line. To what extent do local residents still think of the two parts of the Donbas as one region, and what future status do they envisage for the non-government-controlled areas? Does the fact that a person regularly crosses the Contact Line, or not, make a difference to these perceptions? The issue of autonomy – or, in the language of the Minsk II Agreement, "special status" – is a highly sensitive one in Ukraine. It is closely connected to the idea of a threat to state sovereignty. Russia's calls for the "federalization" of Ukraine have narrowed the space for the discussion of autonomy. Nevertheless, variations of this concept are typical elements of peace agreements and, irrespective of their label and government perspectives, they continue to shape perceptions about the political future of the region.
Our surveys asked respondents to choose their top preference from a list of institutional templates for the territories not currently under Kyiv's control.[30] The categories included options ranging from "give the occupied territories

[30] The survey based on face-to-face interviews in the government-controlled Donbas included more fine-grained distinctions in addition to the four main ones given in the telephone interviews in the NGCAs. As very few respondents chose the extra categories, they were dropped for the comparative analysis.

the same status as before the war" to "give up on the occupied territories and let them be officially or unofficially administered by Russia" (figure 3). In 2019, just under half the respondents in the GCAs (49 percent) wished for the NGCAs to return to their pre-war status, as parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, without any special status. A special autonomy status for the DNR/LNR within Ukraine was favored by about 23 percent, and just under 25 percent did not know how to or chose not to answer this question. Only about 2 percent of the respondents wanted the non-government-controlled areas to become part of Russia without an autonomy status, and about another 2 percent were in favor of integrating the DNR/LNR into the Russian Federation on the basis of an autonomy status. In 2016, about 63 percent of the respondents in the GCAs wanted to return to the pre-war status, about 26 percent favored a special status within Ukraine, and about 5 and 3 percent voiced a preference for integration into the Russian Federation – without and with an autonomy status respectively.[31]

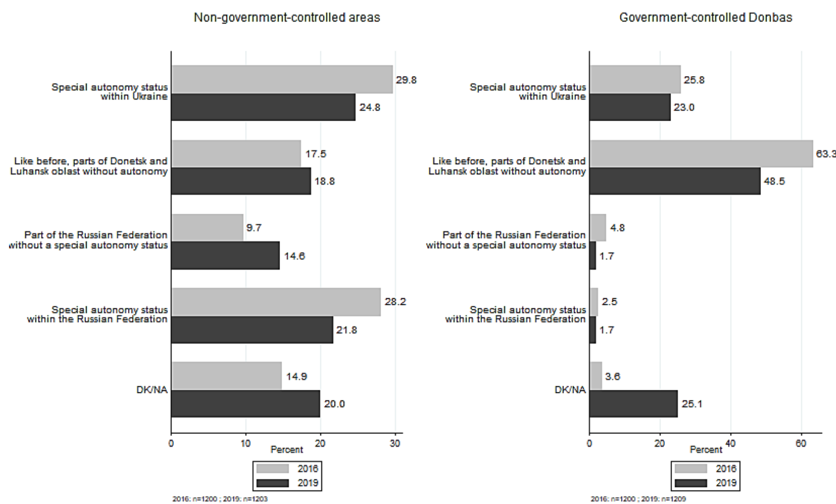
By comparison, in 2016, about 18 percent of the respondents in the NGCAs thought that the DNR/LNR should return to Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts with no special status – as before the war – and a similar 19 percent chose this option in 2019. About a third of the respondents in the NGCAs supported the idea that the NGCAs should have a special status either within Ukraine (30 percent in 2016; 25 percent in 2019) or within the Russian Federation (28 percent in 2016; 22 percent in 2019). In 2016 and 2019, 10 and 15 percent respectively said that the territories should be part of the Russian Federation without a special status. The share of respondents not knowing how to answer the status question or choosing not to answer this question was relatively high in both years: about 15 percent in 2016 and around 20 percent in 2019.

Overall, a majority – about 47 percent (2016) and 44 percent (2019) – of the respondents in the NGCAs preferred their territories to remain part of the Ukrainian state. This is an important corrective to Russia's official rhetoric as well as public perceptions in the West and parts of Ukraine. Moreover, about a fifth had not made up their minds. Thus, by 2019 the institutionalization and partial routinization of the Contact Line had not resulted in a clear re-orientation towards Russia. While the survey data do not allow us to trace the effects of the different local variations in the emerging border regime identified above, the data reveal clear differences in perceptions related to the frequency of the crossings.

[31] As the answer options in 2016 did not distinguish between "don't know" and "refuse to answer" and instead allowed for one category, "no answer," the 2016 and 2019 values are not directly comparable, but the trend is similar.

Figure 3 Status of the DNR/LNR

In your view, what should
the status of the DNR/LNR be?



The logistic regression analysis[32] shows that there is a strong correlation between crossing the Contact Line and preferences regarding the future status of the GCAs. Residents in the NGCAs who cross "often" – defined as crossing at least once a month – tend to be older and more educated, with gender, income, and urban residence showing no effects (see tables 1 and 5, in the Online Appendix).[33] Most importantly, frequent crossings of the line are correlated with political views, namely a preference for a return of the DNR/LNR to their pre-war status (i.e., as part of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Ukraine). Thus, those who cross frequently are statistically less likely to want to see these territories integrated into the Russian Federation (be that with or without autonomy). Controlling for other factors, a higher income and rural

[32] The status variables were derived from the survey question: "In your view, what should the status of the DNR and LNR be?" Each option was recoded to a dummy. The identity variables were derived from the survey question: "As a result of the events of 2013-16, do you feel…", allowing for the following, deliberately open categories of self-reported changes: "more Ukrainian," "more Russian," "more both," or "no change." Each of these answer categories was recoded to a dummy variable. In addition to the frequency of crossings (never, rarely, often), the following controls were added: "year_16_19" (a dummy variable with a 0 for the respondents who answered the questionnaire in the year 2016, and a 1 for those who answered it in 2019), gender, urban/rural, age (equal age groups of 10 years each, ranging from 18 to 99), income (a continuous variable displaying absolute figures of monthly income), and education (a simplified variable reducing an eight-level scale to a dummy variable: "primary education" to "full secondary vocational education" were combined under the value "0," all higher levels under the value "1").

[33] The full results of the statistical analyses are provided in the Online Appendix, available here: https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.trans.34.v01.2021.

place of residence are also correlated with wanting to return to the pre-war status of the territories. The respondents who frequently cross the line also report an identity change toward feeling "more Ukrainian" compared to before the war and, in turn, are less likely to feel "more Russian" (in these regressions, an urban place of residence and being male are significant, too; see Table 2 in the Online Appendix).

Table 1 Non-Government-Controlled Areas: Crossings and Preferences Regarding Future Status

	Like before, parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast without autonomy	Part of the Russian Federation without a special autonomy status	Special autonomy status within the Russian Federation	Special autonomy status within Ukraine	Don't know
Cross often	2.093***	0.432**	0.468***	1.342	0.861
Cross occasionally	1.457**	0.648*	0.581***	1.457**	0.968
Cross never	0.472***	2.074***	2.227***	0.609***	1.106

NOTE: Summary table of logistic regression models with significant effects for crossing frequency (full models in the Online Appendix); exponentiated coefficients.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Residents in the NGCAs who occasionally cross the line are also significantly more likely to prefer a return to the pre-war status (a rural background and a comparatively high income are also correlated) or a special autonomy status within Ukraine. Conversely, they are less likely to favor any form of integration with Russia. Similar to those respondents who cross frequently, they are more likely to report an identity change toward feeling "more Ukrainian" (and less likely to feel "more Russian") compared to before the war (Table 2). Additionally, they are more likely to report that they now feel "both more Russian and more Ukrainian" – i.e., having at least some direct contact across the line is associated with the strengthening of a dual identity. Thus, overall, the experience of crossing the line is clearly linked to feeling "more Ukrainian" and wanting to reintegrate with the Ukrainian state.

Table 2 Non-Government-Controlled Areas: Crossings and Self-Reported Identity Change

	I feel even more strongly that I am both Russian and Ukrainian	More Russian than before	More Ukrainian than before	My feelings have not changed
Cross often	0.927	0.353***	2.857***	1.302
Cross occasionally	1.479**	0.452***	1.640**	1.140
Cross never	0.719**	3.087***	0.304***	0.785*

NOTE: Summary table of logistic regression models with significant effects for crossing frequency (full models in the Online Appendix); exponentiated coefficients.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

NGCA residents who never cross the line are more likely to see these territories as part of the Russian Federation, either with or without a special autonomy status. Conversely, they are significantly less likely to prefer a return to the pre-war status or granting DNR/LNR a special status within Ukraine. Respondents from the NGCAs who have no experience of crossing the line are also significantly more likely to report that they feel "more Russian" than before the war and, in turn, less likely to say that they now feel "both more Russian and more Ukrainian," "more Ukrainian," or that they have not experienced any change in their identity.

Those residents of the GCAs who cross over to the NGCAs tend to be younger, less well educated, and from rural areas (see Table 6, in the Online Appendix). The overall number of those crossing the Contact Line from the GCAs into the NGCAs is small. Nevertheless, a clear reverse trend emerges from the analysis: those who cross the line often or occasionally are significantly less likely to favor a return to the pre-war status (and more likely to favor the integration of the DNR/LNR into the Russian Federation on the basis of an autonomy status; see Table 3).

Table 3 Government-Controlled Areas: Crossings and Preferences Regarding Future Status

	Like before, parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast without autonomy	Part of the Russian Federation without a special autonomy status	Special autonomy status within the Russian Federation	Special autonomy status within Ukraine
Cross often	0.232*	2.960	13.67***	1.521
Cross occasionally	0.506**	0.230	3.563**	1.906**
Cross never	2.228***	2.315	0.192***	0.533**

NOTE: Summary table of logistic regression models with significant effects for crossing frequency (full models in the Online Appendix); exponentiated coefficients.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Those individuals who often cross the line are more likely to describe an identity shift toward feeling "more Russian" (Table 4). Occasional crossings do not have a statistically significant effect on the identity question. Individuals from the government-controlled Donbas who never cross the line tend to be older, less educated, and from urban settings. They tend to have a preference for the pre-war status of the territories as part of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. They are also less likely to support the notion of a special status within Ukraine (or within the Russian Federation). On the identity-related questions, they are statistically less likely to self-identify as "more Russian" as a result of the developments, and none of the other identity categories are statistically significant.

Table 4 Government-Controlled Areas: Crossings and Self-Reported Identity Change

	I feel even more strongly that I am both Russian and Ukrainian	More Russian than before	More Ukrainian than before	My feelings have not changed
Cross often	0.624	18.15***	0.628	0.344
Cross occasionally	0.924	1.774	0.877	1.009
Cross never	1.131	0.301***	1.192	1.142

NOTE: Summary table of logistic regression models with significant effects for crossing frequency (full models in the Online Appendix); exponentiated coefficients.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Thus, the logic behind the practice of crossing that emerges from the survey data varies. Among the residents of NGCAs, the practice of crossing the "Contact Line" underpins a stronger sense of being part of the Ukrainian state and feeling "more Ukrainian," whereas among the residents of the government-controlled Donbas, those who do not cross the line are more likely to hold these views. Mobility across the line from the NGCAs slows the emergence of a new social and political boundary. The reverse holds, statistically speaking, in the other direction, but as crossings from the GCAs are less frequent overall, this effect is, on balance, smaller.

8. Conclusion

We have explored the Contact Line as a border regime in the making. Our mixed-methods approach combining survey research with in-depth interviews allows us to paint a more nuanced picture of the contestation and enactment of the emerging border. The analysis contributes to an awareness of the short-term and long-term consequences of bordering based on a ceasefire line that follows an immediate military logic of separating violent forces. The Contact Line also divides a previously undivided population. It cuts though former infrastructural, economic, and social linkages and daily routines. Checkpoints display authority, but the ethnographic regime analysis highlights variation within the formalized regulations drawn up at higher political levels. Zolote is a case where the former networks and practices were disrupted without being replaced by new ones. The other three cases at or near checkpoints exhibit similar spatial structures but show how people try to maintain their daily practices. The checkpoints are the only infrastructure that offer a degree of social and technical services in a region destroyed by war. The interviews reflect a minimum level of security guaranteed by the official crossings in a wider environment characterized by violence in the

form of mines, explosions, additional block-posts on the way to and from the line, and a sense of isolation, uncertainty, and vulnerability linked to crossing the line.

Despite a highly securitized border and the forced disintegration of former economic, social, and cultural ties, the understanding of the Contact Line as an artificial divide still seems to be strong among those who cross the line, mostly from the NGCAs, as the survey data demonstrate. After five years of war, a considerable number of people in both parts of the divided Donbas still imagine the region in its pre-war spatial configurations on their mental maps. According to the survey data, people crossing the line from the NGCAs into the GCAs are more regularly oriented towards a re-integration of the NGCAs into the Ukrainian state and express a stronger "Ukrainian" identity than those who never cross. The reverse trend holds for the much lower number of people crossing the line from the GCAs: they are less likely to express the wish for reintegration into the Ukrainian state. Crossing the Contact Line is part of both maintaining and redefining the social and political order on both sides of the line and across it. The continuation of some social routines across the line runs counter to the establishment of a social boundary at the ceasefire line. The different zones of the ceasefire line (e.g., Civil Military Administration, grey zones) establish a certain social and political order that, in addition to the line itself, shapes the routines and perceptions of the locals and separates them from the "rest" of Ukraine, thereby establishing a further boundary.

In sum, a border based on a ceasefire line has strong effects on routines, institutions, and the perceptions of individuals in communities divided by war. Ceasefire lines enhance the power of political and security elites. But even the border regime along a "hard" ceasefire line involves variation that maps the scope for local actors to shape borderscapes and border orientation even under conditions of war. Ceasefire lines also need to be studied as spaces of engagement (van Schendel 2005; Cox 1998) where transborder arrangements coproduce the shape, legitimacy, and governance of the ceasefire line. The ethnographic study and the surveys indicate the importance of crossings for imagining the future status of the war region and identities. This raises the question as to whether a contested ceasefire line, understood as a special form of a borderscape, can be considered a site of conflict transformation (Deiana, Komarova, and McCall 2019).

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