

IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY FOR THE POLISH-RUSSIAN BORDER

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Abstract

The opening up of borders in Europe since 1989 has created vast possibilities for trade and cultural interaction. The collapse of the Iron Curtain has seen a radical shift in the reconfiguration and re-administration of the European borders landscape. Formerly hostile borders now resemble ever expanding economic and cultural bridges. Great strides have been made towards integration throughout vast areas in both Western and former Soviet Bloc economies (Mazurkiewicz 1992). An interconnected single market has been created where once only barriers existed. Links have been fashioned between countries, societies and individuals. Nonetheless certain border areas are still difficult to access and continue to challenge not only to wider EU economic integration, but also individual aspirations.

This paper reflects interviews conducted along the Polish-Russian border near Braniewo in Warmia-Mazury County, Poland. This area still has a militarized and bureaucratic border, requiring individuals to make an effort to access the other side. During individual interviews, conducted in summer 2012, two common themes were expressed. The first was of people making the most of the border which contrasted with others having no desire to cross or know what is on the other side. The first group made a choice to (inter)act and tolerated the current border situation. The second group instead chose to focus their lives inwards away from the border, highlighting the border as a kind of living entity with its own identity. This paper will discuss these themes and how individuals interact because of the existing border.

Keywords: *Borders, Europe, Poland, Kaliningrad, Borders, Identity*

Introduction

During the summer of 2012 fieldwork was undertaken in Braniewo, Poland to interview local townspeople about living in the border area. It was hoped that through these interviews a sense of what was going on in the lives of ordinary individuals living on the border could be gauged. Concerning everyday lives the

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subjects showed how connected they felt to those on the other side in Kaliningrad Oblast (Province). These interviews were conducted before the change in border bureaucracy that occurred on the Polish-Russian border in August 2012. These interviews shed light on the mood at the time. Generally this was one of hope that the border would eventually be opened. They also display the discussions, both in locally and within the larger sphere of society, that were occurring during the time period before the bureaucratic shift occurred between the old visa regime and the new visa free regime.

Many positive stories of relationships were collected concerning multiple individuals living on both sides of the divide. Some respondents spoke in positive terms on what those living on the other side meant to them. The overarching theme that was presented from these interviews was one of compromising with the reality of the border. Individuals stated that the border demanded not only obedience to banal bureaucratic norms (visas, paperwork, etc.), but also a level of flexibility or adaptability. Although this idea of ‘working with the border’ needed to be incorporated into their daily lives, by no means was it acceptable to them. Rather it was perceived as one of a number of inconveniences that needed to be tolerated the price of living the border experience. Individuals still went about their daily business and tried to cope as best as possible.

Not all the respondents were aptly or positively inclined towards the border divide and the inhabitants beyond and some felt that they lived at the peripheral end of the country. Others spoke about how there was a feeling that the unknown was just beyond the tree line, but that it did not need to be investigated. Some of these respondents had never been to the other side of the border even though they had lived their entire lives in the town and repeatedly stated that they had no interest in the other side of the border. Instead, they felt like they had their backs to the border. Their overall sentiment was that to go north, over the border into Kaliningrad, was to go nowhere. Their lives ended here.

Interviews and informal conversations comprise the empirical part of this paper that looks at the following question through interview analysis: What occurs when an individual tries to interact or not interact with the border and those on the other side? This will be theoretically framed and grounded by the idea of what it means to live along a border. This will be accomplished by a theoretical deconstruction of the notion of the identity. This paper will also try to understand why a deconstruction of identity leads one to surmise that flexibility is part of a so

called 'identity of the border'. Lastly, this paper will offer some concluding thoughts on what the consequences are of not interacting.

Borders in Context

Historically borders often have been seen as an area of contention and conflict rather than as a space to exchange ideas. It is here where cultures meet, intermingle, clash or divide entirely. More recently borders have been viewed as possible resource and economic bridges. Even so, demarcation seems to be a necessary human process to project a form of stability or 'sameness'. Sameness only can be defined by another's otherness or their difference from oneself (O'Dowd 2002).

The view of state borders, as an administrative demarcation line for 'otherness', has shifted to the idea of borders as unique and individually defined. O'Dowd writes that borders can be viewed as:

...a global patchwork of vastly variable and unequal states shaped by different historical trajectories and with very different capacities to regulate and control their territorial borders and the passage of goods, people, capital and information across them. (2010: 1045)

Still one can argue that the perceptions and the reality of individual borders are two separate things. Each border has its characteristics or dichotomy of how it functions. Likewise, each individual perceives the border and is influenced by it in their own way (Laine 2014). The external borders of the EU are no different.

To understand the idea of what 'living at the border' is and crafting an identity from it one must first look at what 'identity' is and what it entails. Simply put identity is the cumulative sum of the individual and their circumstances expressed to themselves and others. It is as Heyman and Pallitto state, "*the way in which individuals experience and understand themselves*" (2008: 320). Even so, this is a collective process that involves more than just one person. Who a person 'is' is expressed in their own actions and the understanding the actions of others. This understanding is not necessarily conscious. It can instead be understood as actions or ideas expressed at the subconscious or emotional level. Jenkins (1996) states that to attach an identity to something is to classify it. These classifications can range from the very broad to the very minute: gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, living space or place. The classification of the human object is a reflection of societal needs or wants aimed at the individual (Weedon 2004). This creates order or structure within a society and outside of that society. In a similar fashion identity is

arbitrated by groups imposing definition or classification on other groups. None of these processes are finite and can instead be understood as never ending. This process of categorization by society or others continues to move on in an adaptive fashion (Hall 1990). The individual takes on what categorizations are necessary and useful and sheds ones that are not. The individual conforms to one extent or another.

Issues concerning identity and the ‘other’ become problematic when one incorporates the border. What defines who one is and who one is not can be challenging at best. Sovik (2006) argues that identity itself is dividing line of some sort between groups. Placing an administrative border line between two peoples further complicated this identity relationship. Even so Hubbard et al. (2002) argues that the dualistic ideas that identity implies are too simplistic. Simply defining an identity as territorially bound, such as to the border, does not allow for a complexity of that identity. Secondly, the geographical bounds of an identity happen in multiple ways. Reflexivity is a potent force when one group’s own identity is bound up in who the other is not, but often this is not a complete picture of who they are. Instead identity can be defined as a multi-layered social construction (Du Gay 2000). It is the societal and individual accumulation of multiple pieces of ‘baggage’ from which comes a certain hierarchical stratum of who one is/ is not. Not all these parts are useful to understand how the individual functions within a society but may instead impede one’s way by restricting certain actions that would otherwise be desirable.

Arguably, if only a simple definition of the other is allowed it creates overarching identity categorizations. One can begin to look at the initial deconstruction of an identity by looking at generalized structures (Self and Other, Here and There, etc.), but this should be only a starting point. Some classification are broad (language, race, etc.) while others are far more nuanced (accent, self-identification, etc.). The intermeshing of multiple categories or strata makes up an identity. Derrida (1991) argues that not all these categories are always in confluence with one another by examining the relationship between language and identity, but it is equally applicable to other strata of identity.

What becomes problematic is when identity is challenged by outside forces such as the power of the state and its bureaucratic processes. Paasi (1996) argues that these power structures can manifest themselves into both a negative and positive fashion concerning social identities (friends, enemies, stereotypes, etc.). These can range from diverse real ideas that can be felt (state power, bureaucratic structures, etc.) to more imagined ones (exoticism towards the ‘other’s’ culture, feelings of cultural hegemony of one culture over another). The identity of a borderland can be

argued to be built upon similar categorizations to those expressed by Derrida (1991) while still sharing a relationship with multiple power hierarchies. Furthermore it is the importance or prominence of these power relationships that influences the identity of the border. In a figurative way, just as good fences make good neighbors, so do mutually beneficial power structures.

If one takes into account Lundén's (2011) ideas that crossing the border is a necessary human trait maintaining one's own psychology and wellbeing, we can ask what happens when someone shuns crossing the border because of previously mentioned power relationships or dichotomies? The answer may be found in the creation of imagined realities. Part of a belief system that lacks full knowledge of others and oneself is susceptible to falling into the trap of stereotyping the other (Paasi 1996). Marginalized border dwellers that lack knowledge of those on the other side may accept such 'simplified' truths. Stereotypes of the 'other' can develop on such a border because of a perception that the individual has no power to influence larger practices. Without cross-border interaction individuals can end up becoming a caretaker of diminished identity, creating a situation in which the 'other' is nonexistent or unimportant. In this scenario they are then left to figuratively look inward at society with their back against the border.

The Creation and Remanufacturing of the Polish-Russian Borderland

The areas that are today Warmia-Mazury Wojowod (County) and Kaliningrad Oblast are a result of World War II. Previous to 1945 the area was known as East Prussia. Territorially, linguistically and culturally the land and the people were linked to the German nation, albeit sometimes as a part of different nation states, in one way or another for over 700 years (Diener 2011). This changed after the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. In 1946 the Soviet Union divided the territory between itself and the newly created People's Republic of Poland (Lunden 2012). It then began to systematically seize all land and property from local inhabitants. Between 1945 and 1950 the remaining ethnically German population were forcibly expelled (Mertin 2013). The northern part of the territory was formally annexed to the Soviet Union and renamed Kaliningrad Oblast after one of the founding members of the Bolshevik Party, Mikhail Kalinin, and resettled with individuals from multiple parts of the Soviet Union¹. The Polish side was repopulated mainly by Poles who were resettled from land lost to the Soviet Union east of the 'Curzon' defensive line in 1939 and later annexed after the war's end in 1945 (Dewars et al. 2000).

During the Soviet period the border of the Kaliningrad/Warmia-Mazury region was promoted as an area where Poles and Soviets could meet to trade and build cultural ties. This idea was backed by communist propaganda that touted the border as a zone to build friendship between nations, though as no official border crossing point existed in the area, individuals could not interact even if they had wanted to. What existed beyond the line was a mystery to border residents (Swiecicki 2009). Some cross-border meetings of the two sides did occur, though almost all happened on an official level between government functionaries (Balogh 2012). Additionally, interactions were made more difficult due to Kaliningrad Oblast's special military status in the USSR (Gromadzki 2001).

The situation remained relatively unchanged until the end of the communist period in 1989. In the early 1990s the Gronowo-Mamonovo border crossing, near the towns of Braniewo (PL) and Mamonovo (R) was opened to allow vehicular traffic across the border divide. Poles and Soviets could now travel to each other's side of the border with the proper paperwork. Cross-border trade began to be fostered and individual interactions increased after the collapse of the USSR (Palmowski 2010). Concerns about the future of the border arrangement started to grow as Poland began talks in the mid-1990s to join organizations such as NATO and later the EU. These were respectively completed in 1999 and 2004. The role of the border area took on greater importance for both sides because of the direction that Poland was moving towards, i.e. new defense alliances with NATO and economic alliances with the West. Many questioned whether Russia would continue to allow Poles into the territory if they were moving away from their influence. These concerns were generally resolved in 2003 with an agreement allowing Polish citizens to apply for a preferential visa. The incorporation of Poland into the EU made travel from the Russian side more difficult during 2004. From late 2004 until July 2012 Russian citizens were granted entry to Poland via bilateral EU agreements if they lived within 30km of the border and had submitted the proper paperwork to the respective border agency. Such agreements already existed with other states that border Poland but were not part of the EU (Ukraine and Belarus) (Radio Free Europe 2010). The EU had been facilitating a move away from the idea of the border as a military demarcation line towards the concept of creating security by building closer economic ties since the late 1990s along its own internal borders (Andreas 2003). An argument has been made that this process is occurring on other external borders, but this process seems to be an uneven one (O'Dowd 13). Kaliningrad is just such an example of said unevenness (Sagan 2011).

August 2012 marked a turning point in the way the visa regime functioned towards those who lived in the Polish-Russian border area. A long awaited visa free zone was created in the whole of Kaliningrad Oblast, half of the Warmia-Mazury Wojowod and about a tenth of the Pomorskie Wojowod which encompassed the 'Three Cities' area of Sopot, Gdansk and Gdynia. Russians can travel to Poland for up to 30 days in a month or 90 days in a 6 month period provided that they have lived in Kaliningrad Oblast area as their primary residence for the three previous years. Travel beyond these areas would result in one or all of the following penalties: variable fine of 5-125 Euros, deportation, revocation of their Schengen visa status and a subsequent ban on the renewal of visa free travel for an undetermined period of time (Polish Ministry of the Interior Website).

The new border regime configuration and bureaucratic structure on the Polish-Russian border is a marked change from what residents have previously lived through during the communist system and later period after 1989.

What follows is a presentation of the empirical fieldwork. The sections also contain an analysis of the qualitative data and how it relates to previously mentioned theoretical ideas. This analysis is based on Barnes and Gregory's (1997) idea that meaning or analysis can be gleaned from events that occur in people's lives. The collection of all of these initial formal and informal encounters, as well as the later analysis discussed in this paper, was taken in an ethnographic anthropological style as described by Robinson (1998).

'Open Borders' in Braniewo: A Paradox of Perspective

Braniewo is the last Polish town on the western edge of the border with Russia. The northern Polish-Russian border, a closed one until the end of Cold War has been opened to border traffic after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This has created new possibilities for many of the residents on both sides. Many Poles drive across to Russia to fill up with cheap fuel. Russians drive to Poland to fill shopping carts with better quality products that cannot be purchased at home. The area is true to the classic idea of border divides (O'Dowd 2002). The two nation states are split linguistically, culturally, economically and politically. Each side has its own traditions and value systems.

From a geographic point of view the area is quite unique. It feels so remote to not only the rest of the nation state of Poland but also to what is on the other side of the border. Public transportation links between the core of the country and the

border area are sporadic at best. The travel time to cover the 300km distance to the capital of Warsaw is quite long (between 6-9 hours). This separation is exacerbated towards Kaliningrad on the other side with long queues on the border.

Multiple respondents spoke of how people adapted to the logistical situation. It was a part of their daily lives and the individual had to adapt to it as to all things. This was a common theme expressed by all the interviewees: resourcefulness, flexibility and adaptation to any given situation concerning the border. One needed to allow the border time to do what it does. One respondent stated that you could set your watch to the border, but it would almost always be wrongⁱⁱ.

A local hotelier spoke at length about how he needed to be flexible concerning his own business and those coming from the other sideⁱⁱⁱ. Long queues at the border could force him to check-in guests many hours after their expected arrival time. Often this occurred at earlier morning or late night hours that were not necessarily convenient. His personal life also needed to take into account that scheduling a meeting with associates coming from the other side and the logistics of crossing the border did not always work in tandem.

Another common theme that was expressed by one respondent was that the border somehow was a machine that sometimes broke down for no fathomable reason. *“We are all part of great machine here at the border. Some of us don’t know where we fit and others don’t want to fit”*.^{iv} A local businessman expressed this sentiment when stating that setting up football matches in the last year had truly taken on an impromptu fashion^v. The matches were often planned, but had an ad-hoc feel to them. This was because of the need for them to be delayed or have a variable start time. He stated that it was getting more and more difficult to run the tournaments across the border because of the cost in time and money. He could see no reason for why the situation in crossing the border had become more difficult. One respondent stated that things seemed to work out one way or another. The end product of getting across the divide to do a, b, or c would in the end *“come out in the wash”*^{vi}.

There was also the expression that the border had its own personality and moods^{vii}. The logistics of getting through the border depended on these moods. Somewhere, someone was pulling the strings on how the border functioned on any given day. The respondent could give no specifics on who that might be beyond vague ideas of some politicians on their or the other side or possibly this or that border bureaucracy. These ideas are much in keeping with Paasi’s (1996) thoughts that a lack of knowledge creates a false image or imagined dichotomy on what is happening on and beyond the border.

Multiple respondents stated that the logistics and bureaucracy of getting across the border made them not want to go across^{viii}. One of them, a Polish Army 2nd Lieutenant, stated that in spite of these hurdles he obviously had to interact with the border^{ix}. This interaction can be labeled as one of adhering to the securitization of border. He vehemently saw no point to it. He would rather be back in Afghanistan and rejoin his previous assignment. He expressed his sentiment of how out of touch he felt with Braniewo and the surrounding place. “It’s a hole”. He saw his position in the town as only a temporary one. The army would move him elsewhere when the time came. In keeping with Kolossov (2011), the 2nd Lt. saw the border as no more than a line. This was because his job was based on defense, not bridging the divide in keeping with the ideas of O’Dowd (2002).

A public servant stated similar sentiments^x. In his position he had to interact with those who came across the border in his day to day, but did not care so much about these interactions. The respondent had been living in the town for over a decade but had never crossed the border. His governmental position serving the public did not make him comfortable with crossing. He feared the time constraints when applying for the proper paperwork or trying to cross.

Public servants, whether they are employed by the state or the military, seemed to be trapped in a paradox of securitization of the border (van Houtum 2011). Directly involved with said securitization and charged with the protection of the border to one extent or another, ironically they spoke about how this hindered their interaction with it. This also impacted the stereotype that they had built up about those on the other side. None could reconcile these because they could not see the reality of what was beyond the line of the border.

Two public servants spoke about having an image of Russians as part of criminal organization only based on the car that they drove. Stereotyping of the other was displayed particularly well upon leaving the town for the highway as respondents assumed any woman seen hitchhiking by the side of the road as a ‘Russian prostitute’^{xi}. Likewise, traders selling cheap defective goods or cigarettes at the local open air market were labeled by respondents as ‘Russian’.

All respondents stated that they benefited in some way from the cheap gasoline that people trafficked in from across the Russian border. Likewise, all respondents stated that they occasionally took advantage of the trade that was provided by so called ‘ants’ (individuals who make their livelihood through petty trade or the smuggling of goods).

In Search of an Identity for the Border

One can argue that the identity present in Braniewo is in fact not an individual identity. Instead one can argue that it is the identity of the actual border. All the different classifications or subjectivities which it inhabits (bureaucracies, economics, culture, language, religion, etc.) feed the identity. It can be classified as fragmented at first glance, but only because its characteristics are so multiple in nature. The respondents displayed these different aspects in one way or another. The following section will try to glean meaning from some of the characteristics which were observed.

One piece of the so called ‘identity’ that was experienced within the town is being directly shaped by multiple aspects of life interacting with the reality that is ‘the border’ divide. Firstly, it is shaped by the sheer logistics of such interaction, especially with the time constraints of the border. Because of this difficulty those individuals that do interact incorporated a large amount of flexibility into their daily lives. The business of everyday life needed to run by the timepiece of the border.

An observable secondary aspect of individuals adapting to the logistical issues was one of falling into the trap of the unknown. Respondents spoke about the border divide as if it was actually a living entity. The border had feelings or a ‘mood’ that governed the way it functioned. They spoke of this set of border traits as if it was a real rather than imagined idea. An air of mystery surrounds the border. The difficulties of getting past stereotypes of the other and all this entails is made more difficult by the fact that getting to see where the other comes from is time consuming or cost prohibitive. One can wonder whether the lack of interaction with those on the other side had psychological implications. This would be in keeping with Lundén’s (2011) ideas of the necessity of crossing the border for one’s own wellbeing. All respondents, to one extent or another, had created an image of the other that was far from reality. Whether this image was one of honest hard working Russians or criminal elements depended on who they were and what they worked as. Their role on the border, whether as businessman, civil servant or being employed in the black economy, painted the image of who the ‘other’ was. The use of stereotyping was quite prevalent, but this was created to fit the situation or the context. For some respondents Russians were customers, for others they were criminals or they provided a means to an end in the past and present. Many of these view points and stereotypes were based on assumptions without evidence. During the time spent with respondents it became clear that the overt level of securitization of the border

contributed to this general level of mistrust towards those on the other side. No respondent stated that those coming from the other side were 'good people'. At best they were shoppers or had money. At worst they were criminals and prostitutes.

The logistics of crossing the Polish-Russian border are not the only aspect that influences the identity of the border. Individuals are separated by more than just the crossing time. The border is more than just the sum of its respective parts (Newman 2003). It is beset by multiple pieces interacting with one other and inhibiting the growth of the individual. One can make the argument that a narrative is observed in the power of the border. Lives were shaped by the pressure exerted by the border. Whether these manifestations were real or imaged did not matter. People's daily habits made them real. Individuals are separated by their experiences of interacting with border and the receiving shared knowledge or narratives they gain from these interactions (Paasi 1996, Zhurzhenko 2011).

All respondents acknowledged that the border had some sort of power over their own lives, be it negative, positive, logistical, imagined or real. As a result of their border experiences some respondents turned their back away from it, while others grudgingly embraced it out of necessity. Even so, all had a monetary stake in the border and needed the border to function. They accepted the fact that sometimes it did not function as planned and that they were occasionally bound by its whims. Remarkably, those respondents who shied away from border interactions were employed by the state and had little or no personal monetary stake in the border beyond their state funded jobs.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was twofold. Firstly, it tried to show how current border theorization resonates when one couples it with a discussion concerning identity. Although the matter may be complex, one must acknowledge that a conceptual framework does somehow fit together. Secondly and more importantly, it tried to show that the Polish-Russian border is more than just the sum of a group of lines on a map, territorial edicts, orders or bureaucratic rules. It extends beyond the dividing line that is the physical demarcation of its extent. The research question hoped to illustrate how the physical border extends to the individual because one is forced to live with the border and the circumstances it brings.

The identity of the border plays a role in the way individuals live their everyday lives. As with all identities a basic building block is the concept of place.

Living on the border is no different. The border is more than the sum of its most basic parts and other strata are influenced by these basic building blocks (Newman 2003). Individuals gain key pieces of their own identity because of what the border is and how its subjective aspects function with one another. From this a trickledown effect can be felt towards societal roles and behavior. Looking at what has been presented in this paper one can see how this is manifested between the respondents that were interviewed, though further study is needed.

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http://msw.gov.pl/portal/pl/2/10135/Otwarcie_malego_ruchu_granicznego.html (Polish Ministry of the Interior regulations concerning visa free travel to and from Kaliningrad)

Endnotes

ⁱ For a detailed breakdown on incoming migrants, see Kostyashov (2007)

ⁱⁱ Respondent: Tradesperson, June 9th, 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ Respondent: Businessman, June 12th, 2012

^{iv} Respondent: Tradesperson, June 9th, 2012

^v Respondent: Businessman, June 12th, 2012

^{vi} Respondent: Civil Servant, July 6th, 2012

^{vii} Respondent: Tradesperson, June 27th, 2012

^{viii} Respondent: Civil Servant, July 6th, 2012.

Respondent: Civil Servant, June 8th, 2012.

^{ix} Respondent: Civil Servant, July 10th, 2012

^x Respondent: Civil Servant, June 8th, 2012

^{xi} Respondent: Civil Servant, July 12th, 2012