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BORDERLAND STORIES: LIFE AT THE RUSSIAN BORDER

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Abstract. This paper details the project “Borderland Stories,” which focuses on national identity in various borderland regions of the Russian Federation. The authors point out that the contradiction between the pronunciation of national identity in the borderlands and the practical aspects of borders makes it particularly exciting to focus on national identity formation and daily life in the borderlands, especially in a huge country, such as the Russian Federation, that borders many different countries. Collection and analysis of the material are being conducted in 2014 and the first results are due for presentation in 2015.

Keywords: borderlands, Russia, national identity, borders.

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ИСТОРИИ ПОГРАНИЧЬЯ: ЖИЗНЬ НА РОССИЙСКОЙ ГРАНИЦЕ

Аннотация. Статья посвящена проекту «Истории пограничья», в рамках которого изучаются различные пограничные регионы

Российской Федерации. Ее авторы подчеркивают, что противоречие между проявлениями национальной идентичности и практическими аспектами существования границ делает исследование формирования национальной идентичности в контексте повседневной жизни в пограничье весьма интересным — особенно в такой огромной стране, как Россия, которая граничит со многими странами. Сбор и анализ материалов осуществляются в 2014 г., первые результаты исследования будут представлены в 2015 году.

Ключевые слова: пограничье, Россия, национальная идентичность, границы.

State borders are constructed by humans. They are a result of politics and history and are not given by nature. They define where the territory of one state begins and another ends. Borders are essential for states; they determine where the state has the authority to exercise power and where it has a monopoly over the use of force, as well as where the state has obligations to provide services. For central governments, borders must be maintained. A state that cannot maintain its borders and, thus, control its territory, lacks legitimacy (Vaughan-Williams 2009; Wilson and Donnan 1998).

Borderlands are particularly interesting from an identity perspective. Research has claimed that social identities, such as national identities, emerge when the carriers are confronted with those who do not share their identity: the encounter with “the other” creates a “we” (Albert and Whetten 1985; Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001). These encounters take place in the borderlands where different national identities meet.

Consequently, one could assume that the specificity of a state's self-perception—the characteristic elements of a country's national identity—is pronounced in the border regions. But for those who live near the border, the ordinary citizens, the symbolic importance of the border may not be acknowledged. Far-reaching regional collaboration across the border may downplay the importance of the border and instead nourish cross-border culture and regional identities, especially if the borderlands are far away from the central government (Markusse 2006; Wilson and Donnan 1998). More importantly, the perspective of ordinary citizens will inevitably contain practical aspects of daily life, such as employment, shopping, renting a place to live, etc. From this perspective, the border can be perceived as an artificial construction that puts limits on daily living. Differences in rules, norms, and legislation between two countries may create obstacles in the everyday lives of the people who live at or near the border (Lundén 2009; Lundén and Zalamans 2002).

The contradiction between the pronunciation of national identity in the borderlands and the practical aspects of borders makes it particularly

exciting to focus on daily life on a country's borders, especially in a huge country, such as the Russian Federation, that borders many different countries. In our project we examine daily life and national identity in the borderlands of Russia.

Russia is an interesting case for various reasons. Russia is the largest country, in terms of land mass, in the world: it covers a territory from Vladivostok in the east to Kaliningrad in the west. It has land borders with twelve different countries. Thus, some of the borderlands are far from the central government, whereas others are much closer. Moreover, historically, Russia has had different relations with different neighboring countries, which also shapes the possibilities for cross-border cultures to develop. Choosing Russia can thus give us variation among different borderlands in the same country, which allows us to analyze multiple borderlands with the same central government. Recent events also make Russia a particularly relevant object of study. The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine have put a great deal of international pressure on Russia, which could suggest a national mobilization around the central power in the country and, according to identity theory, a strengthening of national identity, especially in the border regions. Is this theoretical claim true? The Russian example can shed light on this question.

In order to analyze identity formation and daily life in the borderlands we conducted interviews with residents of five different borderland cities in the Russian Federation. Examining life stories through in-depth semi-structured interviews gives us good possibilities to explore identity issues and to capture the essence of daily life in the borderlands. Life stories (oral history) as a method increases the understanding of how people define themselves and place themselves in a context (Johansson 2005), which is exactly what we aim to examine: life in the borderlands and national identity.

We have chosen to analyze daily life in different kinds of regions.

Two of our chosen cities border former Soviet republics: Ivangorod and Belgorod. Ivangorod borders Estonia. During the Soviet era it was part of Narva (located in Estonia), but after the fall of Soviet Union the city was divided into two parts. Estonia quickly distanced itself from Russia after independence and entered NATO, and later the EU. Initially it became harder for people on both sides to cross the border, but in recent years it has become easier, particularly for the Russian population in Estonia (Makarychev 2004).

Belgorod is situated on the border with Ukraine, another former Soviet republic. Since the fall of the Soviet Union until recently, relations between Russia and Ukraine have been quite close. In particular, the relationship between Belgorod in Russia and Khar'kov in Ukraine has been described as advanced cross-border cooperation (Zhurzhenko 2004a; Zhurzhenko 2004b). This relationship has changed during 2014.

One city close to Norway, Murmansk, has been included in the study. Norway belonged to NATO during the entire Cold War, making this particular border the land boundary between East and West, and the only land border between the Soviet Union and NATO. The border, which was closed during the Cold War, has lately become one of the most open borders to Russia (Nilsen 2010; Pettersson 2014).

In addition, our study includes the former Finnish town Vyborg, situated on the border with Finland. Finland was part of the Russian empire, but gained independence after World War I. During the Cold War, Finland shared the longest land border with the Soviet Union; the Iron Curtain literally ran through this country (Aggestam 2000; Norborg and Sjöstedt 1998). The border was closed during Soviet times, but this has changed substantially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Paasi 1999).

Finally, we have included the city of Blagoveshchensk, which is located on the border with China. At the end of the nineteenth century and during the Boxer Rebellion there were conflicts between Russia and China. Chinese-Russian relations during the Soviet era were characterized by both suspicion and solidarity. The countries were on the same side against the capitalist West, but both countries competed for power in the Far East.

Analyses of identity formation in these five cities will give us a comprehensive and diversified picture of national identity and daily life in Russian borderlands. On the one hand, historical and political differences between Russia and its neighboring countries will make it possible to discover common features in very different borderlands that could be applicable to all of Russia. On the other hand, the case selection will allow us to identify and explain differences. Collection and analysis of the material are being conducted in 2014 and the first results are due for presentation in 2015.

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