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Ambiguous Borderland

Tatiana Zhurzhenko. *Borderlands into Bordered Lands. Geopolitics of Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2010. 321 p.

The seven essays and introduction that comprise Tatiana Zhurzhenko's book, address the issue of Ukrainian state-nation building from a very interesting angle. They examine, at various levels, how the emergence of independent Ukraine affects the transformation of old, merely administrative Soviet borders into the "real" borders of a sovereign state and how, vice versa, the process of border making challenges, in various ways, the master project of nation building.

Border making, as the author rightly emphasizes, means not only the process of re-mapping but also of re-narrating. Delimitation and demarcation of borders, their international legitimization, the development of a modern border infrastructure and introduction of the proper border regime—all these things are definitely important but, in the case of Ukraine, most of them have been solved relatively easily. The much greater challenge for the new state arises from the people's mentality. Whereas the western borders of Ukraine coincide with the old Soviet borders and are firmly established not only on territory but also in people's minds, the "new" borders – with Belarus, Moldova and, especially, Russia – largely lack such a popular legitimacy.

This is the main political-cum-intellectual problem that looms large in Tatiana Zhurzhenko's work. It is discussed on both macro- and micro-levels, which makes the book especially valuable. The macro-level is represented in the first part of the book, entitled "Remapping the Post-Soviet Space," which consists of two essays: "'Eurasia' and its Uses in the Ukrainian Geopolitical Imagination" and "Slavic Sisters into European Neighbors: Ukrainian-Belarusian Relations after 1991." The micro-level is explored in the third part of the book, "Living (with the) Border," based on field research in a few border villages in the Kharkivska oblast of Ukraine and the neighboring Belgorodska oblast of the Russian Federation. It consists of two lengthy essays: "Making Sense of a New Border: Social Transformations and Shifting Identities in Five Near-Border Villages" and "Becoming Ukrainians in a 'Russian' Village: Local Identity, Language and National Belonging."

The second, middle part of the book, "Bordering Nations, Transcending Boundaries," gradually shifts the perspective from the macro-level (the chapter "Under Construction: the Ukrainian-Russian Border from the Soviet Collapse to EU Enlargement") to the micro-level ("'Slobozhanshchyna': Re-inventing a Region in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands" – on the area where the eventually surveyed villages are located). And, importantly, this part of the book includes the pivotal essay on "Boundary in Mind: Discourses and Narratives of the Ukrainian-Russian Border" – a detailed representation of the author's methodology and theoretical foundations.

In fact, the methodology is briefly outlined in the introduction which informs us that the book "combines several disciplines and methodological approaches: from the history of ideas and theories of international relations to discourse analysis, political science and social anthropology" [37-38], and that the book's ambitious idea is "to approach the post-Soviet borders as a construct produced by different political actors through various narratives; to go beyond the dominant discourses of security and integration and demonstrate their role in the process of border construction," referring, inter alia, not only to the "elitist discourses produced by politicians and intellectuals, but also [to] the narratives of ordinary people living near the border and experiencing it in their everyday lives." [22]

The notion of borders as not merely a physical reality but also a symbolic one dwells at the heart of the constructivist approach applied by the author, and clearly justifies a critical discourse analysis as the major tool of the proposed study.

The fact that the border is a construct does not mean that it is drawn arbitrarily; it usually has some prehistory, e.g. a former administrative division, a historical or ethno-linguistic boundary which can be used as a basis for delimitation. But neither these "objective" factors (usually disputed between the two sides), nor pure political will are sufficient for creating a border. The border has also to be drawn in the minds of the people. It is shaped by the political rhetoric of "national interests," the dominant discourses of nation and state building, the discussions about national identity and "geopolitical choice". Thus, national borders are constructed not only with border stones and fences, but also with words." [155]

They are supported, to put it differently, not only by "hard" but also by "soft" power. They require what Claus Eder terms a "narrative plausibility" [19, 159].

The Ukrainian-Russian border is particularly interesting in this regard – not only because it is "new" and physically underdeveloped, but also because it is under-narrated, it lacks symbolical power and bears question-

able legitimacy for the majority of Russians and the plurality of Ukrainians. The symbolical weakness of the Ukrainian-Russian border is especially noticeable in the near-border areas researched by Tatiana Zhurzhenko. Here, she notes, people "usually do not see their neighbors on the other side as cultural "others". It is rather economic gradients and different welfare provisions which constitute "us" and "them" across the Ukrainian-Russian border. Ukrainian identity in the borderlands with Russia is not exclusive and dominant, but flexible and situational, easily combined with Russian, "Slavic," regional or post-Soviet identities" [159].

Leaving aside a debatable question whether such an identity could really be qualified as "Ukrainian" (i. e., national) rather than "Little Russian" (i. e., a merely regional part of the Greater Russian, Eastern Slavonic, Orthodox Christian, or (post)Soviet supranational identity), we can in any case assume that, for a great many people, the Ukrainian-Russian border is rather a physical than symbolic reality. It does not "separate "us" from "them" and does not "constitute a [territorial] community whose members are supposed to share a common memory, common symbols and historical myths." [156]

Nationwide opinion surveys reveal that a vast majority of inhabitants of eastern and southern Ukraine feel much greater affinity with Russians and even with heavily Russified/Sovietized Belarusians than with western Ukrainians who had broken away from the East Slavonic/Orthodox Christian "ummah" and formed an unquestionably modern national identity. They are "alien" not only because they belong to a different – Western/Catholic/European – civilization, but also because they represent a different type of identity, one that is apparently incompatible with both the subnational identity of "Little Russians" and the supranational identity of Orthodox-cum-Soviet-cum-Russified Eastern Slavs. They are predictably considered "nationalistic" witin the prenational or supranational mental framework – even though no sociological data prove they are more "nationalistic" in whatever way than any of their neighbors to the west.

Ukraine's identity split is the major stumbling block in the complex construction of the new national borders. The two roughly equal parts of Ukrainian society have radically different ideas about "us" and "them" and, naturally, about the "common memory, symbols and historical myths." They have opposite views on who is Ukraine's main enemy and who should be the main ally, and therefore which border, eastern or western, should be strengthened or even closed, and which should be softened or even eliminated. This means they promote opposing discourses and apply different "meta-narratives" to Ukraine's eastern and western borders. One of these groups tends to present the Ukrainian-Russian border as a "site of hostility and of potential if not open conflict," while the other group considers it as a "site of contact, co-operation and friendship, sometimes referring to old historical ties and cultural commonality, sometimes stressing mutual interests, common future, or both" [160].

One narrative is defined as the "narrative of security," the other one as the "narrative of integration." Both of them, as Tatiana Zhurzhenko aptly remarks, "originated to some extent from the European Union" [162]. The similarity, however, is superficial. European integration is fundamentally different from all the projects of "Eurasian" integration promoted within the CIS by Russia. First of all, European integration is voluntary: neither the members of, nor candidates to the EU are forced or even blackmailed to "integrate." Second, European integration is value-based: all the participants of the process must meet strict criteria of democracy, human rights, and rule of law--hardly meaningful things in Russia or elsewhere in the CIS. And third, even the smallest countries in the EU have an equal voice and can, in most cases, block any decision that clearly contradicts their interests or undermines their sovereignty. None of the Russia-led "integration" projects provides this opportunity for its minor shareholders.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko stops short of labeling the post-Soviet "integration" discourses a sheer smokescreen to hide Russian hegemonic ambitions, but nonetheless leaves little room for any alternative interpretation:

Borrowing the discourse of EU integration served to legitimize integration projects in the post-Soviet space, which their critics saw as a restoration of the Soviet empire… This European discourse of integration at the Ukrainian-Russian border intertwines with the discourse of East Slavic unity and the common historical destiny of the East Slavic nations, particularly on the Russian side. [162-3]

The narrative of security at the Ukrainian-Russian border that seemingly "resonates with the EU discourse on the "soft threats" coming from the "new neighbourhood" [164] also has profoundly different meanings in both cases. The threats that emanate from Russia to its neighbors are hardly "soft." In most cases, they include economic pressure, energy blackmail, trade and media wars, covert operations of security forces, and even direct military occupation of territories – as in the case of Moldova and Georgia. Hence, the EU discourse on security resonates primarily with the "Ukrainian fears of losing national sovereignty and falling under Moscow's control" [164].

The fears are certainly not paranoid since a great majority of Russians still

consider Ukraine (with the exception of its western regions) an integral part of the Orthodox / East Slavic / Eurasian civilization… This view was developed in Russian historiography during the 19th century and became

an indispensible part of the emerging Russian identity. Indeed, Ukraine was not just a "normal" colonial subject of the Russian empire but a constitutive element for the metropolitan centre… The persistence of this narrative in Russia during the 1990s and its popularity among both the elites and the population made it difficult to think about Ukraine in terms of a separate nation with legitimate borders. While Russia officially recognized the national sovereignty of Ukraine in its present borders, the implicit condition of such recognition was its "geopolitical loyalty" to the former imperial core. Therefore any movement of the Ukrainian leadership in Western direction has been met in Moscow with great suspicion… Ukraine with its Euro-Atlantic aspirations is seen as a potential traitor of "Slavic unity"… [178-79]

To put it bluntly, Russian politics in the "near abroad" still resembles the notorious Brezhnev doctrine of "limited sovereignty" applied back in the 1960-80s by the Soviet Union to the East European satellites, with tacit Western approval. (cf Putin-Denikin 188). To make things worse, the Russian imperial view of Ukraine is largely congruent with views of many Ukrainian citizens and has broad currency in both the local and Russian mass media distributed/broadcast in Ukraine. Little surprise, then, that the Ukrainian-Russian border,

being closely connected to the issue of national identity, is invested with a special symbolic meaning, which can be understood only in the Ukrainian "post-colonial" context. It is the lack of clear boundaries which makes Ukrainian identity problematic: Ukrainian culture, language, memory etc. first have to be separated from their Russian counterparts. The continuing coexistence of two cultures and languages in Ukraine, Ukrainian and Russian, is seen as a proof of an "unfinished nation-building," a weakness rather than an asset. Significantly, this "post-colonial condition" is represented not so much by the ethnic Russians, but by the Russian-speaking Ukrainians. [164]

The term "coexistence" employed by the author tends to obscure the actual dominance of Russian language and culture over Ukrainian in most parts of the country. Even though, numerically, ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians make up less than half of Ukraine's population, they are traditionally much more urbanized and therefore more advanced socially, culturally, and economically. This firmly secures them, even now, a strong structural dominance over the peripheral Ukrainian-speaking majority.

Equally misleading is the term "bilingualism" praised by numerous authors as a "valuable asset of the region" and quoted uncritically at one point (p. 220) by Zhurzhenko. The truth is definitely more complex. The region in question – Slobozhanshchyna, as well as all of southeastern Ukraine--represents a very dubious case of bilingualism since only Ukrainians, mostly Ukrainophones, are really bilingual there. Neither Russians nor Russian-speaking Ukrainians are able and/or willing, in most cases, to shift to Ukrainian, the language that is broadly considered in their milieu to be "inferior" or "artificial" and "alien". Paradoxically, "nationalistic" western Ukraine represents a case of European, non-Soviet bilingualism since not only Ukrainians but also Russians in the region are able and willing to communicate in both Russian and Ukrainian, depending on the circumstances.

In fact, the major dividing line in Ukraine runs not between east and west or between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, or Russophones and Ukrainophones – even though there are some significant correlations between all these factors and two major types of the country's identity – Ukrainian and "Little Russian". The main split is determined by the opposing notions of "us" and "them" and the radically different meanings of being a "normal Ukrainian". In one identity discourse, Russia is seen as the main "Other," and the national past is considered colonial, whereas the present is seen as an unfinished process of decolonization. In the other identity discourse, the West is assigned the role of the main "Other," whereas the past is considered a history of friendly Russian-Ukrainian cohabitation and common fighting the enemies – primarily Westerners, but also their aboriginal agents and allies – "Ukrainian nationalists" ("mazepists," "petliurites," "banderites," et al.). Since there was arguably no colonialism in the past, no decolonization is needed at present. The "Little Russian" group (one may call it "Ukrainian Creole" – as opposite to "Ukrainian aboriginal") insists on a formal equality of both languages, Ukrainian and Russian, and on a laissez-faire cultural policy, which apparently benefits them as much stronger players vis-à-vis their handicapped rivals.

From the Ukrainian ("aboriginal") point of view, the political emancipation from Russia is insufficient as long as mental/cultural/discursive emancipation is not brought to completion. For many Ukrainians, as Zhurzhenko notes, the symbolic status of the Ukrainian language and culture is therefore reflected, inter alia, in the geopolitical status of the Ukrainian-Russian border. And since "strengthening national identity in post-Soviet Ukraine requires assuming a cultural and political distance from Russia," the new border becomes "not only a symbol of, but also an instrument for the creation of this difference" [165]. In sum, within the past 20 years, "the Ukrainian-Russian border has been subject to a process of symbolic construction, which reflects problems of post-Soviet nation building, state efforts to nationalize borderlands, to assimilate them as integral part of the national territory and to invest new borders with real and symbolic power" [189].

So far, the results of these efforts are rather modest. Two crucial factors, one objective and the other subjective, put limitations on the nationalizing efforts of Ukrainian authorities and on the discursive practices of Ukrainian intellectuals. On the objective side, one should note that Ukraine is not only a heterogeneous but also relatively pluralistic country where "various political actors and 'discursive communities' produce texts and images of a given territory, region, nation." Neither the government nor any other "actor" has a discursive monopoly or even clear dominance in Ukraine. "State institutions, local self-administration, business groups, NGOs, ethnic communities, political parties and organizations, media, academia, the education system, the all produce narratives and images which'make sense'of a border. Not only national states, but also international organizations […] and transboundary institutions […] influence and create border narratives." In Ukraine, as elsewhere, borders are subject to both the "high" geopolitics made by experts and politicians, and "low" geopolitics made by media and pop culture.[158].

This means, in particular, that Ukrainian borders are not only "narrated and constructed by 'discursive communities' of various kinds," but also intensively re-narrated and deconstructed by some other "discursive communities" that include pretty resourceful Russian state, Russian mass media, businesses, NGOs, as well as their pro-Russian subsidiaries in Ukraine. They produce a very powerful counter-discourse (if not the de-facto dominant discourse in Ukraine), which Zhurzhenko defines as a "discourse of integration" that features the "common past," "traditional friendship," and "cultural affinity" between Ukrainians and Russians. The positive rhetoric predominates, however, only in "high" politics. The "low" Russian (and pro-Russian) politics is heavily charged with traditional ethnic stereotypes and cultural suprematism that overtly undermines Ukrainian identity, ridicules Ukrainian language, promotes xenophobic-cum-conspiratorial anti-Occidentalism, and deepens the rift in Ukrainian society between the "true," i. e. Russophile Ukrainians and perverse "nationalists".

On the subjective side, the nationalizing efforts of the Ukrainian government are restrained not only by powerful counter-discourses and widespread sabotage at various levels but also by its own inefficiency, corruptness, and institutional weakness. The main hindering factor, however, is the government's own reluctance to pursue any coherent policy of decolonization / de-Sovietization that may effectively undermine their own Soviet-style, crypto-authoritarian dominance over the country. To some extent, Ukrainian rulers are deadlocked by two incompatible imperatives. On one hand, they need to promote state-nation building and strengthen people's national identity in order to legitimize and secure their own rule both domestically and internationally. On the other hand, they cannot promote modern Ukrainian identity without purging it of various relics of Sovietness. Or, as Zhurzhenko aptly remarks, "in order to 'make Ukrainians' one has to 'unmake Soviets'" [278]. Because, as she noteselsewhere, "(post)Soviet political culture and mentality can become an obstacle for modernization" [200].

But how can the post-Soviet rulers get rid of something that ensures their political dominance, restrains challenges from civil society and undermines real competition? The essentially non-civic, paternalistic, illiberal and irrationally anti-Western Soviet identity is one of the main pillars upon which the dominance of the post-Soviet elites is based. They are definitely not eager to destroy this pillar and expose themselves to real accountability and political competition. Yet, they cannot but yield to the imperative of state-nation building and therefore make sporadic concessions to Ukrainian national identity.

These two factors, both objective and subjective, largely determine the ambivalence and incoherence of much of Ukrainian policies, including the policy of state-nation building and border making as part of it. Tatiana Zhurzhenko exemplifies this general ambiguity with Leonid Kuchma's official rhetoric of "multi-vectorism" that combined the "strategic goal" of European integration with a Ukrainian-Russian "special partnership". In regard of the border issue, she notes, Kuchma's administrationpaid lip service to "national security" and the necessity of "civilized borders" [the EU-styled euphemism for the need to strengthen the border with Russia] while at other occasions promoted cross-border cooperation and integration projects for the "border of friendship" [a Soviet-styled cliché applied officially to the Ukrainian-Russian border]. These two discourses – European choice and East Slavic partnership – were successfully combined and instrumentalized by Leonid Kuchma until they got into open conflict before and especially during the Orange revolution.[186]

The subsequent development proved, however, that neither the "Orange" government of Viktor Yushchenko nor the anti-Orange government of Viktor Yanukovych could completely get rid of the political ambiguity that seems to be deeply ingrained in Ukrainian society, its political culture, mentality, and identity. In Yushchenko's case, the pro-Western, Euro-Atlantic rhetoric had not been supported by overdue institutional reforms and therefore remained shallow and self-compromising. In Yanukovych's case, the pro-Russian rhetoric was rapidly cooled by Russians themselves who clearly signaled that they did not need any "friendship" from former vassals in the "near abroad," but only full obedience.

This means there are very serious structural factors

in Ukrainian society, as well as important determinants in both Russia and the EU, which create a tough framework for any politician who wishes to pursue any proactive politics in Ukraine. Ukraine, together with Belarus and Moldova, belongs to a geopolitically amorphous zone "in between" and bears the classical characteristics of borderlands:

It generates hybrid models and creates political, economic, and cultural practices which combine mutually excluding values and principles, while the political space has been torn between Western and Eastern vectors. The persisting situation of a "final choice" to be made between West and East, between the EU and Russia – a "mission impossible" – produces a whole gamut of "multivector politics" on the national as well as on the regional level. External pressure reproduces and strengthens this political ambivalence. Led by its own interests, the EU wants to see its Eastern neighbours as "bordered lands," whereas Russia would like to preserve them as its own traditional "borderlands." [36]

This "borderland" situation, Zhurzhenko concludes, will persist as long as the competition between "the elephant and the bear" – the reluctant empire of the European Union and the reluctant ex-empire of Russia – determines the map of the European continent. From the political perspective the accomplishment of the border is dependent on the success of nation and state building in Ukraine and Russia, on the dynamics of their bilateral relations and on new forms of cross-border and regional cooperation emerging in the former Soviet space. [37]

All these "ifs," however, can be subsumed under the rubric "success of nation and state building in Ukraine and Russia." But the latter largely depends on the former. In Russia, unlike in Ukraine, the new identity is merely a continuation of the old supranational Soviet/imperial identity. Or, as Zhurzhenko astutely puts it, "the making of Russians does not require the unmaking of 'Soviets'. The new historical narrative integrates not only symbols of the imperial Russian past but also, selectively, Soviet myths and symbols" [278]. Such an identity can barely be defined as modern and national, and certainly does not support transformation of pre-modern subjects into modern citizens – as an important precondition of full-fledged modernization and successful state-nation building.

Ukraine finds itself at the bottom-line of all these expectations. Making Ukrainians as a process of unmaking Soviets may truly be a "mission impossible." But this is the only way to pull Russia back to reality from its imagined imperial world and make it follow suit. Ukraine's accession in the EU and NATO might be a shock for Russians but this is the only way to wake them up and force them to reconsider their obsolete and cumbersome imperial identity centered in the heavily mythologized "Kievan Russia," far beyond Russia's real history and geography. This might be the only way to help them to develop a "normal" national identity and a normal, i.e. reasonable and rational mode of political behavior.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko does not state this plainly. I believe, however, this a justifiable conclusion regarding the possible future of the ambiguous borderland that we can make from her well-researched and illuminating book.

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