

## Introduction

Three decades after the Soviet system started disintegrating under the pressure of unleashed national identities, these identities still need (re)interpretation and (re)conceptualization. The Soviet Union fell apart largely because of the growing crisis of its rule in the colonized peripheries, from the steady reinvigoration of national movements in three Baltic States to deadly inter-ethnic conflicts, highlighted by the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This dismantlement of the USSR was consensually effectuated by the governments of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, and supported by all other republics, which were eager to launch nation-building projects.

Yet, perhaps, by inertia or a lack of an adequate vocabulary, the countries that formed the USSR are still called “post-Soviet”, in spite of a huge divergence between them. Academic literature is replete with single case studies of post-Soviet countries, yet attempts to compare them with each other are relatively rare. Indeed, cross-country analysis of regions as different as the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe or the Baltic Sea Region requires a set of common denominators beyond the simplistic and retrospective reference to the past. This lack of comparative research attests to the resilience of the tradition of viewing these countries through the prism of their Soviet legacy, which has become increasingly problematic due to the semantic emptiness of the notion of “post-Soviet” and its concomitant inability to grasp the logic of cultural difference and diverse types of cultural production.

In post-1991 Russia, as Serguei Oushakin convincingly demonstrated,

“the ‘post-Soviet’ remains an empty space, a non-existence, devoid of its subjectifying force, its own signifier, and its own meaning effect.”<sup>1</sup>

But does this diagnosis apply to other countries that came into existence after the fall of the USSR? We doubt, and in this book will try to show, that the three countries chosen for analysis, strive to substitute the post-Soviet with the national, and do so not only through political discourses,

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1 *Oushakine*, In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia, P.1010.

but also through cultural practices. Thus, the growing fragmentation of the post-Soviet area can be explained by something that most of its subjects share with each other, nation (re)building policies grounded in strong identity momentum.

National projects in post-Soviet countries vary in many respects. One may see ample diversity of societal and political practices. Whether this be in from the Baltic States with their identities consolidated on the basis of strong anti-imperial attitudes, or in the Central Asian countries with a high resonance of narratives implicitly treating Russia as a civilizing power and an attractive labour market. Post-Soviet identities include pro-Russian (and thus pro-imperial) and anti-Russian public sentiments and expectations alongside often broken aspirations and illusions of fully-fledged acceptance into the European “family”.

With the decreasing explanatory value of the “post-Soviet” frame, we still face a problem of finding other tools and vocabularies that could be used for comparative research in this field. In this book we propose the concept of borderlands for bringing together a group of countries located at the intersection of different cultural, religious, ethnic and civilizational flows and systems. But it is not only geography that borderland actors share with each other. Of more importance are the dilemmas these states face and that make them comparable as elements of a single analytical framework.

Firstly, borderland countries face a dilemma of either deploring their location or, on the contrary, celebrating it. Indeed, there are voices that perceive and articulate borderland geography as a tragic and inescapable destiny of sharing borders with countries that disrespect others sovereignty and independence. Yet in the meantime there is a different, celebratory logic of national pride and dignity, which is a powerful source of cultural practices of nation building and consolidation. It is the latter logic that we unpack in this book using three cases of performative celebration of borderland identities. Celebrations of locational advantages go hand in hand with enhancing international visibility and fostering mobility and dense inter-cultural flows.

Another common issue for the three case studies is an intricate combination of integration and resistance. Borderlands are crossroads with vast historical experiences of associating, in one way or another, with external centres of power. Yet, as the post-Soviet historical cycle of transformations shows, most of these countries face complications in their endeavours to integrate within dominant poles. Practical experiences of Euro-

peanization in Ukraine and Georgia reveal institutional and normative gaps between them and EU member states. This gap can be construed differently, but its existence is manifest in many policy areas, from the hurdles of economic reforms to minority protection legislation. In the case of countries institutionally integrated within Europe (such as the Baltic States) this gap, of course, is reduced to different attitudes to specific policy areas, such as minority integration or security perceptions.

Even more pronounced is the cultural and political distance between most of the post-Soviet borderlands and Russia with its integrationist plans. Even those countries, which favour Eurasian Economic Union either prefer to limit this project to a purely economic inter-governmental coordination mechanism (Kazakhstan and Belarus), or are forced to accept Russia's sphere of influence because of security vulnerabilities (Armenia). Georgia and Ukraine are among countries that openly challenged Russia-designed reintegration ambitions, and are important sources (especially Ukraine) of resistance to the Kremlin's neo-imperial policies.

Closely related to this is another dilemma that of diversity versus homogeneity. Apparently, borderlands possess "hybrid" identities that stem from the very nature of their historical location at the crossroads of various cultures, religions and ethnicities. Yet in the meantime, it is in borderlands that nationalism plays a meaningful political and ideological role as a driver for social cohesion and unity. Of course, this nationalism is mainly protective and even reactive, and emanates from widely spread feelings of existential insecurity induced by the troublesome neighbourhood. Borderland nationalism seems to be compatible with democracy building, as the cases of Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia illustrate.

A key element of our research strategy is deploying borderland identities into the reviving binary logic of EU–Russia conflictual interaction. This process of mutual readjustment leaves both Russia and Europe undetermined as to properly defining their (common) neighbourhood(s). For both, though in very different ways, neighbourhood countries are projections of their Selves. It is this interpretation that makes Europe face obvious limitations in its normative and institutional extension eastward, which might be politically consequential for European identity itself. Against this backdrop, a question needs to be asked; how borderland countries define their national identities, and what cultural strategies they pursue, given the binary logic of EU–Russia confrontation?

In Russia, the largest country in the post-Soviet region and the legal successor of the fallen empire, the very concept of the nation state faces

existential challenges from alternative conceptualizations of Russian identity based on imperial underpinnings. As articulated through different discourses of Eurasianism<sup>2</sup> and/or the “Russian world(s)”,<sup>3</sup> Russia’s identity narratives contain the idea of “incompleteness” of the country and its incongruence with “genuine Russia”. Paradoxically, Russia is a proponent of a return to a nation states system as a foundation of the whole structure of international relations, but Russia itself is far from being a nation state, with imperial temptations outweighing the idea of national integrity, as opposed to an imperial one. This has a clear projection onto each of the three countries under consideration. Two of them, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, lost territory because of direct confrontation with Russia, while Estonia is under heavy pressure from the Kremlin due to a sizeable Russian speaking community on its territory. In the light of the crisis in Ukraine–Russia relations it is evident that the future of these borderlands critically depends on EU–Russia conflictual relations which have triggered new identity splits in each of the three nations. Thus, Russia’s neighbours constituting its “near abroad” find themselves under the threat of Russia’s domination, with Ukraine (2014) and Georgia (2008) being targets of Russia’s military force projection, and Estonia facing a deep political conflict with Russia dating back to the Bronze Soldier monument controversy (2007).

The EU, of course, is a completely different actor. Europe is a key signifier and source of inspiration for Estonian, Ukrainian and Georgian identities, and in the meantime a promoter of good governance practice and technical, managerial and administrative experiences of transformation. Yet the connotations of “Europe” in the three cases are dissimilar. Estonia is part of Baltic Europe and gravitates towards Nordic Europe, also positioning itself within a “new Europe”. Ukraine and Georgia are not that deeply embedded in European regionalist settings, and their European identities are in the making, facing multiple domestic challenges.

Globalization adds another important dimension to the topic. It facilitates the proliferation of trans–border projects and a neoliberal commodification of cultural forms and products. Numerous high visibility cultural and sporting events, like Asiad 2011 in Kazakhstan, EURO 2012 in Ukraine, Eurovision 2002 in Estonia, the European Games 2015 in Baku,

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2 Glaziev, Sergey Glaziev web-site; *Delyagin*, Mikhail Delyagin blog.

3 *IzborskiyKlub*, IzborskiyKlub web-site.

the Youth Olympic Festival 2015 in Tbilisi are eloquent examples of such brand promotion. The growing interest to host and bid for mega-events, exposed by many post-Soviet countries, including Russia, testify to their policies of immersing their (re)emergent national identities in a global context. In the meantime, the post-Soviet space is replete with examples that illuminate the resilience of cultural traditionalism, for which exposure to global cultural markets is only of limited importance. The Baltic States' tradition of song and dance festivals and its sacralisation in national discourses is indicative in this regard.

To address the complex set of issues briefly introduced above, in this book we compare Estonian, Ukrainian and Georgian experiences of nation-building that develop against the background of the neo-imperial policies of Russia, on the one hand, and EU normative power projection on the other. For borderlands nation-building envisages strategies of meaning-making aimed at self-identification, consolidation and integration, along with strategies of adjusting to practical tools and mechanisms of governance generated and shared by Europe. We specifically focus on the ideas of Europe, however fuzzy they might be, as exemplified by various imageries and cultural narratives in these three countries. Performative events, as well as the varied representations of Self and Other that serve to express national identity, are at the centre of each of these case studies.

*Estonia*, along with other Baltic States, has successfully integrated into Euro-Atlantic institutions, yet is still vulnerable vis-a-vis Russia due to the large Russian speaking population that Moscow has pledged to protect. In Estonia we looked at national song and dance festivals as key components of its spiritual tradition of nurturing national identity. We particularly studied the XXVI Song and Dance Festival held in Tallinn in July 2014. The Estonian cultural strategy in this domain seems to be predominantly inward-oriented, with only limited interest to either commercialization of this event or to its greater linguistic or ethnic diversification.

A post-EuroMaidan *Ukraine* managed to challenge Russia's domination, yet strongly depends on Moscow economically and in security terms. In this country our main geographic object is its western part, with the city of Lviv as a perfect epitome of a peculiar Galician identity strongly articulated in European terms, in particular due to the European Football Championship (EURO 2012). In this case we found out a peculiar cultural strategy based on promoting a variety of cross-border projects meant to

solidify Lviv's European profile and a deep interest in opening up its cultural landscapes, particularly for European neighbours.

*Georgia* is a country that politically gravitates toward Euro–Atlantic institutions, but culturally shares much with Russia. In Georgia we chose to focus on the symbolic importance of Europe for the purposes of nation branding through international sporting events, namely the European 2015 Olympic Youth Festival and the final of the UEFA Super Cup. These two events of a clear European scope revealed, in our view, some wider issues related to Georgia's path to Europe.

Based on a comparative analysis of the three cases, we argue that cultural semantics of the performative events are constitutive for borderland identities. They face different options and pursue different strategies of constructing and reconstructing multiple boundaries constitutive for identity–building. These identities are embedded in regional contexts and therefore inscribed in the dynamics of alienation and rapprochement, inclusion and exclusion, engagement and disengagement. In particular, by placing borderland identity debates in specific (regional, national and global) contexts, we unveil symbolic roles played by Europe as a signifier shaping various discourses on and around cultural and sporting mega–events, and the political connotations of those discourses. Drawing on constructivist and post–structuralist approaches, we argue that the normative appeal of Europe might render dissimilar effects, facilitating the erasing of certain borders and the articulation of other identity–related borderlines. This deeply divides the European Self and unveils different perceptions of both the idea of neighbourhood and Europe itself.

Comparing the cases of Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia from this research perspective, we contend that these three countries represent peculiar combinations of grass–roots cultural activities, and outward–oriented messages aimed at reaching international (specifically European) audiences. Cultural and sporting events encourage practices of de–bordering and fostering trans–border communication, as well as blending different identities transcending traditional East–West divides. However, we have seen that urban and regional brands meant for global consumption tend to reduce the issues of societal diversity mainly to folkloric manifestations and performances, and avoid articulations of cultural identities that reach beyond rather standardized promotional media discourses and imageries.

There are four chapters in the book. The first one offers a cognitive mapping of the area of research by briefly introducing the concept of borderlands through the prism of border studies literature, followed by a

concise explanation of the role of the EU–Russia analytical framework for studying post-Soviet borderlands. Then we specifically focus on two strategies of borderland actors that of identity–building through meaning–making and of adopting practices of governmentality. The remaining three chapters are based on the case studies of Ukraine, Estonia, and Georgia.

All cases are based on in–depth expert interviews with local practitioners, policy activists, cultural entrepreneurs, intellectuals, artists, analysts and governmental officers (n=85 in total), accomplished in Lviv (Ukraine, n=25), Tallinn, Tartu and Narva (Estonia, n=25), Tbilisi (Georgia, n=25), and Washington, DC (n=10) in 2013–2015.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The interviews were conducted within the framework of the projects entitled “*Soft power and post/neo-Imperial borderlands: cultural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia*” (supported by the NCEEER and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2015), “*EU-PREACC Project*“ (PIRSES-GA-2012-318911, 2013–2017), “*Developing European Studies in the Caucasus*” (DESCNet,565086-EPP-1-2015-1-EE-EPPJMO-NETWORK, 2015–2018), “*Religion and Soft Power: Religious Communities in the South Caucasus as Objects of External Influences*” (SCOPES-Programme, 2014–2017), “*The EU’s Engagement with Russia and post-Soviet neighbors*” (#564891-EPP-1-2015-1-EE-EPPJMO-MODULE, 2015–2017), “*Cultural Infrastructure of Major Sports Events in Post-Soviet Cities: the 2012 European Football Championships in Lviv*” (supported by the Centre of Urban History of East Central Europe, Lviv, Ukraine, 2013–2014), “*Celebrating Identity through Cultural Events: The Case of Estonia’s ‘Singing Nationalism’ in a Comparative Perspective*” (Erasmus Mundus Action 2, Aurora 2, 2013-2521/001-001 EMA2 15/25/2014), “*Song Festivals and Ongoing Nation-Building: Narratives and Identities in Independent Estonia*” (Estonian Institute, 2014–2015).

