A Border on the move

The Ukrainian-Russian frontier from the Soviet collapse to the conflict in Donbas

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The border between Ukraine and the Russian Federation is the longest in Europe. It runs across densely populated territories and is crossed by millions of people for private visits, business and tourism. The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the military conflict in Donbas resulted in new dividing lines, caused flows of refugees and internally displaced persons, affected labour migration and disrupted the cross-border cooperation between the two countries. This development has significant impact on border crossing regimes, transport routes and routines of cross-border movement.

Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the administrative boundary between Ukraine and the Russian Federation became an international frontier. The longest land border in Europe (almost 2,000 km), it runs across densely populated territories and is crossed by millions of people for private visits, business and tourism. The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the military conflict in Donbas have created new dividing lines between the Ukraine-controlled territory and the territories controlled by Russia and by the separatist "republics". The ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia resulted in massive flows of refugees and internally displaced persons, affected labour migration and disrupted the cross-border cooperation be-

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tween the two countries. It caused significant changes in the border crossing regime, transport routes and routines of cross-border movement.

This article offers an analysis of the current situation against the historical backdrop of the Ukrainian-Russian relations since 1991. The first section provides an overview of the institutionalization processes of the Ukrainian-Russian border from 1991 to 2014. The second section discusses the impact of the current conflict on the border regime between Ukraine and Russia. The third section addresses the situation at the de facto borders with Crimea and the uncontrolled territories of Donbas. Finally, the fourth section deals with the migration crisis which resulted from the Ukrainian-Russian conflict.

Historical background

For Ukraine, as for other post-Soviet countries, national borders and the ability to control them have been an important attribute of state sovereignty and one of the key elements of national security. With the collapse of the USSR, the new Ukrainian state faced rather different challenges at its "old" and "new" frontiers. Having a common border with the countries of the "socialist camp" (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania), Ukrainians before 1991 could hardly profit from this neighbourhood: the Soviet external border was well protected and hardly permeable while cross-border contacts were strictly controlled by Moscow. On the contrary, Ukraine's borders with the neighbouring Soviet republics (Russia, Belarus, Moldova) were merely administrative lines, which were neither controlled nor demarcated; they hardly mattered in terms of labour market, social provisions or education system (Zhurzhenko 2010: 126). After 1991, the infrastructure of Ukraine's western border thus needed to be modernized to answer the needs of growing cross-border traffic, to facilitate contacts between the populations of the near-border regions and to develop tourism. At the "new" borders of Ukraine with the former Soviet republics, the delimitation and the demarcation had to be accomplished and the infrastructure of border and custom controls had to be built practically from zero. Additional challenges emerged in the case of the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, where the frozen conflict in Transnistria has become a source of instability and economic crime. Ukraine's border with Belarus, though thinly populated and not very busy in terms of traffic,

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runs through territories which were heavily polluted as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986.

As a border with a former "imperial power", Ukraine's border with Russia has acquired a special symbolic status in post-Soviet Ukraine being associated to such issues as the power imbalance in bilateral relations, unfinished nation-building and the alleged weakness of Ukrainian national identity in the east. During the first post-Soviet decade, the Communist opposition and Russian nationalists in both countries presented the Ukrainian-Russian border as a "wound" cutting through the single collective body of East Slavic civilization and as an artificial dividing line imposed on the "brotherly peoples" by the "corrupted pro-Western elites" (Zhurzhenko 2010: 163). Major issues between the two countries were settled in the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (1997), and in 2003 presidents Vladimir Putin and Leonid Kuchma signed the Agreement on the State Border between Ukraine and Russia.

Nevertheless, the common border remained, to use Friedrich Ratzel's metaphor, a "power barometer" in the relations of the two countries. For many politicians in Kyiv, the border with Russia represented economic dependence, vulnerability to Moscow's political and informational influences, and the general weakness of the Ukrainian state. For the Kremlin, especially after the Orange Revolution in 2004, the border with Ukraine embodied the danger of a further EU and NATO enlargement to the East and the perceived threat of being encircled by a geopolitical adversary and cut off from the rest of Europe.

Like other frontiers in the post-Cold War Eastern Europe, the Ukrainian-Russian border became a laboratory where processes of nation- and state-building overlapped with the effects of globalization. Moreover, it has been the main site of competition (and later conflict) between two ambitious projects: the EU integration and enlargement, on the one hand, and the Russia-led Eurasian integration, on the other. Although Ukraine was not considered an official candidate for accession, the perspective of an EU integration motivated Kyiv to proceed with the delimitation and demarcation of its borders with the post-Soviet neighbours. This corresponded to the growing concern in Brussels that Ukraine—a new neighbour of the EU after its enlargement to the East—posed a number of soft security threats, of which the issue of illegal migration seemed most urgent. Indeed, from the mid-2000s and till the Arab Spring Ukraine was considered one of the main transit

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countries for migrants from the Middle East, China and the CIS to Europe. By investing in the infrastructure of Ukraine's borders, including the border with Russia, and providing training for the local border and custom services, the EU sought to prevent illegal migration, human trafficking and contraband in its neighbourhood but also to contribute to political stability and security in the region (Zhurzhenko 2005).

Russia, which during the 1990s favoured "transparent borders" inside the CIS, has never considered the demarcation of the border with Ukraine a priority. The agreement on demarcation between the two countries was signed only in 2010, and until 2014, only 372 km of the border with Russia in the Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts were demarcated (Chervonenko 2014). While investing in the technical infrastructure of its border with Ukraine, Russia emphasised the importance of cross-border cooperation and regional integration, including such projects as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Single Economic Area (SEA) and lately, the Customs Union. Instruments like the "Euroregions" established in the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands, a consortium of near-border universities and a "green corridor" facilitating the small cross-border movement were largely borrowed from the arsenal of EU politics. This integration "from below" served as a show window for the business projects of the regional elites and was largely welcomed by the local population in eastern Ukraine profiting from cross-border trade, contraband and seasonal jobs in Russia.

These attitudes were reflected in a sociological survey conducted by the Center for Peace, Conversion and Foreign Policy of Ukraine in 2001. It showed significant differences between the attitudes of Ukrainian experts and ordinary citizens towards the status of Ukraine's border with Russia. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainian experts (87.5 %) assessed the transparent and non-demarcated border with Russia "negatively, as a proof of Ukraine's exposure to potential risks." More than a half of the experts (56.2 %) opted for a "Ukrainian border equally protected along its entire perimeter" while another 25 % were for "the western border being more open than the eastern one." In contrast, the results of the general opinion poll demonstrated that the majority of the Ukrainians (59.8 %) saw the transparent and non-demarcated eastern border "positively, as a proof of a special relationship between Ukraine and Russia," and only 22 % considered this situation negatively, as bearing potential risks. Almost half of the respondents (46.7 %) wanted to see

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the eastern border "more open than the western one" (Sushko/Parkhomenko 2001).

The conflict with Russia and the securitization of the Ukrainian-Russian border

With the annexation of Crimea in spring 2014, the outbreak of the military conflict in Donbas and Russia's intervention (on the legal aspects, see Tsybulenko/Sayapin 2018), Ukraine lost 7 % of its territory; about 13,000 Ukrainian citizens have been killed and more than 28,000 wounded in the conflict (United Nations 2019).

In spring 2014, the porous border with Russia was blamed for the smuggling of paid "pro-Russian protesters" and paramilitary groups into eastern Ukraine (cf. OSCE 2014). In summer of the same year, Russia's hybrid aggression turned into a full-fledged military intervention. As a result, Ukraine lost control over 400 km (20 %) of its land border with Russia (Interfax-Ukraine 2016). With the deployment of additional military units and the development of the military infrastructure, the Ukrainian-Russian border has been heavily militarized (cf. UNIAN 2017).

These dramatic developments affected the attitudes of Ukrainians to the border with Russia. According to an opinion poll carried out in June–July 2014, more than a half of the respondents (58 %) wanted Ukraine to close the border with Russia, while 34 % were negative about such a measure. Half of the respondents (49 %) supported the idea of introducing a visa regime with Russia, while 41 % were against it. Such restrictive measures were, however, less popular in the east and south (Rating Group 2014). The widespread perception of Russia as a source of instability and military threat resulted in various grass roots initiatives which emerged during summer 2014 with the aim of improving the infrastructure of the border and supporting the Ukrainian border guards. In Kharkiv, an eastern Ukrainian city forty kilometres from the border with Russia, groups of volunteers helped digging trenches and building bunkers, fixing equipment and decorating buildings with Ukrainian symbols (Kumkova 2014). By the same token, the idea of a "security fence" similar to the one at the Israeli-Palestinian border was proposed by Ihor Kolomoiskyi, a pro-Ukrainian oligarch and at that time the head of the Dnipropetrovsk oblast. Critics of the project pointed out that

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such a wall, even if helpful against illegal crossing and smuggling of weapons, would not be able to stop a military invasion and denounced it as a PR stunt meant to consolidate Kolomoiskyi's image as a Ukrainian patriot. The idea was supported by President Petro Poroshenko and especially by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk, who embraced the project of a "European rampart" which, he argued, would be part of the future eastern border of the EU (Kyiv Post 2014). The government also announced that the demarcation of the border with Russia would be continued unilaterally as the Ukrainian-Russian commission on demarcation failed to continue its work after the outbreak of the conflict. Years after the launch of the "European rampart" project, however, only some elements of it have been implemented, while the rest stumbled over financial difficulties and corruption allegations (Miller 2018).

The regime of crossing the border has been strengthened since the outbreak of the conflict, especially from the Ukrainian side. In spring 2014, afraid of Russia's hybrid aggression, the Ukrainian government temporarily limited the entry of adult Russian male citizens into the country. These restrictions were soon partly lifted, but at the same time new requirements were introduced for Russian citizens visiting Ukraine: travel passports instead of internal ID cards, official invitations and preliminary online registration. The new system of biometric control, which Ukraine implemented at its borders in 2018 as part of the preparations for the visa free regime with the EU, has also affected citizens of Russia, which Kyiv authorities added to the list of "migration risk countries". From March 2020, Ukrainian citizens, too, can enter Russia only with travel passports and not with internal ID cards and birth certificates.

In addition to these changes, Ukraine terminated the agreement with Russia on local border traffic: since March 2015, only international border crossings have been open, while small local ones previously used mainly by near border residents remain closed (UNIAN 2015). In October 2015, Ukraine and Russia suspended direct flights between the two countries; in the following years, Minsk, the capital of Belarus, has become the main regional transit hub. Other transport connections were adjusted to the conflict as well: Russia rushed to build a new railway from Moscow to Rostov bypassing Ukrainian territory. For Russian tourists, the popular transit route to Crimea through the territory of Ukraine was replaced by direct flights to Simferopol; since 2018, the new Kerch Bridge connects Crimea with the Krasnodar

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region. The number of train connections between Ukraine and Russia decreased, although there are still some trains run by Ukrainian Railways connecting main Ukrainian cities with Moscow. Cancelling them would mean a significant financial loss as the Moscow destination remains most profitable for the Ukrainian state railway company (Proskuriakov 2019). Moreover, this would be also a rather unpopular measure as these trains are used predominantly by Ukrainian labour migrants working in Russia (more on this topic in the last section). The situation has been used by various private bus companies which offer alternative and rather cheap possibilities for people commuting between the two countries. Very often, a minibus brings people to the border which they cross by foot and then at the other side are picked up by another minibus which de facto belongs to the same owner (cf. Kolosov et al. 2018: 461).

The deep crisis in Ukrainian-Russian relations resulted in cross-border cooperation projects being put on ice. This concerns, for example, the Ukrainian-Russian Euroregion "Slobozhanshchyna" established in 2003 by the Kharkiv and Belgorod oblasts. In 2016, the trade turnout of the Belgorod oblast with Ukraine dropped 74 % in comparison with 2013 (Kolosov et al. 2018: 462). Kharkiv local business, especially retail, services and entertainment, has been suffering from a significant drop in the number of visitors from Belgorod whose inhabitants also feel a certain nostalgia for pre-war times when Kharkiv was a frequently visited friendly territory offering cultural pleasures, entertainment and affordable shopping. Cross-border professional and personal contacts obviously have suffered from the conflict, especially from restrictions on travel and from hostile TV propaganda. In the interviews I conducted in Kharkiv in summer 2017, representatives of the Kharkiv academic community confirmed broken or frozen contacts with Russian colleagues[1]. Common projects with Russian institutions were put on ice and inviting Russian citizens to conferences in Ukraine became tricky. Travelling to Russia for Ukrainians (and vice versa) has become politicized and thus—especially for academics, journalists and public figures—limited to exceptional reasons of illness or death in the family. Public servants and

1 Research was conducted together with Daria Skibo in Kharkiv and Belgorod in summer 2017 and supported by the program "Transcultural contact zones in Ukraine" of the University of St. Gallen.

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especially law enforcement officers in both countries are strongly discouraged to cross the Ukrainian-Russian border.

Crossing precarious de facto borders

In 2014, Crimea and its harbour city Sevastopol became two new federal subjects of Russia, while parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are now controlled by the self-proclaimed "people's republics" backed by Moscow. According to Ukrainian legislation, in both cases these territories are considered "temporarily occupied"; in 2016, a special governmental body, the Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and IDPs, was established by Kyiv. The new "temporary administrative lines" separating Crimea and the "people's republics" in Donbas from the rest of Ukraine have become de facto new borders; for Ukrainian and Russian citizens as well as foreigners crossing them is in many ways more complicated and stressful than crossing the "normal" Ukrainian-Russian border. The politics of bordering in the two cases of Crimea and Donbas and the regime of crossing on the ground are, however, rather different.

Ukraine's border with Crimea is de facto Russia's new external frontier, even if illegitimate and not recognized by the international community. As a new subject of the Russian Federation, Crimea has been integrated in its administrative, political and economic system. For patriotic or pragmatic reasons, most of the Crimean population accepted Russian citizenship (which was granted automatically to all residents of the peninsula; an exception was made for persons who, within one month after the annexation, rejected Russian citizenship in writing). Quite a few of Crimean residents, however, did not give up their Ukrainian passports (which allow more freedom of movement for inhabitants of a territory under international sanctions). From the Ukrainian perspective, Crimea is an occupied territory temporarily out of control; its residents remain Ukrainian citizens. According to Ukrainian law, entering the territory of Crimea from Russia without permission of the Ukrainian authorities is a criminal offence, and a number of Russian public personalities have been banned from entering Ukraine for this reason (Zhurzhenko 2019). While the fundamental disagreement between Ukraine and Russia on the issue of Crimea is unlikely to be settled soon, the administrative boundary between Crimea and continental Ukraine is de facto a new

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border between two countries. It is controlled by border guard and custom services of Ukraine and Russia, and apart from long waiting hours the regime of crossing is quite stable. Most of those who cross this de facto border are Ukrainian citizens and Crimean residents who kept their Ukrainian passports. Since autumn 2014, there is no direct public transport connection between continental Ukraine and Crimea—the border can be crossed only by foot or by private car—but private minibus services on both sides bring people to the crossing point and pick them up there. As Crimea used to be a very popular holiday destination for Ukrainians, it is hardly surprising that, despite a dramatic drop in the number of tourists, the cross-border movement has seasonal character: in 2019, the number of crossings (both entry and exit) at three crossing points in February was 121,000 while in August 408,000. In sum, during 2019, 2,582,000 persons crossed the border with Crimea in both directions (State Border Guard Service of Ukraine 2020).

At the other new boundary separating the so-called DNR and LNR from (the rest of) Ukraine the situation is far more ambivalent and not settled at all. To start with, the region suffered enormously during the hot phase of the military conflict which resulted in flows of refugees and a ruined infrastructure. The front line has been stabilized but shelling and sniper fire continues, with casualties on both sides reported regularly; after six years there is still no sign of progress in solving the conflict. The new "border"—which is actually a frozen front line—is seen by both sides as provisional and movable, worth investing in fortification but not in civic infrastructure. It runs through two densely populated Ukrainian regions—the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts—leaving the regional capitals with their educational and health care facilities in separatist-controlled territories. While the "republics" issue their own documents (which Ukraine does not recognize) and many local residents made use of the new opportunity to apply for a Russian passport (more on this in the next section), the local population is still dependent on Ukrainian social provisions and thus Ukrainian citizenship. Many families are divided, with young people leaving for Ukraine for work and study and elderly staying in the uncontrolled territories bound to their Soviet era apartments or houses—the only assets they have. This explains the intense movement across the dividing line where five control points from the Ukrainian side have been established (one in the Luhansk oblast and four in the Donetsk oblast). According to the statistics of the Ukrainian Border Service, the total number of crossings (both entries and exits) during 2019

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reached 13,933,000, a number more than five times higher than at the administrative line with Crimea during the same period (State Border Guard Service of Ukraine 2020). Here, seasonal fluctuations are not so pronounced.

The fact that Ukrainian citizens living in the so-called DNR and LNR can receive their pensions and social benefits only on the Ukraine-controlled territory creates additional incentives for regularly crossing the dividing line. According to the Eastern Ukraine Survey Checkpoint Monitoring (UNHCR 2020) 63 % of those crossing the temporary dividing line are 60 years and older, 65 % of them are women. Apart from receiving pension, other popular reasons for crossing are issues with documents, visiting relatives and, to a lesser extent, shopping (food, clothes and many other categories of goods are more expensive in the "uncontrolled territories"). As in Crimea, the border can be crossed by foot or by car (many local residents have both Ukrainian and "separatist" car plates). But unlike in Crimea, the border crossing regime is regulated by a "Temporary Order" established by the Headquarters of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (since May 2018 the Joint Forces Operation). It can be changed (e.g. in case of escalation) by decision of the United Center for Civic-Military Cooperation which includes representatives of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ukrainian Security Service and local authorities. In the last years, it often happened that crossing points were temporarily closed because of shelling threat. But even in absence of immediate danger, the general uncertainty, long waiting lines and the absence of a basic infrastructure and services make crossing the dividing line quite a challenging experience. In 2018 alone, 60 Ukrainian citizens—most of them elderly people with chronical health issues—died during crossing the dividing line (Myrnyi 2020). Illegal crossing outside the official checkpoints can cost a trespasser her/his life—strips of land adjacent to the dividing line are heavily covered with mines.

The humanitarian situation at the temporary crossing points in Crimea and especially in Donbas has been often criticized by human rights activists and international observers, and little progress in terms of improving the infrastructure has been made until recently. It seems that apart from a lack of political will, corruption and weak administrative capacities, the Ukrainian authorities have been caught in a dilemma: while the lack of improvement imposes high human costs on the local residents of the conflict zone and undermines their trust into the Ukrainian state, building a proper

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infrastructure for temporary crossing points would implicitly mean a de facto acceptance of the status quo as a permanent arrangement.

In summer 2019, the Ukrainian government announced its plans to modernize the infrastructure of the two crossing points in Crimea, Chongar and Kalanchak. These plans envisaged the construction of parking areas, sanitary facilities, offices providing administrative services, and medical emergency rooms. In November of the same year the first round of modernization was completed. In February 2020, Ukrainian president Zelenskyy announced plans to build a new town in the Kherson oblast for refugees from Crimea, especially for the families of Crimean Tatars. He promised it to become a "garden city", a show window of the new Ukraine demonstrating its advantages to visitors from Crimea (President of Ukraine 2020). In October 2019, Zelenskyy ordered to restore the bridge (destroyed since 2014) over the Siverskyi Donets river in Stanytsia Luhanska, the only crossing point in the Luhansk oblast (Kyiv Post 2019). The same presidential decree listed a number of other urgent measures aimed at improving the infrastructure and simplifying the regime of crossing the temporary dividing line. The COVID pandemic has unfortunately suspended these plans; moreover, in March 2019 crossing points in Crimea and Donbas were closed for both entrance and exit—a decision strongly criticized from the humanitarian point of view.

Migration crisis and passportization politics

The annexation of Crimea and especially the outbreak of the military conflict in Donbas, resulted in a migration crisis, which, in Ukraine's modern history, can be compared only to World War II. Half of the Donbas population has been forced to flee. Of those who have fled, around one million and a half went to other parts of Ukraine. On May 12, 2020, 1,446,651 persons were registered in Ukraine as IDPs (internally displaced persons) (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine 2020). The official statistics, however, is incomplete. Many of those who went to other parts of Ukraine did not register officially as IDPs while some of those with IDP registration returned back to the uncontrolled territories in 2015–2016, after the relative stabilization of the situation. During the peak of the displacement crisis in 2014–2015, an unprecedented number of people was on the move, forced to leave their homes in haste, often being already traumatized by the armed conflict, families

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being divided by front lines and state borders. The majority were women with children and elderly people with rather limited financial resources. Some could count on relatives and friends in other regions of Ukraine, but the majority needed at least a temporary shelter. The capacities of the Ukrainian state, weakened by the political crisis and the external aggression, were in no way sufficient, and spontaneous civil society initiatives were decisive in providing immediate help during the first months. For example, the "Stantsiia Kharkiv", an around-the-clock info point, organized by local volunteers at the Kharkiv railway station, one of the main destinations for the displaced from Donbas, did not only offer initial orientation and basic information but helped people to find temporary accommodation, provided them with food, necessary medicine, children's clothes and diapers etc. The majority of the displaced have been staying in Kyiv, Kharkiv and the Ukraine-controlled parts of Donbas, still in hope to return home. Very often, they face marginalisation, social exclusion and feel like second class citizens (Bulakh 2020). But there are also many who, due to their education, financial resources and social capital, have been able to start their life anew and even succeed. This especially concerns displaced persons from Crimea, whose number accounts for less than 7 % of Ukraine's entire IDP population (Charron 2020). Crimean IDPs did not flee from the military conflict; most of them left because they refused to accept the annexation or/and saw their future in Ukraine. Having left for "political" reasons, this group enjoys a different symbolic status in today's Ukraine.

In addition to Ukrainian IDPs, over one million Ukrainians went to Russia (Kuznetsova 2020). This number is even more contested and politicized, and the picture is extremely complicated. To start with, there are of course some "political refugees"—people with pro-Russian views, those who were active in the pro-Russian rallies in spring 2014 and thus came under pressure of Ukrainian security services as well as those afraid of criminal prosecution in Ukraine. But there are also people with pro-Ukrainian views who fled from the military conflict to Russia because they have relatives or friends there. The majority of Ukrainian refugees in Russia has been, however, driven by security concerns and hope for a better life: after all, the level of wages and social provision in Russia is higher than in Ukraine and the former was until recently the primary destination for Ukrainian labour migrants.

Like in Ukraine, civil society in Russia responded to the flow of refugees from the conflict zone by a number of humanitarian initiatives. Russian

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regional authorities in the near border regions and the Ministry of Emergency joined in organizing temporary accommodation and basic provision for refugees. The Russian state was, however, not motivated by pure altruism: as noted by Kuznetsova (2020), the issue of the Donbas refugees was instrumentalized by the Kremlin to blame Kyiv for "genocide" of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine. She also pointed to the fact that Ukrainians who left for Russia to escape the conflict do not constitute a single group from the legal point of view: their statuses differ from refugee or temporary asylum to regular labour or irregular migrant. Russia is, however, notoriously restrictive with granting refugee status, while temporary asylum, which is not easy to obtain, limits freedom of movement for its holder. Therefore, "the most attractive and, in some cases, the only way to stay in Russia for some of the displaced, was as an economic or irregular migrant" (Kuznetsova 2020: 517). The way from economic migrant to Russian citizenship was, however, long and complicated. Essentially, the only way to apply for Russian citizenship immediately was the State Programme for Voluntary Emigration of Compatriots Living Abroad to Russia (cf. Kuznetsova 2020) which, however, limited the choice of the place of residence and did not provide additional social benefits.

Responding to the shortcomings of this policy, in May 2019 Vladimir Putin issued a decree simplifying the procedure for granting citizenship to Ukrainian citizens from the non-government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Two months later, Putin's second decree extended the simplified rules for granting citizenship to the inhabitants of the government-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. According to the new procedure, Donbas residents are not requested to provide a proof of their Ukrainian citizenship being renounced. Subsequent amendments simplified the rules for granting citizenship to other categories of Ukrainian citizens (including e.g. former residents of Crimea who had left the peninsula before March 2014). Ukrainian and Belarusian citizens were officially recognized as "Russian speakers" and thus spared from the Russian language exam. According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, during 2019 more than 196,000 Donbas residents received Russian citizenship, 136,000 from the Donetsk and Luhansk "republics" and the rest from the Kyiv-controlled territories (TASS 2020).

These steps can be seen as motivated by pragmatic economic considerations. In the last decades, Russia has been facing demographic decline,

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while some regions suffer from depopulation and its social and economic consequences. Another concern of the Kremlin is that labour migration from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, while filling certain deficits of non-qualified labour in big cities, causes ethnic tensions and nurtures grassroots nationalist sentiments. Against this backdrop, Ukrainians—culturally close to Russians and easily assimilated—have come to be regarded as a welcome resource for Russian economy. The growing demand for Ukrainian labour migrants in the countries of East Central Europe might have additionally pushed Moscow into this direction. But not less important, of course, is the political motivation: passportization has long been used by the Kremlin as an instrument of geopolitical influence-seeking. This has already been Russia's policy in other breakaway territories of former Soviet republics, such as Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (cf. Grigas 2016). Granting Russian citizenship to Donbas residents, gives Moscow additional leverage in the ongoing conflict. No wonder that both the Ukrainian government and the EU denounce this policy.

Responding to Putin's decrees from May and July 2019, the newly elected Ukrainian president Zelenskyy ordered the government to simplify naturalisation procedures for foreigners and stateless people who have "defended Ukraine" and for Russians facing "political persecution" at home (The Ukrainian Weekly 2019). Indeed, Ukraine has been a destination for some Russian political emigrants—journalists, bloggers, academics—attracted by the relative freedom of media and political pluralism in Ukraine in comparison to the increasingly authoritarian Russia. While Ukraine cannot provide a level of security and well-being comparable to EU countries, opportunities for professional career are definitely better in Ukraine, due to the widespread Russian language and the flexible boundaries between the two East Slavic cultures. Apart from this, the attractiveness of the Ukrainian passport significantly increased in the last years due to the visa-free agreement between Ukraine and the EU, which came into force in 2017. For the Crimean residents, this is an additional incentive to keep Ukrainian citizenship despite their new Russian passports: according to the State Migration Service of Ukraine, since March 2014 Crimean residents received 166,000 Ukrainian passports for travelling abroad. "Passport tours" have become a flourishing business on the peninsula—private buses bring Crimeans across the de facto border to the nearest Ukrainian city Kherson, where they can apply for a Ukrainian biometric passport (Evchin et al. 2019).

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The migration crisis caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict should be discussed in a broader historical and geo-economic context. Since 2014, an increase of labour migration from Ukraine can be observed. One of the factors is the growing demand for labour force in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as in other new EU member states which themselves suffer from an outflow of their labour force to the West. Many of these states liberalised migration legislation to attract labour force from Ukraine. The growing attractiveness of the labour markets of these countries led to a significant reorientation of labour migration flows from Ukraine. Russia, which for decades had been the most popular destination, lost its place as number one to Poland. In 2017, the main recipients of the Ukrainian labour force were Poland (38.9 %), Russia (26.3 %) and Italy (11.3 %) (Pyrozhkov et al. 2018: 83). According to Ukrainian statistical data, the decrease of labour migration to Russia started some years before the events of 2014 in Ukraine. Despite the advantage of the common cultural background and the family ties between the two countries, Russia as a labour market has never been as attractive as the labour markets of Ukraine's western neighbours. The new EU members, which now have liberalised their labour migration rules for Ukrainian citizens, offer better working conditions, higher wages and better social protection.[2] No wonder, that the young and more educated risk new opportunities while the older generation and low qualified prefer the old routes. The same tendency—reorientation from Russia to the EU—can be observed in the education migration. One of the reasons is that a European academic degree gives access to the Western labour market.

Conclusion

In his seminal study of the US-Mexican border, Oscar Martinez (1994) suggested a useful classification of borderlands according to the criteria of the intensity of cross-border contacts and the mode of relations between neighbouring countries. He differentiated between alienated, co-existent, interdependent and integrated borderlands. Applied to our case and slightly modified to include the dynamic aspect, Martinez's scheme allows us to

2 Of course, Ukrainian labourers working illegally do not necessarily benefit from these changes.

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see the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands evolving from integrated (during the Soviet era) to interdependent and in some regards co-existent (until 2014). The annexation of Crimea and the Russian intervention in the east as well as the resulting conflict of Russia with the West dramatically changed the geopolitical context of the Ukrainian-Russian border. The current situation thus bears some features of alienated borderlands, especially concerning the official contacts, business and education. The border has been militarised, the regime of crossing has been strengthened and cross-border cooperation projects were put on ice. Moreover, the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands experienced a proliferation of new "temporary dividing lines" and "de facto borders" thus having turned into a patchwork of unrecognized "quasi states", annexed territories under international sanctions and "grey zones" where normal life is suspended due to the ongoing military conflict. Despite all these developments, or as a result of them, mass migration and cross-border movement remain important features of the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands which in this regard cannot be considered alienated.

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