

## From frontier to border and back: mental geography as part of nation building

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State borders can function as rigid dividing lines, physically or symbolically separating political spaces. In some cases, they are reinforced through tangible barriers such as barbed wire and fortifications; in others, through legal and administrative restrictions. The border between North and South Korea, for example, is sealed both physically and legally. Borders may, however, serve the opposite function, acting as zones of contact and interaction between states, as is the case for many borders within Europe.

The borders of the states that emerged from the dissolution of the USSR have undergone, and continue to undergo, a fascinating transformation. While this process is broadly characteristic of the disintegration of multinational empires, it also possesses distinctive features of its own. To understand these developments, one needs to examine the origins of these borders.

Soviet borders emerged in a manner typical of post-imperial dissolution<sup>1</sup>, i.e., chiefly following pre-existing administrative divisions. The USSR fragmented into the fifteen 'union republics' that constituted the top level of its quasi-federative structure. The lower-level entities formally designated as autonomous – from top to bottom, autonomous republics, autonomous oblasts, and autonomous okrugs – were embedded within the 'union republics' but not necessarily within one another (i.e., an autonomous oblast or okrug could be directly nested in a union republic without belonging to a particular autonomous republic, and so on). When the Soviet Union collapsed, only its constituent, or union republics, acquired the right to independence, and the autonomous entities were not involved or consulted in the dissolution process.

The Soviet quasi-federative division was so uneven that the resulting fifteen independent nations varied enormously in terms of size, economic capacity and demographics. Some had an independence movement and some did not; to some, independence was handed on a platter without any explicit expression of popular will. As a consequence of this mode of partition, a number of acute ethno-political conflicts emerged, from Chechnya to Abkhazia, where nationalist elites sought independence for territories that, according to the logic of a status-based dissolution, were not entitled to sovereign statehood. Again, this type of conflict has been a common side effect of decolonization in many parts of the world, from Africa to East Asia.

However, a crucial factor distinguishing the disintegration of the USSR from that of other empires was the Soviet instrumentalization of ethnicity. Following the collapse of the

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<sup>1</sup> The author views the USSR as a continuation of the Russian Empire.

Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires after World War I, the first two disappeared permanently, with nation-states emerging from their ruins, albeit with difficulties and setbacks. The Russian Empire, by contrast, was reconstituted on much of its former territory through the creation of the USSR. One of the instruments used by the Bolsheviks to achieve territorial reintegration was the politicization of ethnicity.

The administrative structure of the Russian Empire had largely ignored the ethnic composition of its governorates<sup>2</sup>. Contrastingly, the Soviet Union established territorial entities formally ascribed various degrees of autonomy and explicitly ethnicity-based. This policy helped the Bolsheviks win the Civil War by attracting many of the empire's non-Russian ethnic groups to fight on their side against the White Movement that advocated a "united and indivisible Russia."

Each of the new entities was thus named after a particular ethnic group, referred to in the Soviet laws as its 'titular nation'. While the union republics were supposedly federative and the other entities were called autonomous, they did not in fact exercise any form of sovereignty. The USSR was unitarian, governed through centralized institutions such as the Communist Party, the KGB and ministries (executive bodies). Decisions on the establishment and embedding of administrative entities were chaotic and arbitrary. Over the decades of Soviet rule, some entities were annulled and new ones were set up, some had their names changed, some autonomous entities were handed over from one union republic to another, and so on. There were, most notably, no consistent criteria for deciding which ethnic groups became titular nations and which did not, or which level of autonomy was assigned to an entity.

Nevertheless, primarily in the union republics, the formal ethnic designation led to the emergence of quasi-states. Each union republic had its own capital city, national language, and, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, borders. Although drawn inconsistently, frequently modified, and rarely based on a single guiding principle, these borders existed on the political maps and eventually shaped the mental maps of the population. In public perception, a border between the Soviet Socialist Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan has a different political meaning than a border between the Erivan and Elisabethpol Governorates. Linked as it was to territory and governance, the ethnic component increasingly acquired ethnopolitical significance. While the formal entities remained largely symbolic, and key institutions such as citizenship, passports, laws, currency and military service were Soviet-wide, the very existence of ethnic borders affected identity by extending ethnic self-awareness into the realm of political hierarchy.

Across the Soviet Union, the coupling of administrative entities with ethnic groups unfolded in different ways. In Central Asia, the Soviet authorities engaged in what was officially termed 'national delimitation': Moscow determined which groups would be recognized as nations, codified their languages, and in some cases, even invented names for nations using existing local identities. Paradoxically, drawing boundaries between ethnic groups often went more smoothly in Central Asia than in regions such as the Caucasus, because in Central Asia, the establishment of ethnic identities occurred simultaneously with the

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<sup>2</sup> Owing to historical circumstances, there were two exceptions to this rule in the Russian Empire: the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Finland.

institutionalization of interethnic borders. Within the newly created republics, diverse tribal, religious, and local identities gradually coalesced into what later became known in official discourse as the Soviet nations.

The Caucasus presented a very different picture. Here the Soviet authorities had to deal with established cultures with deeply rooted historical narratives, literary traditions, mythologies, strong ethnocultural self-awareness, and clearly defined cultural boundaries and distances. To these pre-existing cultural distinctions, Soviet rule added a political dimension. Borders that had previously existed primarily in historical memory, literature, and cultural narratives were transferred onto the ground, often contrary to current perceptions of territorial belonging.

The resulting borders were experienced as artificial not just because of the arbitrary manner in which many were drawn, and the widespread resentment against the perceived unfair allocation of status and resources, but also because they were largely invisible in everyday life. One could unknowingly cross the border of a union republic. It was entirely possible to travel for many kilometers without realizing that one had crossed from Ukraine into Moldova, for example. Yet precisely because these borders were not physically enforced, they often became zones of interethnic interaction and transcultural exchange. Odessa functioned as an educational and cultural center for residents of Tiraspol, while Tbilisi served as a major urban hub for inhabitants of Armenia's Noyemberyan. Populations living near the borders of union republics were frequently bilingual, or at least partially bilingual. Informal trade and exchange networks and numerous forms of cross-cultural communication crossed the invisible borders with ease.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former symbolic borders inside a unitarian state became true boundaries, sometimes impossible to cross. This transformation was especially pronounced in the South Caucasus and the western regions of the former USSR, with the partial exception of Belarus: the Russia-Belarus border has remained nearly as permeable as it had been in Soviet times. Elsewhere, however, particularly in Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus, accession to independence produced fragmented political spaces. Borders increasingly resembled lines separating adversaries rather than zones of interaction.

The Armenia-Turkey border has remained closed for more than three decades. The Armenia-Azerbaijan and Russia-Georgia borders are sealed almost hermetically. Georgia also has effectively closed borders with its de facto seceded entities, unrecognized by Tbilisi but supported by Russia. Azerbaijan sealed its land borders to all neighboring states fairly recently, as a measure to contain the COVID pandemic, but has failed to open them when the pandemic ended, citing sanitary reasons.

Rooted in the numerous conflicts that continue to shape the South Caucasus, the physical cut-offs destroyed the cultural continuum that once characterized the region. Mental borders are changing. People increasingly cease to understand one another, sometimes in the literal linguistic sense. Younger generations no longer maintain the forms of cross-border communication that were common among their parents. The impossibility of travel contributes to growing social and cultural distance from neighboring societies.

Borders cease to function as spaces of interaction and instead, become spaces of competition if not outright conflict. People in post-soviet countries increasingly refrain from visiting neighboring former sister republics even when they have the opportunity. Thus, while residents of landlocked Armenia still travel to Georgia's Black Sea resorts, the reverse flow of visitors is tiny arguably due to the declining cultural attraction that Armenia's historical and cultural sites hold for younger generations of Georgians. The accessibility of previously closed European destinations is only part of the explanation; the other part is that in mental geography, Yerevan is no longer just a few hours' drive away from Tbilisi.

One can interpret this phenomenon as part of the broader emergence of nation-states and the consolidation of new national identities. In this sense, it may be viewed as a transitional stage in post-imperial state-building. Indeed, even the official delimitation and demarcation of borders between former Soviet republics proceed slowly because borders are perceived primarily as instruments of security rather than cooperation.

Once regional conflicts are resolved, borders formally and physically drawn, and territorial claims abandoned, at least at the legal level, a wider understanding of borders may become possible. At present, however, this is an overly optimistic scenario for many parts of the post-Soviet space. In Transnistria and Crimea, Abkhazia and Donbas, the concept of the border also remains heavily securitized, and consequently, difficult to transcend.