

War Borders: Spatial and Temporal Impact of the Shifting Border between Ukraine and its Russia-Occupied Territories

Abstract

How does the war affect established cross-border flows? My paper will demonstrate that it simultaneously decreases/ blocks some of them, but also creates new ones that aim to defy time and space constraints created by the war. I will look at the mobility patterns of civilians across and around the combat zone in Ukraine between its government-controlled territories and areas in the South-East of the country, occupied by Russia since February 2022. War borders evolve with the changing political and military situation, when travellers on the ground navigate the shifting security, political, socio-economic circumstances while trying to maintain cross-border social networks disrupted by the war.

War border exists in Ukraine since 2014, when the political and military conflict between Ukraine and Russia resulted in the establishment of a heavily militarized 'contact line' between Ukraine and its temporary occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea. Despite increasing multi-faced bordering between the opposing sides, the cross-border travels across the 'contact line' grew as the conflict situation 'froze' between 2016 and 2021. Until 2020, up to 13mln people crossed the contact line per year. The Covid-19 pandemic plummeted the number of crossings between Ukraine and the occupied territories of Donbas by 97 per cent due to sanitary restrictions, however, cross-border movement continued as people were making a detour via Russia to reach the 'other side' of the border.

Since February 2022, the war border changed. Ukraine closed its borders with Russia and ceased the crossings with the occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea. However, travellers found new routes and ways to continue cross-border movement either through the highly dangerous 'humanitarian corridors' between the fighting sides or making time-consuming and distant detours (e.g. the occupied territories-Russia-Belarus-the Baltic states-Poland-Ukraine and vice versa, or through Russia-Georgia-Turkey-EU-Ukraine). A small-distance and short trip in peace time within the Ukrainian territory now requires up to a week of travel across multiple countries. Hence, the war border in Ukraine has not only impacted patterns of (im)mobility in terms of time and space, but also created new regional transborder flows.

Biographical note

Dr Lidia Kuzemska is a sociologist with a keen interdisciplinary interest in forced migration, internal displacement, borders and bordering, citizenship, and migration policy. She is currently a postdoctoral Prisma Ukraïna Fellow 2022/23 at the Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin. Lidia received her PhD in 2022 from Lancaster University for a thesis entitled: 'Don't Be Afraid of Our Citizens: Internally Displaced Persons Encounter Bordering and Othering in Ukraine'. Lidia's work aims to explore how everyday bordering and othering processes affect migrants, whose citizenship rights are disrupted by the forced displacements. In her research, she brings together insights from qualitative and quantitative data, policy analysis and field observations.

Lidia is also a co-managing editor of the *Refugee Review* journal, which is part of the ESPMI network. She is also a Research Affiliate at the Internal Displacement Research Programme (the Refugee Law Initiative, University of London) and a peer-reviewer of the Knowledge Platform and Connection Hub established by the UN Network on Migration (UNNM).

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