

Bessarabian borderlands

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Introduction

BESSARABIAN BORDERLANDS: ONE REGION, TWO STATES, MULTIPLE ETHNICITIES

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In May 2003, the Governor from Odessa, accompanied by an entourage of other officials, visited a village situated in the most southern part of Odessa province, near the district capital of Reni on the Danube river, Ukraine. The occasion for the gathering of officials was the opening of the gas pipeline in the district. The Governor began his speech in Russian with the statement 'People ask where is the Reniiski *raion*. And the answer is - at the end of Ukraine, almost in Romania!'. He then briefly paused and as an afterthought added 'sorry, shall I speak in Russian or Ukrainian?'. The loud chorus from the largely village audience confirmed that he should continue in Russian, while one man, leaned over to his neighbour and in good humour ridiculed the futility of giving the speech in any other language.

In these opening moments of the speech public acknowledgement was made of the geo-administrative periphery of this southernmost tip of Ukraine. Language too was highlighted as a sensitive issue – a bone of particular contention in the traditionally Russian speaking Odessa region where inhabitants feel marginalised in the new Ukraine state that has failed to acknowledge Russian as the nation's second official language. The audience (ethnic Moldovans, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Russians and Ukrainians), perhaps more than the officials, appreciated Russian as the only common language between them in this ethnically mixed region.

Political and economic reform across eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union was accompanied by the dismantling/establishing of borders and the emergence of new nation states. Bessarabia, the region we are looking at in this volume, was until recently a part of the Soviet Union, with an internal border extending across two states - the Ukrainian SSR and the Moldovan SSR. This internal border became an international border after 1991, following proclamations of independence by the two Republics. At the same time, the strictly regulated border in the west established in 1944

between Romania and Soviet Union was relaxed after 1989, but is being reinforced again, in preparation for the admittance of Romania to the European Union due to take place in 2007. While the rise of new borders and nation-states are changes to be reckoned with in the region, this collection of articles also considers other boundaries that prove equally significant: boundaries of a historical, ethnic or economic nature, which delineate the area along different configurations. The crosscutting of political borders and ethnic and economic boundaries results in a shifting map of spaces and identities. While in some contexts the historically denoted region of Bessarabia is the significant unit, on other occasions the smaller unit of 'village' is the point of reference (be it a Moldovan, Bulgarian, Gagauz or ethnically mixed village). On other occasions, citizenship in the new nation-state is of central importance.¹

In this paper we consider borders in the most broad sense, that is, as both literal (ie actual geographical) borders and conceptual (socio-cultural) boundaries². Bessarabia is a site of multiple borders and boundaries which 'delimit what is to be included and excluded' (Rösler & Wendl 1999: 2). Thus 'borderlands represent a juncture between the literal and conceptual' borders (Rösler & Wendl: 226). In fact an important theme of the papers in this collection is that in order to understand this particular borderland region, we need to look at literal borders and conceptual boundaries as complementary processes that sometimes reinforce each other, sometimes subvert each other. Underlying this focus on the complementary relationship between literal borders and conceptual boundaries is the recognition that such places are always areas of contested power (Wilson & Donnan 1998: 10 & 26), a point highlighted by the changing configuration of both borders and boundaries in Bessarabia. While it is clear that literal borders have changed over time, as various powers exerting influence over the area have either expanded or contracted their spheres of influence, conceptual boundaries, based on ethnicity and shared history, have remained more constant

(although they too have changed). What is required is an exploration of how the construction and dismantling of state borders intersects with the formation and dissolving of conceptual boundaries (Pelkmans, in press; Berdahl 1999). The aim of this collection is more modest: the papers that follow suggest that both boundaries and borders are being re-valued and used as a resource, particularly at such times of economic uncertainty.³

This volume consists of a collection of essays that were originally presented at a workshop convened in March 2005 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle⁴. Many of the participants were local scholars working on the region from a variety of academic backgrounds: history, sociology and ethnology. But in every case the authors look at boundaries or borders in the context of the new nation-states and economic hardship. The first paper takes a historical perspective of economic relations in the region (Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov) while the second focuses on one type of economic activity - cross border trading (Polese). Migration based on ethnic/historical alliances is presented as a response to present difficulties (Ganchev and Demirdirek), while other authors (Anastasova and Boneva) identify the reverse process – an inward retreat by locals that rejects the integrating nationalising policies of the new states.

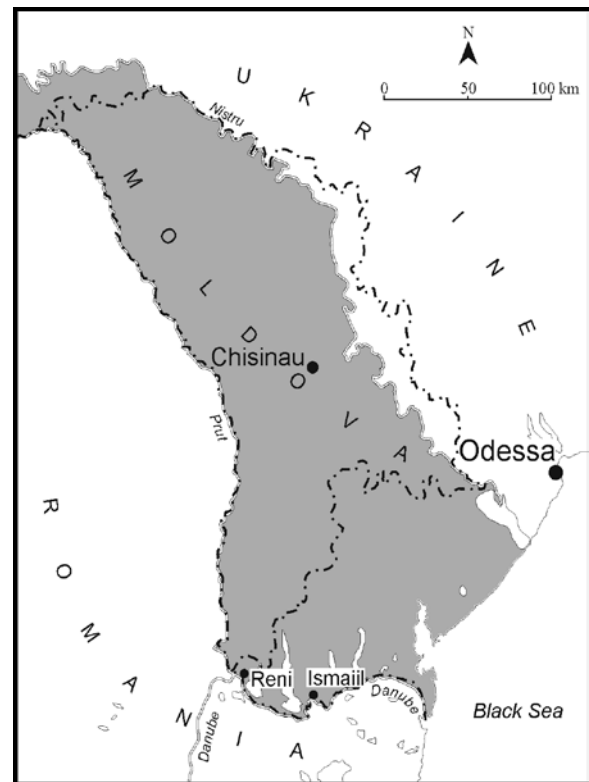
In the following section we look at the history of Bessarabia. Our intention is not to give a detailed or exhaustive record of the region's past, but to highlight the main borders and boundaries that exist in present day Bessarabia and identify their historical source. This allows us, in the section after, to look at how locals negotiate daily with these different borders and boundaries, calling on them in a variety of enterprising ways and using them to their advantage in the difficult economic situations. In the Conclusion we return to our wider concern: boundaries and borders as a strategic resource which varies in different contexts, where sometimes the nation-state, sometimes the region and sometimes the local village provide the guiding framework for local activities.⁵

State borders and local boundaries

Bessarabia can be thought of as an 'institutionalised' borderland, in the sense that it has always been located in a peripheral position with respect to centres of political and often also economic power. In understanding the present position of Bessarabia as both a local 'centre' (for people living in the area) and a periphery (economically and politically, also an administrative/geographical

periphery in the case of Ukraine), it is necessary to highlight a number of historical moments in the locality's past.

The Bessarabian region lies between the Prut, the Danube and the Nistru rivers, covering the vast part of what is now Moldova as well as the southwestern most part of Ukraine (south of Odessa to the Romanian border - see map below). The regional name 'Bessarabia' began its geopolitical existence in 1812, with the incorporation of the eastern part of the Romanian principality of Moldova into the Russian Empire following the Russian-Turkish War of 1806-12. Previously the term had been used to designate only the southern part of Bessarabia that had belonged to the Romanian principality of Wallachia in the 14th century (hence the name 'Bessarabia', which is derived from 'Besarab', the name of the ruling dynasty of Wallachia). Bessarabia was the target of large population influx from the mid-18th century onwards. Before this it was sparsely settled by Romanians and - from the end of the 17th century - also by Russian Old Believers escaping religious persecution in other parts of the Russian Empire). As part of the Russian Empire, the zone became the home to different groups: Bulgarians escaping repression from the Ottoman Empire, Gagauz, Germans, Poles and Jews. The new settlers were encouraged to settle by the granting of free land allotments (Gitelman, 1995).



Precisely because of the peripheral character of the region – located at the margins of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, it was a crossroad and frequently a battlefield – the place attracted those seeking religious and ethnic freedoms. In 1856, in the aftermath of the Crimean War, Russia lost the two most southern districts of Bessarabia to the principality of Moldova, which united three years later with the principality of Wallachia to form the kingdom of Romania. But such an alliance was relatively short lived with the Russian Empire regaining the lost territory following the Russian-Turkish war in 1878. It remained a Russian *gubernia* (province) until 1918 when the entire Bessarabian area became once more subsumed by the Romanian kingdom. This was confirmed by the Treaty of Paris in 1919, but never officially recognised by the USSR (Livezeanu, 1995; King, 2000; Fruntasu, 2003). In the 20th century, the region was passed back and forth a number of times between the USSR and Romania. In 1940 the USSR used the guarantees given by the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of non-aggression with Germany to occupy the region. In 1941, Romania used its new alliance with Germany to take it back. Finally in 1944, the USSR used its victory over Germany to incorporate the region into the Soviet Empire where it remained for almost 50 years. Romania renounced further claims to the region.

Bessarabia was thus incorporated relatively late into the USSR, in 1944. It missed out on the benefits of industrialisation that other parts of the USSR experienced after World War I, and the region entered the Soviet Union devastated by war and particularly underdeveloped. Severe famine (1946-47) and Stalin's deportations (several waves between 1941 and 1949) further disseminated the area. Further, entry into the USSR split the territory into two: the southern part was incorporated into the existing Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the northern and central parts, together with a strip of land situated between Nistru and Nipru (the region of Transnistria), made up the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

This split between the two new Soviet republics was nominal in the sense that the border between them was internal (and not physically intrusive). But the incorporation of the region into the Soviet Union had far reaching implications. As new Soviet citizens, the inhabitants received passports which recorded, amongst other information, their membership in an official nationality⁶. Safeguard mechanisms were established to protect national minorities through administrative subunits (Hirsch 2005:160), but immediately after the war, 'enemy-nationals', such as the Bulgarians, were in a

particularly difficult position. One local response was to play up Soviet citizenship rather than nationality. The presence of internal borders didn't hinder travel across the Soviet Union for work, education or leisure activities. For example, during the 1980s, it was not uncommon for rural inhabitants from Bessarabia – often entire families – to move to Kazakstan or other Central Asian republics for work migration⁷. Others in the region fondly recall their holidays in Crimea or other more distant locations in the USSR, or their five years spent in one or another city while gaining a tertiary education. Of course travel across international borders, for example to some of the historical homelands (especially those countries not part of the socialist block), was much more difficult.

In the same way that national identity was always ultimately subsumed to a Soviet one, so the USSR was far more than a collection of nation-states. Soviet national republics were ultimately valued as parts of a larger political, economic and administrative whole. The region was incorporated through a set of overarching economic, social and cultural policies, which transformed the area in fundamental ways. It enabled the continuation of exchange. Indeed, in many respects it increased exchange, for example educational and economic exchanges across the inner 'border' between the Moldovan and Ukrainian parts of the Soviet Union. It also opened up the region to the far reaches of the Empire (especially at the Port sites, see Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov). Economic integration became evident through common policies that resulted in the specialisation of production and division of labour. This shaped the development of economic activities not only between the two republics but across the USSR, drawing all Soviet republics into relations of mutual dependency.

After 1991 a process of devolution meant the dismantling of the USSR, which had been a centralised Union with a common language, a common monetary currency, and integrated economic/political policies. This dismantling was essentially the reverse of the supranationalism being built up as the EU. The region, once well integrated into the USSR, is now divided between two independent states – Moldova and Ukraine. Two new capitals, Chisinau and Kiev, are trying to replace Moscow as national centres of political and administrative power. Previously 'internal' movement within the USSR has now been 'internationalized' (Brubaker 1992:269). The degree of economic integration of the region into the USSR became abundantly clear after 1991, when the economic dependency of the two new republics on

Moscow, on each, and on other republics, posed a significant hurdle to independence. As we note below, both republics, but especially Moldova, remain intricately dependent on areas now outside the new nation-state.

The newly established republics of Ukraine and Moldova promoted their titular nations through a variety of legislative acts, including the declaration of Ukrainian and (firstly Romanian and then) Moldovan respectively as their only state languages. At the same time, they introduced policies that promoted other ethnic groups as minorities. Despite moves to independence and the official replacement of the Russian language in administrative activities, Russian remains the language of everyday interethnic communication in Bessarabia. Further, the path towards Moldovan independence was less smooth than for Ukraine (although the latter also has its problems). Claims to independence by Moldovans, who are Romanian speakers, triggered anxiety amongst other ethnic groups. The response, sometimes involving outright conflict, included claims to autonomy by Gagauz (in the Gagauz Autonomous region – see Demirdirek) and in Transnistria. As two separate countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States, Ukraine and Moldova legally uphold free exchange relations and facilities for the movement of people within the limits of international regulations. However, there has been some flux. For example, the western and southern border between the newly dissected Bessarabia and Romania, which was well guarded during Soviet times, was relaxed in 1990. It has been reinforced more recently with the anticipated extension of the EU frontier, due to Romania's imminent ascension to the European Union⁸. Although both new independent states have ambitions to join the EU, this is unlikely to take place in the near future and for now they remain outside 'Europe'.

Bessarabia remains a peripheral and marginal region. With respect to the Ukrainian part, the region is geographically as well as politically and administratively distant from Kiev – a fact openly acknowledged by officials, as evident in the anecdote with which we began this Introduction. Bessarabian Ukraine is also an economic periphery; the region has spiralled into decline, having received little support from Kiev in its bid to maintain the international activities of its Ports. Moldovan Bessarabia is also a periphery, due to its continued economic and political dependency on Moscow (to a lesser extent this is also evident in Ukraine and in many of the other former Soviet republics). Moldovan marginality is indicated, for example, in the fact that the headquarters of the

most important Moldovan businesses are not situated in Moldova, but in Russia; in the fact that the embassies of most foreign states on which many Moldovans depend are not situated in Chisinau, but in Bucharest (an estimated 15-20% of the population are engaged in migration); and in the fact that the vast majority of the new Moldovan elites have been formed in Romania in the past fifteen years.

New citizenship rights are also a factor to consider. During the Soviet period, citizenship was granted to all residents on Soviet territory. The national identity of each individual was recognised and featured in the Soviet passport – there was no differentiation in this respect between nationals from the titular nation of any Soviet republic and its co-resident nationals. However, declarations of independence have been followed by different policies for defining citizenship belonging. Unlike the situation in Estonia, where citizenship was initially granted exclusively to ethnic Estonians and the large Russian minority became stateless, in the Republic of Moldova all residents were entitled to Moldovan citizenship, regardless of their ethnic belonging, length of stay in the country or knowledge of Moldovan/Romanian (Kolsto, 2002). A similar situation exists in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the imposition of a new state language and the enforcement of a new nation state project has left non-titular ethnic groups in both countries suddenly marginalized. This has increased – to echo the movement of titular nations – their ethnic awareness.⁹ Language remains a key issue in this context. For example, in Moldova ethnic minorities have not, to date, adopted the state language, despite the state's offer of free Moldovan language classes and an initial ruling that state employees must learn the language within five years (an obligation never enforced). The 'minorities', who form 22% of Moldova's population, prefer to use Russian in the public sphere.¹⁰

At the same time, minority status grants Bulgarians, Gagauz, Moldovans in Ukraine, and Ukrainians in Moldova special access and claims to their historical 'homelands'. Here we find it useful to draw on Brubaker (1996), who identifies three important factors at play in eastern European nationalisms: the 'nationalizing state' (which has the project of building a nation state and state loyalties), 'national minorities populations' (which are historically situated on the territory of the nationalizing state but do not belong to the majority ethnic group) and 'national homelands' (neighbouring countries to which national minorities could refer as 'their' nation state). The dynamics between these three factors determine the shape of

most nationalist manifestations in eastern Europe. He further suggests that national minorities can 'alleviate' the pressure (for example, of linguistic homogenisation) coming from the nationalising state by maintaining their links with their homeland (1996). What is particular to Bessarabia is that most minority groups have not been created by a shift of borders, but by voluntary settlers who come from countries that do not share borders with Ukraine and Moldova. In turn, this means that present migration and special access claims take on a particular form. For example, Gagauz Ukrainians choose to migrate to Turkey rather than any other country, because they say that their language skills make these places easier when seeking employment abroad.

Such relations with their historical 'homeland' (in some cases dormant for many decades) are now being activated, partly as a strategic response to Bessarabian marginality and economic decline. An example is from the ethnic Bulgarian village of Nagorna (7 km from the Moldovan border in Ukraine): Kaneff learnt that the family of one of the Nagorna school teachers, who has worked and lives in Moldova since the 1980s, was applying for a Bulgarian passport. The family did not intend to live in Bulgaria; they simply realized that access to a Bulgarian passport would open doors in terms of migration and work in Europe (Bulgaria is due to become an EU member in 2007). Similarly, Heintz conducted a survey in the Moldovan village of Satu Vechi¹¹ and found that from a sample of 100 households, five contained members who held a Romanian passport. Of those, two spontaneously claimed that they needed the passport only for travelling to the EU for the purposes of car trafficking and not for asserting their Romanian identity. Two of the papers in this collection look precisely at how different ethnic groups in Bessarabia are using their minority status and links with another 'homeland' in order to alleviate their economic situations. Such migration enables educational advantages (Bessarabian Bulgarians in Bulgaria – see Ganchev) or work opportunities (Moldovan Gagauz – see Demirdirek).

Marginalisation through the attribution of 'ethnic minority' status gives non-titular ethnic groups minority status 'at home' and an opportunity to connect with the original/historical homeland. This serves to strengthen regional, Bessarabian links, despite the fact that the area is now divided by an international border. Ties based on marriage, kinship and the practice of common rituals means that ethnic groups maintain links across the border. The Bulgarian schoolteacher mentioned above, for example, travels at least once a month to visit her

Bulgarian sister and family in what is now a town across the border in Moldova. In turn the 'Moldovan' (Bulgarian) nephews spend the entire summer holidays with their aunt and grandmother in Nagorna. Birthdays, Christmas and New Year and a variety of other occasions bring the extended family together. Educational connections, based on people knowing each other during the Soviet period when they studied together (many in Ukraine Bessarabia obtained their university educations in Chisinau rather than the more geographically distant Odessa) provide close alliances between people now living 'across the border'. At the same time there has been an increased population flow for reasons of trade (see, for example, Polese). In many cases, such cross-border connections render the new nation-states 'irrelevant' through the mobilization of shared histories that temporally refer to pre-1991 times and the common use of the Russian language. Everyday border activities take place in Russian, the only common language across the two nations and between the different ethnic groups. The new state border is not undermined deliberately; rather there is a practical necessity for communication between kin and economic traders across the border. Exchanges based on shared history and economic activity often bypass the new international border.

Both new states try to re-focus their minority populations through educational policies that attempt to mould a new generation of citizens who can speak Moldovan or Ukrainian. Also, through a variety of state sponsored ceremonies (such as national holidays) which help to draw the periphery away from the border and refocus citizens inward to the centres of power. To some extent the legacies of Soviet policy, which designated the Moldovan part of Bessarabia agricultural, while encouraging industry in the Ukrainian sector (largely because of the location of the ports of Reni and Ismail) also strengthen new divisions in the area (see Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov) between the countries. A trip to southern Odessa province through the border zone, attests to asymmetrical tendencies: the poorer Moldovans sell agricultural produce on the roadside to passing (Ukrainian) motorists.

Ethnicity in the region occurs in a distinct way, and many villages remain predominantly monoethnic. Regional mix, however, is evident when considering a set of villages. For example, the district of Reni in Ukraine comprises 7 villages: one ethnically Bulgarian, one Gagauz and five Moldovan. This arrangement of predominantly monoethnic villages in districts made up of villages of various ethnicities has been retained over the past two centuries. Various arrangements that maintained the

ethnic continuity of the villages are discussed by a number of authors in this volume (see especially Boneva). For the last 50 years, Russian has served as the common language between all ethnic groups. Thus, within each village the local ethnic language is maintained (Bulgarian, Moldovan etc), while Russian serves as the language of communication across ethnic boundaries.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that even neighbouring villages, which belong to the same ethnic group, display variations in language and ritual practices. This provides a potential source of local differentiation and means that in some contexts even ethnicity does not serve the purposes of regional unification. Thus while ethnic ties across the new border between different minority groups are reinforced in some contexts, in others internal differentiation within each ethnic group is prominent. In Ukraine, Kaneff noted this at Christmas, which was celebrated on different dates and by different rituals not only by villages of different ethnicities but also by the same ethnicity. In Nagorna, for example, Christmas was celebrated on the 7th January. In a neighbouring Moldovan village, it was celebrated on the 25th December, while in yet another of the neighbouring Moldovan villages it was celebrated on both dates! Therefore, some rituals do not subject the local population to the state centre as much as maintain local differences between communities in the district.

In many respects Bessarabia displays many of the characteristics of a 'typical' borderland as both peripheral to the state centre and with unique local cultural and shared economic relations with the other border communities (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 5). What we have tried to emphasise in this section is the complicated intersection across literal borders and conceptual boundaries. These have a long history in Bessarabia and are changing all the time. The present 'unity' of the region is based also on this shared history of resettlement and migration by different ethnic populations during the 18th and 19th centuries – people who have lived together in the region since. Under the influence of various powers– Ottoman, Russian, Romanian, Soviet – these settlers have witnessed the coming and going of many state borders, especially in the last century. Local ethnic boundaries based on language, religion, rituals and economic exchange cross-cut literal borders: sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes rendering them irrelevant. Yet ethnic boundaries too are configured differently in different contexts: sometimes creating differentiation between members of the same ethnic group, sometimes aligning them together with respect to another ethnic group. The

overall resulting picture is of local communities that can be temporarily aggregated along different principles (ethnic, economic, linguistic and history) to serve the interests of the moment. The papers in the volume encourage us to examine how borders and boundaries are exploited locally. They provide examples of when exactly borders and boundaries are unifying and when they are fragmenting forces.

Resourceful borders

In this section we look at how the everyday negotiation of borders and boundaries plays an instrumental role in the way Bessarabians cope with the present difficult economic situation in the region. In so doing, we highlight particular themes in the papers, which essentially can be grouped into three topics: economic trade (Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov and Polese), migration (Ganchev and Demirdirek) and retreat to the local (Boneva and Anastassova). All papers focus on either international, regional or village community borders/boundaries.

Donnan & Wilson (1999: 87) view borders and their 'unique locational ambiguity' as a 'resource,' which those living in the vicinity can exploit. This seems equally true in our extended understandings of borders that include boundaries. The fact that Bessarabians now live in two states, but one historically defined region, and the multiple identities to which they have access is based on a long history of changing states and borders. It is also based on the effects of boundaries – minority status, fluency in various languages. Especially in difficult economic times local people use their multiple identities and minority status (and different combinations of these identities), to develop strategies of survival. For example, an ethnic Bulgarian in the Ukraine state may be geographically, linguistically and ethnically marginalized from Kiev, but has official recognition as a member of a national minority group and a historical homeland (Bulgaria). He may have Russian language skills and perhaps also networks of friends/family in Moldova (and therefore with possible exploitable connections to Romania). Such connections provide a potential resource in dealings with the state, in defining identities and negotiating strategies designed to cope with economic hardship.

Some of these 'resources' come with official state backing – eg the privileges (and constraints) associated with minority status. Formal recognition is achieved through state support of various programmes that encourage local contacts with the historical homeland and through the provision of funding for the establishment of local museums that publicly display ethnic/historical origins. Other

resources are founded in informal networks that compete with the state apparatus (eg cross border trading). As others have noted (eg. Wilson & Donnan 1998: 10, 21), the mobilization of connections that traverse state borders are not necessarily about the deliberate subversion of the new states. Nevertheless, this may be a consequence, for many of these connections transcend the limits of the state and underline its weak position.

When an area is peripheral in geographical and administrative terms, the citizens in this area are often disadvantaged; political and economic resources controlled by the state centre may be harder to access. Minority groups are often structurally in a more distant position to the capital (eg through language disadvantages), adding to the difficulties of accessing resources. The situation is even more dire in a postsocialist context where wide ranging reforms have dismantled previous structures while new markets and political stability have yet to be guaranteed.

Two of the following papers deal specifically with economic activity: Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov take a historical perspective of large scale economic developments, showing the fluctuating fortunes of Reni and regional-national tensions in local attempts to engage in large scale cross-border trading. Polese focuses on small scale informal economic activity across the Ukraine-Moldovan border.

Borderlands, Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov remind us, need not always be economically peripheral regions. Indeed, Bessarabia, or more specifically the district of Reni, was a privileged area during the USSR; it was a crucial strategic transport node connecting Soviet Union to its international trading partners. In this sense the region was incorporated into the economic complex of the USSR through strong economic ties that not only provided economic wealth and stability, but helped maintain regional unity. The collapse of the Soviet Union has brought about a decline in the international importance of this region through the running down of infrastructure and lost business for the Port. The region's present decline in status - from a main international transit site during Soviet times to a rural backwater with little international activity - is occurring despite local leadership attempts to boost local economic developments through cross border cooperative ventures. One of the reasons for failure, Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov suggest, is the lack of support for such ventures at the national level. The newly created independent Ukraine perceives such expressions of local unity as a threat to its integrity. Local and national interests are not always aligned.

In this sense, Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov alert us to local-national tensions when regions attempt to assert initiative and a degree of autonomy in trading (see also Anastassova).

According to Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov, informal and undocumented small-scale trading is an important form of cross border activity with a long history that still thrives in the region. This is the central theme of Polese's paper on traders who move daily between Chisinau and Odessa by train. Polese shows how the inequalities in economic conditions between Moldova and Odessa, draws Moldovan traders to relatively abundant and cheap goods in Odessa. Polese reminds us that much like the border between Moldova and Ukraine, which is so flexible it is experienced differently whether one travels by train or car, trade and 'corruption' can also be ambiguously interpreted. The boundary between illegal and legal activity is frequently unclear. Indeed local, petty trading activities benefit not only those directly engaged in the activity; political/economic elite and customs officials are also beneficiaries. For Polese, the big loser is the state, or at least those state organs, which suffer income loss through unregulated trading. When states are unable to provide economic security for their citizens, undocumented and often illegal cross border trading becomes a local necessity.

Cross border trading is a response to inequalities and shortages between two sides of the border. A more permanent response is migration. In his paper, Ganchev reminds us of the importance of minority status, which opens up possibilities of temporary or permanent migration through educational opportunities. His focus is on Bessarabian Bulgarians who exploit their ethnic connections in order to continue their higher education outside Ukraine, in Bulgaria. Ganchev does not look at the economic side of this migration (although we assume it to be an important dimension of students' motivation), but what is clear is that during the period of study, the visitors' identity as 'Bessarabian Bulgarians' (distinct from a Bulgarian identity) was reinforced, even strengthened, through a variety of practices - for example, speaking Russian amongst themselves rather than Bulgarian. In this way Ganchev shows us how a local Bessarabian identity is reasserted in a 'foreign' context.

The theme of the reproduction of a local Bessarabian identity through interaction with the historical 'homeland' is also the theme of Demirdirek's paper on Moldovan Gagauz. She looks at the crossing of both literal borders and conceptual boundaries (through travel to Turkey and entertaining Turks in Moldova) as a way in which Gagauz reformulated their sense of collectivity. Much as in

Ganchev's Bulgarian example, the importance of language as the source of collective struggle and identity is highlighted in perpetuating the Bessarabian community with respect to the historical 'homeland'. Also much like the Bulgarian case, Demirdirek shows how Gagauz, with privileged access as a 'minority' in Moldova, exploit new educational and employment opportunities provided by another state (Turkey).

A reverse strategy that looks 'inward' is the theme of the final two papers in the collection. Here, the question of maintenance and continuity as a response to external pressure is addressed. As opposed to the two previous papers which look at emigration and crossing of international borders as a way to deal with present hardships in the region, here the opposite strategy is evident: turning away from the outside (and centres of nation-state power) to focus inwards.

Boneva's historical account looks at two (ethnically Bulgarian) villages in Moldova and addresses the question of how they have maintained their identity over almost two centuries. She attributes continuity to the maintenance of various practices (language, particular naming systems and so on) and suggests that these practices have survived over many generations largely as a result of local responses to outsider policies. The Russian Empire showed tolerance towards the settlers (until the 1860s) and after this locals were still able to avoid integration through non-engagement (eg by not attending or being unable to afford to go to school). The big changes came only after Bessarabia's inclusion into the Soviet Union after World War II, when free and compulsory educational programmes led to a gradual break up of endogamy. Agricultural reforms and modernisation were also relatively effective in integrating the region into the USSR. This however, did not bring about massive changes locally, since educated villagers moved out of rural areas. Meanwhile those who remained behind in rural Bessarabia were able to retain their distinguishing practices through a degree of isolation¹². Only now, after over 100 years of isolation from their 'homeland', has there been a Moldovan recognition of rights of ethnic minorities. This has enabled the flourishing of local schools teaching minority languages. In short, it seems that despite the state apparatus (especially education) which has been instrumental in attempts to incorporate the region into wider structures, local autonomy and ethnic markers/differences have been maintained through a variety of mechanisms despite pressures from the outside.

Anastassova furthers this theme of regional autonomy and inward focus. She describes a multiethnic village in Bessarabia (with a majority population of Russian Old Believers) at a historical moment when appeals to Bessarabian identity were particularly vocal and strong. Anastassova shows us how claims to a Bessarabian identity represent both a retreat and rejection of outside reforms that were taking place in Ukraine in the 1990s. The 'retreat' to 'Bessarabianness' was a way to create a sanctuary in a world perceived as disintegrating and dangerous, where chaos and disorder reigned as a result of the gathering moment of postsocialist reforms. The path of local order and economic success was directed by the Head of the village cooperative, who refused to engage in wider reforms, but continued to offer villagers all the benefits of the previous socialist system: protection, welfare, leadership and discipline. His all pervading authority steered the village to economic stability and social security at a time when other areas experienced decline and chaos. A retreat to 'Bessarabia' was a strategy as well as response to the wider external crisis. In her paper, Anastassova thus speaks to the relationship between local and national, showing how external reforms can bring about a regional reaction that is not always in line with national policy (something that Samkhvalov & Samkhvalov also show).

The papers reveal the ambiguous yet numerous resources that Bessarabians can draw on: most have access to more than one state and more than one identity. The liminal position that allows them to negotiate across various borders and boundaries gives them a set of possible 'resources' that can be used strategically. The playing field, however, is not equal: different ethnic groups within the region have unequal access to political and administrative (if not also economic) powers. Thus despite the vast outnumbering of Moldovans in the Reni district in Ukraine, Bulgarians appear more prominent in local administration. Bulgarians themselves attributed this fact to their more efficient language skills. They claim to speak better Russian than the Gagauz or Moldovans (because of the greater similarity between the Bulgarian and Russian languages). Hence, they learn the language with greater ease and fluency than their Moldovan or Gagauz neighbours who speak with an accent.¹³ This gave Bulgarians a greater political advantage during Soviet times and continues to do so in the present, since Russian is still informally the dominant language while similarities with Ukraine still provide an advantage. In theory, with Ukrainian now the official state language, ethnic Ukrainians have the upper hand, as do native Moldovan speakers in Moldova.¹⁴ In short, different ethnic groups have

different access to resources and power in the region at different moments in time.

A regional Bessarabian identity that cross-cuts two nation-states and local village identities (and minority rights that gives privileged access to more distant historical 'homelands') are part of the everyday resources available to these borderland people and by which they negotiate their daily lives.

Conclusion: Strong ethnicities and histories, weak states?

Postsocialist reforms, the rise of new independent states and restrictions relating to the new EU border all influence the particular relations that are being played out between the periphery and the centre in Bessarabia, between 'border people and their political core' (Wilson & Donnan 1998: 21). In conclusion, we underline a few tendencies concerning the strategic use of borders and boundaries.

If borders and boundaries are a resource to be used strategically, then in Bessarabia, the power of this resource resides in its ambiguity. There is, firstly, the ambiguity of the 'political core'. The incorporation of the region into the Soviet Union after World War II gave the zone a clear 'political core'. However today, the situation is more complex and it is apparent that there is no one 'centre'. Competing loyalties, multiple identities and the historically based connections tying the region to various powers at various periods in the past mean that there is no one centre of economic and political domination¹⁵. Rather, the people of the region have a wide set of connections with a variety of centres: Kiev, Chisinau, Moscow, Sofia, Bucharest as well as Odessa. The new national capitals pose alternative links to Moscow and Odessa but their pull is, if anything, weaker - for reasons of language, past connections and networks, and because of the economic opportunities offered to labour migrants in Moscow. The historical 'homelands' of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey are also attractive with their promise of education, employment and better opportunities in a setting that is not totally foreign.

Economic activities, once incorporated the area into the Soviet Union, have unravelled, adding to the region's marginality. Now lacking in international importance, economic activity appears to reinforce regional Bessarabian unity, often at the expense of the new international border between Moldova and Ukraine. This is largely achieved through informal trading activities. Economic marginalisation and decline is also evident in migration patterns; people are often forced to look beyond the nation-state. Often undocumented

migration, which flouts state authority and law, serves to reinforce Bessarabian regional unity through migration to historical homelands (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey). Indeed local villagers openly express disregard for the international border between Moldova and Ukraine; for example, they have been known to swap passports, or borrow a friend's, when they wish to cross the border to visit family/relatives and their own is not at hand.

Boundaries created by rituals and spoken languages serve to both fragment the region into its constituent village units, and bind it into a presented whole. Often, differing social practices within the same ethnic group fragment the region into village 'units'. For example, communities express their uniqueness through particular versions of the same practice (different dialects, times to celebrate Christmas and so on). A display of unity (on the basis of ethnicity) often occurs through group presentations to outsiders - to state officials and visiting dignitaries from the historical homelands. Minority status -a prerequisite for EU membership- grants a particular way for local people to be accepted and disciplined into the nation-state. At the same time, it grants them legitimate access to alternate (historically rooted) homelands. Government policies that sponsor 'minorities' are implemented in parallel with programmes of integration through the educational system and forced imposition of the nation's single language policies in public spaces.

In the context of strong ethnic/historical links and in a time of globalisation and EU supranationalism, it seems particularly difficult for the new states (Moldova or Ukraine) to establish themselves. How can state borders be strengthened in the face of transnational movements and expressions of loyalties that are connected to long and emotionally loaded histories that play to identities of origin? Or in the face of breakaway groups who make claims to autonomy, such as Transnistria? What the following papers suggest is that the new Moldovan and Ukraine states have not, to date, been particularly successful in creating strong borders. Nor have they been outstandingly successful in capturing their citizens' loyalties.

Notes

¹ The use of the term 'Bessarabia' is unproblematic in present day Ukraine but disputed by others in the region, notably in the former Moldovan SSR (where the term is avoided because it is taken to refer to the Romanian kingdom between the two world wars). We use this term because it is unproblematic for the

local communities studied by the researchers in this volume (as well as to many scholars outside Moldova).

² Or to use Donnan and Wilson's terminology (1998: 26), we are looking at both symbolic and state boundaries. To distinguish between the two in this Introduction, we use literal boundaries to refer to actual state 'borders', while conceptual ones are denoted as 'boundaries'. When speaking of conceptual boundaries, we are not looking at the symbolic significance of the geographical state boundaries, but at other markers such as ethnicity or language, which, with the rise of the new postsocialist states, need to be considered alongside these physical/literal boundaries.

³ Verdery showed that in Romania in times of scarcity people access resources through local ethnic connections (1996). In the same way papers in this collection indicate that the play on ethnicity is important, although the cases here indicate that connections along ethnic lines are more likely to be international rather than local. For instance ethnic Gagauz in Moldova will get economic help from Turkey rather than from ethnic Gagauz in Ukrainian Bessarabia (see paper by Demirdirek).

⁴ These papers constitute only a part of those presented at the workshop we convened, titled: Emerging citizenship and contested identities between the Dniester, Prut and Danube Rivers. We regret that A. Prigarin was unable to provide his paper for publication in this volume. The other papers on the topic of citizenship are brought together in an edited volume by M. Heintz, in preparation under the title "Weak State, Uncertain Citizenship: Moldova".

⁵ We thank M. Pelkmans for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper.

⁶ Hirsch (2005: 324) shows how these all important nationality categories had lasting impact as a 'rallying point' in post 1991 events, including in the emergence of the new republics.

⁷ In the village of Nagorna, Ukraine, Kaneff noted that 12 families had gone as work migrants to Kazakstan in the late 1970s and early 1980s and remained there for a decade, compelled to return only after 1991.

⁸ Citizens of the Republic of Moldova, who presently enjoy open access to Romania, will see the introduction of the Romanian visa regime in January 2007.

⁹ This increase in ethnic awareness is not a specificity of the Bessarabian region but widespread throughout the former USSR territory since the 1980s. However, it is exacerbated by the lack of power and the lack of legitimacy of the emerging states (neither Moldova nor Ukraine have a tradition of independence). The

situation is more dramatic in Moldova than in Ukraine, evident by the example of the separatist region of Transnistria, de facto independent while de jure part of the Republic of Moldova (Troebst, 2003). At the beginning of the 1990s, Transnistria, the strip of land east of the Nistru river, parted with Moldova on the grounds of ethnicity. Inhabited by 60% russophones (Ukrainians and Russians), Transnistria protested the Moldovan movement of "national awakening" that ultimately led to the constitution of independent Moldova. Researchers suggest that ethnic conflict was an excuse for a power struggle between communist elites (Troebst, 2004).

¹⁰ Indeed the Party of Communists of Moldova won the 2001 elections campaigning on the reintroduction of Russian as state language and received considerable support from ethnic minorities. The question here is clearly not simply one of ethnicity, since Russians constitute only 5% of the Moldovan population (cf 2004 census). It is much more a question of historical and social alliances and perhaps also cognitive effort and convenience (it is not easy for a Gagauz, native speaker of a Turkish language to learn Romanian, a Latin language, after having obtained his/her education in Russian, a Slavic language, also written in cyrillics). The head of the Department for Ethnic Minorities, one of the rare Russophones speaking Romanian, narrated the problems she was facing when trying to convince her 9 year old daughter of the need to learn Romanian. Her daughter refused to learn Moldovan on the grounds that "all her acquaintances knew Russian". This situation continued until they made a trip to Romania (where the mother was conducting business) and the child faced the Romanians' ignorance of her native Russian language. Her mother convinced her child to learn Romanian, not because Moldovans spoke this language, but because Romanians did not speak any other!

¹¹ Not the real name of the village.

¹² Reviewing two hundred years of Bessarabian history, Fruntasu emphasises the fact that local communities retreated inwards and that this retreat impeded the creation of a larger (regional, national) identity, even in cases when forging an identity was on the agenda of the state in power (Fruntasu, 2003). This resembles the circumstances of 19th century France when regions such as Ariège resisted their integration into the French state, despite the fact that there were no historical quarrels or ethnic conflicts that would have questioned France's authority over the area (Weber, 1976).

¹³ Personal communication, Kaneff, 2003.

¹⁴ Inequalities in language skills has wide ranging implications: Kaneff witnessed the daily exclusion of

villagers as a result of government policy that sponsors one language officially (Ukrainian). For example, in the municipal council, villagers sign legal documents (everything from marriage certificates to land title deeds) without fully knowing what they are signing, since the documents are in Ukrainian and no translations are available.

¹⁵ '...border people have identities which are shifting and multiple, in ways which are multivocal and multilocal...' (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 64).

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