

COST IS0803

Remaking eastern borders in Europe: a network exploring social, moral and material
relocations of Europe's eastern peripheries

Report of a Working Group 3 (Differences and Inequalities) research site visit to Latvian borderlands, 25th - 31st May 2009

(a) Participants:

Aija Lulle	Local organiser and early stage researcher, Centre for Science and Technology Studies, Latvia
Lena Malm	External expert and professional photographer, Finland
Katharina Tyran	Early stage researcher, Department of Slavic Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany
Nataša Gregorič Bon	Early stage researcher, Institute of Anthropological and Spatial Studies, Scientific Research Centre SASA, Slovenia

(b) Itinerary

- 25th May, Day 1: Arrival of the participants and evening in Riga
- 26th May, Day 2: Travel to the first research site - Aluksne, Latvian-Russian border region, NE Latvia. Trip to the Latvian - Russian borderland (*pierobežas josla* or literary -- borderline) in Pededze parish. Stopping in Putrovka village and at Zabolova border checkpoint.
- 27th May, Day 3: Trip to Pededze parish, visit of local informant Adolfs Tasmanis in Putrovka whose house is situated on the border between Latvia and Russia, stopping in Putrovka, Zaiceva, Kalnapededze. Trip to the Soviet time nuclear missiles' base Zeltini at Aluksne's district.
- 28th May, Day 4: Travel to the second research site - Ape, Latvian-Estonian border region. Stopping at Sigulda and returning to Riga in the evening.
- 29th May, Day 5: Nataša Gregorič Bon depart. Project continued in Riga, central market and a so called Moscow's suburb – Lena Malm, Katharina Tyran and Aija Lulle. Katharina Tyran depart in the afternoon.

29th–30th May, Aija Lulle and Lena Malm complete project in Riga and Jurmala, with
 Days 5-6: visits to sites marking the effects of shifts in political borders.
 May 31st, Day 7: Lena Malm departs.

(c) Setting



Pededze parish is located in northern Vidzeme, in Aluksne district. It stretches along 8 kilometres from Latvian-Russian border, nowadays the EU’s external border. According to statistical accounts¹ more than 80 % of the population in Aluksne district are Latvian-speakers and 20 % are Russian speakers. In Pededze the situation is reversed, as there are more than 80% Russian speakers while the rest are Latvian speakers. Most of the Russian speakers obtain Latvian or non-citizens’ passports, issued by the Latvian authorities (this constitutes quasi-citizenship for former citizens of the Soviet Union, and refers to people who migrated to Latvia during the Soviet times and did not have relatives living in Latvia’s territory before Latvia was

¹ Central Statistical bureau. Inhabitants by nationality. 2008. Available at: http://www.csb.lv/images/modules/items/item_file_10202_2_22.pdf (accessed 06.07.2009)

annexed by the Soviet Union), while a small portion of Russian speaking inhabitants hold Russian citizenship. Dual citizenship in Latvia is allowed only to persons who fled from Latvia before the Second World War, mainly to the Western countries, but is not available on basis of living in the border region.

Pededze parish conjoins a number of small villages that are inhabited by 877 people (census 2006). World War II, deportations and later collective farming on the *kolkhozes* and Soviet farms had a significant impact on the number of inhabitants and their ethnicity in this region. In 1935 there were 3040 inhabitants in the parish: 1322 Latvians, 1596 Russians, and a small number of other ethnic groups. Now Latvians comprise 18 percent of the population in this area.

During the Soviet era, the economic activities of many local residents were largely focussed on Russia and its markets. People living in Pededze sold agricultural products, livestock and flowers at markets in Pskov and elsewhere in Russia. They attended religious festivals on the Russian side of the border, and often pursued an education in professional, technical and higher education institutions in Russia. People living near the border on the Russian side took advantage of the same opportunities in Latvia, for example, they came to shop in Latvia or pursued their education in Aluksne or elsewhere.

In 1975 the Latvian school was closed down in Pededze and it became predominantly Russian, leading Latvian families to leave the place or develop asymmetric bilingualism, when Latvians were bilingual in both languages, with Latvian mainly spoken only in families, and Russian being spoken elsewhere. The Latvian school was restored in 1991, helping to improve overall language knowledge in the population. However, the majority of the older generation of Pededze inhabitants are not able to speak Latvian, and Russian remains the main language of communication.

Although there are improvements in border technologies such as newly built roads, planted forests along the border, and surveillance systems, weak civil infrastructure, such as bad roads and increasing depopulation in the area, impedes both economic and social improvements on the Latvian-Russian border area.

The situation differs greatly at the Latvian-Estonian or internal EU border, close to the Pededze parish. The small border town Ape, on the Latvian side, cooperates closely with parishes on the Estonian side, visibly allows perception of the border as an area of cooperation and development, in contrast with the Latvian-Russian border, where the sense is more that the border is a barrier.

(d) Short history on the border regime

Latvia spent nearly half a century under Soviet occupation, and when it regained its independence, the establishment of its border with Russia was of particular importance in political and symbolic terms.

Immediately after the restoration of independence, the country's borders were still quite porous. A more liberal border-crossing regime was instituted in 1994, but it ended in 2000, when the two countries moved toward a bilateral visa regime. Inhabitants of border areas had previously been allowed to cross the border without a visa during important religious festivals, provided that they could prove a close relationship with people who lived on the Russian side of the border, or if they had relatives who were buried in Russia. As Latvia drew closer to membership in the EU and NATO, however, the border grew less porous and visa controls became stricter. Since 2000, both Russia and Latvia have exchanged lists of people who live in the two border zones. These people have the right to receive cheaper or free visas, allowing them to visit the other country once or a few times during the subsequent year. The system was kept in place when Latvia joined NATO and the EU in 2004. But after Latvia joined the Schengen Zone, free visas were not available any more.

Since 1996, regulations have been in force limiting development in the two kilometre-wide border zone and the rules were made even stricter in 2002. These rules place limits on the sale of land or forests, ostensibly for security reasons. Latvia signed a border treaty with Russia in 2007, but many property owners are neither free to do as they wish with their property in frontier territories, and nor they have received compensation for their subsequent financial losses.

(e) The benefits of collaboration in terms of participants' research interests

The visit to the Latvian borderlands provided participants not only with a valuable experience, but also gave them an opportunity to view their own work from a different perspective. Here are some thoughts of participants:

Nataša Gregorič Bon: was led to think in terms of the **processes of Europeanisation** which is one of the primary issues of her research in the borderland region of southern Albania. In this research she is focussing on the various ways through which the bilingual inhabitants (Greek and Albanian speakers) of Himara area in southern Albania reconstruct their sense of regional belonging and constitute their place as a distinct region, which they seek to include to "Europe" as imaginary "entity"

(see abstract <http://www.eastbordnet.org/events/workgroups/WG32009/index.htm>). In her paper at the WG3 meeting in Ljubljana she discussed how the people of the Himara area redefine the Albanian-Greek or the “external” EU border and constitute it as an “internal” one through the mechanisms of state power and control, the ability of passing the Albanian-Greek and other Schengen borders, and through the reconstruction of history. In contrast to most other residents of Albania, they do not perceive this border as a barrier but more as a “road” which symbolically links their area to “Europe” or EU. The latter they often axiomatically relate to “modernity”, “civilization”, and economic development.

In contrast to postcommunist Albania, which strives for EU inclusion, Latvia is already an EU Member State. With the “accession” of Latvia to the EU in 2004, the border between Latvia and Russia that was established with Latvian independence (1991) has been reaffirmed and become even more visible than before. While the Latvian accession to the EU was perceived by many of the inhabitants of the capital Riga and other bigger cities throughout Latvia as the ‘final cut’ from the previous socialist system, to the people of the border area it brought **nostalgia** for the previous system and both new legitimate (visa regime, legal flow of people and goods) and illegitimate (illegal flow of people and goods) connections with Russia. In the Soviet era and partly some years after the re-establishment of Latvian independence, most of the border population was economically as well as socially closely related to the Russian border town Lauri (8 kilometres from Pededze) than to the Latvian border town Aluksne (25 kilometres from Pededze). Latvia’s accession to the EU brought a strict visa regime, which has limited the ability of passing the Latvian-Russian border. For most of the border residents this made their access to the fields, graves, churches, relatives and friends, electricity, water supply and other infrastructure much more difficult. In contrast to the people of Himara in southern Albania, whose majority favour the EU, the inhabitants of the border area between Latvia and Russia define the **EU as a barrier**, which makes their life more difficult, breaking the development of their area and constituting it as marginal. Overall, this short research visit led me to think **how the uneven flow of goods and people through the Latvian-Russian border is shaping a power dynamic** upon which the people living at the border area reconstruct **positive or negative imaginaries of “Europe”** or EU and redefine their belonging.

Katharina Tyran: the research visit afforded her the opportunity to approach the phenomenon of “border” from a new theoretical and academic direction. The Latvian-Russian border proved to be fundamentally different from the border region where she works (Austria-Hungary-

Slovakia), possessing characteristics that are absent or even foreign to her study area. These differences are not least of all a result of the fact that the border between Latvia and Russia remains **closed and closely watched**, whereas the borders between Austria, Hungary and Slovakia are now open. Conversely, the Latvian capital Riga reminded me – in a very personal way – of the Croatian one, Zagreb. The similarities ranged from the city-structure to our experiences in the local market to the way people, especially women, behave and dress.

Another aspect of the trip that proved especially important to Ms Tyran – as a linguist and slavacist – was the **crossing of linguistic borders**. The Russian language is omnipresent not only in the Russian-Latvian border region, but also in Riga. This bilingualism is even more impressive if one bears in mind that the Latvian government is actually negating this bi- or multilingualism. For this reason, although she had no language skills in Latvian, she was able to talk to the people in basic Russian, which greatly integrated her to the local population. Interestingly enough, through this communication she crossed a border of her own – that of being afraid to speak in Russian, something which was important not only to her experience of this research trip in the Baltic, but for her work in general.

Aija Lulle: was led to think both (1) **more widely** and (2) **more focused**, narrower about the border as a barrier. For instance, working together with researchers coming from different disciplines and visiting the field for the first time, they look for the visible markers – geographic, social (no active and easy border crossing). It allowed her to see again and more in-depth, how strong these markers are in the Pededze parish. Also, it encouraged her to look closer to some specific phenomenon such as petrol smuggling in this particular area and read more about this particular border activity discovered and described in anthropological research, especially in the post Soviet era.

The research trip also led her think about possible scenarios, not only where are the bottlenecks in the international relations, culture, e.g. post-occupation trauma for the cooperation, but also, what could be done “bottom-up” and “across the European borderlands”, learning from social and business activities, established mechanisms in South European borders, for example, encouraging tourism.

Mrs Lulle was constantly reminded about the wider, post Soviet context, which is clearly visible to a newcomer, but often hides from a researcher at home.

(f) Thoughts to the WG3 meeting on differences and inequalities in Ljubljana

The short research visit was a good complement to the WG3 meeting as it gave an opportunity to improve the interaction between the participants and allowed them to compare experiences from the border regions which are the subject of their research and discuss a variety of existing and emerging concepts in border studies. The visit raised the following issues:

- **meaning and ways in which the borders are being or not being passed:** while the WG3 meeting in Ljubljana referred to the ability or inability of passing the borders and the ways in which they form differences and inequalities, the short research trip gave an insight to the ways in which the borders are being or not being passed. These ways are based on legal and/or illegal practices which are on the one hand reaffirming the border as a barrier while on the other they constitute it as fluid and porous. For example, the long line of cars owned by Latvian citizens queuing at the border checkpoint in Zabolova are on the one hand constituting the border as a visible barrier while the flow of goods (petrol, cigarettes and brandy or *vodka*) which they are transporting through this border is constituting its fluidity and porosity.
- **different regimes of value:** the border passers are making a good income from gasoline, cigarettes and brandy (*vodka*) which they purchase at the nearest petrol station on the Russian side of the border and later sell on the Latvian side. They profit from different regimes of value that are created by the border and are shaping its ‘gappiness.’ The latter is being manipulated and negotiated by the people living at and passing this border in the ways that bring them practical, personal and/or social benefits. To many of the inhabitants of Pededze the Latvian-Russian or the external EU border is the central agent of their daily life and belonging, while most of the inhabitants of the Latvian capital perceive it as peripheral or as the ‘edge’ of EU.
- **identity processes:** the border dweller’s identification - “I am, who I am. I come from here,” shows that a national sense of identification is less important at this border region. The issue of identity switching and language shifting that was raised at WG 3 meeting was discussed again.
- **Euroregion:** at the WG3 meeting the Euroregions and international cooperation between countries and/or borderland areas were also discussed. It raised a discussion on the needs and challenges for this particular area to be effectively engaged in Euroregion activities.
- **interdisciplinary and interregional nature:** working in different border regions and coming from a different academic discipline the participants were struck by different issues they found important at the Latvian-Russian border region.

(g) The impact of the visual

The lens of Lena Malm's camera gave a new perspective to the meanings of border, its regions and bordering processes in a way that the participants both had and had not thought of before. The images pointed out the interrelation between visibility and invisibility of borders, which helps to maintain them. The photographic material shows how:

- the interrelation between visibility and invisibility of borders depends on one's perspective and how it can be **manipulated and appropriated by the photography itself**. For example the images of Adolfs' house which is situated right at the borderline between Latvia and Russia illustrate how the 'in-betweenness' of Adolfs' home is on the one hand invisible (e.g. an old house situated on the green field) while on the other visible through the road signs (e.g. the sign 'Stop! The passage forbidden' at the entrance to his courtyard or the board 'the Republic of Latvia' on the roof covering the logs).
- the **interplay between visibility and invisibility of borders** is determined by various markers and techniques. In Latvia, for instance, signs are declaring where the border region is and at what point the visitor is inside or outside a particular territory. In this way, certain areas are officially declared, if not in fact stigmatized. As for the actual border itself, this was most apparent during our visit to Adolf, whose house is situated next to a barbed-wire fence which clearly demarcates the border between Latvia and Russia. In other places the border was marked neither by signs nor fences. When looking for a "visible" border the participants found themselves in a kind of "no-man's-land" where the end of one country and the beginning of the next was no longer apparent. The participant's GPS system clearly indicated that they "crossed-over" from Latvia to Russia. The garbage bags on the side of the road, however, which it was identified as being part of Latvian sanitation campaign, served as a visual sign that this is a Latvian territory or at least an area governed by Latvia.
- the **differences and inequalities** between the groups inhabiting the border area were **audibly (discourse) as well as visually identifiable** as the social boundaries. Simple visual markers, such as the striking blue mail boxes in front of Russian houses, marked one group and differentiated it from another. Similarly, in Riga the Russians were identifiable through their enjoyment of sitting in parks during their spare time, something that a Latvian would do only rarely.

- **photography is often more talkative than** informal conversation. For example, while to the participants' view Adolfs gave an impression of being very shy and reserved but and at the same time giving to the camera's lenses the glad eye, school kids smiling or hiding from the camera, and a local healer squaring her shoulders at the doorstep of her house. It led the participants to think about visual anthropology/sociology as a more intense **happening** than verbal conversation is.
- the **pictures are an invaluable resource after the fieldwork**. The visual story allows enriching the whole story about the particular research area, while visual details reminds about facts easy to forget and even leave unnoticed. After the fieldwork analysis the visual information might turn out crucially important to theorize border concepts.

(h) Conclusion

The first photography project of the COST-Action proved to be successful and enabled participants to conjoin their various perspectives which contributed to their individual projects. The participants are looking forward to the forthcoming photography projects which will give an opportunity to compare their experiences and results. The latter might enable to discover the value and an intrinsic necessity of visual methods in border studies. As during the WG3 meeting was agreed to build a multilingual glossary on bordering processes the participants are planning to contribute to this dictionary Latvian and Russian meaning for terms such as border land, border area, border, frontier and define their etymological meanings. Last, but not least this project made it possible for the participants to connect with each other in a very successful way, both personally and professionally. They hope that their contributions, images and notions will help the local organiser, Aija Lulle, in her future research on the Latvian borderlands.