

# **Border Experiences: Everyday Life and Working Life**



# Cross-border links at the boundaries of the European Union: an ethnography of mobility, work, and citizenship in uncertain times

Ignacy Józwiak

## Abstract

This chapter explores the role of the state border in the daily life of the inhabitants of the Transcarpathia region in western Ukraine. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, it offers an insight into the region, which has been affected by the “Europeanization” of the border regime on the one hand and by the post-2014 crisis in Ukraine on the other. The study points to the use of the border and cross-border links as well as the changes the patterns for doing so have undergone. In the face of political crisis and economic recession, Ukrainians face greater pressure to migrate, while in the country’s western borderlands increased utilization of already existing cross-border links can be observed.

## Keywords

State border, borderlands, mobility, ethnography, Ukraine

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the state border as experienced in the daily life of the borderlanders, the inhabitants of the Transcarpathia (*Zakarpatska Oblast*) region in western Ukraine, which borders Romania, Hungary, Slovakia,

---

1 This chapter was prepared under the National Science Center’s PRELUDIUM grant number UMO-2015/17/N/HS6/01167. I would also like to express my gratitude to the colleagues who shared their remarks during the early stages of work on the manuscript: Kamila Fiałkowska (University of Warsaw), Karolina S. Follis (Lancaster University), Michał Garapich (University of Warsaw), Anna Romanowicz (Jagiellonian University), Sandra King-Savic (University of St. Gallen), and Gregory Schwartz (University of Bristol). Regardless of the institutional funding and collegial support, the study would not be possible without the help and engagement of the people directly or indirectly mentioned in the text, with whom I was

and Poland. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork focused on dealing with the border: making use of it and familiarization with the border as such as well as with the people and places on the other side. The subject matter is framed in the wider relations between the local inhabitants, the border, and state apparatuses applied at it. I make use of concepts that interpret borders as factors in both overcoming and preserving inequalities on the international, regional, or local levels. The role of borders as factors for negotiation and transgression of the given social order is also developed.

The sites the study is based upon are Uzhhorod (approximately 120,000 inhabitants), Beregovo (approximately 30,000 inhabitants), and Solotvyno (approximately 10,000), which are located at the Slovakian, Hungarian, and Romanian borders respectively, with border checkpoints either in the towns themselves or on their outskirts. Their specificities are also shaped by their ethnic composition (predominantly Ukrainian in Uzhhorod, predominantly Romanian in Solotvyno, and predominantly Hungarian in Beregovo) and linguistic composition (Ukrainian, Hungarian, and mixed with the occasional dominance of Russian). Importantly, what this paper reflects upon is the common knowledge among the inhabitants of the region. For a researcher, this kind of local understanding of the border, its workings, as well as the potential benefits it offers serves as a window on the processes under study. I visited these places in the summers of 2016 and 2017, however, my experience with fieldwork in the region dates back to 2005/2006 and 2009–2011.

The leading idea behind my last visit was to trace the local grassroots responses to national and international political developments. It is reflected in a research question which refers to the way the political and economic situation in Ukraine as well as the neighboring countries' policies influence the local transnational dynamics in the country's westernmost region.

This study represents an ethnographic revisit (Burawoy 2003)<sup>2</sup>, covering the sites of Beregovo (studied in 2005/2006, with a focus on ethnic identities in the borderland) and Solotvyno (studied in 2009–2011, with a focus on the state border and its role in the local daily life practices). This approach enables me to grasp changes in the sites and in macro-forces which impact and shape the local and regional realities, and to understand the phenomena being studied better. Uzhhorod had not been the subject of

---

able to get in contact and who shared their time and experiences with me. I am very grateful for that.

- 2 To quote Micheal Burawoy, "An ethnographic revisit occurs when an ethnographer undertakes participant observation [...] with a view of comparing his or her site with the same one studied at an earlier point in time" (Burawoy 2003, p. 646).

my ethnographic inquiries prior to 2016; nevertheless, as a regional academic and cultural center it served as a location of library queries and academic networking between 2009 and 2011. Including it in my fieldwork could thus also be considered a revisit. Apart from the fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, the chapter refers to my research conducted between 2005 and 2011, as well as my general knowledge deriving from frequent visits to the region over those 11 years. In that manner, I link the locally observed processes with wider phenomena of international political and economic issues and the way they impact the localities. Ethnographic observations provide us with the “links to outside forces” (Tavory/Timmermans 2009, p. 254).

This kind of strategically situated ethnography provides us with connections between people, stories, places, biographies, and their meanings. It enables us to understand “something broadly about the system in ethnographic terms as much as it does in local subjects. It is only local circumstantially” (Marcus 1995, p. 111). My reference to multi-sited ethnography apart from my physical presence in three different locations concerns the level of entanglement of locally observed phenomena in the large-scale processes, rather than connections between these particular places (cf. Marcus 1995). My previous research (Jóźwiak 2014) revealed that living close to the checkpoint, speaking the neighboring country’s language, or even having relatives on the other side of the border is not necessarily associated with regular visits or an interest in visiting. It has also pointed to the uncertain, often critical, attitudes of ethnic minorities towards their “external national homelands” (cf. Brubaker 1996), that is, Hungary and Romania. The current study is linked to my earlier work, and broadens previous findings and anticipations with a perspective on more recent uncertain times.

Depending on particular situations, I accompanied my informants in their daily routines at home, at work, or in other surroundings such as cafes or arranged appointments in order to accommodate my inquiry. Participants were approached in informal conversations or semi-structured and unrecorded interviews. Observations and notes in my diary were equally important. This kind of “hanging out” served as an opportunity to participate, accompany, and follow Transcarpathians in their daily activities, as well as an occasion for conversations on the subjects of interest. These subjects are illustrated with the examples of three people whose experiences serve as ethnographic vignettes of the phenomena under study. The research deals with some sensitive issues, such as involvement in grey-zone businesses and possession of dual citizenship, which is not recognized in Ukraine. In order to ensure the informants’ anonymity, and so as not to

accidentally point to other people who could have similar characteristics as my informants, no names (real or pseudonyms) are mentioned throughout the text. Instead, they are referred to with capital letters, related to their order of appearance, and not to their names, surnames, or nicknames.

This chapter presents the voices and stories of those whose lives are affected by the border. It dwells upon the practices of the use of border and cross-border links: migration, seasonal work, daily commuting, and registering cars abroad, alongside the changes in these activities. These transformations are grounded in historical legacies<sup>3</sup>, the national and international passport and visa policies, the economic situation in Ukraine, and political developments such as the 2011 amendment to the Hungarian Law on Citizenship. The latter enables the descendants of former Hungarian citizens to acquire Hungarian citizenship regardless of their ethnic identification, which, in practice, favors the inhabitants of the former Hungarian territories.

As it borders Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, past statehood changes, regional ethnic composition and cross-border kinships translate into livelihood strategies. Local inhabitants often speak the neighboring country's language or have relatives there, which is likely to facilitate their travel, stays there, and search for employment. In the face of the political and economic crisis in Ukraine resulting from the 2014 revolution, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Donbas, citizens of Ukraine are exposed to increased pressure to migrate or use the state border in other ways. Transcarpathians maintain and make more extensive use of the already existing local cross-border links with Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia. That in turn leads to the general increase in the role of the state border in everyday life. However, I claim that despite the possibilities that the border offers, and the borderlanders' agency when working out strategies to overcome the border as an obstacle, the social inequalities and exclusive mechanisms inherent in their functioning prevail. Obtaining foreign passports, applying for visas, making use of language skills, and cultural competence appear to be widespread practices, but it does not mean that everyone engages in them. As we shall see, not everyone has the necessary networks or wealth, both social and material, to put this subversion of

---

3 Between 1867 and 1919, Transcarpathia was part of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Hapsburg Empire. In the interwar period (1919–1938), it was a part of Czechoslovakia, being annexed by Hungary in 1938 following the short-lived independence some of its territory enjoyed as part of the republic of Carpathian Ukraine. In 1944, it was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a Transcarpathian District (*Zakarpatska Oblast*) of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

the state border into motion. Thus, border experience is far from being universal to all borderlanders.



*Illustration 1: Map of Transcarpathia*

## *2. Borders of the borderless: ambivalence and transgression*

The regimentation provided by the state borders and the control over mobility, as well as policies related to it (cf. Feldman 2012; Torpey 2000), structure not only patterns of mobility, but also the horizons of belonging while living “simultaneously on two [or more] sides of the border” (Follis 2012, p. 79). Even if perceived as “absolutely nondemocratic, or ‘discretionary’ condition[s] of democratic institutions” (Balibar 2004, p. 109), the contradictory nature of state borders creates potential sites for transgression (Green 2010, p. 262) as well as “zones of engagement” (Simonyi/Pisano 2011, p. 224), where different kinds of contact, inclusion, and exclusion are possible. With their selectivity and non-democratic character, state borders preserve global social and economic inequalities on the one hand, while at the same time being exposed to being undermined at the bottom-up level. In the spaces like borderlands where the state is subjected to subversion, the mutual influence of the values, ideas, customs, and shared economic relations on both sides of the state border can also con-

tribute to transnationalism (Donnan/Wilson 1999, p. 4–5). Such is the case with the apparatus of state security, which “contributes to the formation of local and transnational networks” (Simonyi/Pisano 2011, p. 223–224), as individuals reinvent and renegotiate the rules and order as well as their social meanings at the limits of the state.

Reflecting on contradictions characteristic of the functioning of state borders in Europe, Sarah Green (2012) and Ruben Zaiotti (2007a; 2007b) point to their functioning as a combination of surveillance, security, and commercial enterprise. Entrepreneurial aspects of state borders apply to public and private investments along the border and around checkpoints, as well as other profit-generating activities, including grey zones, such as shuttle trade, carrying passengers, and the legal infrastructure (shops, gas stations, open-air markets) that accompany them. There are significant differences between Ukraine and its western neighbors in terms of wages and living standards.

Borders also relate to the region’s history of statehood changes over the last 100 years. In this regard, we can speak of the Ukrainian/Hungarian struggle at the symbolic level. The involvement of Hungarian national ideology extends beyond the boundaries of the nation state and meets Ukrainian state-building and pursuit of territorial integrity. This symbolic tug of war is translated into particular policies of single against multiple citizenship. As the latter is tolerated *de facto* (but not *de jure*), Hungary appears as a symbolic winner in this regard. Apart from granting citizenship to around 200,000 Transcarpathians, Hungarian extraterritorial policy also takes the form of subsidies not only for Hungarian-speaking schools and cultural institutions, but also health-care institutions in Transcarpathia regardless of the language of their services. In the framework of “gesture politics”, Ukrainian cultural initiatives in the region are also supported (Erőss/Kovaly/Tatrai 2016, p. 22–23). Obtaining Romanian citizenship is also a possibility, but this country’s regulations, unlike Hungary’s, do not favor Transcarpathia (which unlike the Ukrainian region of Bukovyna—*Chernivetska Oblast*—has never belonged to Romania), and are not as easily applicable as Hungarian ones (cf. Jóźwiak 2014, p. 32–33). The procedure can take years and there is never a guarantee of success. Even for people who identify as Romanians, it is often easier to obtain a Hungarian passport than a Romanian one. This is where the borderlanders enter the scene as actors and agents of negotiation and transgression, as it is up to the local inhabitants to deal with these contradictions, navigate their way through them, and make use of them.



### *3. Border locations: sites of inclusion, exclusion, and subversion*

Unlike the neighboring Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk regions (*Lvivs'ka Oblast'*, *Ivano-Frankivs'ka Oblast'*), which in the course of history were parts of Red Ruthenia, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Hapsburg Galicia, and Poland, the territories comprising Transcarpathia from the Middle Ages until the First World War belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary, Hapsburg Austria or the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. After the Treaty of Versailles (1919), they were ceded to Czechoslovakia, and in 1938 were annexed by Hungary, to be ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944 as part of the Yalta agreement. Transcarpathia is characterized by a mixed ethnic composition, since apart from Ukrainians (and people referred to as Rusyns or Ruthenians, whose number is difficult to estimate), it is inhabited by ethnic minorities: Hungarians, Romanians, Roma, Slovaks, Germans, Russians, and other nations of the former USSR. The region has 13 checkpoints and three of the neighboring countries maintain their consulates there: Hungary in Uzhhorod and Beregovo, Slovakia in Uzhhorod, and Romania in Solotvyno. The consulates, apart from their usual task of issuing visas or representing their citizens abroad, also issue citizenship and local border traffic (LBT) documents.

Ukraine as a whole appears affected by the “EU-ropeanization” of the border regime and post-2013 turmoil in Ukraine. However, in Transcarpathia, due to its geographical location, this is particularly visible. Historical legacies expose the region and its inhabitants to the historical and symbolic policies of the neighboring countries, most of all Hungary. The very functioning as well as the social role of the border has changed due to the passport/visa regulations introduced by Ukraine’s western neighbors in the context of the EU’s enlargement. Thus, even though it is not a member of the EU, Ukraine has been impacted by its policies.

On the other hand, the country as a whole has been facing continuous political and economic crises since Russia’s seizure of the Black Sea Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the armed conflict in the Donbas region. The conflict covers less than 5% of the Ukrainian territory in the east of the country and is occurring 1,500 kilometers from Transcarpathia (the distance between the two regions’ administrative centers is 1,534 kilometers), that is, extremely far from Transcarpathia (the westernmost region of Ukraine). Nevertheless, the economic impact of these political and military developments can be sensed throughout the entire country. Ukraine had already been affected by the 2009 global recession; the post-2014 turmoil has added to this situation, and the country has been struck by further recession (cf. Iwański 2015; Yurchenko 2018).

Uzhhorod, the regional administrative, cultural and academic center of *Zakarpatska Oblast*, is a city of approximately 120,000 inhabitants situated on the border with Slovakia, and the checkpoint is located just on the outskirts of the city. The border cuts through a hilly area, so when leaving Uzhhorod in a western direction, one is not exposed to any significant interventions in the landscape until one reaches the border crossing. When one looks in the same direction from the top of one of the city's hills, the boundary line is not visible either. Approached from the Slovakian side, the city appears out of the blue, as there is a hill separating it from the checkpoint. Unlike the territories in nearby Slovakia and—somewhat further away at around 30 kilometers—Hungary, or numerous small towns and villages in Transcarpathia largely inhabited by ethnic Hungarians, the city itself is predominantly of Ukrainian ethnic and linguistic composition. The Ukrainian language dominates the public space in inscriptions and in conversations. Russian and Hungarian can be heard sporadically, while the Slovak language is not present at all.

Arriving in the town of Beregovo from Hungary, one is not exposed to any changes in the landscape or to natural geographical obstacles like rivers or mountain passes. In fact, the area is quite flat apart from the hills in the town, which are visible from Hungary (and in good weather conditions from Romania as well). There is also hardly any difference in the architecture between the countries, which looks pretty much the same in Beregovo and in Hungarian towns of similar size. If it were not for the queue at the checkpoint and the better quality of asphalt roads in Hungary, one might have found it difficult to spot the place where the actual state border is delimited. The use of languages changes slightly, but the majority of communication after crossing to Ukraine is still carried out in Hungarian; however, Ukrainian and, too a much lesser extent, Russian can also be heard. It is slightly different in the case of inscriptions, most of which, unlike in Hungary, are bilingual (Ukrainian and Hungarian). When approaching the city from within Ukraine, one observes gradual changes in both the natural and human landscapes, as well as an increase in the use of the Hungarian language and the number of cars with Hungarian license plates.

Crossing the bridge from the Romanian town and municipal center of Sighetu Marmăției (or simply Sighet) to the Ukrainian town of Solotvyno, one can clearly see the river Tisza and the bridge over it, which serve as border landmarks. In the middle of the bridge joining two checkpoints on the two sides of the border, the borderline (officially delimited in the middle of the river) is marked with a red stripe. On the Ukrainian side, the river bank is planted with a line of tall acacia trees, which block out the view

of the river but make the boundary even more visible. Thus, for the visitor, the border viewed from Ukraine appears hidden and blurred, as clearly visible trees do not delimit either the official borderline or the publicly accessible space. Here, the use of languages changes slightly after leaving Romania, since in addition to the Romanian language (spoken by the majority of the Solotvynians), one can easily hear Russian, the local *lingua franca* which is not spoken on the Romanian side apart from by visitors from Ukraine. Hungarian and Ukrainian are spoken on both sides of the river but they are much more widespread in Solotvyno than Sighet. Entering Solotvyno from within Ukraine, one passes different villages, some inhabited almost exclusively by ethnic Ukrainians and others also almost exclusively by ethnic Romanians. One thus finds oneself in a multilingual space where Romanian, Russian, Hungarian, and Ukrainian can be heard, often spoken by the same people. This kind of local “ethnic and linguistic map” depicts the way local communities function in bilingual or multilingual conditions, but also as “islands” within the Ukrainian linguistic space. However, one should bear in mind that the ethno-linguistic composition looks similar on both banks of the Tisza, as there are also Ukrainian-speaking villages on the Romanian side.

In Uzhhorod, a careful observer can easily spot the numerous cars with foreign license plates (mostly Slovakian and Polish, but also Czech, Hungarian, Lithuanian, and others). In Beregovo, around half of the cars have Hungarian license plates, and individual ones with Czech, Polish, Slovakian, or German plates can be noticed. In Solotvyno, Ukraine-registered cars are in a minority. Most of them have license plates of, in order of approximate popularity, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and other EU member states. These cars, apart from Romanian ones which are mostly driven by the visitors from that country, belong to the local inhabitants. Buying a second-hand car in the EU is at least three times cheaper than in Ukraine, while not registering a car in their country of actual residence enables owners to save even more on taxes and import tariffs. Depending on the vehicle’s ownership status and due to some legal gaps, it has to leave Ukrainian territory every five days or once a year. Referring to the owners of these cars as “Ukrainians” or “Ukrainian citizens” would not present us with a full picture of the situation, as many of them also have either Hungarian or Romanian citizenship, and use the respective countries’ passport when registering their vehicles. “Foreign” cars (i.e. those registered abroad) driven by the local inhabitants serve as one of the preliminary indicators of local and regional cross-border links. Spotting a car with Czech, Polish, or Slovakian license plates in eastern Hungary or north-western Romania, one may assume that they are driven by Tran-

scarpethians, who in turn might be traveling with Ukrainian, Hungarian, or Romanian passports in their pockets.

In all three locations, job adverts offering work abroad and visa brokers can be easily spotted. As migration patterns from this region will be elaborated elsewhere, here I will just point to the familiarization with the state borders, as well as pragmatic aspects of the citizenship issue, of which international mobility is a part. The number of announcements and the level of professionalization of the intermediaries depend on the size of the town. Local specificities are also relevant, as in Uzhhorod all of the adverts and announcements are in Ukrainian, and they offer work mostly in the Czech Republic and Poland, as well as higher education in Poland and Slovakia. Many adverts and announcements in Beregovo are bilingual (Ukrainian and Hungarian), some of them are only in Hungarian, and some are in Russian. It is in Beregovo that the issue of Hungarian citizenship is most visible, as some advertisements make clear that the jobs are offered only to “EU passport holders”, while others list a Hungarian passport, among other possible documents, as enabling jobs to be taken up (such as Polish or Czech visas). In this town, Hungary, next to the Czech Republic, appears as a destination country. In Solotvyno, job advertisements are rare and almost exclusively in Ukrainian, which contrasts with the low level of the use of the spoken language (the town may be too small to create its own “advert culture”, as in Beregovo), and the contacts provided are usually in Uzhhorod and Ivano-Frankivsk. The number of job and visa adverts as well as cars with foreign license plates has clearly increased since 2011. The changes observed relate not only to the scale, but also and even more importantly to the patterns and strategies which people apply in their border-related activities.

The Luzhanka–Beregsurany checkpoint near Beregovo is always full of cars, pedestrians, and cyclists. Most of the regular commuters travel and return every day, others stay in Hungary for a few days. Many of those who cross the border on foot or by bicycle reach the farms and orchards on the Hungarian side of the border, where their relatively cheap labor is needed by the local landowners. Some others, after crossing the border, wait to be given a ride by cars going to the nearby town of Vasarosnameny (10 kilometers away) or—somewhat more distant—Nyiregyhaza (70 kilometers away).<sup>4</sup> Dozens of cars are also parked on both sides of the border, as many travelers prefer to reach it by car and cross on foot. The traffic in Solotvyno

---

4 There is also one bus a day from Beregovo to Nyiregyhaza and back, and one to Budapest twice a week.

is not as intensive as in Luzhanka, but cross-border commuting (on foot, by bicycle, and by car) to shop, work, or to trade at the open-air market in Sighet also takes place there. What can also serve as an illustration of the local (or translocal) familiarity with state borders is the fact that some local drivers travel to Hungary via the Solotvyno-Sighet bridge and Romania due to the better quality of the roads in the neighboring country. The alternative, which some people take, is to travel on Ukrainian territory to the nearest Ukrainian–Hungarian checkpoint in Vylok (98 kilometers away). The Uzhhorod–Vysne Nemecke checkpoint is open only to cars, trucks, buses (with regular connections to Presov, Košice, Prague, and Plzen), and motorbikes. The scale of traffic is much greater than in the locations previously mentioned. With no cyclists and pedestrians or hitchhikers, and no shops, markets, or large car parks nearby, the area around it seems far less lively than in Solotvyno and Luzhanka. Still, when the weather is good and the queues are long, drivers and passengers leave their vehicles, gather around, chat to each other or keep places in the line for others. With Uzhhorod being a relatively big city with a high number of cars registered abroad, the checkpoint is full of “passers” (Ukr. *peresichniki*)—drivers whose cars need to leave Ukraine every week, often without even entering the neighboring country. Many of these drivers, though, prefer to use the Chop (UA)–Zahony (HU) border crossing 30 kilometers away, which is much bigger but also known to be more traveler-friendly.

In Uzhhorod, Beregovo, and Solotvyno, some people travel to the neighboring country every day, whilst others do not do so at all. Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania also serve as transit countries for longer journeys: Debrecen (Hungary) and Košice (Slovakia) international airports, as well as bus stops and car parks in Sighet, Satu-Mare (Romania), Nyiregyhaza or Mataszelka (Hungary), where international buses stop. Thus, even traveling to more distant destinations involves local cross-border networks and strategies, as getting to any of these places requires using the regular bus connections (mostly from Uzhhorod, but also from Beregovo and the town of Mukachevo halfway between them), the services of local “taxi drivers”, as people who provide international transport like to be called. There is a huge group of them in Beregovo. They know each other and often meet and talk in the lines at the border. They also use the same parking spots near the train station in Nyiregyhaza and they usually deliver to and pick up their passengers from the same trains to or from Budapest. Such is the case in Solotvyno, where the drivers also operate, driving cars registered in the EU. Like most of the inhabitants of the town, they drive EU-registered cars and take passengers to locations in Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia. Unlike those from Beregovo, they also serve connections within

Ukraine: mostly Hungarian consulates in Beregovo and Uzhgorod, or hospitals in the latter. As public transport in Solotvyno is inefficient and the choice of taxis not very wide, they are also likely to take the very local routes. They maintain contact with each other so that they can pass the clients (passengers) among themselves, or recommend each other when they cannot make the route requested. The size of the town and the state of its infrastructure enforces a certain flexibility on them. As their number of clients and the distances they have to go are uncertain, their earnings are far from stable. Using second-hand cars (sometimes up to 25 years old) also poses the risk of breakdowns, which subsequently requires some time out of action to fix it. The demand on transport services is much lower than in Beregovo, while in Uzhhorod it is sufficiently well developed to enable a choice between buses from that town or the trains from the nearby Chop station which, combined with huge traffic at the Uzhhorod–Vysne Nemcke checkpoint, does not leave much space for the cross-border taxi services.

Regardless of the checkpoints, out of the three neighboring countries it is Hungary that generates the most diverse plethora of attitudes, activities, and intimacies. After obtaining citizenship, numerous Transcarpathians work, study, and settle there. Others have their properties and registrations in both countries and share their lives between Ukraine and Hungary. Apart from the labor market (not as attractive as those in the Czech Republic, Poland, or Germany), Hungary offers a relatively well-developed health-care system and pensions which can be even 10 times higher than the Ukrainian ones. The demand for passports (often referred to as “European” ones) has boosted the property markets in the villages in eastern Hungary.

#### *4. Experiencing the border and studying it: an ethnographic revisit in uncertain times*

In terms of the changes that the region and its inhabitants have been experiencing in the face of political shifts and economic downturns, A, a teacher from Beregovo, personifies both the national and the regional turmoil. For 10 years (2004–2014), or “from Maidan to Maidan” as she describes it, referring to the two waves of opposition protests in Ukraine, with their epicenter at Kiev’s Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*), she used to work as a school teacher in her hometown. Disappointed with the lack of positive changes regarding corruption, salaries, and mafia-like structures in public institutions (including schools) after the post-2014 breakthrough,

she quit her job and was considering quitting her profession. However, through informal networks she got to know about a job offer at a school in one of the villages in Hungary, within a few kilometers of the Ukrainian border. This was where her Hungarian citizenship, acquired 2 years before, became useful. Like many other teachers from Beregovo and the neighboring villages, she commutes to work daily, either by bike, car, or school bus, which picks her up on the Hungarian side. Depending on the queue at the checkpoint, getting there takes between 2 and 3 hours. At first, she found it difficult to get accustomed to the new realities and different culture of work in the neighboring country, as well as to its language (her mother tongue being Ukrainian).

Daily commuting is not an easy task to cope with, and some teachers from Ukraine who also work in the same or nearby schools have settled in Hungary, some of them with their entire families. But A never seriously considered such a solution, as she enjoys returning to her home and family (husband and children) and sleeping in her own bed. She declares that she feels that she belongs *here* (Beregovo, Ukraine) and identifies herself as a Ukrainian patriot. When asked about her Hungarian citizenship, she did not consider it any kind of “treason” to her motherland. For her, it is just a way of finding a better-paid job—truly better, as her salary has increased at least five-fold. She has no insurance in Ukraine, but is insured and is entitled to health-care in Hungary.

Increased mobility across the border in turn creates demand for means of transport, and due to underdeveloped international public transportation in this section of the border (unlike the much bigger and busier Chop–Zahony checkpoint), paid hitchhiking from the border to the nearby towns is common, which increased together with the level of local mobility. In the face of the fall of the Ukrainian *hryvna* (in 2014), which was also the time when people started to travel more extensively, B gave up his job as an office worker in Beregovo in order to become a full-time driver in his family business. Driving a minivan with Hungarian license plates, he collects passengers to and from Nyiregyhaza and Debrecen (cities in Hungary 80 and 120 kilometers away, respectively), traveling to addresses as well as arranging pick-ups or drop-offs at the railway station in the former and the airport in the latter. The route and the timing are set according to the passengers and their needs, and if there are any seats left (sometimes he goes empty one way just to pick up some passengers in Hungary), he tries to find passengers at the border. Apart from buying lottery tickets in Hungary and occasional visits to the second-hand electronics shop, he is not interested in bringing any larger amount of goods home. Presenting his Hungarian passport, which he obtained in 2012, to the border guards of



both countries, in 2016 he claimed it to be less confusing (both for him and for the officers) than swapping the passports in between the checkpoints, as many others (including his passengers) did. As he explained, the document was also supposed to serve as a kind of “insurance” that might enable his family’s escape from Ukraine once “they start to shoot here”. The year after, it was his associate who was driving in Hungary, while B picked the passengers up from or dropped them off at the checkpoint before or after they had crossed the border on foot. The initially less-confusing strategy of using only the Hungarian passport at the checkpoint became inefficient when the Ukrainian border guards started to count the days that foreign passport holders spent in that country. To secure their re-entry into Ukraine, the country they actually live and originate from, frequent commuters had to change their strategy to presenting each country’s officers with the passport of that country. With his Ukrainian passport being outdated, he could not, as he put it, “go abroad” for a while. In spite of identifying as a Hungarian and having Hungarian citizenship and making frequent visits to that country, he felt at home in Beregovo and he never wished to move elsewhere, not even to Hungary, where he had nothing but formal registration.

Back in 2006, C worked as a receptionist in Beregovo. With his salary hardly enough to make a living, at that time he was full of bitter words towards the country he lived in (Ukraine): the state of the economy and industry, corrupt political elites, unemployment, poverty, and the general lack of propriety. He did not spare his criticism of what he considered his actual motherland (Hungary) either. It was the country where he was treated like a foreigner, especially by the border guards, custom officers, and police. Back then, Hungary did not offer its co-ethnics from abroad the right to citizenship, which was rejected in the 2004 referendum<sup>5</sup>. He willingly and nostalgically (though not without bitterness) recalled his visits to the open-air market in the nearby city of Nyiregyhaza and his work at construction sites in Budapest, Sopron, and Komarom in the 1990s. Prior to that, he had traveled around the Soviet Union as a truck driver. After 2006, he changed his workplace a few times, but every time we met between 2006 and 2009, his material situation was far from stable. Prior to our meeting in 2016, I was wondering to what extent his life had changed after

---

5 In December 2004, the voters in Hungary were asked whether they were in favor of ethnic Hungarians (non-citizens and non-residents of Hungary) being granted the right to Hungarian citizenship. Although the majority of voted in favor, it was rejected due to the low turnout.



him acquiring a Hungarian passport, as I was convinced he had obtained it. I also had some doubts about whether I would still find him at his home in Beregovo, as I thought it quite possible that he had moved to Hungary or elsewhere. It turned out that he was still living his previous life, only it was a Ukrainian pension of 1000 Ukrainian *hryvna* (around 35 euros), not the precarious jobs he used to do before, which was supposed to secure his life. In fact, it was thanks to his small garden, where he grew fruit and vegetables, occasional support from his neighbors, meals provided by some Hungarian humanitarian organizations, and to him occasionally carrying cigarettes (into Hungary) and other goods (into Ukraine) across the border that he could make a living at all.

He had applied for Hungarian citizenship in 2011 (just after it became possible) and received it in 2012, but it did not change his situation much. For him, the retirement age in Hungary, which differs according to year of birth, was 64, while in Ukraine it was 60. Turning 62 in the summer of 2017, he was stuck between the two systems. Reaching retirement age was also rather unlikely to improve his situation. As he explained, in order to receive a Hungarian pension, one needs to register there and for that, he or she needs money to buy or rent a property, which C simply did not have. Selling the place he lived in was not a possibility, due to some ownership disputes. Bearing a Hungarian passport, he started to carry cigarettes across the border—an activity he, as a Ukrainian citizen, had given up more than 10 years before, after being fined and issued an entry ban.

One would be mistaken to think of dealing in contraband as a profitable activity. It does not appear to be so for people like him, who use what is left of their physical strength and health to work for the entrepreneurs paying 50 Ukrainian *hryvna* (less than 2 euros) for one trip across the checkpoint. The procedure is that goods that are cheaper in Hungary or the EU in general are brought to the border and then carried into Ukraine and shared between large numbers of people, so that the limits are not exceeded. This kind of work involves either physical carrying or sitting in a car loaded with cargo and pretending that part of it belongs to him and to other “passengers” like him. He also attempted to benefit from his Hungarian passport in summer 2016, when he went to work on a construction site in Budapest. He had hoped to spend 4 months there, earn 1,000,000 Hungarian *forints* and buy a small house in the village of Beregsurany on the Hungarian side of the Ukrainian–Hungarian checkpoint, 5 kilometers from Beregovo, which would secure his Hungarian pension. However, on his first day at work, he fainted, was taken to hospital, and had to go back home without even selling the Ukrainian cigarettes he had brought.

## 5. Conclusion

The impact of state borders on the life of the borderlanders is affected by the economic situation in the countries on either side, as well as by bilateral and international regulations regarding passports, visas, and work permits, or citizenship rules. The latter also influence the intensity of various forms of cross-border contacts and international mobility. However, the border is not experienced by everyone in the same way. As described by Alan and Josephine Smart, state borders structure the world according to one's citizenship and wealth, acting as full stops (which deny entry), semi-colons (which require the travelers to obtain visas and work permits), or commas "slightly slowing movement at various checkpoints" (Smart/Smart 2008, p. 175). In my previous study, based on my 2009–2011 fieldwork in Solotvyno, I wrote that:

Applying the metaphor to the bridge linking Solotvyno and Sighet [which could actually apply to any EU border crossing] would mean that it serves either as a 'full stop' or a 'semi-colon', and as a means of exercising control over the third-country nationals (needed but also 'dangerous') in the European Union. (Jóźwiak 2014, p. 36)

After six years and related changes, the scale of this "time-space punctuation" (Smart/Smart 2008) and the groups of people it affects are different, but the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion persist. Despite an increasing pressure to leave the country and use the border in various ways possible, some of the local inhabitants cross the border on a regular basis (even every day), whilst others have never been to the other side. Nevertheless, the scale of cross-border activities and the strategies of familiarization with the state border have changed.

According to Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, cross-border activities, on both official and grassroots levels, puncture the borders and subvert "the state's own design" for them (Donnan/Wilson 2010, pp. 6–7). Added to the popularity of Hungarian and Romanian TV and radio, strategies for securing a livelihood, which involve obtaining another state's citizenship or registering cars on the other side of the border, contribute to the transformation and increased role of the transnational spaces, in both social and geographical terms, in which people operate. Referring back to the question about the significance of political developments on national and international levels, we should acknowledge that cross-border links in Transcarpathia date back to the early 1990s, while the everyday presence of the neighboring countries in the form of the mass media has been the case for decades. What we observe in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can-

not be described as the “formation” of these spaces. These spaces, together with phenomena observed at and near the borders, can be interpreted as “gaps in Fortress Europe” and “blurred boundaries of the nation state”. The abovementioned phenomena are at stake regardless of the political and economic conditions, it is the process of becoming blurred that changes.

These border-related grassroots responses to the (inter)national political conditions also reflect individual and collective agency and the limits to agency, entrepreneurship as well as “the precarious economy of the border” (cf. Arnold/Pickles 2011) in a time of instability and uncertainty. Carrying passports that are more powerful (Hungarian or Romanian passports) or less powerful (Ukrainian passports with visas or local border traffic documents) when leaving Ukraine makes one privileged in the context of selectivity performed at the borders of the EU. However, safeguarding the rights to cross the border, to reside abroad and to vote in a neighboring country (or its consulates at one’s place of residence—a crucial aspect in the case of Hungary and Transcarpathia) does not eliminate social inequalities. Exclusionary mechanisms embedded in the functioning of the border are indirectly preserved. In order to fully enjoy the opportunities of the “golden tickets” to the EU, one needs certain resources which are not equally available. Carrying passengers on international routes requires capital to be invested in buying cars, registering them, and maintaining them. Working abroad requires networks (in order to find a job) or good health, in the case of physical labor. Receiving a Hungarian pension requires registration and actually settling in the country, for which, again, one needs funds.

When I was leaving B’s car after he had taken me to the place I was staying in Beregovo, he encouraged me to call either him or his boss (who already had my number stored in his phonebook as the “Polish Sociologist”) whenever I needed their service. When I last met A it was at her home with her friends and family members. Due to the summer holiday season, she did not have to worry about the queues at the border and the amount of time needed to get to and from work. Thanks to the holiday, she had more time not only to spend at home but also to look after a small business she ran with her husband in Beregovo. However, even without daily commuting, Hungary was still there. She gave me a lift in her car registered in that country, and the conversations around the table revolved around the Hungarian health-care system, pension fund, and the labor market. As was agreed among the company, it was all far from excellent, but still beyond comparison to what one can expect in Ukraine.

When in the summer of 2016 I called C on his cell phone, he was unable to meet as he was cycling to the border, “8 kilometers there and back in order to earn 40 *brywnias*” [less than 1.5 euros]. When we met the next year, he recalled this and numerous similar situations when he had had to wait for a phone call and leave home when needed, never sure how much time he would have to spend at the checkpoint and how much he would earn there. “I am not in charge of myself,” he said during our last meeting. On top of that, he still could not sell his house in order to possibly arrange a Hungarian pension.

## References

- Arnold, Denis/Pickles, John (2011): Global Work, Surplus Labor, and the Precarious Economies of the Border. In: *Antipode* 43, no. 5, p. 1598–1624, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00899.x>.
- Balibar, Étienne (2004): *We, the people of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers (1996): *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Burawoy, Michael (2003): Revisits: An Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography. In: *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 5, p. 645–679, DOI: 10.2307/1519757.
- Donnan, Hastings/Wilson, Thomas M. (1999): *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg.
- Donnan, Hastings/Wilson, Thomas M. (2010): *Ethnography, Security and the ‘Frontier Effect’ in Borderlands*. In Donnan, H./Wilson, T. M. (eds.): *Borderlands. Ethnographic Approaches to Security, Power and Identity*. Lanham – Boulder – New York – Toronto – Plymouth. University Press of America, p. 1–21.
- Erőss, Ágnes/Kovaly, Katalin/Tatrai, Patrik (2016): *Effects of the Ukrainian Crisis in Transcarpathia: the Hungarian Perspective*. CMR Working Papers 93. Warsaw: Centre of Migration Research, URL: <http://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/publikacje/effects-of-the-ukrainian-crisis-in-transcarpathia-the-hungarian-perspective-2/> (accessed: 23/10/2018).
- Feldman, Gregory (2012): *The Migration Apparatus: Security, Labor, and Policy-making in the European Union*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Follis, Karolina S. (2012): *Building Fortress Europe: The Polish-Ukrainian Frontier*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Green, Sarah (2010): *Performing Border in the Aegean: On Relocating Political, Economic and Social Relations*. In: *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2, p. 261–278, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494376>.

- Green, Sarah (2012): A Sense of Border. In: Donnan, H./Wilson, T. M. (eds.): A Companion to Border Studies. Malden – Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 573–592.
- Iwański, Tadeusz (2015): A Ship Run Aground. Deepening Problems in the Ukrainian Economy. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, URL: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-06-16/a-ship-run-aground-deepening-problems-ukrainian-economy> (accessed: 23/10/2018).
- Józwiak, Ignacy (2014): Ethnicity, Labour and Mobility in the Contemporary Borderland. A Case Study of a Transcarpathian Township. In: Central and Eastern European Migration Review 3, no. 1, p. 27–39.
- Marcus, George E. (1995): Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography. In: Annual Review of Anthropology 24, p. 95–117, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523>.
- Simonyi, André/Pisano, Jessica (2011): The Social Lives of Borders: Political Economy at the Edge of the European Union. In: DeBardeleben, J./Hurrelmann, A. (eds.): Transnational Europe: Promise, Paradox, Limits. Hampshire/New York: Springer, p. 222–238.
- Smart, Alan/Smart, Josephine (2008): Time-space Punctuation: Hong Kong's Border Regime and Limits on Mobility. In: Pacific Affairs, 81, no. 2, p. 175–193, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5509/2008812175>.
- Tavory, Ido/Timmermans, Stefan (2009): Two Cases of Ethnography. Grounded Theory and the Extended Case Method. In: Ethnography 10, no. 3, p. 243–263, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1466138109339042>.
- Torpey, John C. (2000): The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State. Cambridge University Press.
- Yurchenko, Yuliya (2018): Ukraine and the Empire of Capital. From Marketisation to Armed Conflict. London: Pluto Press.
- Zaiotti, Ruben (2007a): Of Friends and Fences: Europe's Neighbourhood Policy and the "Gated Community Syndrome". In: European Integration 29, no. 2, p. 143–162, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036330701252581>.
- Zaiotti, Ruben (2007b): Revisiting Schengen: Europe and the Emergence of a New Culture of Border Control. In: Perspectives on European Politics and Society 8, no. 1, p. 31–54, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850701204087>.

### *About the author*

Ignacy Józwiak | University of Warsaw | Centre of Migration Research | ul. Patteura 7 02-093 Warsaw | Poland | T +48 22 55 46 779 | [i.jozwiak@uw.edu.pl](mailto:i.jozwiak@uw.edu.pl)

Józwiak, Ignacy, holds a BA and MA in ethnology and a Ph.D. in sociology, which makes him consider himself a social anthropologist. He is a researcher at the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw. Areas of research interest: labor migration to the EU countries, state borders, borderlands, and transnational spaces.

