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**FROM POLITICAL BORDERS TO SOCIAL BOUNDARIES:
ORAL HISTORY METHOD IN THE STUDY
OF A PETTY SMUGGLING COMMUNITY
ON THE BELARUS-LITHUANIA BORDER (1989–2008)**

Introduction

1. The spatial and temporal frames of the research

The paper concerns the issue of border and local studies in the context of globalization and their potential to challenge existing theoretical discussions on borders, places and localities. The main aim of the paper is to consider how globalization stresses the issue of borders, and to which extent local studies could bring new insights and new approaches to borders. As I argue, one of the most useful methodologies for bringing a local experience into theoretical debates is oral history research. In the second part of the paper I consider a political dimension of oral history and explain why I find this methodology of particular importance for studying a petty smuggling community on the border between Belarus and Lithuania.

The history of the Belarus-Lithuania border is rather recent. The border has been demarcated and institutionalized mostly in Post-Soviet times. An actual border line between Belarus and Lithuania was more or less fastened in 1940. However, it was only the administrative boundary between two Soviet republics during the Soviet times. It was completely porous and was not perceived as a border. The Belarus-Lithuania border has become to be officially demarcated only after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The border between Belarus and Lithuania is one of three borderland regions where Belarus adjoins the European Union and its new members – Latvia, Poland and Lithuania. Only one of them – the border between Belarus and Poland – is relatively well-studied and attracts the attention of scholars (Smułkowa/Engelking 2007). New borders between Belarus and Latvia, Belarus and Lithuania occupy a marginal position as in political debates, so in the academic sphere, although, to my mind, they represent “the most significant metamorphoses of post-Soviet space”. A Russian scholar Olga Bredniikova has formulated the essence of these metamorphoses by a following citation: “The ‘unbreakable’ Iron Curtain has come crashing down. However, new inner borders have instead emerged” (Brednikova 1997: 153).

As I argue, the history of the Belarus-Lithuania border after the Soviet Union’s breakup was rather dramatic because it reflected the process when the institutionalization of the border was accompanied by the increase of the persistence of the border. What I am interested in is how this ambiguous process which was taking place in the region during 18 years (from the declaration of independence by Lithuania in 1990 to joining Lithuania the area of Schengen Agreement at the end of 2007) is perceived by local people who live near the border and consider the border as an essential part of their everyday live.

2. Studying a petty smuggling community on the border: methodology and research questions

Studying the case of the Belarus-Lithuania border, I concentrate my attention on the community of petty smugglers whom I call here shuttle traders. Borrowed from the Post-Soviet public discourse, the metaphor of shuttle trade has two important dimensions. First of all, it appeals to the specific time and space which are determined by the Soviet Union collapse and re-bordering Post-Soviet space. Secondly, under shuttle trade I understand the certain type of an economic activity on the borderland. It can be considered as a part of smuggling characterized by the following features:

- an individual strategy of realization (an individual does not involved in smuggling networks, she or he carries and sells goods by her-or himself);
- a small scale (it requires small investment and brings small income);
- carrying legal goods (such as clothes, alcohol, tobacco, perfume as opposed to drugs or weapon) illegally (for instance, the quantity of tobacco and alcohol

you can carry is restricted by law but shuttle traders always break the rules of goods' transportation).

The metaphor contains also an important sociological context. Shuttle trade is precisely a female strategy of employment which is simultaneously connected with the decline in social status. It means that shuttle trade is an important strategy of employment for disadvantaged women (unemployed, retired, low-paid) in the peripheral regions of transnational borders.

Obviously, my research is focused on the particular case of a local community belonged to the peripheral border region between two relatively insignificant states in the world's political arena – Belarus and Lithuania. Nevertheless, the research questions I am trying to raise in my dissertation seem to be of a wide interest and importance. They are:

- 1) How can we understand and study borders?
- 2) How do borders appear and which social changes do they bring into life?
- 3) How do people living near a border (in particular, shuttle traders) construct the history of the border and its meaning as for the region, so for their personal experiences? How are borders adapted by people?
- 4) What can local historical experience of a border add to the existing theoretical discussions on borders in the context of globalization?

My research is generally based on an oral history method. Living in the Belarusian border town Oshmyany which is located in 20 km from the border I've been conducting narrative interviews with women who are involved in shuttle trade. Narrative interviews presuppose that a person who shares a story with a researcher provides a coherent narrative about her life experience with a focus on a certain aspect designated by research interests of a scholar. According to my research questions, I focus on how people conceptualize the border and how they define the role of the border both in their personal biographies and in social changes in the region. The process when people construct the meaning of certain historical events through their personal narratives I would call narrativization. In addition to narrative interviews, I also use the method of participant observation for understanding how a border impacts the everyday life in the town. My research diaries include also everyday short conversations with the inhabitants of the town, people's memories about the region before and after the appearance of the border.

In this paper I would like to regard some important theoretical issues of my research. I consider the questions of theory and methodology important for border studies. Criticizing the only empirical approach to research, an American

critical theorist Nancy Fraser argues, that “the ‘empirical fact’ [...], far from being independent, is a performative artifact of prior design” (Fraser 2010: 40). In other words, theories we are using impact the empirical data we get. Operating by some theoretical hypotheses we construct the object of research and consciously or not arrange our empirical sources around this object. Moreover, if we take the oral history as an example, it is evident that oral history sources do not preexist; their appearance is to a great extent stimulated by a researcher. It means that oral history sources are mostly produced during research and the process of their producing strongly depends on theoretical background of a researcher which simultaneously – and I will return to this point later on – could be considered also as a political position.

1. Borders in the context of globalization: oral history and the meaning of local experience for border studies

1.1. Debates on borders in the discourse of globalization: affirmative and critical approaches

For a long time border studies have dealt with the particular cases of different border regions all over the world. If to give a glance at the core literature about borders, one can definitely find that most of texts concern certain regions (the Mexican-US border, the border between Poland and Germany, the Russian-Estonian-Latvian border region) and theorization is still relatively uncommon. As a Finnish political geographer Anssi Paasi argues: “[...] boundary studies have often been labeled among the most boring and torpid areas of inquiry. This argument is based on the fact that most boundary studies have been descriptive, empirical investigations of specific cases and theorization was a rare phenomenon” (Paasi 1997: 14).

It is obviously that in my research I deal with a very local border (even with one part of the whole border region between Belarus and Lithuania) and focus my attention on a close and relatively small community of people. The problem is the same: how to conceptualize my empirical research and how to bring it in the wider context of border studies?

There are two main historical events which make the border between Belarus and Lithuania such a fascinating research case: the first is the collapse of the Soviet Union, the second is the enlargement of the European Union to East

Europe. Both of these events including also the expansion of the Schengen Agreement's area define not only temporal but also conceptual frames of my research. According to a French philosopher Étienne Balibar, one of the historical occurrence without which "we could have never seen 'globalization' used in its current sense is the collapse of the Soviet socialist system, bringing with it the end of the 'division of the world' into two antagonistic blocs. [...] 'globalization' would never have become the issue it is, or in any case it would never have become an issue in such a 'global' way, had there not *already* existed 'global' faultlines (or *global superborders*), as well as a global antagonism, and had these lines not then been erased. In this respect globalization is nothing more than the transcendence of the division of the world, the end of the antagonism, apparently forever" (Balibar 2004: 103, 104).

However, Balibar is far from being simply optimistic about such consequences of the Soviet Union's collapse as a possibility for newly appeared nation states to be included in the Western world on the equal base or as the restoration of a harmonious world without any conflicts and antagonisms. Moreover, he is rather skeptical about the European West which still considers East Europe "as a border of democracy" instead seeking to invent new forms of European solidarity (Balibar 2004: 99). However, written the quoted texts before May 1, 2004, Balibar does not take into consideration the fact that East Europe is not homogenous anymore, but is divided between European and Eurasian global spaces. This division is not even so much simply geographical as mostly political and symbolical. According to a Ukrainian scholar Tatiana Zhurzhenko, the situation looks like "the winners of the post-communist transition have deservedly received their entry tickets to Europe, while the losers (like Belarus, Ukraine or Moldova) still belong to "Western Eurasia", the latter used as a synonym of authoritarianism, corruption and poverty (Zhurzhenko 2010: 44). It allows me to suggest that a *global superborder* between East and West still exists, although not outside, but inside of East Europe. As Zhurzhenko argues, "the Soviet bloc collapsed, but the border between the two political blocs did not disappear completely. With EU and NATO enlargement it was shifted to the east; it now separates the new EU members and their Eastern neighbors" (Zhurzhenko 2010: 28).

Thus the Belarus-Lithuania border can be also considered as the geographical embodiment of the concept of *global superborder* which appeared in one of the former boundary regions between Soviet republics. This border reflects the traumatic experience of re(b)ordering the world after the Iron Curtain's destruc-

tion. Generally speaking, being in some sense very peripheral and insignificant, this border simultaneously becomes an important laboratory for studying global processes of westernization, Europeanization, people's mobility and new types of inequality from a local perspective. To my mind, it means that an important theoretical frame for understanding the geographical, social and symbolical essence of the Belarus-Lithuania border becomes the discourse on globalization and the debates about the meaning of borders in a globalizing world.

One could say that globalization stressed the issue of borders and in the certain period of time even challenged the future of border studies which could not exist without the object of studies, notably, without borders. This challenge was mostly connected with that interpretation of globalization which could be called *affirmative*. The affirmative version of globalization proclaims the new world without borders and the end of the territoriality and the nation state. This approach is represented as by business analysts, for instance, by Kenishi Ohmae whose well-known book "The Borderless World" is widely discussed and criticized, so by some sociologists and especially by Manuel Castells according to whom nowadays we deal with the "space of flows" instead of the "space of places" (Ohmae 1994; Castells 1989). In this paradigm borders are considered as an anachronism of the nation-state-times which today can be easily overcome, for instance, with the help of new technologies. I would say that in some sense the European Union, though being a regional supranational formation, demonstrates regular attempts to implement this ideal. Theoretically, the EU can be considered as a "space of flows" where people, goods, services and money can move freely. Practically, this ideal is still far from being completely realized.

Moreover, the European Union's policy towards migration, people's movement, securitization of external borders is the object of constant criticism. For instance, the Schengen area has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it reflects the process of de-bordering and guarantees the free movement of people: "The Schengen area represents a territory where the free movement of persons is guaranteed. The signatory states to the agreement have abolished all internal borders in milieu of a single external border".¹ On the other hand, this de-bordering is followed by the simultaneous re-bordering, when the external borders of the European Union becomes strongly persistent. As Zhurzhenko argues, "the new

¹ The Schengen Area and Cooperation, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/justice_free-dom_security/free_movement_of_persons_asylum_immigration/l33020_en.htm (1.03.2011).

external EU border is technically superior to the former Iron Curtain, but its permeability varies significantly for various nationals and different social groups” (Zhurzhenko 2010: 28). In this quotation Zhurzhenko stresses not only the persistence of new external borders of the European Union, but also their potential to order global society, dividing it into definite groups of those who are allowed and those who are forbidden to move freely all over the world.

Here I would like to return again to Balibar who argues: “Nothing could be more wrong than the idea that globalization would be accompanied by a parallel growth of material, immaterial, and human circulatory flows. Whereas information has become practically ‘ubiquitous’, and whereas the circulation of goods and currency conversions have been almost entirely ‘liberalized’, the movements of men are the objects of heavier and heavier limitations [...] A world that is now broadly unified from the point of view of economic exchange and communication needs borders more than ever to segregate, at least in tendency wealth and poverty in distinct territorial zone” (Balibar 2004: 113). According to Balibar, borders do not disappear in the global world, on the contrary, they receive a new meaning of “essential institutions in the constitution of social conditions on a global scale where the passport or identity card functions as a systematic criterion”, the socially discriminatory function of borders is intensified (Balibar 2004: 113).

The idea of Balibar on the meaning of borders in the global world can be considered as a quintessence of the other approach towards borders in the debates on globalization. This version should be called *critical*. It mostly insists that globalization and visible de-bordering in the world leads to the practices of inclusion and exclusion and increases inequality among people depending on which territory they belong to. Evidently, this version challenges the affirmative approach to borders in the global world. It disputes not only the seeming insignificance of borders in the global world, but also the unambiguous positive interpretation of global processes in general.

Sharing a critical approach to borders in the global world and in particularly to the external borders of the European Union, I would like to shift a little the focus of my attention. Despite a disciplinary and ideological gap between both mentioned approaches, they have one common feature – both of them shed light only on the negative aspects of borders: they are treated either as barriers for global flows of people, goods, services and money or as the lines of the world’s and people’s division. Following a Britain political sociologist Chris Rumford, I would say that “an approach to borders which is framed narrowly by debates on

a borderless world, on the one hand, or the re-bordering of an increasingly security-conscious (Western) world, on the other, is less than satisfactory” (Rumford 2006: 160). The borders are ambiguous and multidimensional. They include many different agents: a superstate government, a national state, border control institutions, smugglers, migrants, etc. All these ‘agents of borders’ can give us new perspectives on theorizing borders in a global world.

1.2. A local perspective on borders in the context of global disputes

Now let me return to my research case – the community of women involved in shuttle trade in the border between Belarus and Lithuania. What can this case bring to the interpretation of borders? As I have demonstrated, dominant approaches to borders in the context of globalization explain many things about borders and challenge their meaning in a global area (both in positive and negative senses). However, they are not completely satisfactory, because these approaches do not include into the focus the experience of people who are directly connected with the border. First of all, these approaches leave behind the everyday experience of people living near borders, people’s relations with borders and the individual perception of borders. That is why I insist that the case of the Belarus-Lithuania border taken in a historical perspective has significant importance. It allows me to retrace the process of how borders become the part of a people’s everyday life, how people adapt themselves to newly created borders, how borders reshape social relations and social boundaries in the region and how borders are intersected with trajectories of individuals’ lives. As far as the history of the Belarus-Lithuania border is relatively recent, people still have fresh memories about how they had to learn living with a border. I think that their memories about life before and after the appearance of the border and during the institutional changes of the border can be invaluable material for theorizing borders in the global era.

According to the sociologist of globalization Saskia Sassen, “when today’s media, policy, and economic analysts define globalization, they emphasize hypermobility, international communication, and the neutralization of distance and place. This account of globalization is by far the dominant one. Central to it are the global information economy, instant communication, and electronic markets – all realms within which place no longer makes a difference, and where the only type of worker who matters is the highly educated professional” (Sassen 2004: 254). Sassen finds it important to broaden the analysis of economic globalization

by the categories of place and work process (Sassen 2004: 257). Despite the fact that Sassen's attention is focused on global cities and the networks of migrant workers in them, I find her approach useful for my case because it allows me to shed light on the marginalized groups of people whose experience is important for understanding impacts of globalization on the local communities but remains mostly invisible.

Therefore, studying the border between Belarus and Lithuania I concentrate my attention on the community of women involved in shuttle trade. While borders are considered in a mostly negative sense in dominant approaches to the interpretation of borders in a global world, the experience of shuttle traders can give us another perspective. Unexpectedly, not only highly educated professionals, but also provincial women carrying cheap goods across the border become the winners of globalization because a new global border which lies now not outside, but inside East Europe becomes an important source of their income and their employment.

Finalizing the first part of the paper, I would like to look back the idea of Balibar about social discriminatory function of borders. He notes that in other times this could be called a class function (Balibar 2004: 113). For him borders are the means of people's segregation in a global context. For me the different possibility of various social groups to cross a border is the important means of segregation in a local context. As I argue, people's mobility being connected with a right to cross the border becomes an important class attribute. From the non-EU perspective this possibility depends less on person's territorial belonging (I think that the chances for Russians, Belarusians or Ukrainians to receive a Schengen Visa are approximately equal), than on one's class position in a local society. Therefore, most of those people who claim the changes in the strict visa policy of the European Union are Belarusian journalists, intellectuals, students and businessmen for whom the possibility to move freely is an important marker of their symbolical and cultural capitals. But how does the situation look from the peripheral perspective of the border town Oshmyany? What role has a border played in the construction of new social boundaries in the region? How have people changed their positions in local society due or contrary to the border? How can the position of shuttle traders be interpreted? These are the questions I try to answer in my research.

2. Studying borders from a local perspective: the political dimension of oral history research

One of the main theoretical arguments of my research concerns the importance of local studies for understanding borders in a contemporary world. Moreover, I consider local studies as not only a significant methodological issue, but also as an important political choice for a researcher. Therefore, in this part of the paper I would like to turn my attention to the political dimension of oral history research.

I was prompted to raise the question of the political dimension of border studies by the opening speech of an Irish anthropologist Thomas M. Wilson “The Boundaries of an Anthropology of Borders in Europe, Past and Present” at the conference “A Borderless Europe?” in the University of Southern Denmark. According to Wilson, an ethnographic perspective gives us an opportunity to find out more about certain things which are not represented in other sources. Nevertheless, the investigation of borderlands has to be useful for people we are studying and writing about. It should be also about institutions, processes, and agency. In general, the ethnographic research has to have a political aim and to be helpful for people of borderlands. Although I do not deal with ethnography and anthropology in a clear disciplinary sense, nevertheless, I collect the stories of people, their views on a border and their stories about a border trying to reconstruct the everyday history of the borderland since the border appeared. The ethical dilemma here is how my research can help those people or, in other words, what is a political relevance of my research? This question leads us to more methodological ones: is there a real gap between theory and politics? How can the academic work be used for solving the problems of inequality, gender and class deprivation and subordination? In general, how can our research contribute to the claims of justice?

In this paper I am barely able to give exhaustive answers to questions I have raised. Nevertheless, I try at least to trace a course of my thinking. In my research I do not deal a lot with postcolonial studies; however, I would like to borrow some ideas from postcolonial discourse and particularly from Homi Bhabha’s book *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994). In the chapter *The Commitment to Theory* Bhabha tries to revise the prevail approach to theory according to which it is considered as “the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged” and always is in a binary opposition to political (Bhabha 1994: 19). As Bhabha argues, the

dichotomy *theory VS politics* does not have any sense because both – theoretical and political – “are [...] forms of discourse and to that extent they produce rather than reflect their objects of reference” (Bhabha 1994: 21). He gives an example of a political leaflet involved in the organization of strike and a speculative article on the theory of ideology, and argues that both of them are the part of the common political process and the only different lies in their operational qualities: “The leaflet has a specific expository and organizational purpose, temporally bound to the event; the theory of ideology makes its contribution to those embedded political ideas and principles that inform the right to strike” (Bhabha 1994: 21–22). Bhabha sees the function of theory within the political process as to make “us aware that our political referents and priorities are not there in some primordial naturalistic sense. Nor do they reflect a unitary and homogeneous political object” (Bhabha 1994: 26).

To overcome a binary opposition between theory and politics means also to change the understanding of theory. Bhabha argues that the basis of this binarism which is needed to be erased consists in “a view of knowledge as a totalizing generality and everyday life as experience, subjectivity or false consciousness”. (Bhabha 1994: 30). I would interpret this Bhabha’s idea as an attempt to level a boundary between theoretical work or some “pure knowledge” and everyday life experience and to recognize their equal importance for the academic work. Therefore, as I argue, studying the everyday life of people and the people’s experience of certain historical events and trying to bring this experience into the academic discourse we already make some political choice and demonstrate our political commitment. This is not a coincidence that many feminist scholars work with oral history, ethnography, biographical interviews. The political is implicitly contented in theories, methodologies and approaches we use. Choosing certain methods of research we simultaneously make a political choice.

There are two main approaches to the meaning of oral history sources. First of them considers oral history only as an additional or supportive method when the other sources are unavailable or a researcher needs some information which was not represented in written sources. This approach also perceives an oral history as a less reliable source because of the faultiness of the personal memory. The second approach regards oral history as an independent historical method which research potential is not inferior to the more traditional sources. Nevertheless, it does not mean that one can use an oral history method instead of written sources to reconstruct some historical events. Rather, the sources received by

oral history method have their peculiarities and are used in research by definite theoretical and political reasons.

The first – theoretical – issue is connected with the conception of a historical fact. Avoiding the whole theoretical discussion about the meaning of a historical fact and the possibility of pure historical truth, I would only like to say that a historical fact in oral history sources has its specificity. As an Italian historian Alessandro Portelli argues, oral history “tells us less about events as such than about their meaning” (Portelli 1981: 99). It does not mean that oral history interviews do not contend any facts; moreover, they are able to shed light on the misrepresented aspects of history. Moreover, what is even more important and what makes oral history different and self-valuable is that it gives us information about subjectivity, the personal perception of certain processes and about the attitude to some events at the level of social groups. According to Portelli, “subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible ‘facts’. What the informant believes is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that he or she believes it) just as much as what really happened” (Portelli 1981: 100). Therefore, scholars mostly should choose an oral history method not for searching for misrepresented or unknown facts, but for understanding how certain events impact people and the ordinary life, how these events are perceived by people depending on their class, gender, race or ethnicity.

The second peculiarity of an oral history method lies in the conditions of their existence. Unlike written documents, oral history sources mostly do not exist before their appearance is not initiated by a researcher. This issue makes oral history an ambiguous method. On the one hand, the objectivity of oral history is always under the question because oral sources “are always the result of a relationship, a common project in which the informant and the researcher are involved, together” (Portelli 1981: 103). On the other hand, the participation of a researcher in the emergence of oral history sources requires for stronger responsibility and clarifies a political dimension of a researcher’s position.

Finalizing my paper, I would like to return again to the question of political relevance of my own research. What is political in oral history research of shuttle trade on the Belarus-Lithuania border? How could my work help people whose life stories I am going to analyze? What are the political results of a local perspective on the history of borders? In general, what is my role or the role of academic critic in the claims to justice? These questions I am still trying to answer. Nevertheless, my main idea is following. Oral history is mostly the history of non-he-

gemonic classes or subaltern groups such as a working class, Third World labour migrants, East European villagers. As a rule, the history of these groups and their experience are not represented. At the same time, according to Nancy Fraser, representation is a necessary condition of justice which can be interpreted as “dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction” (Fraser 2010: 16). If to look back to the idea of Saskia Sassen about globalization as a discourse of professional elites, it becomes clear that the history and experience of many other groups, directly or indirectly dealing with globalization in different aspects, is still far from being presented as in intellectual, so in political arena. It means that my research will probably barely be able to solve problems of justice neither at the global, nor at the local level. However, I hope that it will widen the perspective on borders including and representing the experience of those people who are mostly excluded as from public discourse, so from the process of decision-making.

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**OD GRANIC POLITYCZNYCH DO SPOŁECZNYCH:
WYKORZYSTANIE METODY PRZEKAZU USTNEGO W BADANIACH
NAD SPOŁECZNOŚCIĄ DROBNYCH PRZEMYTNIKÓW
NA GRANICY BIAŁORUSKO-LITEWSKIEJ W LATACH 1989–2008**

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest poświęcony metodologii badań nad granicami politycznymi w ujęciu historycznym. Biorąc za przykład granicę białorusko-litewską, która powstała w wyniku upadku ZSRR oraz poszerzenia Unii Europejskiej o część Europy Wschodniej, autorka udowadnia, że prowadzenie badań w oparciu o metodę przekazu ustnego jest konieczne do zrozumienia, w jaki sposób granica staje się częścią codziennego życia i doświadczenia ludzi. Doświadczenie ludzi związane z istnieniem granicy jest często pomijane w pracach dotyczących ustalania i znoszenia granic we współczesnym globalnym świecie. Dlatego też autorka jest żywo zainteresowana tym, jak ludzie uczą się żyć z granicami, jak wykorzystują je w swoich lokalnych działaniach i w jakim stopniu czerpią ekonomiczne korzyści z ich istnienia. Autorka przekonuje, iż wykorzystanie metody przekazu ustnego do badania zmarginalizowanego ludzkiego doświadczenia jest najlepszą drogą do odnalezienia odpowiedzi na postawione pytania.