

Revitalising Borders: Memory, Mobility and Materiality in a Latvian-Russian Border Region

By Aija Lulle

Abstract

In this paper I investigate how an international border is ‘revitalised’ in political discourses as opposed to lived experiences. Based on narratives I have collected from border dwellers on both sides of the current border between Latvia and Russia and placing them into a broader context of current border debates, I analyse how geographical and social mobility is remembered from Soviet times and reworked in current contexts. I argue that while politically the border is revitalised through abandoning and forgetting the Soviet past and through the idea of constant threats in the future, locally it is revitalised through giving a life to the abandoned: memories of ‘vigorous times’ in life-courses and material things. People who dwell at the border did not move themselves: the international border moved several times in one century leaving border dwellers’ memories and significant places on the ‘other’ side. I focus on how these borders were crossed in the past, how they are (not) crossed now, and the social meanings assigned to these circumstances. In the current context I follow diverse paths of reasoning that describe how the uneven flow of goods and people through the Latvian-Russian border shapes the power dynamic against which the people living in the border area used to reconstruct imaginaries of ‘Soviet times’ versus ‘Europe’ and ‘vigorous times’ versus decline.

Keywords: revitalising borders, Soviet time, mobilities, Latvia, Russia

Vignette: ‘Times Can Change’

On 1 May 2004, Latvia joined the European Union (EU), the same year it had already joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In Pededze, as in other state and municipal centres in Latvia, the EU flag was to be raised on that day to wave permanently side by side with the Latvian maroon-white-maroon. The village of Pededze is located only two kilometres from the Russian border. In the mid-2000s there were just under 1000 inhabitants in Pededze, and numbers continue to decline year by year. But just before the public celebration, something rather awkward occurred.

The municipality representatives had been looking for a person who could climb up and tie the flag to the pole, since it did not have an automatic mechanism to do the job. A young local man agreed to carry out this honourable duty, but early on the morning of May 1, he changed his mind. Since he had a family and children, he decided he could not risk their futures. ‘Who knows how the times might change, and what the changes might bring’, he said, implying that the membership in the EU may not be for long and reunion with Russia may follow. He apologised, but was staunch in his decision. Nevertheless, the EU flag was raised that day; another person agreed to be the flagman.

In the language of numbers, Pededze’s journey to EU membership seemed like a 50/50 chance: in the 2003 referendum on joining the EU, the local voters were divided almost equally, symbolically favouring the EU by a single vote: 203 citizens of Pededze voted for accession, while 202 were against it.

Two territories are at the centre of this investigation into the current state of the Latvia-Russian border. In addition to Pededze on the Latvian side of the border, I will also focus on the village of Lavry in Russia, with just below 2500 inhabitants. Lavry is located seven kilometres from the Latvian border, in the Pechory district, and was a part of independent Estonia during the interwar period between 1918-1940. There is a Latvian minority living in Lavry, people who consider themselves to be Latvian, even though they do not always speak the language.

During several years of research in this area,¹ I have been on the lookout for what is significant for the people of Pededze, dwelling here at the Latvian-Russian border. The borders between the different Soviet Republics were administrative; there were no border controls or posts, just road signs marking the border to another Soviet Republic. What was once just an administrative line on Soviet maps between two socialist republics has now become a strictly guarded border. To cross it involves official documents, time, and money (Assmuth, 2003). For some, the Latvian-Russian border, has been redefined as a geopolitical barrier as this border is the easternmost edge of the European Union and NATO borders that face Russia.



Figure 1. Latvian and EU flags at Pededze municipal building. 2004. Photo: Aija Lulle

Russia is the direct legatee of Soviet power, the power that occupied the Baltic states during WWII and annexed the small country to the USSR for almost half of the 20th century. However, the shifting order in this region is even more complicated. At the beginning of the 20th century, the territories that are now the sovereign states of Latvia, Estonia, and Russia, were all united under the Tsarist Russian Empire (Berg 1998). The new order at the border interferes with people's lives in explicit ways, but even so, in many cases the current reality is seen as a throwback to the pre-WWII period. For the people living there, it is significant that for almost half a century these places in the Soviet Republic of Latvia and Soviet Republic of Russia were fully inhabited and freely accessible to one another. In a political perspective, disseminated from the power centres, the political border between the EU, NATO, and Latvia on the one hand and Russia on the other, the importance of the border is constantly revitalised through discourses of threat and resulting securitisation responses. Moreover, the political discourse on futurity, understood as an affective orientation to the future (Anderson 2010), is about abandoning and pushing out of memory all that relates to the Soviet past, privileging instead 'futurity' of a secure and prosperous life in the EU and NATO. This resonates with Paul Gilroy's (2005) writings on Europe's unresolved relationship with its colonial histories, where an inability to mourn results in a political condition of historical amnesia. Local lives appear in sharp contrast to this political revitalisation of the border:

the local revitalisation of the border is a praxis of remembering, co-referencing in time and space, and about the physical materiality of the border.

The main aim of this paper, therefore, is to trace how the significance of the border manifests itself in conflicts between a political discourse of the border and the reality of a lived life, with memories of the borderland.

Conceptualising Time B/orders: Memory, Mobility, Materiality

A political discourse with its ubiquitous emphasis on possible threat, securitisation and a need to invest more in the tightening of the border carries youthful energy traits and a construction of ‘furity’. But what is striking here is the ageing and declining reality at the border, both in terms of life-courses and material infrastructure. This reality is almost completely forgotten in political discourse. In order to probe deeper into this paradox, I propose to use the concept of ‘rupture,’ as it is understood from a geographical perspective (Hörschelmann 2011). By rupture, I mean sudden political changes, embodied changes as well as individual and social changes, when life can no longer be organised as it was before. Rupture is also an important concept throughout shifting conceptualisations of the ‘border’ in border studies – from geological, natural entities, to geopolitical and cognitive, socially constructed borders. By placing an emphasis on rupture, the main question becomes as follows: *how do ruptures emerge; how are they produced and experienced by people in a borderland?* I argue that revitalising a sense of rupture symbolically as well as revitalising memories and materiality of life at the borderland becomes a crucial practice which makes the border come alive in disparate ways.

The first rupture occurs between political discourse and lived reality. Not surprisingly, a border that has been established politically can seem strongly fixed from positions of power, be they representations on political maps or included in discursive ideologies disseminated from the centre. A border space can seem absolute, and mathematically measurable. As soon as it is ideologically represented, however, it becomes a social space (van Houtum et al 2005). A border, first of all, is a belief, a mental thing that shapes social reality (Paasi 1996). As such, border areas are always produced through social praxis (Werlen 2005). Differences emerge between the social praxis of political discourse on the one hand, and praxis on the ground, in everyday life in border areas, on the other. At a political level, b/ordering – a concept that combines drawing of boundaries, managing borders and ordering social life as a strategic fabrication – constitutes a reality of affective orientations, thereby expressing the desire for protective distance from the outside world (van Houtum and Naerssen 2002). The nature of the relation between ‘order and orientation’, manifested by physical constraints such as border marks, walls or fences can be found in all societies in all times and imposes a normative order on earth (Minca and Vaughan-Williams 2012: 757).

Borders select and prioritise social relations, and b/ordering creates and represents exclusive knowledge. Through b/ordering, actors decide what is to be included and excluded, and what the border wishes to communicate (ibid 125-126). The excluded in the dominant perspective and unequal power relations of a competitive memory (Reading 2011) are the locals, those, who actually dwell at the border. Through the focus on the 'everyday' we can see how bordering practices are carried out by state and international actors as well as by local inhabitants. The latter too need to abide by certain orders at the borderland, such as carrying with them permissions or other documents stating that they can be present in the border area (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012). However, my informants' Soviet memories are effectively silenced, in other words, they are seen as the past, which should be forgotten.

Second, it is impossible to understand local concerns about 'how the times can change,' and to make sense of their current mobilities into and away from this place, without understanding the mobility patterns that were common here during Soviet times. Soviet memories are the best possible data source for tracing lived experiences and representations about time-space as most informants, and, indeed, most of the inhabitants of the village of Pededze are ageing, or their parents lived in this place in Soviet times and generations before. Through everyday mobilities, people routinely draw paths and co-opt their places through embedded practices. Transformations that shifting borders and new regimes bring into people's lives 'change times'. Symbolic and cultural boundaries are more fluid than political borders and rarely coincide (Wilson and Donnan 1998; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Verdery 1998). The new orders and embedded praxis rub against each other in conflict. The question is what the references are, according to which life in Soviet times was remembered and continuously compared to the present order of things: how is this space currently being shaped in response to these references?

Frames of reference, according to which a space is b/ordered, constitute an important conceptual tool for the structuration of the interrelations between material realities and meanings that people attach to the border (Werlen 2005: 53). In turn, meanings attributed to material things and geographical mobilities depend on the experiences people have, the knowledge they carry, and what roles these things and mobilities played within the life-course and history of individuals and families. Werlen emphasises the symbolic appropriation of material things as the key dimension of everyday geography-making. According to this conceptualisation, b/ordering space is primarily a selective appropriation of the world (Werlen 2005: 55-56).

The main axes around which these spatial frames are constructed locally are mobilities related to agriculture production in the collective farms (*kolkhozes*) or state farms (*sovkhazes*), visiting markets and shops, and cultural, educational and religious activities, such as excursions and religious ceremonies. It is important to highlight that the mobilities afforded during Soviet times are re-embedded through a

corporeal frame of reference: these times are often referred to as *spēka gadi* (vigorous years) or *mani gadi* (my years), evoking the youth and working lives of the informants themselves, their relations, their neighbours, and their friends. Lynch argued that ‘timeplace’ is a continuum of the mind, a social and cognitive process, in other words. The presence of the past occurs through recalling, and learning past is linked to imagined future (Lynch 1972). The interplay of politically unrestricted movement in the area together with the memory of physically youthful movement and activities during Soviet times was often expressed by mobility reflected in verbs, such as *going* (for e.g. goods), *biking*, *driving*, *roaming around*, *running*, *flying* (moving freely, fast, unrestrictedly, in a metaphoric sense), while current immobilities are expressed with words like emptiness, abandonment, decay, cut off (from the other side of the border), and moving away (to more central places in Latvia and emigrating to other European countries.)

In the remainder of the paper I will trace how ruptures emerge, are produced and experienced in the following political and everyday contexts: changes of the political border and names of collective farms, revitalising praxis of memories of a ‘radiant past’ (Paxson 2005) and the ‘vigorous years’ during the Soviet era, followed by narrations of decay and abandonment in the borderland nowadays. In order to give a voice to those who are silenced in political discourse, I prioritise the focus on how societal change is experienced and interpreted by border dwellers themselves in their life histories (Chamberlayne et al 2000). In the last analytical section, the paper will come back to the political revitalising of the border through the securitisation discourse.

Changing Borders and Place Names

While reviewing fieldwork transcripts and interviews, I paid special attention to the words and notions that my informants used to refer to Soviet times. This made it possible to excavate specific markers: *times* were distinguished politically and like Pāts’ times² or Ulmanis’³ times, or, according to the organisation of agricultural production during Soviet times (kolkhoz times).

During the 20th century, three major legal-political border shifts occurred in the research area. In 1918, when both Latvia and Estonia declared their independence from the defeated Tsarist empire, Pededze officially became a part of Latvia, while Lavry (in Latvian Lauri, in Estonian Laura) was a part of Estonia, although, with a considerable minority of ethnic Latvians who returned from emigration in other parts of Russia. All three languages were taught in Pededze school during the inter-war period, while Russian and Estonian were taught in Lavry school, with Latvian only partially used, but the language praxis remained strong in Latvian families and everyday encounters. This situation lasted until 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic states, followed in quick succession by the German occupation in 1942, and then the Soviet Union returned in 1945 to fortify its borders after the

victory in WWII. However, according to new administrative borders, the territory where Lavry is located was annexed to the Soviet Republic of Russia. After collapse of the Soviet Union when the Baltic states re-claimed their independence, the Soviet administrative borders were not changed, and Lavry remained a part of Russia.

These border shifts are important for understanding the seemingly paradoxical nature of what the informants verbalised as important time-frames in their memory narratives, and what remained unsaid. On the Russian side, people most often emphasised the pre-war period, saying things like “We Latvians lived here in Estonian times”. For those who were born in the 1920s and 1930s, the greatest emphasis is on their early memories of visiting Latvia:

I remember Riga castle, wait a second, and were the Freedom monument and the honour guards at the monument in Riga or elsewhere? I remember Sigulda and a restaurant there; we were given a glass of milk. A very beautiful place. I remember, I was there during Ulmanis’ time, on a school excursion. (Ludvig, 80s, Lavry)

As a whole, the Latvian roots and the Latvian history of the Lavry village are acknowledged and appreciated, also by local Russians. Moreover, local Russians tended to distinguish themselves from Russian-speakers of different nationalities from the other republics of the former Soviet Union. ‘Local versus Soviet’ boundaries on the current Russian side are more strongly emphasised than on the Latvian one. Estonians, Latvians and Russians, who had lived in Lavry for generations, were regarded as true locals, while those who came later were labelled ‘Soviet people’ by locals.

The people who lived here until 1918 were locals, but those who came later were Soviets. People remember, this is inscribed in the memory. For example, a woman who came here by marriage, she is a Soviet until this very day. See this old *babka*, she maybe cannot walk well anymore and her memory fails, but we remember that she is not a local, she is a Soviet. (Antonina, 60s, Russia)

The discursive drawing of socio-ethnic boundaries, tracing back for almost a century, still was there in the border area to some extent. However, on an everyday basis, remaining in the border areas was not so much influenced by ethnicity as by a familial preference to continue living in the rural area that had been cultivated by one’s ancestors, and by the choice, often collectively made, to engage in agricultural production.

I wanted to go to work in a factory after the war, but my parents were already old and they said: “Where will you go, our little son? Better stay where you were born.” So I joined the sovkhos. The work was hard, not like in the factories, but I worked as a smith for fifty-two years. (Ludvig, 80s, Russia)

In the quote above, pay attention to the advice given by Ludvig’s parents. This local mentality to stay put despite changing borders, is expressed in the proverb “you should remain where you were born,”⁴ a popular saying on both sides of the border. Ageing people declined to make complicated requests for visas and other documents due to declining health. They would rather accept the tighter borders as an

inescapable reality where local voices do not matter in unequal power relations, overlapping with their own slower pace of life in old age.

After the war, when collectivisation started, the kolkhozes were named after Lenin and Stalin, but the names were changed when the totalitarian regime was relaxed, when Nikita Khrushchev came to power in Moscow. So, the new ideological names of the kolkhozes were *Rassvet* ('dawn', 'flourishing' in Russian) and, similarly, *Zarya* ('morning light', 'dawn' in Russian). One kolkhoz, where comparatively more Latvians worked (although, still in a minority), was named after the village, *Pededze*. In an everyday language, my older informants still bordered local places according to names of the kolkhozes.

It is important to stress that changing borders and place names are reflected upon in one breath with reflections of informants' youth, of post-Soviet decay and EU expansion. Memories are constructed side by side through bodily and life-course changes along with political changes. This should be taken into account especially when people emphasise the 'radiant past' (Paxson 2005) of Soviet times. In sum, the construction of this 'radiant past' is intrinsic to stories of people's own youth, and a more positive sense of the places where they lived. In the meantime, if the positive value of individual and collective memories related to life-courses is denied in political discourse in the name of 'national security', and the dominant trope of the Soviet past as something to be simply forgotten in the name of a better future, the human ability to create multidirectional memories is also constrained.

Radiant Past, 'My Vigorous Years'

The Soviet times, those, which the official memory rather pushes aside, were the 'radiant past' (Paxson 2005) for my informants, who were young and strong in their 'vigorous years' from the 1950s-1980s. Ideological time thus clearly entwines with embodied time. On the Russian side, there were state farms, which were remembered by inhabitants from both sides of the border as being rich and flourishing. It is often highlighted that the sovkhoses in Lavry were among the five best in the Pskov region of Soviet Russia. This was particularly remembered with regret in the 1990s, when almost everything of material value had been either stolen or demolished in the abandoned farms. The active flow of life in the area was directly related to the high volume of agricultural production. This was something that the people tried to maintain in the early 1990s, when the new cooperatives were established. However, the closer the country came to the joining the EU, the more agricultural production in Pededze was abandoned as a non-profitable activity.

In memories of daily life, roaming freely around the countryside was particularly mentioned. Sovkhoz workers from the Russian side came to Pededze, and vice versa. "It was my village! Seven kolkhozes and sovkhoses together, we lived together in such friendship," Anton from Pededze, in his 60s, told me with a youthful sparkle in his eyes, showing belongingness, a symbolic 'ownership' of space and

time in his youth and middle age. Similarly, joyful memories are remembered by others, as in the quote below by Elisaveta:

We were roaming, running back and forth. It was interesting, often on bikes, somebody was sitting on a luggage carrier, all the way down. I spent my youth cheerfully, I went everywhere. My years have gone now but then I managed everything – work, coming back home, flying around here and there, and the celebrations! – kolkhoz or singing excursions with the choir. It was fun. [...] Now that house is empty, one old woman lives in the other house. Every second house is empty. (Elisaveta, 70s, Pededze)

Like in all other places in Latvia, people from Pededze were deported to Siberia in 1941 and 1949, especially from the more affluent farms. Contrary to the meta-discourse of Soviet atrocities however, those who were deported from Pededze and returned did not express bitterness in their memories. Like Alida, whose family properties were confiscated and collectivised. She returned from Siberia in the late 1950s. “Actually, I would have so much wanted to see those places again, how it is there now. But it is not possible any more [due to her age]. Common people were not guilty for what happened here. And we did not live badly there; the local Siberians helped us a lot,” she said. Similarly, she expressed positive memories of the life she and her family led during Soviet times.

We went to Leningrad in a cargo car, covered by a tarpaulin canvas. Two of the women were pregnant. It was during the *Rassvet* times. We saw Peter’s palace, what a beauty! I love fountains. It is so beautiful there. People were laughing about us – poor *kolkhozniki*, arrived in such a car, but we were happy that we made it. Those were such good years. [...] And when I was in Riga the last time? It was also during the *Rassvet* times. But usually we went for excursions to Russia, all around in Estonia, we worked diligently in the production units and the *kolhoz* granted excursions to the South [of the Soviet Union]. (Alida, 70s, Pededze).

Excursions to the Caucasus and Central Asian republics, or sometimes to other friendly socialist countries such as Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, were given as rewards for good work in collective and state farms. Such travel opportunities were seen as extended mobility into the vastness of the Soviet Union and even farther into the more alluring socialist states. Since salaries were similar in most collective farms, and education and health services were free, however poor the quality might have been, people were able to live in relative comfort with their families in the countryside.

Materiality and Mobility at the Border

Revitalising the border in everyday life was also prominent in memories of acquiring material goods during Soviet times. A *need to be mobile* to acquire better quality daily goods was a prerequisite in the Soviet type of economy of scarcity, and the geographical positioning between three Soviet republics provided a certain mobility advantage. People would go where the sausages, milk or curd were better, and look

for opportunities to escape the pervasive deficit of material goods. Shops and outdoor markets were situated across three republics within easy reach of one another on foot, by bicycle or by horse. Similar cross-border practices can be traced nowadays across Europe (see e.g. Spierings and Velde 2013; Velde and Spierings 2010) but in different political and economic settings under the Soviet Union. Due to their proximity to the border, border dwellers were in a privileged situation to engage in everyday commercial mobilities and trade goods from various places (Borén 2009)⁵.

Apart from everyday work and leisure-related mobility in the border areas, it was possible to improve the quality of life beyond the means that earnings in a kolkhoz or state position could afford. Since most shops were often empty, lacking even such basic items as bread, soap, and footwear, much of the time that was free from obligatory work was spent on small private farms that generated extra income and home-produced food. Most of the rest of a person's free time was devoted to travelling around and searching for cheaper, better goods, or anything that was available. The Pskov market, close to both Lavry and Pededze willages, was an especially active exchange place. Most of the inhabitants of Pededze bought and sold goods there: pork, piglets, wool.

In Soviet times we bought piglets there [on the Russian side], it was cheaper to get footwear, some services – to make a dress, for example. It is just five-seven kilometres, closer than Pededze village's centre and besides, in Pededze there were no services. So, we did day work, harnessed a horse, and went to Lavry. (Zelma, 70s, Pededze).

Most remember going to nearby Estonian villages for sausages since throughout the 1960s-80s, the territory of Latvia was poorly provided with processed meat products, while the situation was better in neighbouring Estonia.

There were times when it was difficult to get soap, queues for bread were long, and the last ones in the line did not get anything. Kolkhoz workers could shop in mobile busses, [they] could get bed linens and crimplene clothes, but not us. So, we went to Estonia to buy these things. Goods from the other side always attracted attention although money-wise it was similar. (Elvira, 80s, Pededze)

In the late 1990s, people from the Latvian side still went shopping to Pskov, the closest regional centre on the Russian side. Although permission to cross the border was officially given only as far as the neighbouring village of Lavry, border guards allowed some people to go further. There was a very good currency exchange rate for Latvian lats to dollars, and dollars to roubles. People bought clothing and home textiles, which otherwise would have been difficult to afford in Latvia.

And those from the Russian side still went to Aluksne, the closest Latvian regional centre, appreciating not only better prices for selected products, but the fast improving service culture in Latvian shops:

Milk, curd, and sour cream were very cheap, but the best thing was the service, so polite. Going shopping in Aluksne was a way to calm your nerves, like psychotherapy. (Valentina, 60s, Lavry)

Lavry inhabitants, however, most often went shopping to Estonia due to their historical ties with the Estonian state. Not unimportantly, some Lavrians held Estonian passports as ‘locals’ of the pre-war Lavry village, and took advantage of being recognised as belonging to independent Estonia again.

The Soviet experience that my informants described also carries positive connotations. Informants recognised and talked about forced mobility, the deficit of goods, and the oddities of centralised distribution of goods under the Soviet system,



Figure 2. ‘Revitalising confusion times’. The border sign that was in use in 1990s and early 2000s was replaced by a new one, exhibiting the European Union’s symbol. The latter (in photo here) was abandoned as useless but was given a new, practical function in one of my informant’s sheds, protecting logs from rain and snow. Photo Lena Malm

but they also positively emphasised specific forms of belonging to the Soviet space. Living at the border put them in a privileged position compared to those living further away from administrative check-points. Border dwellers had shorter distances to travel to access certain good in other republics, and could do it even on an everyday basis, filling their cupboards with milk and meat products.

The practice of acquiring goods manifested later as well, during independent Latvia and Russian Federation years, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, but already in more specific contexts of a border which was difficult to cross. Alcoholic drinks and petrol were the prime commodities border dwellers from the Latvian side bought in Russia and sold in nearby villages through informal social networks. The ‘confusion times’ as locals called the 1990s and 2000s, with shifting border crossings, were in-

creasingly more b/orderred towards Latvia’s joining the EU and NATO, and the subsequent tightening of border crossing regimes.

Decay, an Empty Space and Direction Europe

As mentioned earlier in the article, Independence and its attendant curtailed opportunities for mobility in this Russian-Latvian-Estonian triangle coincided with the ageing of most of my informants. If younger people could move away to search for work elsewhere, the older awaited their pension and maintained the wisdom they trusted to, namely “you better stay where you were born.” In the 1990s and early 2000s, when Latvian authorities were striving to join NATO and the EU, portraying their country as increasingly progressive, the ‘times’ in Pededze went backwards. Sinking into economic, and indeed psychological, depression was the leitmotif for framing of everyday time in the 1990s:

In the 1990s it sometimes seemed that life was passing us by. Everything was happening far away and without us. There was a sense that we were living in a swamp and sinking ever deeper. People no longer knew what day it was. (Gaida, 50s, Pededze)

On the Russian side, the poverty was even deeper and was related to the dismantling of state farms, which caused unemployment and lack of income. Cash in salary was insecure for those still working in agricultural production. Roads to the regional centre of Aluksne deteriorated over the years. They were mainly dirt roads with some patches that had been asphalted [as a special favour to someone] during the kolkhoz times. Those who lived close to the road could not open their windows due to the heavy dust. During the years just after independence, no roads leading toward Pededze were maintained, and some parts were impassable during the spring and autumn rains.

Pededze had just one simple border control point, which does not have a customs officer. While unemployment stood at 20 %, men from Pededze went to Russia on regular basis and were bringing in petrol, sugar, and alcohol in the small amounts that individuals were allowed to carry across the borders. However, this practice required strong physical and mental health since the border-crossers often had to wait for days to fill their tanks in Lavry, or to buy 10 kilos of sugar, 10 packs of cigarettes, and two bottles of spirits. Upon returning home, the tanks were emptied into petrol cans, and the men immediately rushed back to the border again.

The closer the dates for joining the EU and NATO came, the more diminished the prospects appeared for most locals. This sense of shrinking was not only psychological, but literal as well – their properties shrank. Their land was taken away metre by metre, like in the case of the local man whose house was located at the furthest point of the Latvian border, next to Russia.

I did not want that European Union, I was against it, nothing is better now, because of that. The authorities [in the centres] have distributed money, but do not want to pay a peasant. [...] The border zone was initially six metres, then my toilet was still three meters on the Latvian side. But now [in 2004] Latvia needs twelve meters to separate it from Russia, because it is Russia, and because of joining the EU and NATO. I had planted spruce trees on the north side. They [the border makers, the state] cut those down. I had apple trees, hazels, and red currants; they tore them out because of the border. (Arvids, 60s, Pededze)

As the border regime tightened, the locals increasingly became the subjects of control, not the owners and operators or authors of the daily paths they had been drawing or years. Exceptional cases – sad or joyful – to locals, were not reason for exceptions for state power. Let us hear the memories of a tragic event in the following excerpt:

I just went to see my neighbour, see there on the corner some fifty metres away. He was harvesting cabbages. I went to him and said that my son had just died. I just wanted to talk, to ask, when to bury him, where to bury him. So, I walked back and the boys [the border guards] stopped me. I asked, why, and they knew that I am a local, where I live, I pushed them two aside, but they are four, and put hand-lockers. Well, I will go, do not break my arms, I said. “You are going to sit down now [in the detention room],” they said. They changed their minds three times about whether to fine me or not, and finally they fined me. (...) [My son was] buried on the Latvian side, despite the fact that my whole family is [buried] on the Russian side. (...) I don’t know where I will be buried, maybe just at the border column [laughing]. I will simply remain where I was born. I will die here. (Adolfs, 60s, Pededze)

On the Russian side too, for some there were regrets, like for Konstantin: “During the *juku laiki* [the ‘confusion times’ in 1990s] I would have wanted to move to Latvia since I am Latvian. I still regret not going. It would have been easy when borders were still open. But now it is no longer possible anymore.” Like some of the others from the Russian side, Konstantin went to church services in Aluksne in the 1990s. Although it was not entirely legal, again, the border guards allowed it, admonishing the transgressors to return to Russia by evening.

The decline of agricultural production and subsequently, the liveliness of the place, are reinterpreted through today’s neoliberal discourses where individuals are blamed for the decline, not the structural changes that took place on national and global scales. See the informant’s critique of cutting out forests to earn money, and her negative memories of the laziness of kolkhoz workers:

Agricultural production should be encouraged...Fields are covered with bushes, it is a disaster. Forests are being cut down, cars are bought in for the money earned from timber, but soon there won’t be anything left. When my grandparents came here, there was a forest. They put a bundle of their belongings on a stick, and started to clear woodland for tilling. Now this place is overgrown with bushes again. During the kolkhoz times there were wide tillages, but oh, how those kolkhoz workers went on breaks! The drunkards were just sitting in the ditches until midday when the brigade leader came back to check. They did not have a serious attitude, a sense of responsibility that their own work would come to fruition. (Alida, 70s, Pededze)

The main factors delaying development are undeveloped business activities – even the grain grown in the agricultural cooperative is sold to locals rather than being marketed further on – long distances to town centres, and poor infrastructure, especially the roads, which make the relatively short distance to Aluksne (25 kilometres from the centre of Pededze village) seem great. As Zaiga, in her 30s, put it: ‘Pededze is like an empty space that you travel through to get to Russia.’



Figure 3 Block houses at the centre of Lavry. 2004. Photo: Aija Lulle

Since Latvia joined the EU and especially since the late 2000s, border dwellers in their prime, who wish for a better future for their children, have new values and a new understanding of how a better life can be achieved:

My grandmother said that the land is the most important...I would not say so now. I hope that my children will go to the *gymnasium* [the best secondary school in a regional centre], and then to Riga or elsewhere. Education is the most important thing. I do not want them to stay here and waste their lives. (Zaiga, 30s, Pededze)

The memories of mobility during Soviet times were gradually replaced by overwhelming emigration from the whole country, including at least ten percent of the working population from Pededze village in the late 2000s.

I would never change those [Soviet] times for these. My grandson studies for his Master's degree in Manchester! Of course, we all have to work hard to support him. Including me, I was working all the summer. And I hope that the younger grandchild would also study abroad. [...] [But I myself] will not move anywhere, I cannot adapt to a new environment easily. I will not move anywhere. When I die, I will remain here forever. (Alida, 70s, Pededze)

‘This is a Time’: Securitisation of the Border

In early 2015, when the conflict in Eastern Ukraine continued to escalate, spreading fear and anxiety elsewhere in the post-Soviet region, the speaker of the Latvian Parliament, Inara Murniece visited the Latvian-Russian border, emphasising in her speech:

This is a time when Latvia should act decisively and effectively in order to strengthen the state security. The internal state security is crucial and we have to work in order to further improve the state borders. We have to strengthen our armed forces and National Guard. [...] However, the strongest defence line goes through people’s hearts and minds. (Saeima 2015)

By referencing ‘hearts and minds’, the speaker of the Latvian Parliament was drawing special attention towards the necessity of strengthening the state’s ideology among border populations, and ensuring loyalty to the independent state of Latvia. As Pfoser (2015) who has researched the securitisation of the Russian-Estonian border has pointed out, local ‘demands and grievances’ can be politicized in turbulent times. However, in the case of rural areas with ageing populations and dismantled infrastructures, local border voices in Latvia remain effectively excluded and silenced.

The state continued using references to ‘outer threats’ and by the end of August 2015, there was already a lack of space in Daugavpils State Border Guard Administration for detained foreigners and asylum seekers: 28 people had to be placed in a State Police temporary detention isolator (Border Guard 2015a). Due to the global crisis of asylum seekers, the emphasis was changed from regional to global threats. Again, just as it had been throughout the years I have researched the border region, the quest for local meanings and what unites people in border regions was absent from this securitisation discourse. This was brightly summarised by one of my informants in Pededze as early as in 2004:

Sometimes we [locals] joke: if the Russian army will enter from the Pskov side, they will not even notice us and will just pass by. We have never had any ethnic tensions here; our grandparents and great grandparents have said the same. None of us feel that we live like Russians with Latvians. We live like neighbours with neighbours, a human with a human. If somebody made a fuss, then he or she made a fuss with Anna, it was not a Russian falling out with a Latvian. (..) Still during those times, when I freely travelled to that side of the border, I could see that they are very heart-warming people, something so familiar, a part of us. (Gita, 40s, Pededze)

The lack of commitment to improve lives for border dwellers translates into broader frictions between Eastern Europe and other EU member states regarding the movements of people in the asylum/refugee crisis in 2015. Namely, the debate on asylum seekers was not about how to help them but rather – how to strengthen borders against any incomers. Baltic and several other post-socialist states were worried about the security of their borders and primarily saw asylum seekers as a threat. Politicians in Western Europe (although not all), on the other hand, saw the situation

as a humanitarian crisis where human lives and possibilities to help people were at the centre of the debate.

In order to stop the flow of people across the border, the Minister of the Interior Rihards Kozlovskis has estimated that 17 to 19 million Euros are necessary to strengthen the Latvian-Russian border (MoI, 2015). He has argued that this would be a more efficient long-term solution to the issue of trespassers as, for instance, it costs approximately 2000-2500 Euros to transport one Vietnamese person who has trespassed the Latvian border back to Vietnam (Border Guard 2015b). The need to cut out forests, increase the border width of the border line and to build a fence are emphasised, while the needs of locals who have to and want to live at the borderland, remain absent.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I have reflected on how border dwellers, especially the ageing population in the borderlands, are basically politically abandoned when it comes to the discourse of securitisation. The state emphasises the importance of the political border, and the border is actually becoming more and more concrete rather than abstract in their everyday lives. The actual border is revitalised by state discourses of the possibility of military and global migration ‘threats’.

The political discourse privileges ‘futuraity’, and the older generation is here overlooked as being a future-less one. However, insights into the reality of political loyalty and political decisions reflect that sudden political changes and long rupturing processes occur at differing paces, locally. Memories of Soviet times and changing political situations are passed on to other generations too, and magnified by lived reality in the borderland, where a border is primarily a constraint in one’s day-to-day life. The new borders and orders have opened up the whole post-socialist space to the world, but a concrete border shapes and limits local lives even more. Therefore, a specific value of the ‘border’ as an analytical concept was applied here to probe deeper into empirical findings. Political redrawing of borders can happen fast, but local placemaking? practices and adapting to new regimes requires much longer. Personal narratives of life-course and a sense of limited time left for an individual life span reveal these temporal modalities in sharp relief.

We should take into account that remembering always takes place in contemporary contexts. However, for the local people, the border emerges through the frames of reference of what was lost through political and life-course ruptures. The frame of reference of Soviet times, corresponding to informants’ youthful years, here serves as a memory resource to revitalise the border and give meaning to ordinary people’s lives. Memories of places and b/ordering are constructed through life-paths, from youth to ageing, and from Soviet times, to post-Soviet decay and EU expansion, as parallel processes that feed into each other. This also helps to explain

why the trauma of the Soviet regime, with high immigration from other Soviet republics and forced migration (deportations), were remembered as traumatic but also mitigated thanks to the resilience of youth. In the meantime, the futuristic anxiety that is enforced presently in the name of state security is translated in contemporary understanding as a metaphor for ‘decay’, not only due to local realities of constrained life at a strictly guarded border, but also due to limited bodily mobility in old age.

The flow of everyday life, a practical life, is first and foremost about mobility and the material world that we can see in specific places: access to services and goods and local infrastructure. The plea to the local people to be loyal to the state feeds further the discourse and praxis of competitive memory (Reading 2011) and historical amnesia (Gilroy 2005), where local lives do not matter.

The counterpoint therefore would be to bring in the local voices and seriously engage with local needs as the way out from thinking of the border as a constant constraint in everyday lives. In a practical policy, this positivity of cross-border shopping can be taken up on a more positive note to revitalise current EU outer borders like the one presented in this paper. In memory work, it means engaging in dialogue and negotiating memories, and instead of making the border space increasingly less liveable, to turn it into a productive space and practice where memory orientations ‘cut across and bind together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites’ (Rothberg 2009: 11). Last but not least, in national and international post-socialist political discourses, it means bringing in the value of human life into conversation with the b/ordering world.

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Notes

¹The fieldwork data presented here I collected in 2004-2009, and I have kept in touch with a few key informants also in the following years. The first fieldwork in 2004 was a part of a larger project, funded by the Academy of Finland and led by Prof. Laura Assmuth. A Russian ethnologist, Dr. Jeanne Kormina, and I were working on the Latvian and Russian borders. The methods were participant observation, life-story and thematic interviews and group interviews at the both sides of Latvian and Russian border. In 2006, Assmuth and I returned for a fieldwork in Pededze and in 2009 I again returned to the Latvian side of the border, this time as a local organiser of the COST IS0813 border fieldwork visits, with the aim of collecting visual data on everyday lives on the borders and revisiting my key informants. Interview quotes presented in this paper are from interviews carried out by me, in Russian and Latvian.

²Konstantin Päts, the most influential Estonian politician in interwar period, Estonian Prime minister 1932-1937, President –Regent 1937-1938 and the State President of Estonia 1938-1940.

³Kārlis Ulmanis was similarly the most influential Latvian politician in interwar period became the State President of Latvia 1934-1940.

⁴In Russian: “Где родился, там и пригодился”

⁵In Soviet and post-soviet landscape, shops were *in place*, while people had to be mobile to obtain needed goods. See more in the concept of ‘stiff landscapes’ by Thomas Borén (2009).

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