

PREFACE: REMAPPING SORTAVALA FROM BELOW

In the post-Cold war era, the construction of new state borders, on the one hand, as well as the changing significance of old borders, on the other hand, have been at the heart of border studies. The parallel processes of de- and re-bordering, together with the changes in the nature of European borders that they have implied, have been interpreted in terms of competing projects of identity building related to traditional nation building, as well as the results of emerging trends of European integration and globalisation. In the context of this type of binary vision, national perspectives have been linked to securitized views of territorial integrity, while de-bordering and cross-border regionalisation have been related to a new post-Cold war era, and even a post-modern politics. When applied to the re-definition of post-Soviet borders, such a template accentuates a juxtaposition between the supposedly nationalising identity politics promoted by the Russian federal centre and the politics of de-bordering and cross-border regionalisation represented by the European Union and its neighbourhood policies.

This study of Alexander Izotov brings at least two important elements to this discussion: the role of local identity and the importance of analysing Soviet era traditions. Izotov's study of the Soviet border town of Sortavala in the post-war period stresses the significance of local identity building by bringing to light rich evidence of how broad and expansive patterns of national and political identification are in fact deeply embedded in local institutional and discursive practices. Perhaps even more importantly, Izotov goes behind the party-led symbolic construction of Soviet identity and uncovers in detail the every-day mechanisms of identity building in their local setting. His analysis shows that Soviet identity cannot be understood just as a mask on the surface of an ethnic identification and something which can be thrown away overnight, but instead as something that is much more deeply rooted and far-reaching.

Izotov does an exceptional job in illustrating the complex nature of this identity building process with a number of empirical examples. He reveals the various ways in which the local identity of this garrison town, once situated in closed border zone, is linked to the traditional image of 'defenders of the socialist motherland.' His in depth analysis, however, goes further than this in revealing several other layers of the Sortavala identity, which is related to the socialist production system and the position of the town in it and the particular ethnic-cultural traditions of the region. Izotov demonstrates the well-known paradoxes of Soviet nationality policies with examples showcasing antiquarian Karelian ethnic traditions in a town of immigrants that had no roots in the area. Besides general observations of official Soviet policies and the propaganda modes typical to the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Republic, a special feature of Izotov's analysis is the much needed, but often ignored perspective from below that allows him to better capture the complex history and positioning of the town.

The town of Sortavala was part of the Finnish areas ceded to the Soviet Union after WWII. When Finnish troops retreated, its old inhabitants were evacuated to Finland, and newcomers from Belarus, Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union settled in the town. Like Kaliningrad, it formed in this sense a true Soviet town, where the new community had very thin links to earlier history and traditions. The narratives examined by

Izotov demonstrate how a diverse community of migrants has actually produced new forms of locality while the initial feelings of unfamiliarity and alienation have given way to manifestations of local patriotism.

However, it is remarkable, as Izotov shows us, that despite this exceptional situation, the Finnish heritage, architecture, town infrastructure and even nature was part of the milieu of local identity formation. The most interesting aspect of all this, in my reading, is not however merely the survival of certain features of Finnishness in the identity of the town as a contrast or competing element to Sovietness, Karelianness or Russianness, but rather the striking manner in which Izotov demonstrates how all these elements are at the same time present in the everyday construction of identity of this small Soviet border town.

It is this part of his analysis that opens up an important perspective for us to better understand the post-Cold war changes that have taken place in certain border regions. In the Finnish discussion, the Sortavala region has often been conceptualised as a 'lost land' while the broader post-Soviet developments have been interpreted in rather national terms through a juxtaposition of Finnish and Russian cultures. An alternative 'European' reading has in turn emphasised the shared Karelian traditions on both sides of the border. It is exactly this perspective of joint traditions that have been taken as the main building blocks for the future of the area in terms of a European cross-border region within the framework of EU neighbourhood policies.

However, instead of taking these commonly used perspectives for granted, Izotov's study illustrates that from the standpoint of localities on the Finnish-Russian border, such as Sortavala, these processes and questions of identity construction are actually far more complicated and multifaceted. He demonstrates in a convincing manner that ethnic-cultural traditions are not just ready-made packages of competing identities but elements in an on-going process of identity construction where local, national and European aspirations are mixed and constantly transfigured. At times, official local discourses served to reproduce the national ones seeking to depict Sortavala first and foremost as a Soviet town. At the same time, however, some elements of the local Finno-Karelian traditions were incorporated into the narrative of Sortavala's Sovietness, and in doing so altered the limits within which elements of the social, economic, cultural and architectural history of the town were considered as acceptable.

Coming back to today's debates within the field of border studies, the story of identity formation in Soviet Sortavala certainly questions interpretations on bordering processes where supranational, national and regional perspectives are pit against one another. It neatly verifies the findings made in globalisation studies that global is not merely something that happens at the supranational level, high up above our heads, but instead something that is present at all levels, and perhaps most tangibly at the local level as a part of our everyday life. Instead of focusing only on the supranational policy initiatives and the global scale dynamics of integration, which downplays the role of borders, or relegates the implications of the enduring nation-state system and the national-level projects that sustain this system, the recent border studies literature has underlined that these perspectives must be combined, because the processes of *de-* and *rebordering* are not exclusionary, but occur simultaneously.

As Izotov's work highlights, the processes of bordering and cross-border integration interact with each other in the midst of several contextual factors that intervene and influence the dynamics and processes taking place within a particular cross-border space. The territorial rearrangements implied by globalisation force us to rethink our layered analysis and seek to understand how borders contribute to a nested system of territoriality produced by various actors on different scales, from the global to local. It is necessary to focus on the emerging epistemologies of how state borders are understood, perceived, experienced, and exploited as not only political but also social resources—bottom-up just as much as top-down—in order to gain a more thorough understanding of why borders have endured in spite of global pressures, and how they reflect, and thus help us interpret, both the tensions and points of connection within intercultural and interstate relations.

In the midst of the post-Cold War 'disorder' the nature of borders has been changing, and it is important to understand the complex roles and realities of borders to address both how they are changing and their strategic, economic, and cultural implications. Izotov's work fits neatly within the contemporary border studies literature for it provides clear evidence that borders are far more than just formal political markers of sovereignty, but multifaceted social institutions, products and processes of a continuous social and political negotiation of space and practice. Borders frame social and political action, help condition how societies and individuals shape their strategies and identities; and are re- and de-constructed through various institutional and discursive practices at different levels and by different actors.

Through regional responses to globalisation borders are often reproduced in situations of conflict where historical memories are mobilised to support territorial claims, to address past injustices, or to strengthen group identity. At the same time, however, it is important to remember that through new institutional and discursive practices contested borders can also be transformed into symbols of cooperation and common historical heritage. In order to better understand the complexity of the present situation, it is also necessary to pay more attention to changes in the governance of borders and border regions, as well as to the regional responses that are linked with such developments. Although throughout the world most borders are subject to precisely the same global phenomena, there are various context-specific responses to these trends, meaning that generalised border narratives can obscure more than they illuminate.

The Sovietisation of the local identity Izotov describes does not per se condone or reify the Soviet identity politics but rather allows the people to forget its contingency. In Sortavala, the Soviet leadership was confronted with a demanding task, having to build a Soviet community out of people of various origins in a socio-spatial environment prone to injurious influences, in terms of both history and geography. Even so, Izotov's study shows that it was the discourses and practices linked to the defence of the socialist Motherland that became of particular importance for Sortavala's borderland identity. In this process, the state border with Finland gained a symbolic meaning and a status of a sacred boundary protecting the Motherland from the foreign capitalist enemy.

Part of the significance of Sovietisation lies in its power to uphold the belief systems that people have about their own country and its neighbours. Izotov's study illuminates how in the case of Sortavala it moulded a border area into a Soviet space, affecting not only the people living in Sortavala but also having an impact on the re-conceptualisation of the city neighbouring Finland. The powerful Soviet ideology was emotionally charged and certainly helped construct meaning in this particular borderland context. In this process, the border in between becomes increasingly a marker of difference, on the opposite side of which different modes of belongingness are acted out and performed. Being a border town thus gave Sortavala a preeminent role in the Soviet project of national identity. The narratives studied by Izotov illuminate how in the local identity construction process in Sortavala the self-identification of an ethnically and socially diverse community became (re)shaped in accordance with the goals of the Soviet project of national identity through communist socialisation and the indoctrination of core socialist values.

Consequently, the exciting challenge for research is to recognise the various ways supranational and national level processes are present in local everyday institutional and discursive practices. For me, this is precisely what Izotov does in his analysis of Soviet nationality policies and the multifaceted dynamics of identity formation in the Soviet border town of Sortavala. We might conclude that, if this kind of multiplicity is conceivable under the extreme regulation of Soviet circumstances, then a closer look at local and everyday processes of identity formation might have relevance today in seeking alternatives to the hardening discourses of East-West division and national juxtaposition in Europe and in particular on the Finnish-Russian border.

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