

The Liberal Script in Ukraine's Contested Border Regions

The aim of this study, located between geography, political science and anthropology, is to analyse different challenges to the liberal script in border regions, in particular with regard to sovereignty, mobility and individual vs. group rights. The case of Ukraine offers an interesting within-case variation on the claims and practices surrounding borders. It thereby speaks to a broader comparative and transregional context. First, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine are among the most blatant contemporary challenges to the liberal script as enshrined in international law. Second, Ukraine's western regions bordering the EU are characterized by the tension between mobility and controlled access as well as the contestation of competing notions of the nation-state and the political regimes they underpin (e.g. on both sides of the Ukrainian- Hungarian border). And third, Ukraine's border with Transnistria – a de facto state let in between Moldova and Ukraine – highlights the practical and security implications of a contested border on neighbouring states. The feasibility of the qualitative data collection has been tested in the pilot study Ukraine's contested border regions with funding by the Research Unit Borders in 2019. The new data will be of interest to European policy-makers and opens up possibilities for engaging the wider public by bringing to life a range of border experiences. The project extends the international network of SCRIPTS in Eastern Europe.

Methods and Data Collection

The novelty of the project lies in the in-depth and comparative analysis of different border regions and contestations at once. Four border regions have been selected for this study, including two border regions with a highly uncertain territorial and legal status: the Ukrainian-Russian border, the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, and the Ukrainian-Polish border.

Research Questions

The central research questions of the project are:
Why and how is the liberal border script, as enshrined in national politics, international law and EU norms and regulations, contested in Ukraine's border regions?
What are the driving factors and who are the actors behind these contestations?
What are the effects of different types of contestation on the perceptions, practices and identities of those living in the contested regions?
How is the liberal script maintained or redefined as a result of these challenges?