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Russia-Kazakhstan Border-Zone: Sociological Analysis*



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Abstract. The article, based on the research conducted by the Center for Regional Sociology and Conflictology Studies of the Institute of Sociology of RAS, discusses the features of cross-border cooperation of Russia and Kazakhstan. It considers works of Western and Russian scientists to identify major approaches to the study of cross-border cooperation. It discusses strengthening of inter-ethnic and socio-economic integration and cross-border cooperation at the regional level. The borderland as a social phenomenon is an object of our study; the research is focused on local communities, understood as residents of Russian regions bordering with neighboring countries. This means that the research is devoted to local communities of the areas, located on Russia's borders with different states – with the new neighbors, which appeared after the USSR collapse (e.g., Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States in the West, Kazakhstan in the East) and the long-existing ones – Turkey, China, Mongolia, etc. For analysis we select the Orenburg Oblast, which has one of the longest border lines with Kazakhstan. We make an attempt to identify whether the border-zone can serve as a frontier base for the creation of a successful brand of the region based on the self-identification of local people and thereby increase the level of socio-cultural and socio-economic development of the region through the attraction of additional tourist flows and investment in the region. What is the specificity of self-identification of the border region population and how can border relations become a tool for development of socio-economic, socio-cultural and inter-state relations?

Key words: border-zone, Russia-Kazakhstan border, Orenburg Oblast, regional integration.

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The border territory of the Russian Federation includes a border zone, Russia's part of waters of border rivers, lakes and other water bodies, inland sea waters and the territorial sea of the Russian Federation, where there is a boundary regime and state border checkpoints and also territories of administrative districts and cities, resort zones, specially protected nature territories, facilities and other territories adjacent to the RF state border, the border zone, the banks of border rivers, lakes and other bodies of water, sea coast or checkpoints [Vardomskii, 2008].

Huge space of Russia found itself at the border of the country, forming the so-called zone of the new frontier. Twenty-four Russian regions became bordering for the first time and three RF subjects acquired additional borders, which are considered as state. In the recent past they were absolutely open and formal by basic parameters. At the present time due to the change in their political status openness of borders dropped sharply and the barrier function increased, causing changes in conditions and factors in socio-economic development of the territories of the new frontier of Russia.

The issue of border areas was studied by the supporters of different approaches, including Western, such as geopolitical – K. Haushofer, S. Huntington, A. Chauprade [Haushofer, 2001; Huntington, 2003; Chauprade, 2013]. We should also note research of rational choice theory supporters, in particular P.K. Roberts and M. Lloyd [Roberts, Lloyd, 2000]. As for Russian

scientists, the most interesting works belong to V.V. Markin, I.A. Khalii, L.B. Vardomskii.

The features of Russian-Kazakh cooperation are the following: the longest border – more than 7.5 thousand km – a third of Russia's land border; 13 out of 27 RF subject, located on the frontier with the CIS States, border with Kazakhstan; facilitated border crossing for residents of border regions of the two countries. These factors lend particular urgency to the expansion and deepening of cross-border cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan, as well as contribute to the development of socio-economic relations, and closer collaboration in the field of small and medium businesses, culture, science, education and sport [Cross-border cooperation..., 2012].

In 2011 we carried out a public opinion survey of the population of border areas of the Orenburg Oblast using a representative sample. In total the survey involved 496 residents of Adamovsky, Kvarkensky, Yasnensky and Svetlinsky districts. The sample included 43% of men and 57% of women. Of the total number of respondents young people aged 18–30 accounted for 29%; people aged 31–40 – 23%; people aged 41–50 years – 22%; people aged 51–60 years – 17%; people over 60 – 9%; people having higher education – 20%; vocational secondary – 45%; incomplete higher – 9%; secondary general – 20%, and incomplete secondary – 6%. If we consider the respondents by occupation, the greatest number of them belongs to the category of workers (without specifying posts) – 21%,

followed by professional classes (journalists, educators, cultural professional) – 18%, pensioners – 15%, temporarily unemployed – 10%, and students – 6%.

The study tries to identify whether the specifics of self-identification of local population, as inhabitants of a border region, is different from self-identification of residents of other regions outside the border-zone of Russia. The main questions posed in the research are aimed at determining whether there is a positive opinion about a border-zone; whether the border-zone can become a brand of the Orenburg Oblast; what impact such location of regions makes on their socio-economic development.

According the survey results, more than 46% of the respondents make positive assessments of the border-zone with Kazakhstan and provide their associations that characterize images of the Orenburg Oblast. At the same time, the study reveals the brand of the Orenburg Oblast as a frontier outpost or a region-wall (*table*).

Understanding of the border-zone as an integral part of social space of Russian society involves protection of the state border together with its simultaneous socio-economic development, given the interests of the state, region and local border population. In the modern ever-changing world for successful regional development the border-zone should not be a “no man’s land, but “space for meeting”, which has its own set of cultural patterns.

Words that have most positive associations

Word	% (percentage of respondents)
Grain	77.2
Gas	64.6
Virgin land	63.8
Border	46.3
Chernomyrdin	39.4
Mosquitoes	38.6
Gagarin	32.3
Gold	31.3
Lake	30.3
Asbestos	29.1
Road	24.2
Hunting	22.0
Pushkin	20.5
Nickel	20.1
Missiles	19.1
Arkaim	17.1
Chapaev	16.3
Pugachev	14.4
Wild geese	13.8
Cossacks	13.4
Space	10.6
Aksakov	9.8
Rodimtsev	8.5
Zykina	8.3
Flamingo	7.9
Tolstoy	6.1
Dutov	5.1
The Sarmatians	2.2

This opinion is logical, as, in addition to wages and pensions, nearly 35% of the respondents have extra money at the expense of socio-economic relations with Kazakh neighbors. A third of the respondents have relatives and close friends on the other side of the border. Thus, we can conclude that close Russians-Kazakhs relations are based not only on trade and economic ties, but also on deeper ones – kinship and friendship.

However, in reality this is not always the way we would like. Unfortunately, border regions are not most economically developed subjects of the Russian Federation. Their development level can be affected by local resources – objects of material and spiritual culture that underline the formation of a border-zone brand and tourism business. Border and customs agencies can be another significant factor in socio-economic development. It should be noted that the level of districts development varies greatly: relatively developed districts neighbor nearly desolated, the high unemployment rate results in the outflow of population. The latter leads to growing social tensions on the verge of explosion or depression of the remaining population and creates additional risks for the border security [Khalii, 2014, pp. 23-33].

The brand of a territory, according to I.S. Vazhenina, is “a set of unique qualities, enduring human values, reflecting originality, inimitable consumer characteristics of this territory and community, widely known, recognized and demanded by the consumers of this territory» [Vazhenina, 2008, pp. 49-58].

As for successful cross-border cooperation, provided by regional authorities, the respondents’ opinions are divided almost equally: 30.6% of them support it; 35.4% doubt the benefit of cross-border cooperation for the region; 33.4% find it difficult to answer. Perhaps, this is due to biased opinion that the government intervention can, on the one hand, complicate established connections through personal contacts and, on the other hand, use cooperation in some “corporate” interests.

Probably, we can observe the trend of transformation of modern Russian society, mentioned by V.V. Markin. At the regional level it occurs primarily in the sphere of big business, corporations and so-called “elite”. He writes: “*Regional government is between a rock and a hard place (refers to big business and population), all the more so as corporations themselves form their structures of influence in government and promotion of their representatives in these bodies. The population is weakly structured and has virtually no institutional “lobbyists”* [Markin, 2014: 137-143].

Successful border cooperation should be built with account of interaction of population, traditions, kinship and friendship, etc. Despite the ambiguity of opinions about the success of cross-border cooperation, the Russian-Kazakh border area is specific socio-cultural space of Eurasian integration. As can be seen from the above table, positive associations can be used as a platform for the formation of if not single, but common post-soviet Eurasian identity.

At the moment the situation around the border between Russia and Kazakhstan develops quite favorably. However, there is some disparity in regional distribution. The most developed relations with Kazakhstan are observed in five regions: the Omsk, Kurgan, Chelyabinsk, Orenburg and Astrakhan oblasts. These regions account for the essential shares of total commodity turnover. At the same time, the relations between the neighboring territories of Altai Krai and the Novosibirsk Oblast are less developed. The reduction in these disparities is supported by the Russian Federation and especially the Republic of Kazakhstan. Speaking at the Economic Forum in Astana in July 2011, President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev stressed that at a time when other countries respond to the crisis by closing their borders and separating off from the outside world, Kazakhstan calls for strengthening regional cooperation [Toshchenko, 2014, pp. 60-73].

The Orenburg Oblast is a historical center of intercultural communication and a bridge between the Central Asian countries and the Russian regions with Turkic ethnic groups. It defines the strategic importance of the Orenburg Oblast as a RF subject, and the task to overcome the shortcomings of spatial position of the region should be not only of regional, but also of federal importance [Misharin, 2008, pp. 12-17].

The interaction of different cultures creates space of values comparison. Since the values of modern Russians are questioned, people's uncertainty in their culture leads to tensions

when interacting with bearers of "foreign" culture and is interpreted as a threat. For this reason there are contradictory social myths – collective views that interpret neighboring Kazakhstan as a possible threat to national interests of the Russians. Therefore, the formation of the Eurasian content of new identity of the border-zone population should involve the connection of Russian and Kazakh social-cultural values.

The border, as a state political project, presupposes special socio-cultural development of border areas. It implies the existence of a relationship between two parties, no matter whether confrontation or cooperation. The frontier of a modern state involves a paradox: separating people, it causes their interaction, creates new solidarity, and forms new socio-cultural space where different cultures "meet".

This is facilitated by territorial closeness of the border areas on both sides. Not only socio-economic, but also cultural relations develop. The collaboration is characteristic of areas located in the immediate vicinity of the border and each other [Oidup, Kylgydai, 2012].

It is possible to note that Russia faces the phenomenon of its border vulnerability and border buffer space transformation. New identity would allow both sides to develop in the conditions of global processes without prejudice to territorial integrity of both Russia and Kazakhstan and not depending on the center greatly. Cross-border cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan is an example

of this identity formation. Russia can and should be understood as part of Europe. Thus, the Orenburg Oblast and other border regions can be considered as “windows to Asia” of not only Russia, but the whole Europe and in this case inter-civilizational differences do not become a “stumbling block”.

In general, the border relations of Russia and Kazakhstan are characterized by positive trends for further development, especially if we consider Russia’s economic relations with other CIS countries. In particular, Russia’s commodity turnover is developed better with Kazakhstan than with other countries-former Soviet republics.

Moreover, 7.5 thousand kilometers of the Russian-Kazakh border is a sufficient reason for building quality relationships that are of joint interest of the two states. The Russian leaders’ orientation on strengthening constructive partnership and cooperation with Kazakhstan can be considered as one of the major achievements of the national foreign policy. Comprehensive socio-economic development is an effective way to eliminate real and potential threats. The development of cultural mediation mechanisms in opposite

directions is the most natural function of the border regions and one of the main factors in their development.

Studying everyday behavior of the frontier area residents, it is possible to understand how this new border-zone of dialogue is forming, its elements are functioning, what rules define behavioral strategies of the population and institutions and what role the new frontier is playing in these processes. Objectively existing mutual needs and interests promote cultural exchange, encouraging different regional cultures with their national component to learn all the positive from each other.

The border regions of the Orenburg Oblast act as natural “bridges” of socio-economic cooperation with Kazakhstan due to its geo-economic position; at the same time, to the greatest extent their development depends on the nature of economic and political relations at the interstate level, the ratio of contact and barrier functions of the frontiers. Inter-regional cooperation, as a low level of interaction, is an important form to fill the Eurasian Union with real content [From Asia to Europe, 2014].

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