Articles

Russian border security: trends of post-soviet transformation

La seguridad fronteriza rusa: tendencias en la transformación postsoviética

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Abstract

After the disintegration of the USSR, Russia confronted the task of reforming its border security policy, which had previously emphasized stringent control over both inbound and outbound cross-border movements. This challenge was further compounded by the unprecedented management of 13 thousand kilometers of newly established borders with other states of the former Soviet Union. This article examines the evolving trends in Russian border security policy, encompassing the management of these new borders, endeavors to integrate Russia's border security spaces with those of its post-Soviet allies, and the impacts of geopolitical expansionism. The transformation of Russian border security policy has yielded mixed results. On one hand, Russia has effectively embraced modern approaches to cross-border flow management. On the other hand, the scope of issues covered by Russia's border security agenda remains extensive, encompassing geopolitical fears and other issued that cannot be managed effectively by the agencies tasked with routine border management.

Keywords: Russia, border security, geopolitics, securitization, seclusion.

Resumen

Tras la desintegración de la URSS, Rusia enfrentó la tarea de reformar su política de seguridad fronteriza, previamente enfatizada en un estricto control sobre los movimientos transfronterizos de entrada y salida. Desafío agravado aún más por la gestión sin precedentes de 13 mil kilómetros de fronteras recién establecidas con otros estados de la desaparecida Unión Soviética. Se examinan las tendencias evolutivas en la política de seguridad fronteriza de Rusia, la gestión de estas nuevas fronteras, los esfuerzos por integrar los espacios de seguridad fronteriza de Rusia con los de sus aliados postsoviéticos y los impactos del expansionismo geopolítico. La transformación de la política de seguridad fronteriza rusa ha dado resultados mixtos. Por un lado, Rusia ha adoptado efi-

cazmente enfoques modernos para la gestión del flujo transfronterizo. Por otro lado, el alcance de los temas cubiertos por la agenda de seguridad fronteriza de Rusia sigue siendo amplio, abarca temores geopolíticos y otros problemas que no pueden ser gestionados eficazmente por las agencias encargadas de la gestión fronteriza de rutina.

Palabras clave: Rusia, seguridad fronteriza, geopolítica, securitización, aislamiento.

Introduction

The Russian Federation is the largest country in the world, boasting the most extensive border (over 60 thousand kilometers) and the second-longest land border (over 22 thousand kilometers). Following the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia faced unparalleled challenges in reforming the rigid border security system inherited from the Soviet era and of managing the emergent 13 thousand kilometers of international borders with newly independent states. From at least the 2000s onward, Russian border security policy has been influenced by geopolitical expansionism, which culminated in the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.

This article examines the evolution of key trends in Russian border security policy. First, I outline some possible ways of conceptualizing border security. Second, I provide a concise historical overview of Russian border policy, before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with a special emphasis on the post-Soviet border security agenda and on the evolving official approaches to border security. Third, I discuss the security challenges that Russia encountered while managing the new post-Soviet borders, highlighting two distinct trends in Russian border policy: unilateral efforts ("fencing-off") and the integration of border security spaces with those of its post-Soviet allies. Fourth, I analyze the impact of Russia's geopolitical expansion on its border security policy. Finally, I briefly touch upon the perspectives of ordinary border crossers regarding Russian border security policy.

Methodologically, this study falls within the realm of contemporary history, focusing on the causal narrative of the evolution of Russian border security policy. It can be regarded as a single-case study encompassing this evolution. The research incorporates relevant theoretical perspectives from Border Studies (primarily constructivist and critical approaches), which aim to conceptualize and deconstruct the evolving Russian border security agenda. Unfortunately, in certain instances, valid citations could not be provided due to the unavailability of functioning internet links to the cited news sources.

Conceptualizing border security

Questions arise regarding which borders need protection and whether a national border should be viewed itself as the object to protect or as a means to safeguard something else. The meaning of "security" in a border-related context remains uncertain. What kind of border deserves protection? Should a national border be viewed as an object that needs to be protected or merely as a means to protect something else? How do we conceptualize security within a border-related context?

If we perceive a national border as a demarcation line that delineates the limits of national sovereignty in relation to the sovereignties of other states, it can be seen as an entity requiring protection against unauthorized and undesirable changes that may arise from territorial disputes, secession movements, or changes in the natural landscape. Prior to and during World War II, powerful nations often employed the concept of "natural borders" by imposing it upon weaker states or colonized communities. This principle advocated for borders to align with natural obstacles such as rivers or mountains, as they were believed to provide stability and defensibility (Holdich, 1916). Another kind of pre-war conceptual geopolitical borders, to be imposed by a stronger nation (often associated with its titular ethnic group), were the borders of this nation's perceived living space (lebensraum) (Haushofer, 1927).

While the concept of "natural borders" were widely employed by colonial power, the concept of *lebensraum* provided a theoretical basis for the Nazis' territorial expansion. Therefore, those pre-war theories, that sought to establish secure and "just" borders for dominant nations, were discredited and lost their previous popularity. However, as I will discuss later, these seemingly outdated geopolitical theories currently are regaining relevance, not least due to Russia's geopolitical practices.

Following World War II, the global adoption of the principle of "inviolability of borders" shifted the focus of first international relations theories (such as political realism) towards existing "imperfect" borders, viewing them as reflections of the military power balance between neighboring states (Herz, 1957, p. 482).

The functionalist perspective regards national borders as a tool, functioning as a filter or membrane for cross-border flows. Ideally, this filter should facilitate the smooth passage of "good" and legal cross-border flows while effectively serving as a barrier against "bad" and illegal ones (Kolossov & O'Loughlin, 1998). In this context, border security can be seen as the efficient operation of this filter or membrane. However, the precise definition of a border remains unclear within this framework. Should a border be understood as a relatively narrow zone managed by specialized agencies (such as border guard and customs services) relying on checkpoints, sensors, and fences? Alternatively, should the focus be on "thick borders" (Longo, 2017), encompassing broader zones where border security agencies possess special powers? Additionally, should remote surveillance of cross-border flows (such as profiling visa applicants) be considered a border security practice, despite being implemented far away from the physical border?

Post-modernist border studies, which proclaim physical borders as either obsolete (Ohmae, 1995), multiple (Albert, 1998), or fluctuating (Balibar, 2002), provide a positive response to the preceding question. Consequently, it becomes possible to view border security as a reasonably effective means of regulating cross-border flows, without placing special emphasis on fixed national borders or practices associated with bordering. Given the impracticality of achieving one-hundred percent inspection in the era of accelerated cross-border flows (Bigo, 2005), effective control should be based on smart risk assessment.

The constructivist approach views both borders and security as social constructs that can have both enduring characteristics (supported by norms, practices, and historical representations) (Paasi, 1999) and more transient attributes (ascribing

political meanings to borders and framing border-related matters as security threats). The concept of securitization put forth by Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, which involves representing an issue as a security threat and seeking its acceptance by significant audiences (Buzan et al., 1998), proves particularly relevant in this context. Similarly, Andreas argues that border security functions as a game that is "less about deterring the flow of drugs and migrants than about recrafting the image of the border and symbolically reaffirming the state's territorial authority" (Andreas, 2009, pp. 144-145). It is worth noting that within the constructivist framework border security can encompass not only claims that securitize specific issues but also "borderization of security issues", i. e. claims these issues are related to border protection and should be addressed by border management agencies.

The approach critically examines traditional power dynamics, domination, and the centrality of the state (Booth, 2005). Consistent with this perspective, traditional border security should be explored from a non-statist standpoint, taking into account the experiences of border crossers (including irregular immigrants) and borderlanders. These perspectives shed light on the various forms of compulsory border control rites (Sasunkevich, 2015), digital surveillance (Marx, 2005), and exclusion (Basaran, 2008) imposed upon border crossers. In extreme cases, border crossers can find themselves trapped in a liminal space, stripped of many of their social and political rights, and even reduced to a mere biological existence in line with Agamben's concept of "bare life" (Agamben, 1998; Vaughan-Williams, 2009).

How do these approaches relate to Russia's border security agenda? From this perspective, I will examine both the range of issues typically viewed through the lens of border security and the policies implemented to address these issues.

Historical background

The Soviet period

Historically, Russia's territory lacked natural borders in many areas, making it vulnerable to foreign invasions. The attention given to borderland areas varied considerably. For instance, certain forested border regions, such as Siberia, were underprotected, while other areas were closely monitored by regular and paramilitary units primarily to address issues like smuggling and other illicit cross-border activities (Dyakova & Chepelkin, 1995). To counter the vulnerability of certain areas to nomadic invasions, Russia implemented a constructed a network of small fortresses, earth walls, and pale fences, compensating for the absence of natural borders. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Grand Defense Line was established to protect Russia from incursions by the Crimean Khanate. Similarly, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, multiple lines were erected to safeguard Russian settlements in Asia from attacks by Dzungar, Kazakh, and other nomadic groups. Comparable defensive lines were also

constructed in the Caucasus during the 19th century. These fortified lines not only served defensive purposes but also acted as outposts for Russia's systematic expansion into the Eurasian Steppe and the North Caucasus (Dyakova & Chepelkin, 1995). As Russia expanded its territories, these defense lines gradually shifted into colonized territories and eventually disappeared following the conquest of the targeted regions in the North Caucasus and Central Asia.

In the 20th century, the political regime of the Soviet Union perceived uncontrolled communication with the external world as a potential threat to national security. Soon after the establishment of the Bolshevist regime in 1917, the Soviet Russia's government implemented mandatory exit permits for individuals wishing to travel abroad. From 1925 onwards, travelers were required to possess special passports for international travel. Over time, exit visas were introduced, requiring individuals to undergo a comprehensive background check conducted by security services to obtain approval. As early as the 1920s, the Soviet Union reduced to a minimum both foreign visits and international travel by its citizens. Eventually, a surveillance system was established to monitor foreign visitors, who were obligated to register their address shortly after arrival and, in many cases, were prohibited from traveling beyond their destination areas.

During the first decades of its existence, the Soviet borders still remained penetrable, as they were often crossed by various groups such as Basmachi Islamic guerrillas, smugglers, and hundreds of thousands of Kazakh refugees who fled to China due to expropriation agricultural reforms and collectivization in the 1930s. Individual defectors also sought to cross the borders. In response to these challenges, the Soviet Union implemented trace-control strips in the 1930s to enhance the detection of unauthorized border crossings and improve the effectiveness of apprehending trespassers.

During the summer of 1941, the Soviet border protection system proved to be largely useless against such a well-prepared enemy as the German army. The German forces successfully penetrated the Soviet borderland defense line, which had been established after the Soviet Union annexed Eastern Poland in 1939. Due to mismanagement, both this line (informally referred to as the Molotov Line, named after Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov) and another line constructed prior to the annexation (named after Joseph Stalin) were not adequately equipped and staffed at the time of the German invasion. Consequently, they were swiftly breached by the German forces' overwhelming tank attacks.

It was only after World War II that the Soviet Union successfully established a comprehensive border control system, effectively curbing unauthorized border crossings. The introduction of advanced border security alarm systems in the 1950s played a significant role in achieving this. The sophisticated border protection system was further bolstered by close cooperation with neighboring states, including both Moscow's socialist allies and even non-socialist Finland. Remarkably, Finland cooperated closely with the Soviet Union in preventing illegal border crossings, actively handing over defectors attempting to escape to the West. Overall, the mature

Soviet border security framework aimed to deter unauthorized inward and outward border crossings by relying not only on its own system but also on cooperation with neighboring states.

Turbulent 1990s and the emergence of a new border policy

Stringent control over cross-border movement lost relevance with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet external borders, fortified with physical barriers and alarm systems, continued to serve as a deterrent against irregular cross-border movement, the Russian border security agenda underwent a significant transformation. First, the emergence of eight or nine (if the Kaliningrad exclave is counted separately) new borders with post-Soviet states presented new challenges, as these borders were inadequately protected. Second, there was a dramatic liberalization of cross-border movement for people and goods, placing immense pressure on underpaid, understaffed, and ill-equipped border guard and customs services to effectively manage these flows.

Additionally, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of challenging cross-border informal economic trends. One significant development was the exponential growth of opiate production in Afghanistan, with the "northern route" through Russia becoming a major conduit for the transportation of heroin to Europe. Similarly, new routes for people smuggling from developing Asian and African countries to the EU via Russia began to emerge during this period. China's remarkable economic growth resulted in a surplus of inexpensive goods, which posed a threat to Russia's light industry production. In response, high customs duties were imposed, but individuals sought to circumvent these duties by bribing customs officers, concealing goods in vehicles, or bypassing checkpoints. The weak and corrupt Border Guard and Customs services struggled to effectively combat highly profitable poaching activities in the Russia-Japanese borderland and the Russian zone of the Caspian Sea.

Lastly, during the early 1990s, as Russia began deregulating prices and transitioning to a market economy, unregulated exports of scrap metals and foodstuffs emerged as additional security concerns, prompting measures to restrict these exports at the border (Vares, 1999). However, by the mid-1990s, as Russia progressed further towards a market economy with deregulated prices and as the Border Guard Service managed to establish relatively effective control over Russia's borders with Estonia and Latvia, this issue was largely resolved.

Furthermore, Russian decision-makers were increasingly alarmed by emerging political trends. While territorial claims towards the Soviet Union (made by China, Japan, Norway, and the USA) had existed before, the number of these claims multiplied, and informal claims towards Russian territory gained more traction among Russian internal audiences, unlike during the strictly censored Soviet era. Additionally, violent conflicts erupted in nearby regions such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Tajikistan, posing significant challenges near Russia's borders. Moreover, the secession of

Lithuania resulted in the Kaliningrad province becoming geographically separated from mainland Russia. Although Lithuania allowed visa-free transit for Russian citizens through its territory, the accession of Lithuania to the EU could made Russians to obtain Schengen visas for travel between the two parts of Russia. This issue was resolved in 2002 when the EU and Russia reached an agreement on facilitated transit to and from the Kaliningrad province (European Commission, 2002).

These developments and challenges caused significant concern among Russian decision-makers, leading to the securitization of these issues. Security concerns, that were often accompanied by conspiracy theorizing, were quickly accommodated within the framework of classical geopolitics, which gained popularity among military and security officers in the 1990s, filling the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of Communism. Geopolitical ideas found resonance among high-ranking officers of the Border Guard Service, which became an independent agency in 1993 after being separated from the powerful security ministry.

After Vladimir Putin, a former security service's officer, became a president in 2000, the internal balance of power shifted towards the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the notorious Committee for State Security (KGB). In 2003, the Federal Border Guard Service was reintegrated into the FSB, that led to various consequences, such as the adoption of the FSB's style and practices by border guards, as well as an increase in the Border Guard Service's ability to advocate for certain interests within the government behind closed doors. Following the transfer, border guards transitioned from their traditional green uniform to the black uniform of the FSB. Since 2007, the traditional Soviet practice of conscripts serving as border guards was discontinued, and only contract officers were hired. From personal experience, the author can attest that the Border Guard Service adopted a much more closed approach to communication with the media and researchers, demonstrating a significant shift in their public relations style.

In 2006, supported by the FSB, border guards were able to push forward a highly controversial regulation aimed at "thickening" Russia's borders. This involved the establishment of extensive border security zones, which could range from several dozen to several hundred kilometers wide, as opposed to the previous 5-10-kilometer zones. This decision was justified by the need to create buffer zones that would deter the activities of terrorists, drug dealers, smugglers, poachers, and illegal immigrants. To access these zones for purposes other than quick transit to or from a neighboring state, non-residents of the respective border zone, including Russian citizens, were required to submit an application for a visa-like special permit. The processing of these permits could take up to one month. Additionally, the FSB was granted the authority to authorize economic activities within the border security zone, which resulted in a significant weakening of civic oversight over abuses of power in these vast territories. The implementation of these new regulations posed serious obstacles to maintaining social and economic connections between the borderland territories and the rest of the country. In response to numerous protests in border regions, the FSB issued a new order in 2007 that scaled down the typical width of border security zones to just a dozen kilometers (Golunov, 2012).

The Customs Service, which primarily concentrated on inspections at checkpoints, also held significant influence as it contributed more than half of the national budget during certain periods. The Customs Service managed to keep its autonomous status for some time, resisting to attempts to subordinate it to the Ministry of Finance until 2016. It could be argued that this subordination somewhat desecuritized the Customs Service's mission while emphasizing its fiscal role even further.

Evolution of Russia's border security concept

The official Soviet vision of border security regarded borders primarily as barriers to protect a besieged fortress of the Soviet State. According to this perspective, strict control over cross-border movement in both directions was deemed essential, with thorough screenings conducted to determine individuals' political loyalty. Post-World War II, the prevalent threats to Soviet border security, as portrayed in officially endorsed works of art like movies and novels, often revolved around foreign spies attempting to illegally cross the Soviet border and smugglers who exploited their travel permits to enter or exit the country.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian border security agenda underwent a significant liberalization and expansion. While strict control over legitimate cross-border movements was no longer seen as feasible, the perceived challenges faced by border security multiplied. In the 1990s, this resulted in conceptual confusion, as the official documents and conceptual research conducted by the Border Guard Service's think tank, the Border Guard Service's Academy, encompassed too wide and ambiguous range of border security challenges.

The first Border Policy Strategy, approved by the first Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 1996 (President of Russia, 1996), focused on the border space, which encompassed Russia's national border, checkpoints, borderland territory (although the concept was not clearly defined), airspace, water bodies, territorial waters, continental shelf, and exclusive economic zone. The strategy identified various threats to Russia's national security within this border space, including territorial claims, unresolved delimitation and demarcation issues, ethnic and regional separatism, religious conflicts, economic and demographic expansion against Russia, misappropriation of national resources, large-scale capital flight and export of strategic raw materials, social instability, cross-border organized crime and terrorism, and transborder natural and technological disasters.

Since border guard and customs services alone could not effectively address these complex challenges, the strategy emphasized the need for a collaborative approach involving a wide range of federal and local authorities, NGOs, and individuals as those who should be responsible for managing these border-related issues. Still, the strategy fell short in providing clear guidance on the specific issues to be prioritized and the allocation of responsibilities among the various stakeholders for addressing perceived security threats. The inclination to securitize numerous issues and assign them to

border control agencies (in other words to borderize security issues) can be attributed not only to securitized geopolitical thinking but also to the desire to obtain greater authority and resources for addressing these multifaceted challenges.

Some conceptual essays by researchers of the Border Guard Service's Academy, that were largely based on the mentioned strategy and on national security strategies, proceeded with multiplying border security threats and security-related interests sometimes up to several dozens. These interests were categorized as national, societal, and individual. However, a significant portion of the societal and individual interests appeared contrived and overly focused on the state's perspective. Examples included preventing the formation of coalitions hostile to Russia, safeguarding against foreign economic expansion, promoting and consolidating Russia's economic position globally through regional cooperation, and fostering national consensus on economic development in border regions and the country as a whole (Grishin et al., 2001, pp. 17, 55-56, 62). Some proposed measures to address these threats seemed not only isolationist but also financially burdensome, making them unrealistic, particularly during the severe economic crisis Russia faced in the 1990s. For instance, some authors argued that to avoid dangerous dependence on neighboring states, Russian border regions should prioritize economic self-sufficiency or seek support from the central government, rather than relying on cross-border cooperation (Kulakov, 2000, p. 335).

Some of the issues categorized as border security threats actually could not be effectively addressed at the border itself. One notable example was the significant increase in the number of Chinese visitors to Russian regions bordering China. This demographic expansion was viewed as a potential threat by many scholars and the public and often attributed to weakened border control. However, in reality, the majority of Chinese visitors entered Russia legally as short-term visitors (Alexseev, 2003), and the annual number of apprehensions of illegal Chinese border crossers was relatively low (approximately 500 cases per year, Golunov, 2012). Thus, there was no compelling reason to consider this phenomenon as a threat that required intensified border protection.

The 1996 Russian Border Policy Strategy was updated in 2018 (President of Russia, 2018), during a period of crisis in Russia's relations with Ukraine and the West. The revised strategy attempted to present a more clear, focused, and realistic list of border-related security threats. At the same time, the strategy was still informed by geopolitical concerns. The updated list of border security threats included, among other things, territorial claims against Russia, disputes over Russia's Arctic and Far Eastern strategic resources involving foreign states and transnational corporations (that could imply disputes over the Arctic shelf and the Russia-U.S. maritime boundary), increased economic influence of foreign states in certain depressed borderland areas, foreign intelligence activities involving espionage and subversion, separatism, infiltration of terrorists and extremists, various forms of cross-border crimes, and natural and technological disasters.

In contrast to the 1996 strategy, the new version explicitly embraced a statist approach and was renamed as the "State Border Strategy", solely recognizing federal and regional authorities as key actors. However, like its predecessor, the new strategy

still lacked a clear definition for the concept of "borderland territory", despite its repeated mention.

The issue of new borders: security vs. integration

As mentioned earlier, the disintegration of the Soviet Union had profound and unprecedented consequences for Russian border security, which had to be addressed in the midst of a severe and prolonged economic crisis. Russia faced the loss of control over a significant portion of the Soviet land border and eventually had to fully or partially withdraw its border guards from the former Soviet Union republics (FSU states).

Out of Russia's total land, lake, and river borders spanning 22 000 kilometers, approximately 13 000 kilometers constituted "new" borders with the FSU states. This included the 7 500-kilometer border with Kazakhstan, which now holds the distinction of being the longest uninterrupted land border in the world. The Russia-Kazakhstan border alone accounts for approximately 60 % of the total length of Russia's new borders, surpassing the combined length of Russia's borders with Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus region, which were considered particularly problematic in the 1990s due to the armed conflict in Chechnya.

Initially, Russia's new borders lacked adequate infrastructure not only for monitoring the areas between checkpoints but even for inspecting the traffic passing through the checkpoints. It is not surprising that the flows of heroin, smuggled goods, and human trafficking entered Russia predominantly via these "new" borders, which were the most vulnerable.

In light of these challenges, Russia was confronted with a dilemma between prioritizing unilateral efforts to safeguard its borders or to pursuing cooperation with FSU states. Let us examine these two options in greater detail.

The "fencing-off" option

Some Russian officials and public factions argued that, given the severity of threats, Russia had no alternative but to bolster its new borders, especially with Kazakhstan, making them impervious to criminal activities. In the early 1990s, such views weren't widely accepted, as citizens of post-Soviet states were still seen as "our people", maintaining strong economic, social, and cultural ties with Russia. However, over time, a gradual process of othering residents of Asian post-Soviet states progressed in Russia. By the late 1990s, the idea of separation appeared more feasible than it had been immediately after the Soviet Union's dissolution.

Yet, Russian decision-makers' propensity towards the "fencing-off" option varied, influenced by political relations with neighboring countries and the perceived

threat level. For instance, despite concerns about Belarusian border management's effectiveness and accusations of the Belarusian leadership's involvement in large-scale smuggling between the EU and Russia (a topic to be further discussed later), Russia decided to maintain an open border with Belarus. Although the Baltic states and Ukraine showed no desire for reintegration with Russia during the 1990s and 2000s, Russian decision-makers didn't perceive urgent border security issues warranting the immediate fortification of these borders.

Contrarily, the cross-border challenges that emerged in the Caucasus proved to be severe. The escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in 1992-1993 led to a humanitarian crisis, ultimately transforming the de facto state of Abkhazia into a hub for informal cross-border economic activities, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling (Kukhianidze et al., 2004). The armed conflict in Chechnya, which began in 1994 and persisted until the late 2000s, had a significant cross-border dimension. For a while, Chechen guerrillas used Azerbaijani and Georgian territories for supplies, volunteers, and as a retreat during targeted Russian offensive operations. In the early 2000s, when the Russian government secured funding for a comprehensive program to fortify the new Russian borders, the Caucasian borders emerged as the top priority. The planned fortification efforts in this region were mostly completed by 2008 (Kulikov, 2007).

Regarding the Russia-Kazakhstan border, no regular border guard units were stationed there until the late 1990s. Yet, a network of road police posts was set up near the border in 1992, and underequipped customs checkpoints were established in 1993. For a while, Russia and Kazakhstan's governments negotiated the abolishment of these customs checkpoints, nearly reaching an agreement in 1995. However, this agreement was revoked by the Russian side (Yussin, 1995), presumably due to dissatisfaction with Kazakhstan's efforts to curb consumer goods smuggling from China.

After failing to reach an agreement with Kazakhstan on shared border security arrangements, Russia proceeded to establish border control. The deployment of border guards at the border with Kazakhstan was officially approved in 1997 and finally initiated in 1999-2000.

The resources initially allocated for combating intensive illicit flows through the vast border appeared insufficient for the task. The government made it clear that the border would not be patrolled in the Soviet-style manner, relying on numerous conscripts and comprehensive stationary alarm systems. Instead, the approach was to be more economical, involving a relatively small number of underpaid contract officers (typically earning around $100 a month) equipped with patrol vehicles. Initially, funding for managing the Russia-Kazakhstan border was minimal, undermining the effectiveness of border control, fostering corruption, and exacerbating embezzlement issues (Golunov, 2008). Several regional branches, established in the late 1990s to oversee the Russia-Kazakhstan border and restructured in the mid-2000s when the Border Guard Service was incorporated into the FSB, struggled with coordination. Only in the second half of the 2000s (especially from 2008 onward), after the government program aimed at fortifying Russia's Caucasian borders was completed, another

program to strengthen the border with Kazakhstan was launched (Kulikov, 2007). Russian border guards and customs officers started receiving modern equipment, including infrared and seismic sensors, unmanned aircraft, thermal cameras, and scanning equipment.

The effectiveness of border and customs control in combating the most severe threat—Afghan heroin trafficking—was questionable. Despite the seizures of several hundred kilograms of heroin each year by border guards and customs officers (RIA Novosti, 2009), the estimated volume of heroin primarily trafficked through the Russia-Kazakhstan border—considered the easiest and most logical route to Russia—amounted to several tens of thousands of tons annually. Based on my calculations—which factor in the average doses consumed by heroin addicts, the estimated number of addicts in Russia, and the annual volumes of heroin seizures in the country—it appears that only around 2 % of the heroin smuggled into Russia via the Russia-Kazakhstan border was intercepted by border guards and customs officers during the 2000s. An event analysis of heroin seizures at the Russia-Kazakhstan border indicates that the majority of heroin was trafficked through checkpoints rather than over the "green" border, or the land border between checkpoints. Additionally, I argue that no more than 1 % of Central Asian immigrants entering Russia could have been involved in drug trafficking (Golunov, 2008).

Although the estimated value of seized Chinese goods noticeably decreased in the 2000s (TKS, 2008), this may simply reflect a shift in smuggling routes, possibly involving corrupt officials. The estimated value of Chinese goods seized in the Russian Far East in 2005 after uncovering such a route, was approximately 1.4 times greater than the total value of smuggled Chinese goods intercepted at the Russia-Kazakhstan borders from 1997 to 2004 (Golunov, 2008).

The perceived threat of Central Asian immigration, presumed to contribute to a "Muslim demographic expansion" (Sokolov-Mitrich, 2001), take jobs from locals, and introduce numerous drug traffickers, terrorists, and other criminals, led some officials and sections of the public to call for the fortification of the Russia-Kazakhstan border and the implementation of a visa regime for Central Asian nationals. However, these perceptions were founded on misguided assumptions. The total Central Asian population was several times smaller than Russia's, and the majority of Central Asian visitors were not involved in drug trafficking. Moreover, most Central Asian visitors entered Russia legally, with visa-free access. Misinterpretations arose from the term "illegal immigrant", which often implied unlawful entry into Russia. In reality, for Central Asian nationals, the term usually referred to unauthorized employment (often due to complex and confusing foreign employment regulations) or overstaying the permitted visa-free term in Russia.

The perceived connection between terrorism and Russia-Kazakhstan border security was largely misleading. The roots of Russian terrorism were predominantly domestic, namely from the North Caucasus, and identifying individual terrorists within the yearly multi-million influx of visa-free FSU states' citizens into Russia was almost an impossible task.

Despite these misperceptions and the limited efficacy of Russia-Kazakhstan border control, the proposal to transform this border into a rigid barrier gained popularity among high-ranking Russian officials in the 2000s. In 2001, Ramil Mullayanov, head of the South-Eastern Regional Branch of the Border Guard Service, not only suggested introducing a visa regime with Kazakhstan but also forming a borderland "Orthodox belt' to counter the "advance of Islam from the South" (Sokolov-Mitrich, 2001). The concept of fortifying the border with Kazakhstan was also supported by governors of border provinces, who feared an escalating threat of drug trafficking and held alarmist views of Central Asian immigration (Golunov, 2008).

Although Russia's borders with Georgia and Azerbaijan were successfully fortified, rendering the green border relatively impervious to potential trespassers, the task of fortifying the longer and more permeable Russia-Kazakhstan border proved significantly more challenging. Apart from its questionable feasibility, the idea faced opposition for some reasons, which will be discussed further below.

The integration option

While opting for the "fencing-off" approach might provide a sense of enhanced protection against the perceived threats mentioned above, selecting the integration option could foster closer cooperation with neighboring states, without causing alienation. In certain instances, neighboring countries could be encouraged to pool resources for the protection of the external borders of an integration union through collaborative efforts. While the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan were hesitant to reintegrate with Russia to avoid dependency, Belarus and Kazakhstan appeared more receptive to integration and even frequently proposed initiatives themselves.

The efforts towards Russia-Belarus integration were less marred by security concerns and disagreements over border control and customs regime than Russia-Kazakhstan integration efforts. Indeed, Belarusian territory was often used for informal cross-border operations between Russia and future EU member states. These activities included unauthorized imports of consumer goods to Russia, unauthorized exports of oil products and (in the early 1990s) scrap metals from Russia, as well as drug trafficking and human smuggling via Russia heading westwards. Some Russian officials and observers frequently argued that the Belarusian authorities allegedly welcomed some of these informal activities, profiting from them (see Charter97, 2017).

Nevertheless, these issues did not serve as a justification for strengthening the Russia-Belarus border. Despite both Russia and Belarus establishing customs checkpoints in 1993, stationary customs control was abolished by the bilateral customs union agreement in 1995. In the same year, top Russian and Belarusian officials participated in a symbolic border theater performance, publicly removing a border pillar and an autobarrier specifically installed for this event (Belnovosti, 2018).

For many ordinary Russians and Belarusians, these integration efforts really meant the abolition of border and customs controls. However, frequent intergovernmental

disputes and conflicts emerged concerning the transit and re-export of third-party goods, and differences between Russian and Belarusian border controls, immigration, and customs regimes. Officials from both Russia and Belarus periodically threatened to reinstate border and customs controls, and in some instances, at least one of the two states indeed made demonstrative steps in this direction (see, for example: TASS, 2014). Nevertheless, despite the authoritarian regimes in Moscow and Minsk not fully becoming reliable partners in the domain of border security, the border between them has remained nearly transparent for ordinary citizens. The open Russia-Belarus border has consistently been a top priority in Russia-Belarus integration, touted by both leaderships as one of their key foreign policy achievements.

The removal of border barriers between Russia and Kazakhstan turned out to be more challenging due to Moscow's economic and security concerns. Yet, as early as the late 1990s and early 2000s, some Russian officials were not happy with heightened border and customs controls. They argued that Russia should instead focus on collaborative efforts to control Kazakhstan's southern post-Soviet borders, rather than isolating itself from one of its closest political partners (see, for example: Rogozin, 2003). This stance could be further supported by the fact that the 7 500-kilometer Russia-Kazakhstan border alone was about 1.8 times longer than Kazakhstan's southern borders with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan combined.

After complex negotiations concerning issues, such as managing the control over imported Chinese goods and cooperation between customs and border guard services, Kazakhstan and Russia agreed to abolish customs control at their shared border within the framework of the Eurasian Customs Union, established by the two states along with Belarus in 2007. The customs control at the Russia-Kazakhstan border was abolished in 2011, which effectively signified Russia's willingness to partially compromise its concerns about massive heroin trafficking from Afghanistan in favor of integration. However, border guard control remained in place, and no agreement was reached regarding the full-scale joint protection of Kazakhstan's external border. Therefore, it can be argued that for Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union had a more profound impact on customs control than on immigration control by border guards.

Since 2014, Russia entered a "sanction war" with EU member states and other Western countries, implementing an embargo on their foodstuffs. Following this, the territories of Kazakhstan, and particularly Belarus, started being used by informal entrepreneurs to transport these goods into Russian territory. Some observers suggested that Alexander Lukashenka's regime profited from these informal activities and in some cases facilitated them (Charter97, 2017). As a result, Russia's border security agenda expanded to include preventing the informal imports of goods that were previously brought into Russia legally. This new issue once again presented a dilemma between Russia's specific security interests and its Eurasian integration efforts. Russia chose to respond by bypassing the regulations of the Customs Union, introducing a form of quasi-customs control conducted by mobile checkpoints of sanitary and transportation inspections (see, for example: Karpyuk, 2014). This practice was met with negativity in both Belarus and Kazakhstan, as it was perceived as a move that questioned the foundations of Eurasian integration.

In 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, halting the massive outflow of specific consumer goods from Russia became a major border security issue for the first time since the early 1990s. In early March, to address the temporary deficit of medical masks, sanitizers, and other medical supplies, Russia banned their export, even to Customs Union countries. Border guards and customs services were tasked with preventing attempts to illegally export these items from Russia. After managing to overcome the deficit, these export restrictions were lifted in May 2020 (Golunov & Smirnova, 2022).

Until at least October 2022, the Russia-Belarus border was utilized as an exit point by those Russians and Belarusians who were restricted from leaving their countries due to various reasons, such as debts, political persecution, pandemic restrictions, and mobilization. The information exchange between Russian and Belarusian border guards regarding individuals ineligible for exit was weak. As the Russia-Belarus border was considered in Russian legislation not as a proper international border but more akin to an internal one, trying to cross it illegally presented a low-risk challenge for Russian citizens, who at most could be fined a small sum and sent back. It is unsurprising then that during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when Russia's land borders were closed for ordinary travel abroad, a low-risk business assisting illegal border crossings flourished in the Russia-Belarus borderland (see, for example: Raspopova, 2020).

In September-October 2022, the Russia-Belarus border was utilized as an escape route by conscripts attempting to avoid mobilization amid the Russia-Ukraine war. However, at some point, information cooperation was established between Russian and Belarusian border guards, leading Belarusian border guards to systematically deny boarding to those Russian conscripts attempting to flee to a third country via Minsk International Airport.[1]

The cases of Belarus and Kazakhstan demonstrate that Russia was willing to compromise its security concerns in favor of integration with its priority political partners, despite not fully trusting the quality of their border and customs controls. However, integration did not eliminate certain divergent border-related interests. As a result, conflicts regarding immigration and customs regimes continued to arise periodically, at times undermining the respective integration efforts.

From defensive to offensive border security

The concept of Russian border security began to expand as early as the 1990s, with the popular idea that Russia should not rely solely on its new national borders but also on the external borders of other post-Soviet states. Initially, this concept primarily referred to aiding post-Soviet states in protecting the former external borders of the Soviet Union. This was the cornerstone of the "Two Borders Doctrine", adopted by the

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[1] The information from "Pogranichny kontrol" (Border Control) Russian Telegram channel that connects evidence from Russian border crossers.

Russian Border Guard Service in the early 1990s (see Tymko, 1996). The 1996 Russian Border Policy Strategy also applied to the external borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (President of Russia, 1996). However, this vision became outdated after Russia withdrew most of its border guard troops from these borders in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the context of Eurasianist geopolitics, which also emerged in the 1990s, the externalization of Russian border security was viewed in a more expansionist manner. In alignment with the concept of "geopolitical borders", introduced by notorious far-right philosopher Alexander Dugin (Dugin, 1997), Russia should defend itself not necessarily at the external borders of the FSU but at those post-Soviet borders that were deemed suitable for "geopolitical defense". These views were grounded in strong anti-Western sentiment, and the eastward expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was perceived as one of the main geopolitical threats to Russia, along with the perceived northward expansion of radical Islamism. Establishing "geopolitical borders" would provide Russia with the impetus to be assertive and offensive, applying pressure to those post-Soviet states resistant to the idea.

After Vladimir Putin came to power, his views gradually evolved in a similar direction. During the 2000s, political tensions between Russia and Georgia escalated, as Georgia moved towards joining NATO and forcefully reintegrating its two secessionist territories, the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In August 2008, Russia intervened in the armed conflicts between Georgia and these de facto states, officially recognizing their independence, and protecting them with military force, thereby effectively taking control over their borders with Georgia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia delegated part of their de facto sovereignty to Russia, including control over their de facto borders with Georgia: South Ossetia welcomed both Russian border guards and customs officers, while Abkhazia allowed only Russian border guards and resisted ceding control over its customs borders to Russia. As a result, Russia partially incorporated the territories of these two de facto states, often described as "anarchical badlands" by some politicians and scholars (see Caspersen, 2012), into its border security perimeter. This move required Russia to invest additional resources in border control infrastructure and to recruit extra personnel to patrol over 500 kilometers of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's borders with Georgia. Cross-border movement through these borders is limited and tightly regulated. The immigration control at Russia's de facto borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia has not been abolished, which poses some hurdles for the residents of these two de facto states, although the majority of Abkhazians and South Ossetians hold Russian citizenship.

In 2014, Moscow's frustration over the perceived threat of NATO and EU geopolitical expansion in Ukraine, led to Russia's annexation of Crimea and substantial support for the irredentist movement in Donbas. This resulted in the establishment of two new post-Soviet de facto states—the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR)—. The borders of these two de facto states with Ukraine were heavily militarized and controlled by the DPR and LPR militias, which received military support from Russia. Yet, the de facto borders of Russia with DPR and LPR remained thoroughly

patrolled by Russian border guard and customs services. This was largely due to high levels of crime and pervasive shadow economy in the two republics, which included trade in firearms (see, for example, Buscemi et al., 2018).

Russia's involvement in the Georgia's conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the subsequent takeover of Crimea and support of separatist movement in Donbas gave many a reason to proclaim the return of "traditional geopolitics" (see, for example, Mead, 2014), including arbitrary border-making by dominant powers according to their "vital geopolitical interests" (determined by national security considerations) and by delimitation of spheres of influence by great powers. Some scholars and journalists (see, for example, Añorve Añorve, 2010; Marshall, 2016) proceed the assumption that Russia's response was primarily driven by strategic interests to prevent NATO from establishing a foothold near Russia's core territory, which is poorly defensible due to its plain terrain and lack of natural obstacles. These interests have been framed by such authors as long-term, rational, and dictated by objective geopolitical realities rather than ideological preferences or the personal interests of those in power. The countries that happen to lie in the path of a great power's expansion are effectively not considered by those authors as autonomous actors, whose interests deserve to be taken into account.

Tim Marshall's book *Prisoners of Geography* (Marshall, 2016), which has gained considerable popularity, frames historical Russian expansion, even expansion into the vast and sparsely populated Arctic region and Siberia, as a supposedly highly consistent and centralized long-term strategy to defend geographically vulnerable Russian core territory from potential adversaries. The current Russian geopolitical moves, as the author believes, reflect a strategic vision extending for a century ahead. It is important that Marshall's work is not academic but journalistic, does not cite scholarly research, largely ignores modern criticisms of classical geopolitics, and contains serious shortcomings and errors. Apart from its pronounced geographical determinism, the book overestimates the strategic consistency of Russian expansion and overemphasizes defensive motives behind it. Among other things, Marshall attributes the 16th-century Russian advance into the Caucasus under Tsar Ivan IV to the goal of protecting Russia against the Mongol Golden Horde, which, in fact, never controlled the South Caucasus and Iran (both were under the control of the Iranian Safavid dynasty at that time), and which had already ceased to exist long before the Ivan IV's reign. Also, when discussing the defense vulnerabilities of the Russian plain, Marshall surprisingly pays almost no attention of the nuclear factor, only mentioning it just twice marginally, as if Russia's nuclear retaliation capability plays no significant role in deterring potential aggressors.

In contrast, Gerard Toal's book "Near Abroad" (Toal, 2017) is academic and much more nuanced. His conceptual framework accommodates not only a "geopolitical field" (the post-Soviet space as a theater of geopolitical competition) and specific geopolitical conditions, but also geopolitical cultures and discourses that establish sets of geopolitical views, forming the basis for divergent strategies (for instance, pro-Western and imperial expansionist). Contrary to the framing of geopolitics as rational and strategic, Toal posits that it is highly influenced by strong emotions (such

as love, hope, pride, outrage, contempt, and hate) and short-term political factors and considerations alongside long-term ones. In line with Toal's framework, the expansionist Russian border policy can be viewed as a complex phenomenon, shaped not only by the realities of the "geopolitical field" but also by an imperial geopolitical culture (which began to replace the Soviet internationalist ideology in the 1990s among Russian military and security services officers), short-term considerations (such as the political elites' desire to maintain power and boost domestic popularity, and be remembered as the restorer of the USSR), and a range of intense emotions, such as resentment and frustration triggered by the collapse of the USSR.

Anyway, Russian control over Crimea and de facto control over the DPR and LPR did not satisfy those officials who advocated for westward expansion of Russian geopolitical borders. These officials feared that if Ukraine is allowed to join NATO, its territory could be used to surround Russia with a hostile military alliance or even to launch a decapitating strike, exploiting the proximity of Ukrainian territory to Moscow ("Putin listed the consequences", 2021). The latter assumption actually implies that a successful strike on Moscow ostensibly could incapacitate Russia's retaliatory nuclear strike capability, including the functionality of the Russian nuclear triad.

In February 2022, Russia launched an attack on Ukraine with the aim of either formally or informally bringing a large part, if not all, of Ukrainian territory under its control. Almost simultaneously, the DPR and LPR were incorporated into Russia. In September 2022, Russia also claimed incorporation of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia provinces, which included not only territories under the control of Russian troops at that time, but also areas under effective Ukrainian control. Although these territories were declared a part of the Russian Federation, only customs control at Russia's borders with the DPR and LPR was removed, while immigration control by border guards was maintained.

Overall, Russian policies for securing its national and imagined geopolitical borders appear to be conflicting. In cases where Russia managed to exert control over territories beyond its internationally recognized borders, these borders continued to be patrolled by border guards. This suggests that the incorporated territories are not trusted to the extent that would permit their full inclusion in Russia's border security space.

Beyond the statist perspective: Russian border security in eyes of border crossers

The preceding sections illustrate that Russian border security is overwhelmingly seen from a statist perspective, with scant attention paid to the interests of borderlanders and border crossers. For the sake of better balance, I would like to briefly outline the viewpoint of border crossers as an alternative to the purely statist perspective on Russian border security.

While the Soviet border security system was markedly rigid towards cross-border mobility, the post-Soviet border security regime yielded mixed effects. For Russia's "old" borders (those that coincided with Soviet external borders), there was a significant move towards the liberalization of cross-border movement in both directions. This included a gradual modernization of checkpoints and related infrastructure, and a progressive easing of border control and customs clearance procedures (such as on-the-move control in trains, e-visas for citizens of some countries, electronic customs declarations, etcetera). However, even the renovated infrastructures proved inadequate to handle the large number of travelers and vehicles within a short time frame. Numerous instances were recorded where the waiting time in queues near checkpoints lasted up to several days (Golunov, 2012). In contrast, for travelers across Russia's "new" borders, the new border security regime (imposed not solely by Russia but also by the respective neighboring states) led to deteriorating conditions. Tens of millions of people, who previously moved freely between Soviet republics without noticing a border, were now required to waste a lot of time and endure the inconveniences associated with travel through distant checkpoints, waiting in queues, producing the correct documentation, and enduring stressful inspections.

Driven by significant cross-border price differences, many people engaged in cross-border trade, even when it was deemed illegal or undesirable by governments. While some individuals partook in heavily punishable activities such as drug trafficking, most informal cross-border traders chose to engage in relatively low-risk games with border guards and customs officers, either trying to circumvent restrictions or engaging in low-punishable activities. For instance, during the 2000s and 2010s, informal gasoline traders across the EU-Russia border would make multiple trips in cars with enlarged tanks, as petrol could only be brought in gas tanks only. Some informal cigarette traders would distribute packs among bus passengers to bypass restrictions, while others smuggled cigarettes in worn-out cars (bought for cheap exactly for this purpose), given that confiscation of the vehicle was a typical punishment for tobacco smuggling (Golunov, 2017).

For many foreign citizens, Russian border control has evolved into a tool of marginalization or exclusion, further reinforced by the burdensome and outdated immigration surveillance system. Up until 2006, visitors from most foreign countries were required to register with the Russian police within three working days of their arrival, a period that was later extended to seven working days. However, in many cases, Russia simply implemented a principle of reciprocity, that does not apply mainly for citizens of some poorest Asian and African states (who are required to obtain Russian visas). Nationals of EU member states, the USA, Japan, and some other countries were required to obtain Russian visas under conditions similar to those faced by Russian citizens traveling to these countries. Trying to attract tourists and boost its soft power, Russia, since the late 2010s, has begun to deviate from the reciprocity principle, moving towards the introduction of e-visas for citizens of 52 countries, including EU member states and Japan. However, the full-scale roll-out of e-visas was initially delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and later by the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022.

Despite the mentioned security concerns, Russia has upheld a visa-free regime with all Central Asian states apart from Turkmenistan, where it has merely applied the principle of reciprocity. As a result, Russia hosts millions of Central Asian visitors annually. However, those migrant workers who fail to meet the stringent requirements of Russian immigration and labor laws could face exclusion, more specifically to be banned from entering Russia for five years or more. The annual number of foreigners banned from entering Russia fluctuates between 100 000 and 150 000 (Sputnik Tajikistan, 2022). As it was mentioned before, it was not a border regime but rather legalization regulations that turned many foreign workers into illegal immigrants.

As the Russian political regime increasingly turned towards authoritarianism, it began to systematically exclude unwanted foreigners, including critical politicians, journalists, and activists. These individuals were typically denied entry for extended periods, often for ten years or more. Unwanted persons usually received no prior warning and were simply detained at the border before being deported.

From February 2020 to 2021, Russia utilized immigration and sanitary controls at its borders in an effort to initially prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from spreading into the country and later to restrict the movement of travelers (Golunov & Smirnova, 2022). While Russian citizens returning from foreign travel underwent "purification rites" such as testing and quarantine to ensure they were not carriers of the virus, most foreigners were temporarily excluded, i. e., not allowed to enter Russia until travel restrictions were eased. However, exceptions were made for certain categories, including close relatives, transport personnel, certain highly qualified specialists, and residents of de facto states bordering Russia. Starting from the latter half of the 2020s, Russia began to lift entrance restrictions for citizens of some foreign states on a reciprocal basis.

The pandemic bordered order trapped in the Russian territory those numerous Central Asian labor migrants who lost their jobs and sought to return home. This situation arose because Russian border guards denied exit to those migrants, as neighboring states, such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, refused their entry via land borders. Deprived of money, many returning migrants from Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan opted to wait near respective Russia's land borders, staying up to a month in temporary camps with difficult living conditions. The desperation of these returning migrants occasionally resulted in violent clashes with Russian police forces near the Russia-Azerbaijan border and the Russia-Kazakhstan border in summer of 2020 (Poryvaeva & Tadtaev, 2020). Although governments periodically organized evacuation runs by train and bus, these measures did not fully meet the needs of those waiting. The situation improved in the autumn of 2020 when Russia lifted its lockdown, creating more job opportunities for Central Asian migrants.

While some foreign nationals might be barred from entering Russia, certain Russian citizens, and even foreign nationals, can encounter the converse problem of seclusion. During the Soviet era, seclusion was a crucial function of border security, and the vast majority of Soviet citizens were forbidden from traveling abroad. However, in the post-

Soviet period, the right to freely leave Russia was granted to citizens by Article 27 of the 1996 Constitution. Even after Vladimir Putin came to power, the new authoritarian regime did not impose strict exit restrictions. Many observers argue that this can be attributed to the regime's strategy of encouraging dissenters to emigrate rather than pushing them into a corner (see Golunov & Smirnova, 2022).

Nonetheless, in certain cases, Russian borders were rendered seclusive for individuals who attempted to leave Russia either intentionally or unintentionally. Among those prevented from leaving Russia freely were individuals with access to state secrets, conscripts and mobilized individuals, suspects, accused persons, convicts, FSB officers, bankrupts, and debtors. In 2007, the government introduced a regulation that resulted in the seclusion of a significant number of debtors by denying exit to those with legally recognized debts of an unspecified amount. Often, such individuals were not even informed about their debts, and payment of the debt at the border was not possible, resulting in extended delays before the restriction could be lifted. As of May 2020, the list of debtors ineligible to exit Russia already included 3.5 million individuals (Kulikov, 2020). Eventually, this restriction was softened: an online service for checking if a person was on the list was introduced, a minimal debt amount triggering restrictions was established, and by 2022, the time between paying a debt and lifting exit restrictions was minimized (Kulikov, 2022).

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's land borders were closed to most of its citizens. Although this measure was presented as a temporary precaution, some observers expressed concern that the authoritarian regime might exploit the pandemic as a pretext to establish restrictions that could eventually become permanent. The idea of keeping Russian borders closed even after the pandemic was supported by some business people in the domestic tourism industry (Fontanka, 2020). However, it quickly became evident that Russia's internal tourism infrastructure was ill-equipped to accommodate an influx of domestic tourists. Eventually, the Russian government reopened its land borders by 2022.

After Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, numerous dissenters hurriedly left the country, fearing that cross-border travel can be restricted. These fears had not entirely materialized yet, as the regime preferred active dissenters emigrate rather than resist. Still, many dissenters hastily left the country in the spring of 2022, though many had to return after their funds depleted. Started from March 2022, some individuals trying to exit or re-enter Russia reported being interrogated about their political loyalty by airport border security officers who also asked them to unlock their smartphones grant access to the contents of their social networks and messengers. While these practices are formally illegal, the probability of winning a lawsuit against a security officer remains quite low given the current Russian political regime. Also, if an outbound passenger tries to resist, the likelihood of missing their flight increases considerably. Therefore, passengers usually chose compliance to escape the liminal space of rightlessness they found themselves in.

The partial mobilization in September 2022 presented a more tangible threat to Russian men, prompting hundreds of thousands to flee the country to avoid being

sent to the frontline. The sudden wave of refugees overwhelmed major airports and paralyzed land checkpoints at the Russia-Georgia and Russia-Kazakhstan borders. Many people endured days-long waits in queues, suffering from hypothermia, food scarcity, dehydration, and occasional altercations with those attempting to bypass the line (see for example: Lomsadze, 2022). Some who reached the checkpoints found themselves blacklisted and denied exit by their military conscription offices. Once the mobilization campaign slowed down, exit control resumed its normal operation, routinely permitting almost everyone to exit, including those previously denied.

However, the Russian government proceeded with developing a more selective and sophisticated "electronic curtain" for conscripts and dissenters. By 2023, border guards gained full access to the databases of military recruitment centers, and in April, a law was enacted that automatically restricted exit for individuals sought by these recruitment centers (Maynes, 2023). In May 2023, another law was adopted that allowed the temporary confiscation of passports for traveling abroad, applying not only to conscripts but also to those whose passport's authenticity aroused suspicion on vague grounds (Russian Life, 2023). The expanding range of exclusionary practices, utilized as tools for mobilization and political repression, could potentially compel many of those deprived of the opportunity to freely leave the country to seek illegal escape either by crossing borders outside designated checkpoints or by attempting to bribe officers. This practice could provoke reintroducing a comprehensive dimension of seclusion to Russian border security, unseen since the Soviet era.

Conclusion

After the USSR's collapse, Russia faced some the challenges and dilemmas of transforming its traditionally isolationist border policy.

First, Russia had to navigate between safeguarding against unwanted cross-border flows and boosting legitimate cross-border movement. Russia has made significant steps in boosting its capacity to process cross-border flows, adopting contemporary methods such as collaborative control with border services of adjacent countries, e-declarations, and e-visas. However, Russia's border security agenda is characterized by a high degree of securitization, particularly concerning political conflicts with other states and immigration issues.

Not surprisingly, immigration and customs control remain cumbersome. For border crossers and borderlanders, Russian border security presents a typical set of problems: border queues, nitpicking inspections, stringent immigration rules, and the exclusion of unwanted entrants. A less common emerging trend is the seclusion of a growing number of Russian citizens, potentially denied exit and seeking ways to bypass the border security system. Furthermore, Russia's expansionist policy and its worsening relations with certain post-Soviet states and the West increasingly lead to stricter and more complex immigration and customs controls.

Second, with the collapse of the USSR, Russia faced the challenge of compensating for the loss of a large part of the Soviet fortified borders and establishing effective

control over previously transparent borders with FSU states. This gave rise to a policy dilemma: whether to unilaterally "fence-off" to guard against border security threats, or to collaborate with neighboring states to keep common borders relatively open. Not all post-Soviet states were happy about the idea of integrating their border security institutions with Russia's; only Belarus and Kazakhstan agreed to partial integration. Consequently, border and customs controls were largely removed from the Russia-Belarus border, and customs control was eliminated on the Kazakhstan border. However, these integrated border spaces are not without issues, with periodic conflicts over their regulations and occasional re-emergence of immigration and customs control or their functional equivalents.

Third, over three decades of the post-Soviet era, Russia oscillated between various philosophies for its new border policy, influenced by factors such as competition between pro-Western and imperial geopolitical cultures, security concerns, economic utilitarianism, integrationism, and humanitarian considerations. While all of these components were taken into account to varying extents, the imperial and expansionist geopolitical culture, distinguished by a securitized perception of the West, the Muslim world, and China, gained particular prominence. Initially, the Moscow's geopolitical view of borders was more defensive than offensive. Over time, however, it evolved to become more offensive, with the notion of extending Russia's geopolitical borders beyond its actual territory for better protection against perceived threats of encirclement and attacks by potential enemies. This perspective contributed to Russia's military conflicts with Georgia and more recently, Ukraine. Except for Crimea, those territories that Russia formally or informally brought under its control have not been fully integrated to the Russian border security space, as control over cross-border flows at least by border guards is still maintained.

Acknowledgements

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