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The Spatial Transformation of the Urban Environment in the Conditions of Post Industrial Development of Society: Dedicated to the 100th Anniversary of Jean Gottmann, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, 23-26 August 2015, Russia.

Current State and Problems of the Border Regions of Russia with Belarus

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ABSTRACT

The article describes the characteristics and problems of socio-economic development of the Russian border regions with Belarus. The basic stages of development and transformation of the economic and resettlement structures are revealed. Particular attention is paid to the strengthening peripheral effects in the development of the borderland in the post-Soviet era. It is noted that the economic stagnation and deindustrialization in the last decade is combined with the social degradation of the countryside and de-agrarianization of the territory. Particular attention is given to the Smolensk oblast as a key link of the Russian-Belarusian borderland. The ways and directions of further development of the regions are presented. Paper argues on the need to develop a single concept and development programs of the Russian-Belarusian border area. The creation of the priority development areas in each of the border regions of Russia and Belarus proposed as an instrument of economic revitalization.

Keywords: Russian-Belarusian Borderland, Customs Union, Union State, Eurasian Economic Union, Smolensk Oblast, Bryansk Oblast, Pskov Oblast, Cross-Border Links, Border Effects, Human Capital

JEL Classifications: E6, F5, R1

1. INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union has led to the emergence of a new post-Soviet neighborhood. In a short period of time, many regions of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other countries of the once united country gained a new status, new functions, and new challenges. Russian-Belarusian borderland is one of those regions. A new phenomenon has attracted considerable scientific interest of researchers, attracted the attention of scientists from various disciplines: Economists, geographers, environmentalists, linguists, psychologists and others. Over the last 20 years, the development of the Russian-Belarusian border area was the subject of hundreds of studies, a plethora of publications have emerged on the subject. In 2016, a new borderland at a post-Soviet space marks a quarter of a century, thus certain results of development can be summed up, conclusions and generalizations made about trends and issues of regional development, the ways of settlement transformations, the economy of Russian border regions with Belarus.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASES: BOUNDARIES AS A FACTOR OF REGIONAL FORMATION

Theoretical problems of development of border regions, special functions and mission of national frontiers have received consideration in research of numerous national scholars and international scientific society in general. In Soviet times, growth of interest in the geographical studies on the challenges related to the border regions took place in the 1980s. In 1982, was released a compilation of scientific works entitled "The geographic boundaries," which included fundamental articles of Rodoman, Shuvalov, Kagan, Mironenko, Vardomsky and others.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent emergence of a new borderland contributed to the revival of interest in the problems of the development of border areas. Among the

fundamental works written by Russian researchers in the post-Soviet period are the publications of Fedorov and Korneevets (2009), Kolossov and O'Loughlin (1998) Kolossov (2005), Korneevets (2010), to name just a few. Among the foreign scholars who have strongly influenced the direction, technique and methodology of Russian studies of the border in post-Soviet time are Anderson (1990), Anderson and O'Dowd (1999), Bryant (2004), Jorgensen (2002), Paasi (1996), Scott (2000) and others.

Problems of development of a new Russian-Belarusian border area were considered in many works of both Russian and Belarusian researchers, the most significant of which are published by Chasovsky (2010), Gritsenko et al. (2013), Katrovsky (2002, 2010), Katrovsky and Ridevsky (2013) Morachevskaya (2010), Ozem (2004), Pirozhnik et al. (2009).

Research on the boundaries as a factor of regional formation (i.e., "rayonobrazovanie") is generally reduced to studies on the influence of the border on the interaction of the delimited objects (Shuvalov, 1982). Borders can both promote and inhibit the interaction of neighboring countries. The importance of studying the processes of integration is due to the fact that integration enhances the integrity of the entire territory covered by this process. Borders spawned the phenomenon of borderland and transboundary localities, which can be regarded as a special state of the regions. The problems of the border regions are extremely diverse, and cover various aspects starting with the ecology and nature spanning to the issues of ideology and psychology.

The recently completed study on the problems of the borderland, held by a group of authors in the framework of the "Cross-border cooperation of the regions of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine" project of the Centre for Integration Studies has enabled to distinguish several components of cross-border cooperation (Anisimov et al., 2013). The first relates to the resolution of purely local issues - ensuring social ties of the population of border regions, the development of cross-border trade, addressing municipal and environmental issues, the provision of medical, educational and cultural services. The second is due to cooperation of border areas for the implementation of nation-wide functions (e.g., transportation, border security, protection of the national economic space, prevention of natural disasters, etc.). The third is related to the economic development of border regions and their foreign trade activities. By implementing national and local functions, cross-border regions serve as one of the natural foundations of national economies' integration.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN BORDERLAND

Russian-Belarusian borderland is a result of the political development of the territory, which is now part of the Russian Federation and Belarus. Political boundaries between subjects of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the last 100 years has repeatedly changed. In the 1st years of Soviet power, several districts of the Vitebsk and Mogilev provinces were included in the province of Smolensk. Profound changes in the administrative-

territorial system took place in 1920s. In 1920, the Bryansk province was formed, which lasted until 1 October 1929. From 1919 to 1926, the Gomel province was part of RSFSR, and from 1919 to 1924 so was the Vitebsk province. In January 1919, the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia proclaimed in Smolensk was part of the RSFSR.

Since 1927 up to the reorganization, the border region of the RSFSR with Belarus was the Western region. In 1935, after the transfer of Velikoluk district in part of the Kaliningrad oblast, the last has acquired the status of a border region of Russia with Belarus for some time. From 1944 to 1957, the border region of Russia and Belarus was Velikoluk oblast. After its elimination and up to date the border regions of Russia and Belarus are Bryansk, Smolensk and Pskov regions. The questions of the changing composition, transformation of the territorial structure of the Russian-Belarusian border region, the cyclicity of its development are well elaborated by Kostuchenko (2004).

Economically, the Russian-Belarusian borderland refers to the earlier developed regions, but most of the territory (excluding Bryansk) remained predominantly agricultural until 1930s. Before the general industrialization started, there were few large industrial enterprises on the borderland. The development of industry was following a scattered pattern. In the prewar years, the region has acted as a donor of labor resources for the areas of rapid industrialization and new industrial development. From 1926 to 1939, despite the natural increase, the population in the boundaries of modern Pskov oblast has decreased from 1788 to 1550 thousand people, in Smolensk oblast from 2293 to 1984 thousand people, and in Bryansk oblast from 2006 to 1802 thousand people. While in 1926 the region accounted for 6.04% of the population of the Russian Federation, in 1939 the share was just 4.92% (Regions of Russia, 2014).

During the World War II, the whole area was badly damaged. The modern population size of the border regions of Russia and Belarus is more than two times lower than pre-war. An important role for the development of economy, industry in particular, played the resolution of The Council of People's Commissars of USSR number 2122 of November 1, 1945 "On the matter of priority in the restoration of 15 ancient Russian cities," including Pskov, Great Luke, Smolensk, Vyazma, and Bryansk.

In the postwar period, the Russian border regions with Belarus went through a stage of active industrialization. The growth rates in industrial production and productivity in the region were above the national average.

4. THE POST-SOVIET STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

In the post-Soviet period, the Russian-Belarusian borderland passed several stages in its development. As a rule, a new stage is associated with significant institutional changes.

The first stage relates to the collapse of the USSR and characterized by the destruction of the existing economic and social relations

between the territories, individual enterprises and people, which were built over the centuries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the implementation of the state border changed the place and function of regions of the Russian-Belarusian border area. Over a short time, special structures and social institutions have emerged in Smolensk, Bryansk and Pskov regions due to the border status. The functions of the former inter-republican border has also changed, which in the new political environment has become interstate. The new border has started to contain the flow of goods, information, and capital, preventing cross-border educational, social, and labor migration. The barrier function of the border has begun to be more and more clearly fulfilled, the effect of “frontier” was plainly manifested, the strengthening of the periphery effects of the Russia and Belarus border regions happened.

The contact function is implemented differently by the border regions. Significantly increased their role as transit channels. New geographical location has become a leading factor in regional development. Particularly these new border regions of the two countries have experienced the greatest negative effects of the emergence of new political frontiers due to the presence of the traditionally close economic and social ties during the Soviet era. The collapse of the single economic space of the USSR was accompanied by the destruction of industrial relations established over decades, replacing the traditional suppliers of industrial and agricultural products. The centrifugal tendencies in the Russian-Belarusian border area intensified after a complete break of a commuter rail service in 1993 between the railway stations of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, more than four-fold reduction in the number of cross-border buses, introduction of strict customs regime. Disintegration processes peaked in 1993-1994 (Katrovsky, 2002). Already by 1995, significantly decreased the number of applicants and students from areas of Belarus in the Russian universities as well as the number of high school graduates of the Russian Federation entering or continuing education in higher educational institutions of the neighboring country (Katrovsky, 2010).

For the areas directly adjacent to the new state border, the consequences of the Soviet collapse were felt most painfully. These areas have soon understood all the negative effects of the new border location, the difficulties of the new conditions. Seven of such border areas are in Smolensk oblast. They accounted for 10.2 thousand km² – A little over a fifth of the region, and 9.4% of the population¹. For most of the parameters of socio-economic development, the borderland of the Smolensk oblast surpassed the regional average figures right until the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in the post-Soviet period the border zone has undergone profound social and economic changes that affected both the demographic situation and the condition of the settlement system, the scale and structure of economic activity. The result of destruction of the economic ties was a considerable drop in industrial output in all seven border districts of the Smolensk oblast by 1995. The de-industrialization has become a feature of economic development of the borderland of the Smolensk oblast in the first stage.

Political sovereignty was raised above the economic feasibility. For the majority of the industrial enterprises of the border regions the decoupling caused significant difficulties, for some causing the termination of activities over time. Some positive developments have taken place in the raise of tertiary sector of the border regions, for which the introduction of the national currency in Belarus, the growth of price disparity, limitation and sometimes the termination of cross-border supply of goods have created the conditions for the organization of retail trade in the new environment. Price gradients on the border with Belarus became a source of steady income for trading industry and stimulated its active growth (e.g., value of the index of trade turnover per capita of the Smolensk oblast was two times higher compared with the Tver oblast and 1.5 times above average of the Central economic region). The share of Belarus borderland in the volume of trade with the CIS countries reached 90% by the year 2000, excluding the informal sector (Kostuchenko, 2004). A new phenomenon in all regions of the border with Belarus was the formation of a special society, engaged in shuttle trade. Most of this “new middle class” used the presence of significant transboundary gradient in the prices of essential commodities.

The disintegration lasted several years. With the victory of Alexander Lukashenko in the presidential elections of the Republic of Belarus in 1994, significant changes in Russian-Belarusian relations occurred. Suburban rail services were restored, the number of bus lines between settlements of the two countries has increased, and a part of the economic ties was restored. A new phenomenon was the conclusion of bilateral agreements between the border regions of Russia and Belarus. Therefore, in the framework of the first phase, it is useful to distinguish two periods, the boundary between which is the inauguration of the President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko.

Dissatisfaction with the state of economic, political, social and other relations within the CIS contributed to the conclusion of new inter-governmental agreements, the creation of new interstate formations. Union of Russia and Belarus is one of them. The need to strengthen economic and social integration between the two countries contributed to the “Treaty on the Union between Belarus and Russia” that was signed in Moscow on April 2, 1997. In late 1999, in the capital of the Russian Federation a treaty, establishing the Union State, was signed and a joint action program between the two countries was adopted to implement the terms of this Agreement.

On 20 January 2000, after ratification of the treaty by the parliaments of the two countries, it entered into force, and the border regions of Russia and Belarus entered a new stage of development. The signing of the agreement has created certain preconditions for economic, social, and military rapprochement between the two countries, but it has not led to the creation of a single economic space. Economic barriers are still directly or indirectly impede the effective mutually beneficial cooperation. In the first stage, in all of the regions of the Russian Federation that bordered with Belarus the restructuring of the economy has begun: The share of the tertiary sector has increased markedly, while the proportion of industry and agriculture has decreased.

¹ Based on: Socio-economic indicators of development of cities and districts of the Smolensk region (2014). Smolensk: Rosstat.

However, the second phase has not caused significant changes on the formation of a unified economic, educational space, the deficiencies in cross-border connectivity of the districts and cities of the borderland have not been overcome. In the second phase the “peripherality” of border areas was not solved, which determines the majority of the socio-economic parameters, even when it would seem the border location could make a positive impact (Morachevskaya, 2010). Because of the infrastructural backlog, the border regions of Russia, some municipalities in these regions, remained underinvested. In 2010, the three regions of Russia on the border with Belarus accounted for only 1.02% of GDP, 2.02% of agricultural production, 1.12% of investments in fixed capital, 0.27% of the Russian export and 1.19% of fixed assets of the country (Gritsenko et al., 2013). Economic backwardness promoted migration of the working population, primarily young people, in the neighboring more developed regions. As the main landmark in this case were Moscow, St. Petersburg and both metropolitan areas. While in 1992 the Bryansk, Smolensk and Pskov regions accounted for 2.6% of the population, by 2010 this figure fell to 2.05% (Regions of Russia, 2011).

The Russia-Belarus border regions had to be the first to feel the positive effects of the transnational integration, benefit from various contracts and agreements in the economic and social spheres. Advances in economic integration between the two countries, including the border areas, were repeatedly noted at various political and economic levels of national and regional governance. Border and cross-border economic integration had to become the basis for sustainable development of the whole region. However, judging by the development results, the boundary between the two states by 2010 did not become the area of active contact and interaction, while co-operation did not transform into an active cross-border integration.

The third stage for the evolution of the border areas has started with the Customs Union. In July 2010, three CIS countries: Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus formed a customs union, thereby facilitating the movement of goods, capital and services. All regions of the three countries (borderland in particular) had new opportunities for the development of cross-border relations. However, these capabilities were not used. Despite the benefits of border location with one of the leading trade partners of the country, the role of the region in the national economy remained insignificant. In 2012, three regions accounted to 1.04% of GDP, slightly more than in 2010 (1.02%). At this stage, no significant economic growth was achieved. The region was still underinvested. In 2013, investments in fixed assets amounted to only 144 billion rubles or 1.09% nationwide. The border regions of Russia, unlike the country as a whole, were still subject to depopulation. While from 2010 to 2014 the population of the Russian Federation increased from 142.9 to 143.7 million people, the population of the border areas has decreased: From 1278 thousand people to 1243 thousand people in Bryansk oblast, from 985 thousand people to 968 thousand people in Smolensk oblast, from 673 thousand people to 657 thousand people in Pskov oblast (Regions of Russia, 2014). In 2014, the regions’ share in the population of Russia for the first time has fallen below 2.0%. This figure is more than 3 times lower than in 1926. The absolute number of

the population of border regions of Russia with Belarus in 2014 decreased compared to 1926 by more than 2.12 times.

The fourth stage of development and socio-economic transformation began on 1 January 2015 due to the transformation of the Eurasian Economic Community into the Eurasian Economic Union. This stage began in the difficult conditions of sanctions introduced by some Western countries, the decline in production in the Russian Federation, the aggravation of the crisis in the economic sphere. Introduction of Western sanctions, the response of the Russian counterpart created the preconditions for the development of import substitution.

In Smolensk oblast, the index of industrial production for January-March 2015 compared with January-March 2014 amounted to 98.6%, in Pskov oblast - 97.9%. The only region where there has been some growth in industrial production was the Bryansk oblast - 107.8%². Multi-vector development was observed in the agricultural sector of the border regions of Russia with Belarus. In all three areas, the decline in milk production was combined with an increase in meat production. The volume of retail trade in the first quarter of 2015 has decreased in all three regions - 2.0% in Smolensk oblast and up to 4.9% in the Bryansk and Pskov regions. This is caused by a reduction in the purchasing power of the population, a decrease in real income in comparable prices. In the context of the increasing challenges of lending, the accounts payables, including overdue, have increased in all border areas. The situation is particularly acute in the Smolensk oblast, where the arrears reached 8.4% as of 1 March 2015³.

In this situation, it is decided to form two industrial parks and several projects in the field of agriculture in the Smolensk oblast, the cities of Smolensk and Safonovo. However, the priority development of the industry, the agricultural sector and the lack of attention to post-industrial areas will not enable the region to overcome the current difficulties. The post-industrial era brings the task of developing “creative industries.”

An analysis of the demographic, esthetic and economic development of border regions of Russia with Belarus suggests the presence of serious problems. The demographic situation in the borderland is more complex than in the country as a whole, and the trends of demographic development are more threatening. The nature and trends of social and economic development of both the border regions and the border municipalities of the three regions in the post-Soviet period show significant destructive changes in the economic and social spheres. In the Bryansk oblast and the Shumyachsk district of the Smolensk oblast, the negative trends were partly due to the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster.

Despite the adoption of a set of measures to develop cross-border relations as well as the development of cooperation between individual producers and an increase of “transparency” and “softness” of the border the active fulfillment of the barrier function

2 “Information for monitoring the socio-economic situation of the Russian Federation” <http://www.gks.ru/gis/images/graf-oper2015.htm>.

3 “Information for monitoring the socio-economic situation of the Russian Federation” <http://www.gks.ru/gis/images/graf-oper2015.htm>.

remains. The border with Belarus regions of Bryansk, Pskov and Smolensk regions have been unable to realize the benefits of its geographical position. Moreover, they have increasingly become the typical peripheral regions, with economic depression being combined with social issues, which reflects the destruction of internal and external links - the support frame of settlement.

The negative economic and social dynamics is yet to be overcome. Meanwhile, even the economic stagnation did not yet occur. The borderland has not transformed into a cross-border region. The reason is that in addition to barriers in the form of political and administrative boundaries, the economic, social and cultural borders that divide the territory hinder this integration. Moreover, in recent years, according to the survey of the population, the cultural distance between the population of border regions of Russia and Belarus has increased (Katrovsky and Sergutina, 2010).

Economically, the borderland has all the features of peripheral regions. After gaining the status of the borderland, these areas significantly worsened their geographical locality, they have been sidelined from social and economic development. Border areas to a greater extent are “hostages” of big politics, on which depends the preservation and development of economic and social ties with the neighboring country.

The Russian regions on the border with Belarus do not have significant mineral potential or unique human capital. In terms of infrastructure, they are inferior not only to Belarusian neighbors, but to also other regions of Central Russia. Infrastructure backlog, a low natural and socio-economic potential reduce the investment appeal of Bryansk, Smolensk and Pskov regions. In the post-Soviet period, the Russian border regions with Belarus have evolved considerably slower than the “raw material areas.”

A serious remaining problem for the modernization of the Russian border regions with Belarus is low innovation potential of these territories. None of the subjects reaches even the national average indicators on innovation capabilities. Best of the regions under study is Smolensk oblast, which in 2013 was ranked only 50th nationwide, having fallen six positions in comparison with 2012. Pskov and Bryansk regions generally fall in the “moderate-weak innovators” group and occupy 69th and 66th places respectively (Regions of Russia, 2014). The low innovation potential of the Russian borderland with Belarus is due to both the lack of strong regional academic institutions, low level of development of agricultural science, low productivity of industry research institutions on the one hand and the current state of higher education on the other. The region does not have its own national research or federal universities. The key role is played by regional universities, which only recently acquired this status, after the transformation of pedagogical universities.

Improvement of the innovative capacity of the borderland could facilitate the development and implementation of a special program for the development of higher education. This program should be aimed at forming peculiar training, research and innovation systems in the leading regional universities, focused primarily on the innovative development of the region. Such a program cannot be

realized without enlarging the existing universities, certain financial investments, from both the federal government and local businesses.

In recent years, differences in economic interests, economic structure, institutional differences, and price differentiation often created obstacles to economic cooperation between the border regions of Russia and Belarus, further contributing to “trade wars” between members of the Union State. The Russia’s border regions with Belarus are in the need for antidepressants and follow-up measures aimed at recovery and the socio-economic development. One of these antidepressants could be a course on the formation of a cross-border region of the Russian-Belarusian borderland with a single concept and development program. The cross-border region is a region comprised of neighboring territories belonging to different states. At the core of this definition is the assumption that the geographical proximity between the areas separated by political and administrative border is an important factor that can influence and enhance the development of several areas on both sides of the border. The transformation of the Eurasian Economic Association in the Eurasian Economic Union formally removes many of the obstacles in the transition to a single strategic planning of development of the Russian-Belarusian borderland. Efficient development could be further contributed with the development of a single scheme of territorial development.

Implementation of such a project would help close the gap in socio-economic development of the borderland, create preconditions for its sustainable development. In course of developing this kind of program, one can refer to the experience of the European countries to overcome the inequalities and the integrated development of cross-border regions. Meanwhile, it is necessary to critically reflect on the positive and negative experience in the formation of specific types of cross-border regions – “Euroregions” in other parts of Russia. Unfortunately, due to the declarative nature of most Russian “Euroregions,” the goals set before them have remained unfulfilled. However, that is no reason to ignore this approach to program development of border regions. Among the priority measures for the integration and the formation of cross-border regions are the investment in infrastructure, including communications, which can cause a reduction in the functional distance between the different parts of the borderland, creating the basic antecedence to the formation of cross-border clusters (Mikhaylov, 2013; 2015). Low transport connectedness of the border regions of Russia and Belarus objectively hinders social and economic integration of the two countries. According to the report presented on the 49th Congress of the European Regional Science Association, the process of integration and the formation of cross-border regions follows a three-stage pattern (Lundquist et al., 2009). Following this pattern, the Russian-Belarusian border area is still at the initial stage of integration. Interests of the Union State require priority development of a unified communications system, modernization of cross-border transport, including high-speed rail links between the two capitals, with stops in Vyazma, Smolensk and Orsha.

Since human capital is the main potential for regional development of the Russian-Belarusian cross-border region, the actual and practical significance could be the idea of a support frame for a common educational space of the Russian-Belarusian borderland,

with the regional and industry-leading universities being the nodes of this process.

At impossibility of the development of common cross-border programs and development strategies it is required to proceed with the development and subsequent implementation of the federal target program on the development of Russian border regions of the Russian Federation with Belarus, aimed at economic growth, infrastructure development, improvement of social conditions. Having the preconditions for the development of cross-border development programs, such an approach might seem “half-hearted.” However, its development and implementation will not require coordination with partners from neighboring Belarus. One of the objectives of this program can be to overcome infrastructural backwardness of the Russian regions, which should have a positive impact on their investment climate. In addition, while each of the neighboring regions of Belarus have free economic zone for more than 10 years - “Gomel-Raton” since 1998, “Vitebsk” in 1999, “Mogilev” in 2002, in the Russian regions to date similar zones with special economic conditions are absent.

In this regard, particularly relevant might be the idea of creating priority development areas (PDA) in the border regions of Russia with Belarus. It is obvious that not only the Russian Far East, but also the regions of European Russia could be enhanced through the creation of such forms of the territorial organization of economic activity. In addition to the regional centers the medium-welterweight cities, such as Great Luke, Vyazma, Roslavl, Yartsevo, Safonovo, Klinty, and Novozybkov can act as growth poles in PDA. Strategy for the development of Russian border regions with Belarus should not be reduced to a ‘classical’ scheme being built on the re-industrialization and priority development of the agricultural sector. In modern conditions, special attention should be paid to creative industries. However, development of the “creative economy” is impossible without “creative education system.” Only through qualitative development of higher education, the human capital of the region can be significantly improved.

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