

Are the European Union's New Boundaries like the Iron Curtain? 1989, Borders and Freedom of Movement in Poland and Ukraine

Karolina Szmagalska-Follis

Published online: 24 July 2009
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

Abstract This essay looks back at the changes that unfolded in Central Europe since 1989 from the perspective of freedom of movement. The iconic tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the rapid openings in other socialist countries put an end to borders as “institutions of isolation.” In the course of the next two decades, ten postsocialist countries initiated and completed the process of joining the European Union (EU). The end of border controls and the ability to move freely within a unifying Europe was hailed as one of the main benefits of integration east of the former Iron Curtain. However, internal freedom of movement requires tight and secure external borders, such as the one that today divides Poland and Ukraine. In this essay, I draw on my research in those two countries to compare the socialist and the EU border regimes, the ways they have pervaded quotidian experience and the distinct modes in which they have imposed limitations on human mobility.

Keywords Border regime · Iron curtain · European Union · Poland · Ukraine · Mobility

*Undoubtedly I could call Europe my home,
but it was a home that refused to acknowledge itself as a whole;
Instead, as if on the strength of some self imposed taboo,
it classified its population into two categories:
members of the family (quarrelsome but respectable) and poor relations.*

Czeslaw Milosz

*To tear down the walls of the state is not . . . to create
a world without walls, but rather to create a thousand petty fortresses.*

Michael Walzer

The images of concrete walls falling and of barbed wires being cut are about as powerful an icon of the end of oppressive regimes as one can picture. Since 1989, the climactic representations of the collapse of the Berlin Wall constitute a symbol of the peaceful demise

K. Szmagalska-Follis (✉)

Department of Anthropology, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Ireland
e-mail: karolina.szmagalska@nuim.ie

of communism and the end of the Cold War. In fact, the repeated reproduction and exploitation of these images has at times slid into cliché. Many participants and chroniclers of 1989 point out that the November events in Berlin are part of a much larger history of local resistance and complicity across Eastern Europe combined with Cold War power games. They argue that this history and its complex fallout is obscured when it is reduced to triumphant flashes of the falling Wall.¹

I recall these images here with a different intention. From today's perspective, I contend, they are best read not as a metonym for the collapse of socialism as such, but rather as a potent symbol of the destruction of the scaffolding upon which it rested. The strictly enforced Cold War borders were a key strategic device for party-states that helped control societies and domestic economies through police, military, and administrative means. The vanishing of those borders and the lifting of the severe restrictions on travel that were a hallmark of socialist regimes were among the most enthusiastically welcomed achievements of 1989. Over the next two decades the newly unleashed international mobility of postsocialist citizens turned from a new and exciting experience into a taken-for-granted civil right. Eventually, the inclusion of ten postsocialist countries into the European Union (EU) and the expansion of the Schengen Agreement to eight of them took freedom of movement to a new level, providing for borderless travel within virtually all of the EU.²

But while these developments constitute the perhaps ultimate act of exorcizing the Iron Curtain, the pragmatic politics of building a united Europe require that it too have tight and secure borders somewhere. Currently, those borders stretch from where Finland meets Russia on the coast of the Barents Sea all the way south to where Greece touches Turkey and Albania. A particularly long (ca. 320 km) and busy section of EU's new boundary runs along the river Bug and into the Western Carpathians and it divides Poland from Ukraine. Ukrainian intellectuals, activists, and regular citizens are among the ones who most vocally compare the new arrangements on their western frontier to the old Berlin Wall. They speak of an Iron Curtain of the twenty-first century, this time built to deprive them of access to Europe.³ What makes them find this new divide all the more infuriating is that they consider their own country to be Europe's proper part.

To Yuri Andrukhovych, the Ukrainian writer from the West Ukrainian town of Ivano-Frankivsk, the border is almost a personal affront. "It is like this with the border," he said to me in 2005, a year after the EU was expanded, "when I'm being told that I cannot just go whenever I want to Vienna, Warsaw or Berlin, it feels the same way as if someone locked me out of the rooms in my own house." Andrukhovych, the author of several novels where

¹ The founders of the Solidarity movement in Poland (today bitterly divided and supporting conflicting visions of contemporary politics) often express frustration that the catalytic role of the Polish labor union in the collapse of communism is overshadowed by the spectacular nature of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. As far as Germany is concerned, in her fine ethnography of a divided German village Daphne Berdahl (1999) points out that the vanishing of the border was a process much more ambiguous and confusing than the triumphalism of the standard narrative would seem to suggest.

² Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Slovenia were accepted into the EU on May 1, 2004. Bulgaria and Romania joined on January 1, 2007. At present, the candidate states are Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and—more controversially—Turkey.

³ In the fall of 2003, before Poland was admitted to the EU, *Nasha Sprava*, a youth organization in the borderland Ukrainian region of Volhynia staged a happening where they built a styrofoam wall near the border, decorated it with graffiti and then destroyed it in front of local television cameras. Protests linking the new rules to the Berlin Wall were organized also in December of 2007, just as the border was tightened further in preparation for joining Schengen (see <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,531083,00.html> accessed on September 12, 2008). For a sharp critique of the alienating effect of the border see also Riabchuk and Mykola 2005.

Central Europe's towns, landscapes and eccentric personalities are rendered in a rich phantasmagoric fashion, claims a rightful belonging to Europe as a geographic entity and a cultural whole (see, e.g., Andrukhovych 1998 and 2005). For him, the most upsetting aspect of the current EU border policies is being subject to regulations that effectively cut him off from membership and participation in a universe he considers his own. The new system, in an effort to keep the territory of the EU free of unwanted immigrants, employs cutting-edge surveillance technologies and requires expensive and difficult to obtain visas of such immediate neighbors as Ukrainians and Belarusians (not to mention the hurdles it places in front of other citizens of the former Soviet Union, most countries in Asia and Africa). Yet regardless of obstacles and inconveniences suffered by those on the "wrong side," comparisons of the EU's external borders to the Cold War boundary on the Elbe are generally dismissed west of the Bug. But whether they are correct or not, they constitute historically charged attempts to make sense of a new divide in a region whose ultimate fate is far from decided. As such they deserve attention and analysis.

In his account of life in bisected Berlin, John Borneman draws attention to the totalizing embrace of the East German *Grenzregime* (1998). The *Grenzregime* (border regime) was a particularly salient feature of everyday life of East Berliners because of the tangible materiality of the divide. For 28 years, the "piece of Cold War furniture" as Anthony Bailey called the Berlin Wall (in Rose 2005:8) enclosed and constrained the East German state and its citizens, dividing such organic wholes as neighborhoods and families and creating new and separate moieties out of what used to be one (Borneman 1998:171). But even if almost everywhere else the Iron Curtain was a somewhat more abstract notion than in the East German capital, all socialist societies were held in the tight embrace of their own border regimes. These regimes in turn constituted the building blocks of the larger Soviet security system. They kept people in place through maintaining a system of laws, regulations and repressive practices intended to demarcate boundaries of territory, police departure, entry, and transit, as well as senses of belonging and citizenship itself.

The lifting of the Iron Curtain between East and West forced massive shifts in the infrastructure and bureaucracy that sustained this successful (up to a point) isolation of East Europeans. By the night of November 9th 1989, when Berliners scaled the Wall and later demolished it with pickaxes, the socialist border regime had already been dealt an intense blow. In the summer of 1989, the reformist Hungarian government opened the border with Austria. German Democratic Republic (GDR) citizens began to escape via Hungary through Austria to West Germany. The situation escalated by the fall, when thousands of East Germans converged on the West German embassies in Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw demanding asylum and transit into the West. This mass exodus of East German citizens fatally undermined the GDR's already wobbly government. But it was not until after the final dismantling of the Wall that the rules governing where, when, and how people are allowed to travel and settle begun to change in a radical and systematic manner.

The ultimate lifting of barriers that restricted travel and trade hastened the process of postsocialist political, economic, and cultural transformation. That does not mean however that from then on mobility became a universal right. Rather, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall marked the beginning of a new paradigm in thinking about borders. This paradigm involves restrictions on movement as well, although different people are targeted and for different reasons. In this essay, I draw on my own historical and ethnographic research in Poland and Ukraine to compare the old and the new border regimes, the ways they have pervaded quotidian experience and the distinct modes in which they have imposed limitations on human mobility. Are the EU's new borders like the Iron Curtain? In what sense is "fortress Europe" a fortress? Or is this just an ill chosen metaphor?

The Tight Embrace

Historically, state boundaries and demarcation lines were sites of heightened military presence and of protection mainly against attacks of hostile armies (see, e.g., Anderson 1996, Walters 2002). Over the course of the nineteenth century, they gradually became places where states keep checks on human traffic across separate sovereign territories. To use the term developed by John Torpey in his account of the history of the passport, modern international borders emerge as sites where authorities claim monopoly over the “legitimate means of movement” (Torpey 2000). “The result of this process,” writes Torpey, “has been to deprive people of the freedom to move across certain spaces and to render them dependent on states and the state system for the authorization to do so” (ibid.:4). Twentieth century European dictatorships unleashed particularly powerful police bureaucracies for the control and manipulation of movement, from forced mass expulsions and resettlements, to severe repression of travel and migration.

The chief objective of today’s systems of border controls in the West is keeping certain things and people *out*. The focus is on undesirable persons (e.g., illegal immigrants, unrecognized refugees, terrorism suspects) as well as on dangerous objects and substances. Such policing—in theory—should be practiced without unduly burdening those whose movement is deemed legitimate (see, e.g., Andreas 2000, Andreas and Snyder 2000). In reality, the demands of economic freedom, freedom of movement, security, and human rights often contradict each other, producing such insidious practices as racial profiling at international checkpoints or detaining asylum seekers in violation of international treaties. But socialist states had their own concept of undesirability. It manifested itself in forced expulsions of “hostile and temporary elements” (in Poland, that meant, among others, the supposed and actual “ethnic Germans” in the 1940s and 1950s and, as I show below, Jews in 1968) and in the zealous guarding against the entry of anyone suspected of espionage and subversive activities or intentions. But even more salient to their model of protecting borders was keeping ordinary citizens *in*.

After World War II, following Soviet lead, all socialist countries had to develop dedicated military units for the protection of borders and subject them to the oversight of secret police. Poland’s territorial outline changed beyond recognition after its boundaries shifted 200 km to the west as a result of Yalta. Once the new Soviet-controlled government asserted its rule over the country, it was compelled to organize border controls based on the repressive model developed in the USSR. Soviet-type institutions enforcing territorial boundaries were dedicated to ensuring and sustaining isolation. As Andrea Chandler put it, “Soviet Union’s leaders knew that control of knowledge, information, and contact with the outside world was power” (Chandler 1998:5).

Consequently, selected units of Poland’s new People’s Army returning from the front were renamed the Borderland Protection Forces—*Wojska Ochrony Pogranicza*, *WOP*, commonly known as *Pogranicznicy* (People’s Army, *Armia Ludowa*, supported the new socialist government as opposed to the underground Home Army, *Armia Krajowa* which was loyal to the prewar Polish state.) The communist Decree on the Protection of Borders of 1953 specified that *Pogranicznicy* were responsible for controlling cross-border traffic and protecting state borders from a military attack and individual acts of violation. In a broader perspective, however, the borders of states remaining within the Soviet Union’s orbit were part of the larger security scheme covering the entire Warsaw Pact (Dominiczak 1985:224). The respective border units in all countries of the bloc were supposed to focus on any and all elements that could seep inside their territories and threaten the socialist edifice. Handling non-political trespasses (for example of fugitive criminals illegally

crossing borders) was exclusively in the competence of the *Milicja*, the socialist police force. In Poland, and other states bordering to the east with the Soviet Union, it were the western, not the eastern borders that required the most intense vigilance.

In other words, the task of *Pogranicznicy*—as described by one Army historian—was the “military-political” protection of the border (Dominiczak 1985). While the *military* responsibilities were fairly self-explanatory (be prepared for a possible attack, especially from the West), the mandate of *political* protection required tight cooperation with other institutions of the socialist state, such as passport bureaus, local party committees, and workplaces, all of which were thoroughly infiltrated by agents of the security apparatus. Political protection involved far more than preventing the entry of spies and saboteurs. It entailed investigating shipments of banned literature in both directions; stopping cash, printed materials, printing equipment, and other aid smuggled into Poland, as well as *samizdat* going abroad. Above all, *Pogranicznicy* had to prevent and combat clandestine escapes and intensely scrutinize those who were granted the scarce benefit of travel.

Although the border regime was rigid, it was certainly not entirely impermeable. Westward travel remained a controlled privilege, but not entirely out of reach for those with *znajomosci* (good contacts) and determination.⁴ The secret police maintained firm control over the issuing of passports and even the sales of international transportation tickets.⁵ Still, some measure of freedom for citizens—especially artists and scholars—was maintained throughout the socialist period. It helped project abroad the illusion that these were progressive societies which did not cage their people. At the same time, as the accounts of several Polish authors amply document, blackmail and the denial of travel documents were the state's standard form of punishment meted out to intransigent intellectuals whose activities and foreign contacts the party found subversive (see, e.g., Szczesna and Bikont (2006), Osiecka (1996), Brandys (1996), Meller and Komar 2008). In any case, every potential traveler had to negotiate massive bureaucratic obstacles before receiving (or not) a travel document and all passports had to be returned into state deposit within 7 days of return.⁶

The Polish People's Republic differed from the GDR or Czechoslovakia in that it was territorially enclosed within the Eastern bloc. Unless we count the Baltic Coast separating it from Scandinavia, it shared no borders with any Western states. This somewhat reduced the everyday drama of both the political and the military aspects of border protection. Even though the Federal Republic of Germany did not officially recognize Poland's postwar borders until 1970, the GDR provided a buffer against any potential retribution. The Borderland Protection troops were only sporadically involved in preventing the kinds of ingenuous escapes in self-made vehicles and flying objects that happened on a regular basis

⁴ In her ethnography of the privatization of a baby food factory in Poland, Elizabeth Dunn cites her landlady as having said, “A hundred years of communism without *znajomosci*! . . . That is the worse curse you could have imagined under socialism” (Dunn 2004:119). The word *znajomosci* is derived from the verb *znac*, to know, and it connotes an ambient acquaintance, a reciprocal and trusted personal connection that one could call upon (and be called upon by) in need. In the context of travel formalities, *znajomosci* in passport offices, consulates, and among airline employees were among the most valued.

⁵ The Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw store ample evidence that permissions to travel abroad were often used by the secret police as a carrot to recruit informants (see http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/en/7/44/Office_for_Preservation_and_Dissemination_of_Archival_Records.html accessed September 19, 2008).

⁶ In the 1970s and 80s, tourism within the Soviet bloc—vacationing in Bulgaria on the Black Sea, or in Hungary on Lake Balaton—emerged as a popular pastime and an expression of relative prosperity. For an exhaustive collection examining travel and tourism in the Soviet bloc, see Gorsuch and Koenker (2006).

on the East–West German border.⁷ Persons who fled socialist Poland usually did so after they actually got a permission to leave (or, as in the case of Polish Jews in 1968, they were forced to leave after being handed a one-way passport out of the country). Once abroad, they would either choose to never come back, or (as was the experience of many people involved in the democratic opposition) they were denied the right to return.

Members of the intelligentsia took advantage of educational and career opportunities abroad (US universities were particularly eager to welcome Eastern European scientists and scholars in the 1970s and 1980s). Those who had relatives among earlier emigrants qualified for family reunification. Still others were left only with the more haphazard routes towards life abroad, such as working one's way through a string of low-wage jobs or getting involved in more or less shady businesses. Over all, it is estimated that the total number of Polish citizens who emigrated—both legally and illegally—between 1945 and 1989 oscillated around 6–7 million (Igllicka and Sword 1999:7). This includes the total of approximately 1.25 million people who left for West Germany, taking advantage of the policy to accept Poles claiming German heritage, as well as the 225,000 Jews of whom 150,000 left between 1945 and 1948, and the overwhelming majority of the rest was expelled during the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign.

When in 2005 and 2006 I discussed the history of border controls in Poland with journalists, historians and older officers of the Border Guard (the agency that in 1992 replaced the Borderland Protection Forces), they sometimes recalled the anecdotes about the tour busses belonging to *Orbis* (the state-owned tourist agency) that went full on organized trips to Paris or Rome and returned empty to Warsaw. These partially factual, partially exaggerated stories circulated in Poland well into the 1980s. In repeating them, people reinforced the ubiquitous sentiment that real life was elsewhere, beyond the borders of the East bloc and behind the thick wall of socialist bureaucracy. Ferries connecting the Polish harbors of Gdansk, Gdynia, and Swinoujscie to Stockholm and other cities in Scandinavia are also remembered for the many escapes they facilitated. They include a well-known case of the Zielinski brothers (aged 12 and 14) who in 1985 hid in the chassis of a truck loaded onto the ferry, survived the grueling trip (not too different from those attempted today by many migrants crossing the English Channel) and asked for asylum in Sweden. The case was a late socialist East European prefiguration of the Elian Gonzalez story. A diplomatic dispute ensued between the Polish government which tried to bring them back, and the Swedish authorities who granted them asylum and placed them in a foster family. The boys' parents encouraged them to remain in Sweden, even though they eventually paid the price of losing parental rights. The story was subsequently fictionalized in a 1989 movie by Maciej Dejczer called *300 Miles to Heaven*—a film that serves as a powerful commentary on the sense of entrapment and hopelessness that marked the experience of late socialism, even as first faint signs of the system's demise were already on the horizon.

Immigration into eastern bloc countries was practically non-existent. The rare exceptions were students from socialist countries in the developing world who were invited to Poland (and other People's Republics) under a governmental program to study at universities and polytechnics, and who sometimes settled and stayed (in the late 1990s in the New York City

⁷ The Museum of the Berlin Wall, known as Haus am Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin exhibits the documentation concerning some of the more spectacular escapes and commemorates the persons who were shot on attempt of making a crossing (as of 2006, a German institution called the Center for Contemporary Historical Research has been able to confirm 125 such deaths; see <http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/> accessed on June 16, 2007).

subway, I encountered a Nigerian man who spoke almost fluent Polish. Twenty years earlier, he had been a student at the Poznan Polytechnic, but he left Poland because he was yearning for an environment where he would not feel so *inny*, that is “different” or “other.”) Also, in 1949, the communist Polish government accepted in a gesture of solidarity approximately 15,000 Greek refugees who fled Greece after the failure of the communist insurgency. But, besides these scarce instances, immigration was a non-issue.⁸

To sum up, in stark contrast to the priorities of the twenty-first century, the key concern of border authorities was not control over incoming foreigners, but ensuring the relative immobility of socialist citizens. These restrictions were not an unheard of historical anomaly—as Aristide Zolberg observed,

Migration policies vary enormously, both historically and between states in a given period. States have at times prohibited the exit of just about all their population and used draconian means to implement this policy, such as the imposition of galley slavery in seventeenth-century France to prevent Huguenots from departing for Protestant states . . . At the same time they have acted ruthlessly to push out religious, ethnic or social groups. (Zolberg 2008:267).

Such stances can coexist and, as Zolberg remarks (*ibid.*), they certainly did during the Cold War, with Polish Jews in 1968 being an example of a “ruthlessly pushed out” minority. The approximately 13,000 Polish citizens of Jewish background who left the country in 1968 were forced to leave as a result of the “anti-Zionist campaign” orchestrated by the Communist Party under Wladyslaw Gomulka’s leadership in response to the Six-Day War of 1967. The scapegoating of Polish Jews was however primarily a diversionary strategy designed to deflect attention from the loss of legitimacy suffered by the Party in the late 1960s and from the student protests that destabilized the regime in March of 1968 (see Stola 2005). In other words, the rigidity of the border regime notwithstanding, there were political factors that could, from time to time, lead to the loosening of restrictions on exit.

Overall, before 1989, in Poland and other socialist states, strict control over the ability to travel was ideologically motivated and achieved through police manipulation, blackmail, and bureaucratic obstruction. It meant limiting people’s access and exposure to the attractions of Western prosperity, which given the chronic material deprivations of the system, was a strategic political objective. It was about keeping in check the precarious forces of desire and dissent and it made anti-capitalist propaganda easier to spin. It was also a way to repress the actually and potentially subversive intellectual exchange and collaboration between dissidents at home and their supporters abroad.⁹ Despite the fact that the formal passport denial documents always cited some paragraph of the 1959 Act on Passports, it was not the rule of law but ideological zeal and political calculation that determined the extent of socialist citizens’ freedom of movement.

The rapid and spectacular withdrawal of socialist states from the Soviet model of border protection was precipitated by the larger post-1989 transformations which in turn were accelerated by modern communications and newly possible forms of movement and exchange, including, as Katherine Verdery points out, the slow opening up of socialist

⁸ This does not mean that no one ever visited socialist countries. But the trajectories, experiences and perceptions of foreigners, from the West or otherwise, who visited or resided in the east bloc are a vastly understudied topic. The few incisive exceptions include accounts of the encounters of Jeffrey C. Goldfarb (Goldfarb, 2006) with Polish dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s and—from a very different perspective—the work by Kesha Fikes’ and Alaina Lemon (2002) on African diaspora in the dissolving Soviet Union.

⁹ The key example of such exile support was the formidable Parisian circle of the journal *Kultura* (see Kostrzewa 1990).

economies to foreign capital (Verdery 1996). If Verdery is right that what ultimately killed socialism was the “collision of two differently constituted social orders, together with the notions of person and activity proper to them” (ibid.: 37), then it is hardly surprising that throughout the Cold War authorities sensed a great danger particularly at their western borders. Ultimately, however, the rupture came from within, immediately revealing the impotence of all attempts at enclosure and containment.

1989–2004

While everyday life under socialism unfolded in forced isolation from the other side of the Cold War divide, societies in Western Europe were beginning to explore and experiment with ideas of unbordered space. First efforts to promote greater freedom of movement on the continent were made long before 1985, when France, Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg signed the original Schengen Accords, that is the agreement to eliminate checks on the boundaries between participating states.¹⁰ The Benelux countries introduced a reduced system of passport controls as early as 1950. In 1954 Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland agreed that their citizens could cross borders without passports when traveling among these countries (Torpey 2000:145). Those initial steps towards what Habermas later called “the ‘de-bordering’ of economy, society and culture” (2003:88) were intimately intertwined with the emerging vision of integrated Europe developed in the name of unifying the war-scarred continent. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome envisioned an “ever closer union among the peoples of Europe” and “common action to eliminate the barriers which divide Europe” in order to ensure enduring peace and economic and social progress (Preamble to the Treaty of Rome 1957).

But neither then nor at any other time has debordering been a smooth or uncontested process. And so, for example, the rather revolutionary idea of one European passport for all citizens of Western European states did not survive even the initial vetting by national governments. It was advocated in the 1950s by, among others, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, but quickly abandoned due to fierce opposition on the grounds that it undermined the exclusive prerogatives of the nation-state. Europeans until this day are issued national passports, albeit ones that feature EU symbols (and conform to shared standards of machine readability and anti-forgery protection). As Torpey shows in his discussion of border controls in postwar Western Europe, the supporters of relatively unbridled mobility have always had to struggle against the pervasive “surveillance preoccupations of police bureaucracies” and the agents of entrenched sovereignties anxiously guarding their domains (Torpey 2000:145).

Nevertheless, when the Iron Curtain was lifted in 1989, Eastern Europeans saw a Western Europe of national societies mutually bound by strong economic and cultural ties—a state that has been accomplished thanks to concerted efforts to promote and facilitate such connections. Thanks to the Single European Act of 1986 (which concluded two decades of preparation for the creation of the single market without tariffs and other barriers), by the 1980s, many of the goals of economic integration had been accomplished and the ease of mobility on the continent was becoming increasingly taken for granted. January 1990 was the original target date when the Schengen Convention abolishing checks

¹⁰ Initially, the Schengen Accord was separate from European Treaties. It became incorporated into the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997; the EU fully embraced the idea of constructing the larger European “area of freedom, security and justice.”

on internal borders was to enter into force. However, the avalanche of change in Eastern Europe and governments' fear of an inundation with illegal migrants from the region "prompted second thoughts about the abolition of member state controls" (Dinan 2005:565).

In 1991, the year of the Soviet Union's collapse, the most alarmist predictions estimated that nine million citizens of the former USSR would head west seeking opportunities to settle and find work (Iglicka and Sword 1999:2). But the anticipated 'wave' did not materialize, save for the challenge presented by the estimated 600,000 to 800,000 refugees who fled former Yugoslavia in 1991 and after. However, it did take several more years until the political and technical obstacles to the full implementation of the agreement had been settled, and the internal border-free Schengen zone became reality. From the point of view of those responsible for the sheer logistics of maintaining a border-check-free territory in Western Europe, the fact that the Iron Curtain was gone was a perplexing and challenging one. With borders demilitarized and massive traffic flowing from the east, the EU justice and security bodies, interior ministries of Schengen states and as well as "ordinary Europeans" begun to express concern—sometimes verging on panic—about the unwanted people and things that would enter their territories. How to open up to East Europeans, without, at the same time, allowing in everybody else? "Everybody else" in this case meant people who would soon be referred to wholesale as illegal migrants or asylum seekers, accused of abusing welfare systems and refugee laws and subjected to an innovative and constantly evolving scheme of exclusion, detention and deportation.

Meanwhile, the idea that one could cross borders without standing in lines, presenting loads of documents, or explaining in detail the purpose of one's travel had a great appeal to Poles and other East Europeans, even if during the first post-1989 decade it appeared to be virtually a fantasy. Eager to put behind them the constraints and the paranoia of Soviet borders, postsocialist travelers keenly took advantage of the loosening of restrictions. The January 1991 Polish Act on Passports abolished the old socialist international travel laws and introduced the revolutionary regulation that every citizen was not only entitled to receive a passport valid in all countries of the world, but also to keep it at home at all times. Also, in 1991, Germany (and soon after most other countries of the European Communities) abolished visas for citizens of Poland and most other postsocialist states. These changes were politically and symbolically consequential, but they did not immediately alleviate the trauma of decades-long enclosure. Slavenka Drakulić, the Croatian writer and chronicler of socialism's demise described how her fear of borders endured and remained a mark of difference between the continent's two parts.

I no longer live in communist Yugoslavia, but in democratic Croatia. Similar is the case of Romanians, Poles and Bulgarians, for that matter. Why, then, has my fear of borders not gone? Why do I feel as nervous going west as ever before? . . . Today the proof of our status in Europe is easy to find. It awaits us at every western border crossing in the stern face of a police officer looking down upon us, even if he doesn't say a word. (Drakulić, 1997:15)

The authoritative gaze of the border official was internalized. At airports, holders of Eastern European passports engaged in acts of self-discipline when they steered clear of the quick lanes for Europeans only, and walked straight to the *Other Passports* lines, assuming, regardless of the purpose of their journey, that they could be questioned, searched, and harassed.

This look has not changed. I know it by heart. I remember it from before—police officers at crossings have always looked at us that in that way. They know perfectly

well that this look would make us nervous, because we always had to disguise the amount of money that we possessed, or to lie about the dying aunt that we were supposedly visiting or just about the hidden bottle of home made plum brandy. Then there was look number two: the screening, X-ray officer's look, suspecting everyone of wanting to get illegally employed in his country, if not—God forbid!—asking for asylum. Once you have felt that look of suspicion, you don't ever forget it and you can recognize it from miles away. (ibid.)

Such hierarchical encounters made the boundaries between the continent's two parts palpable and acutely real, long after the actual barbed wires were taken down. Fear of borders was far from a mere subjective perception of overly sensitive travelers. Rather, it constituted an enduring element of the socialist *habitus*, a socially reproduced sentiment induced by earlier experience of severely constrained mobility and reinforced by actual and imagined inequities in the present.¹¹ It was difficult to reconcile with the optimistic rhetoric of “return to Europe” which constituted the key post-1989 political project in most of the postsocialist countries. Border anxieties portended non-belonging. They served as a powerful reminder of the mistrust and distance between the continent's two halves. As Lawrence Wolff powerfully argued, these divisions date back to the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994) but they have been intensely exacerbated by the Cold War.

In spite of such deep-running estrangement, the commitment to joining continental integration grew out of the evidently even stronger convictions of the region's essential Europeanness, democratic traditions and the suppressed but vital political doctrine of Western alliances (see, e.g., Geremek 1990, Michnik 2003). This commitment overdetermined the course of economic and political change in the 1990s and it accounted for the fervor with which old boundaries were being abolished. Since the beginning, free travel within the EU was presented by integration proponents as one of the main benefits of enlargement. In December 2002, while the Polish government negotiated the accession treaty and public support for joining the Union was at a moderate 51% (Eurobarometer 2002), *Gazeta Wyborcza* (12.13.2002) listed the “end of border controls” as the first among its three main reasons to support Poland's membership (the other two were “stable law” and “billions of euros in aid to local governments and enterprises”). The editorial voiced the widespread conviction that the absence of internal frontiers would entail a higher civilizational standing, and that it would be the antithesis to Cold War restrictions on movement.

The 2004 eastward shift of EU borders reorganized traffic at border checkpoints, adjusted the hierarchy of citizens and their passports, and sorted people anew into those who are swiftly ushered across, and those who wait in designated lines to be cautiously admitted or decisively barred. On October 1, 2003, in anticipation of EU accession planned for the following year, the Polish government deprived Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians of the privilege of visa-free travel to Poland which they enjoyed since 1991.¹² As the EU domain crept up to their national frontiers, their access to a country which, previously, they could enter freely was restricted. This reorganization of space and traffic produced new senses of spatial belonging and entitlement in citizens of the included nations, while reinforcing the experience of marginality in those who were not.

¹¹ I use the term *habitus* here in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of a “socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of the world—a field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.” (Bourdieu 1998:81)

¹² Before 1989, crossing the Poland–USSR border required an invitation. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the old system remained in place, although was mostly not enforced. The transit rules with Ukraine were even more liberal and the only requirement was showing a certain small amount of money (Iglicka 1999).

In Poland, the prospect of eventually joining Schengen not only promised the freedom to travel, work, and live nearly anywhere in the EU, but also, at a time of terror-related fears it became a reassuring narrative of safe space within well-policed outer boundaries. With ever more people perceiving themselves as citizens of Europe, it emerged as such an unquestioned social good that it has been rare for anyone to dwell on what kind of damage and on whom was inflicted by EU's core idea of the "area of freedom, security and justice" (Treaty of Amsterdam 1997).

Contingent Mobility and the Undercutting of Human Rights

The borders that now encircle the cluster of the EU's 27 states, together with the patchwork of those countries' gradually converging asylum and immigration laws make up a novel type of a border regime. Like the socialist one, the EU regime is an expression of the sovereign desire to control mobility, only this time the preoccupation is with the people and things that might come from the outside. Unlike the socialist self-imposed isolation, the EU's approach to travel and migration is an unfinished and evolving result of pragmatic negotiations between member governments and the European Commission in Brussels. It attempts to reconcile freedom of movement for citizens with protection against the perceived excess of immigration, unwanted refugees, actually and potentially dangerous individuals as well as bio-threats, weapons and drugs. It deploys modern methods of policing and the newest surveillance technology (such as magnetic motion sensors, thermal vision, and digital databases for storing and transmitting biometric information) in place of the older military models of protection. The philosophy governing the EU's internal affairs is that unbordered space is only possible within borders.

To understand how the new Euro-border works is to appreciate the extent to which it forms what Chandran Kukathas calls a "complex system of machinery" where openness and permeability are determined along multiple axes.

Policy can . . . make borders more open and yet, at the same time, more closed. This is because policy can change the terms of entry in a number of different respects. It can vary the terms by specifying i) what kinds of people may enter and what status they may hold on entering; ii) how long they may stay; iii) what qualifications or characteristics they must possess to enter; and iv) what procedures they must follow to remain within a territory. Policy can also specify v) the number of people admitted in various categories. (Kukathas, 2008)

The doors are, in other words, not closed, but they are not open either—they are carefully set ajar. Europe's contemporary external borders are devices for sorting out the millions of people who present themselves for inspection or try to pass under the radar. Few are welcomed and embraced. Many can come, provided that they also go. Approximately 300,000 of the least fortunate bounce every year off the borders of Europe.¹³

There is of course—as in any bureaucracy—some room for manipulation, subversion, and resistance on behalf of those crossing borders. For many migrants, the bribe they hand in, the forged passport they buy, or the fake family relation they claim equals the difference between a continued life of privation and a shot at an improved situation abroad. There is

¹³ Estimating the numbers of persons who are not admitted into the EU's territory presents massive challenges. There are no centralized statistics that would for example tally up visa rejections for the entire Schengen zone. The 300,000 estimate refers to people who attempted to enter Europe illegally and were apprehended (Duvell 2006).

also the possibility that border guards and immigration officials might make mistakes and abuse their powers. These instances account for much of the hardship and suffering in all migrant populations. Conversely, officers may be lenient and liberal, as it sometimes happens on the Polish–Ukrainian border where many of the frequent border crossers are on a first name basis with local border guards and customs officers. But in the end, the arbitrary decisions of state functionaries determine only some individual cases, not the larger tendencies in regulating mobility. Ultimately, the actual extent of openness is shaped by a complex and shifting combination of economic calculation, security, and foreign policy imperatives, human rights obligations and the overall sentiment towards foreigners that happens to characterize the *Zeitgeist*.

“Third country nationals” arriving at the external gates of the EU today can be assigned different types of legal status with or without the right to work, such as temporary visas, residence, subsidiary protection or refugee status. In every instance, procedures of varying expense, complexity, and duration separate the non-citizen from exercising his or her freedom of movement and entering the EU. But most inhabitants of the developing world and its various zones of conflict lack the means to qualify for visas. They do not have the resources to secure legal jobs in the EU or the ability to prove that they fulfill the ever more rigid criteria for asylum. For them, the border regime stipulates no legal status, and therefore no sanctioned way to be present within the EU’s borders. Instead, these “undesirables” are the subject of matter-of-fact discussions between politicians, experts, bureaucrats and functionaries of the border police on how to best prevent their arrivals in the first place and, failing that, how to deport them in a clean, efficient and inexpensive manner back to wherever they happen to come from.

This ongoing fine-tuning of the EU border regime is about drawing boundaries and exercising exclusion in ways that are more effective and targeted than ever. In this sense, it would be a mistake to understand the system which is currently under construction simply as a repressive and blindly unjust bureaucratic design. The issue with the new Euro-border is not that it is a new Iron Curtain. Such historical analogy is not accurate because it obscures the fact that the stakes in debates about borders are very different this time around. The explicit commitment that the governments of EU member states made to refugee rights and human rights in general make it impossible to police borders in the blunt and violent ways that were routine along the Berlin Wall and elsewhere in the East Bloc. Likewise, today trade with countries on the other side is not only allowed but encouraged—the flow of commercial traffic is steady and too important to interrupt.

But even though the borders of Europe cannot and will not take the shape of a concrete wall, at the same time, the readmission policies, the newest surveillance protocols as well as the detention and deportation procedures all raise concerns about possible violations of human rights.¹⁴ Therefore, the problem at hand is that the bureaucrats who design the border regime straddle a thin line between staying true to the spirit of rights recognized as fundamental in European democracies, and inventing new ways of simulating, deferring, and diffusing concern for those rights.

Finally, there is the issue of the immediate neighborhood of the border and of the division the EU boundary imposes on interconnected borderland regions. I am familiar with the Polish–Ukrainian borderland (Szmagalska-Follis 2008); others have written of the

¹⁴ Readmission policies are bilateral administrative agreements that allow for handing over illegal migrants to the border authorities of a neighboring country. They raise particular concerns because the practices they sanction are not subject to judicial oversight. There is no mechanism to ensure that persons who are being sent back have access to humanitarian assistance and proper asylum procedure (HRW 2005).

Finnish–Russian (Laine 2007, Paasi 1999) and Greek–Albanian (Hart 1999, Green 2005) frontiers, as well as of the Polish–German (Durr Schmidt 2002, Rottenburg 2000) and Italian–Slovenian (Ballinger 2003) ones that have since been abolished. The narratives that emerge from these peculiar places have always one thing in common: the tense combination of proximity and distance and of access and restriction that produces ambiguous belonging and fractured identities.

Life in the towns, villages, and at border crossings on the eastern side of the borderland between Poland and Ukraine is characterized by what Diana R. Blank aptly called “a condition of contingent mobility” (2004:350). In her account of life in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, a town in Ukraine’s southwestern borderland whose economy disintegrated after the Soviet Union’s collapse, she observed that “with the end of state socialism in Ukraine, the restrictions on exiting national borders came to an end. Yet to leave, one must have somewhere to go” (ibid.:352). What Blank noted about Chelnohovsk is true also of other Western Ukrainian towns and villages. Those fortunate enough to have a viable destination have already left, for example to join family members in Ukrainian diasporic communities in the United States or Canada, or—in case of persons able to prove Jewish descent—to take advantage of the opportunity to emigrate to Israel. Others attempt to find their way in the new and volatile capitalist economy by practicing a cross-border ‘shuttle trade’ (Igllicka 2001). They transport tobacco, alcohol, and gasoline to Poland, and bring back household goods, construction materials, meat, onion, and cheese for sale.

Besides participating in this informal market, every year, thousands of people cross the border to take up seasonal or otherwise temporary employment. Due to the unregulated nature of this migration, there are discrepancies in data concerning the estimated scale of this migration. Some researchers claim that the total number of Ukrainian migrants in the EU is between 5 and 7 million (Duvell 2007). The number of Ukrainian citizens in Poland is estimated at ca. 500,000 (International Organization for Migration 2004). The majority of them hail from Western Ukraine. These itinerant workers whose livelihood depends on their ability to circumnavigate Europe’s new border regime have perhaps the most acute understanding of what a life of “contingent mobility” entails. All in all, inhabiting an area directly across the border from the now-proximate but, due to growing immigration restrictions, increasingly inaccessible Europe, residents of the borderland are intimately familiar with the opportunities and foreclosures at work in their region. They are as much aware of the jobs available to them directly on the other side and further west, as they are of the tenuous status that awaits them abroad, and of the risks involved in illegal border crossing and employment.

Conclusion

This essay departed from the premise that recurrent comparisons of the EU’s new eastern borders to the Iron Curtain deserve attention and analysis as a form of local narrative which attempts to make sense of the region’s new divide. When discussing the new border regime as an updated version of the old one, Ukrainian and Polish intellectuals, youth, and migrants provide vernacular commentary on post-2004 East European geopolitics. But such rhetoric should not obscure the fact that Soviet-era restrictions on mobility were a product of distinct historical circumstances and political imperatives, vastly different than those which created “fortress Europe.” I have shown how the emphasis in socialist Poland and other countries of the bloc was on keeping ordinary citizens *in* and how loosening of those strictures was of profound symbolic and political importance to postsocialist societies after

1989. I have contrasted Soviet-style policy with the EU's efforts to keep certain people and things *out* of its shared territory. I argued that the attempt to simultaneously respect fundamental rights of migrants and legally prevent hundreds of thousands of them every year from entering the EU territory is contradictory and undermines the Union's human rights commitments. Furthermore, as the thousands of "contingently mobile" Ukrainians remind us, Europe's new borders engender a renewed sense of marginalization among those left on the other side of continental integration.

For intellectuals like Andrukhovych, frustration with the present border regime goes further than impatience with endless visa application processes, rude border guards, and intrusive customs officers. As he and I discussed his border experiences, he told me that he was mostly concerned with what he referred to as "mental borders":

Y.A.: We are talking about the border in the sense of mentality, right? Such border exists for Western Europeans, and not only for them. Many Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians think so too... That Asia begins in our country, the Wild East. So, this real border, the political border, represents the frontier of consciousness. People continue to perceive Ukraine as a part of the Russian world, part of the Soviet Empire. They cannot open up to larger Europe, the true perspective of Europe.

When he compared his experience at the border to being locked out of rooms in his own house as well as when he expressed his aggravation with the practical inconveniences presented by the intensified policing, Andrukhovych voiced his worry that not unlike the Iron Curtain which divided the continent 60 years earlier, the new border seals, legitimates and solidifies the vague and shifting frontier between Europe's West and East. Like many other Eastern Europeans who after May 2004 found themselves outside the EU, not only does he resent the exclusionary force of the new geopolitical arrangement, but he also opposes equating "Europe" with the EU.

Andrukhovych is thus echoing a well-grounded fear of marginalization expressed in the past by many other thinkers from the region. It is a fear which grows out of the experience of occupying an ambiguous position between the East and West, Germany and Russia, or (as the eighteenth century Western thinkers tended to assume), between barbarity and civilization (Wolff 1994). It is a dread of being not only walled off from the Western world, but also somehow unwanted. Insofar as the reinforcement of the EU borders reproduces these cultural, political, and social anxieties it is indeed *like* the Iron Curtain. Only this time, the divide is erected farther to the east. Its engineers are backed by all the legitimacy of the EU. And the protests uttered by those left behind sound like faint grumbles from behind the high-tech border fence.

References

- Anderson, M. (1996). *Frontiers: territory and state formation in the modern world*. Cambridge; Oxford: Polity.
- Andreas, P. (2000). *Border games. policing the U.S.-Mexico divide*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Andreas, P., & Snyder, T. (2000). *The wall around the West: state borders and immigration controls in North America and Europe*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Andrukhovych, Y. (1998). *Recreations*. M. Pavlyshyn (transl.). Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press.
- Andrukhovych, Y. (2005). *Perverzion*. M. M. Naydan (transl.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Ballinger, P. (2003). *History in exile: memory and identity at the borders of the Balkans*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Berdahl, D. (1999). *Where the world ended: re-unification and identity in the German borderland*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Blank, D. R. (2004). Fairytale cynicism in the 'Kingdom of Plastic Bags': the powerlessness of place in a Ukrainian border town. *Ethnography*, 5(3), 349–378.
- Borneman, J. (1998). *Subversions of international order: studies in the political anthropology of culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: on the theory of action*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Brandys, M. (1996). *Dziennik 1976–1977 (Journal 1976–1977)*. Warsaw: Iskry.
- Chandler, A. (1998). *Institutions of isolation: border controls in the Soviet Union and its successor states, 1917–1993*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Dinan, D. (2005). *Ever closer union: an introduction to European integration* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Rienner.
- Dominiczak, H. (1985). *Zarys Historii Wojsk Ochrony Pogranicza 1945–1985 (An Outline of the History of Borderland Protection Forces 1945–1985)*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Bellona.
- Drakulić, S. (1997). *Café Europa: life after communism*. (1st ed.). New York: Norton.
- Dunn, E. C. (2004). *Privatizing Poland. baby food, big business and the remaking of labor*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Durrschmidt, J. (2002). "They're worse off than us. The social construction of European space and boundaries in the German-Polish Twin City Guben-Gubin. *Identities*, 9, 123–150.
- Duvell, F. (2006). *Illegal Immigration in Europe. Patterns, Causes and Consequences*. Accessed on <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/>
- Duvell, F. (2007). *Central East European Migration, Country Report I. Ukraine - Europe's Mexico?* Accessed on <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/>
- Eurobarometer (2002). *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer. Complete Report*. Accessed on http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cceb_en.htm
- Fikes, K., & Lemon, A. (2002). African presence in former soviet spaces. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), 497–524.
- Geremek, B. (1990). Which way to Europe? *National Review*, 42(15), 28–32.
- Goldfarb, J. C. (2006). *The politics of small things: the power of the powerless in dark times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Green, S. F. (2005). *Notes from the Balkans: locating marginality and ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian border*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Gorsuch, A., & Koenker, D. (2006). *Turizm. The Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Habermas, J. (2003). Toward a cosmopolitan Europe. *Journal of Democracy*, 14(4), 86.
- Hart, L. K. (1999). Culture, civilization, and demarcation at the northwest borders of Greece. *American Ethnologist*, 26(1), 196.
- Iglicka, K. (1999). The economics of petty trade on the Eastern Polish border. In K. Iglicka & K. Sword (Eds.), *The Challenge of East-West Migration for Poland* (pp. 120–144). London: Macmillan.
- Iglicka, K. (2001). Shuttling from the former Soviet Union to Poland: from 'primitive mobility' to migration. *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, 27(3), 505–518.
- Iglicka, K., & Sword, K. (1999). *The challenge of East-West migration for Poland*. New York: Macmillan.
- International Organization for Migration. (2004). *Migration trends in selected applicant countries. volume III: Poland. Dilemmas of a sending and receiving country*. Warsaw: IOM.
- Kostrzewa, R. (1990). *Between East and West: writings from Kultura*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Kukathas Ch (2008). The Theory and Practice of Open Borders. In *Citizenship, Borders and Human Needs. Conference at the University of Pennsylvania*, May.
- Laine, J. (2007). Incommodious border? Rethinking the function of the Finnish–Russian border. *Fennia*, 185 (1), 49–62.
- Meller, S., & Komar, M. (2008). *Swiat wedlug Mellera (The world according to Meller)*. Warsaw: Rosner i Wspolnicy.
- Michnik, A. (2003). What Europe means for Poland. *Journal of Democracy*, 14(3), 129–136.
- Osiecka, A. (1996). *Na poczatku byl negatyw (In the beginning there was a negative)*. Warsaw: Tenten.
- Paasi, A. (1999). Boundaries as social practice and discourse: The Finnish–Russian border. *Regional Studies*, 33(7), 669.
- Riabchuk, Mykola. (2005). Schengen: A Fortress of Rules. *Transitions Online* no. 10/3/2005.
- Rose, B. (2005). *The lost border: the landscape of the Iron Curtain*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Rottenburg, R. (2000). Sitting in a bar. *Studies in cultures, organizations and societies*, 6, 87–100.
- Stola, D. (2005). Fighting against the shadows: the anti-Zionist campaign of 1968. In R. Blobaum (Ed.), *Antisemitism and its opponents in Modern Poland* (pp. 284–300). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Szczesna, J., & Bikont, A. (2006). *Lawina i kamienie. Pisarze wobec komunizmu (Avalanche and Rocks. Writers facing communism)*. Warsaw: Proszynski i Ska.
- Szmagalska-Follis, K. (2008). Repossession: notes on restoration and redemption in Ukraine's Western Borderland. *Cultural Anthropology*, 23(2), 329–360.
- Torpey, J. C. (2000). *The invention of the passport: surveillance, citizenship, and the state*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Verdery, K. (1996). *What was socialism, and what comes next?*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Walters, W. (2002). Mapping Schengenland: denaturalizing the border. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20, 561–580.
- Wolff, L. (1994). *Inventing Eastern Europe: the map of civilization on the mind of the enlightenment*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Zolberg, A. (2008). *How many exceptionalisms? Explorations in comparative macroanalysis*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.