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The Rebordering of Everyday Life: War, Mobility and Solidarity on the Ukrainian–Slovak Border

Nataliia Zaitseva-Chipak*

The article analyses the transformations of the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland under the conditions of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Drawing on qualitative empirical research (24 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2023–2024) and ethnographic observations, it attempts to trace how the functional meaning of the border and its everyday perception by the residents of borderland communities are changing. The study centres on the concept of 'borderscapes', which makes it possible to interpret the border as a dynamic socio-spatial construct formed at the intersection of embodied experience, material infrastructure, institutions, practices and narratives. In wartime, the border becomes not only an instrument of security but also a resource of everyday resilience that reorganises routine interactions, forms of solidarity and moral boundaries in Ukrainian–Slovak borderland communities. The research shows how the narrativisation of the traumatic experience of war transforms the border from a space of cross-border economic interaction into a multi-layered security infrastructure, a resource of protection and a channel of selective mobility. The war activates processes of 'affective bordering' within which emotional reactions and feelings of threat and solidarity shape new representations of 'us' and 'them' – both in inter-national and intra-Ukrainian dimensions. The analysis identifies gender-asymmetrical mobility regimes, the delegitimisation of the informal borderland economy, and the growing role of borderland communities as agents of social resilience, solidarity and cross-border cooperation.

Keywords: borderscapes, Ukrainian–Slovak border, war, securitisation, affective bordering, borderland communities, mobility, social resilience, Ukraine

* Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology, Czechia. Address for correspondence: socioinform@gmail.com.
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Introduction

Over the past two decades, conceptual understandings of borders have undergone a profound transformation. After the short-lived euphoria of a 'world without borders' sparked by the wave of globalisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars quickly realised that borders had *not* disappeared but had merely changed the ways in which they exist. Contemporary approaches move beyond viewing the border as a static geopolitical line or a state institution and, instead, focus on processes of 'bordering' (Newman 2006; Newman and Paasi 1998) – the multiple socio-cultural, discursive and material practices through which borders are produced, maintained, dismantled or redefined (Rumford 2014; van Schendel 2005).

This study focuses on bordering processes that are enacted through the interaction of the material, symbolic and institutional dimensions of the border, shaping specific local lifeworlds under conditions of global socio-political change (Paasi 1998). The object of analysis is the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland as a social space undergoing significant transformations as a result of the Russian–Ukrainian war and the associated processes of securitisation, humanitarian mobility and cross-border solidarity.

The main goal of the article is to examine how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has affected the representations and everyday practices of residents of the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland, in particular through the lens of the concept of 'borderscapes' (Brambilla 2014). This concept makes it possible to conceptualise borders not as static territorial boundaries but as dynamic spaces of interaction between discourses, bodies, emotions and practices that are in a constant process of becoming and reinterpretation. Particular emphasis is placed on the phenomenological aspect of the border, which makes it possible to analyse the emotional and bodily experiences of borderland residents in a situation of existential uncertainty caused by the war.

The context of the Russian–Ukrainian war has become decisive for the transformation of the representations and functions of the Ukrainian–Slovak border. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly changed the everyday practices and survival strategies of borderland communities, turning the border into one of the key resources of security and survival. This study underscores that everyday representations of the border have shifted from cross-border economic interaction to an emphasis on issues of security, solidarity and crisis management, accompanied by the formation of new local narratives and cross-border social ties.

Rethinking borders: approaches and debates

Contemporary border studies focus on the mobility and multidimensionality of borders. They can simultaneously act as spatial demarcations, legal regimes, economic filters, biopolitical technologies of control and symbolic resources of identities (Kolossov and Scott 2013). The events after 2001 (the strengthening of security regimes), the introduction of the Schengen area, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have shown that borders can be re-actualised within a matter of days (Pavlásek 2025; Zaitseva-Chipak 2025). The humanitarian crisis on the Belarusian–Polish border in 2021 demonstrated how the EU border can simultaneously be an instrument of geopolitical pressure and a space of vulnerability. The tightening of control, the restriction of crossings and the politicisation of the border showed how quickly the regime of free movement within the Schengen area can be 'deactivated' and replaced by a security logic.

At the same time, global commodity chains, digital platforms and cross-border social networks stimulate parallel processes of debordering/rebordering (Cassidy, Yuval-Davis and Wemyss 2018).

Such an analytical shift requires taking into account the historical, political and social contexts that constantly reconstitute borders. Even when they appear as fixed lines on the map, in people's everyday experience other, often invisible but no less effective, boundaries are at work – linguistic, cultural, religious, economic or informational. Accordingly, borders are conceptualised as dynamic, multi-level and interconnected constructs that are formed and lived in motion, rather than as static structures fixed once and for all (Migdal 2004; Newman 2010).

'Bordering' is understood as the process of the everyday (re)construction of borders through a multitude of complementary channels: discourses and institutions, media representations, stereotypes and everyday cross-border practices (Newman 2003). The shift of emphasis to borders as 'lived' spaces (lived borderscapes) has become one of the key directions in borderland studies. Within this perspective, the border is considered not so much as a physical object as a phenomenologically experienced context in which material infrastructures (checkpoints, customs, road networks) intertwine with everyday interactional scenarios (Scott 2020).

Such an approach at the micro level makes it possible to trace how macro-processes are filtered through local experiences and practices, creating a specific 'grammar' and pragmatics of the border. Thus, everyday life simultaneously reflects broader social transformations and mediates them, giving them concrete content and form in the local realities of the borderland.

The relevance of studying the Ukrainian–Slovak border under the conditions of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is determined by a number of interrelated factors that concern both transformations in the border space and broader changes within the European Union. This article focuses specifically on the period following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, while recognising that this phase forms part of the broader Russo–Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014.

First, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become an unprecedented challenge for the European security system and for the principles of openness on which the Schengen Area is based. In this situation, the EU border with Ukraine – and the Ukrainian–Slovak border in particular – has been transformed from a peripheral point of cross-border interaction into a strategic humanitarian and security node. The uniqueness of this border lies in its dual nature: as an external boundary of the EU and as a zone directly bordering a state at war. This creates new contexts of interaction between Ukraine and the institutions of EU member states and shapes unique practices of everyday interaction at the boundary of 2 political and social spaces.

Second, the full-scale invasion has substantially changed the nature of everyday life in the borderland. In peacetime, the border played primarily an economic and social role – as a resource for labour mobility, small borderland business and cultural exchange. In the new conditions, in contrast, the border has become a space of security, selective mobility and immobility (especially for men of conscription age). This has led to the emergence of new narratives of the 'border as a security outpost', strengthened gender asymmetry in mobility and transformed representations of the EU as a protected space 'on the other side' of the border.

Third, the study of the Ukrainian–Slovak border makes it possible to trace how global events (the invasion), refugee flows, humanitarian and military assistance, etc.) are embodied in specific local practices and discourses. The borderland functions simultaneously as a zone of vulnerability and adaptability, where new forms of interaction between the state, civil society and international structures are formed. Studying this experience makes it possible to better understand how the perception of the border changes in borderland communities and how residents develop new survival strategies, forms of solidarity and identities.

Despite the notable dynamism of research on the borderlands of Eastern Europe (Byrska-Szklarczyk 2012; Cassidy 2013; Ciapin 2017; Jóźwiak 2020; Polese 2012; Zhurzhenko 2010, 2024), the transformations of the Ukrainian–Slovak border under conditions of full-scale war remain relatively under-researched and require greater attention. Wartime ethnographies, in particular the study by Butko (2023), demonstrate how the border in this region becomes a resource of survival and a space where formal and informal economies intertwine.

On the Slovak side, it is worth noting the publications of researchers from the University of Prešov who, for several years now, in cooperation with Ukrainian colleagues, have been systematically studying the Ukrainian–Slovak border. The main focus of their work is on cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine (see, in particular, Duleba 2019a; Duleba 2019b; Duleba, Lendel and Oravcová 2023; Székely 2019). As in the case of other authors, the vast majority of these publications examine borderland issues from the perspective of economic and political studies, relying in their analysis primarily on quantitative data. At the same time, the socio-cultural dimension – issues of the transformation of residents' everyday practices as a result of the full-scale invasion, changes in mobility regimes, humanitarian challenges and the redefinition of the border in the imaginaries and narratives of the local population, particularly after 2022 – require deeper study.

Conceptual framework

In the course of the study, we deliberately sought to avoid pre-given rigid theoretical frameworks that could narrow the field of our observations or direct the interpretation into a predetermined channel. Recognising that no observation is entirely free from theoretical load, we tried to maintain analytical openness. Our research strategy was based on an interpretive approach that regards the border as a multivalent phenomenon that arises in the interaction of people, practices and symbolic representations. This approach appears to be the most relevant and makes it possible to grasp the mutable, processual nature of the border, which is continuously reproduced and transformed in the everyday practices, experiences and perceptions of borderland residents.

Within the article we focus our attention on the agency of borderland residents while, at the same time, acknowledging the barrier and semi-permeable nature of state borders. In this article, the semi-permeability of the border is understood not as its 'weakness' or insufficient level of control but, rather, as the selective regulation of the movement of people, goods, information and resources. A state border simultaneously performs both barrier and gateway functions. It may remain open to humanitarian assistance, women with children, persons under temporary protection or institutional cross-border cooperation while, at the same time, serving as a barrier for military-age men, certain categories of goods or irregular forms of mobility. It is precisely this selective permeability that transforms the border from a static territorial line into a regime of differentiated access, in which mobility is shaped by legal status, gender, age, documentation, institutional position and the broader security context. The empirical orientation of the work consists in examining how formal borders acquire significance in people's everyday experience and shape their everyday interactions.

In addition, as the initial general analytical framework we employ an understanding of the border as a multi-level structure that combines institutional regimes, material infrastructures and discursive practices (Simonyi and Pisano 2011). It is precisely through the prism of these structural dimensions that we analyse the everyday actions, narratives and routine interactions of residents of the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland in the crisis situation of social uncertainty caused by the Russian invasion. Such empirical analysis, in turn, opens up the possibility for theorisation: it makes it possible to outline how

the local practical logic of interaction and the perception of the border correlate with broader macro-processes.

When speaking about the analytical framework, it is worth mentioning the concept of 'borderscapes' (Brambilla 2014), which serves as a kind of umbrella term for various contemporary approaches and research lenses in the study of borders. The concept of 'borderscapes' represents a set of contemporary conceptualisations for interpreting borders as multidimensional and processual formations that are constantly in a state of becoming, change and redefinition. Departing from the traditional understanding of borders as stable territorial frames of sovereignty, this approach proposes to consider them as dynamic spaces of interaction between bodies, discourses, practices, representations and power relations. This concept emphasises the multiplicity, mobility and contingency of borders.

The term 'borderscapes' simultaneously encompasses both the symbolic representations of borders and the set of individual and collective practices of the border. It is precisely this etymological 'duality' that makes it possible analytically to connect the lived experience of borders with their cultural, political and visual representations, revealing the interdependence between how borders are lived (experiences) and how they are represented (representations). The emphasis is placed on the need to 'humanise' borders by focusing on individual and collective experiences, which makes it possible to restore the phenomenological dimension in the study of border processes (Brambilla 2014: 14).

The border appears as a 'lived' embodied space that is inscribed into individuals' biographies. It is precisely the awareness of emotional aspects (fear, hope, routine, expectation) that makes it possible to reveal how the everyday practices of borderland residents often come into dissonance with grand political narratives. The experience of the border is a dynamic resource of memory and identity – the border is remembered in the form of stories about 'the first crossing', 'smuggling', 'queues of refugees' or 'night runs', etc. and these stories subsequently shape local myths and representations.

Research sites and methodology

The study is based on 24 semi-structured interviews conducted in four border locations in Ukraine's Transcarpathian region, each closely associated with the everyday functioning of the Ukrainian–Slovak border: Uzhhorod, Velykyi Bereznyi, Malyi Bereznyi and Mali Selmentsi. Uzhhorod, Malyi Bereznyi, and Mali Selmentsi are directly associated with border crossing points or border infrastructure. Velykyi Bereznyi, by contrast, was included in the study as a local centre of the borderland whose everyday life is structured by its proximity to the border, cross-border mobility and institutional links with neighbouring Slovakia.

We use the notion of 'borderland communities' not in an administrative but in an analytical sense, as a collective designation for the set of local communities whose everyday life is structured by their proximity to the border and the practices associated with it (work in border infrastructure, cross-border mobility, 'petty' trade, work with refugees, etc.). The sample included participants with different types of involvement in border-related processes: residents who have no professional ties to border infrastructure (non-experts) – 13 persons; representatives of local self-government – 3 persons; entrepreneurs whose activities are directly related to the border (trade, logistics, services) – 5 persons; activists of civic organisations and volunteer initiatives – 2 persons; and a customs officer – 1 person. Among the participants there were 14 women and 10 men aged from 20 to 73 years, which ensures both an intergenerational and a gender diversity of perspectives.

The field material was collected in two stages: the first (12 interviews) took place from 10 to 12 August 2023, the second (12 interviews) from 10 to 23 July 2024. Each interview lasted from 40 to 90

minutes. The interviews were conducted mainly in Ukrainian (with Russian or local language mixtures used where necessary), in private or semi-public spaces convenient for the participants (homes, offices, cafés, community spaces). All participants gave informed consent to take part in the study and to have the conversation audio-recorded.

Participant selection was carried out purposefully (purposeful sampling) with elements of 'snowball' sampling. Initial contacts were obtained through local self-government bodies, civic organisations and informal networks in borderland communities, after which some participants recommended other potential participants. In the villages, non-experts were selected according to criteria by visiting the random households of local residents. The key criteria for participation were: 1) residence in one of the borderland communities; 2) experience of regular or episodic border crossing before and/or after 24 February 2022 and/or a professional/volunteer connection with border infrastructure; 3) diversity in terms of gender and age.

The semi-structured interviews were combined with elements of the participant observation of everyday practices at the border: queues at checkpoints and the everyday use of border infrastructure (shops, petrol stations, currency exchange points, etc.). These are everyday scenes of borderland life in which the border appears not as an abstract line on a map but as a material and social environment – a queue, a barrier, a completed declaration, a volunteer point, a relatives' meeting. The ethnographic notes made during the two field trips are used in the analysis to contextualise the interviews and reconstruct local regimes of 'bordering'. This is a partial application of the ethnographic approach, since the observations were not long-term or fully multi-session but complemented the interviews in key border spaces.

All interviews were transcribed and anonymised. To designate quotations in the text, codes are used in which the numerical index corresponds to the order in which the interviews were conducted and the short description indicates the type of participant and location. Further analysis was carried out through stepwise thematic coding. First, broad thematic clusters were distinguished (the border as a security resource, mobility/immobility, economic strategies, solidarity and assistance, images of 'others', etc.), after which sub-themes and typical narrative forms were inductively identified within each of them. The coding schemes were compared and harmonised, which made it possible to unify interpretations and reduce the risk of a purely individual reading of the empirical material.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of qualitative social research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the possible risks and ways in which the data would be used; the voluntary nature of participation and the right to refuse to answer or to stop the interview at any time were emphasised. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored securely.

Results

Borders of safety: shelter, stability and survival

A comparison of the materials from the first and second stages of the field study (2023 and 2024) shows a noticeable change in the tone and content of the narratives of borderland residents. The statements of participants in the first stage (2023, the second year of the war) were emotionally saturated and oriented towards the traumatic experience of the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The study participants emphasised the chaotic nature of the first weeks, the mass queues at the border and the intensive support, compassion and humanitarian aid from neighbouring countries, primarily Slovakia. At the same time, a gradual decrease in the number of people entering Ukraine was recorded, which was

interpreted as the exhaustion of the initial impulse of solidarity and the return of some of the refugees to EU countries.

By contrast, in the statements of participants in the second stage (2024, the third year of the war), the dominant motifs were those of normalisation and adaptation. They spoke about the routinisation of the war, as well as about structural changes in transnational relations. Gradual changes were also noted in Slovak society's attitude towards Ukrainians – from the emotional solidarity of the first months to more 'pragmatic' positions, in which the cost of support, the burden on social systems and fatigue from a protracted conflict come to the fore. Surveys conducted in 2024–2025 record a clear intergenerational gap: according to CEDMO (2025), 56 per cent of respondents in Slovakia aged 16–24 wanted Ukraine's victory – this is the highest indicator among all age groups; by contrast, the desire for victory or for a 'compromise at any price' with Russia is most often found in the 65+ group (24 per cent). For residents of the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland, these shifts in public moods 'on the other side' of the border become an important background into which their own narratives about security, reciprocity and the future of cross-border solidarity are embedded.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the border with the European Union has come to represent not merely an administrative boundary for borderland residents but also one of their key resources for everyday security. Whereas pre-war narratives most often associated proximity to the border with economic opportunities, cross-border trade, labour mobility and access to the 'European' consumer space, since 2022, protection, refuge and the possibility of rapid evacuation have taken centre stage. The border is increasingly perceived as a space that provides an additional course of action in situations of danger.

This sense of security has both physical and psychological dimensions. In physical terms, proximity to the border is perceived as a kind of 'shield' against missile and aerial attacks. Local narratives reflect the widespread assumption that Russia avoids striking settlements located immediately adjacent to the borders of EU and NATO member states, since even a minor miscalculation could trigger an international incident. Psychologically, the border provides a sense of relative predictability: even though everyday life remains marked by the war, the very possibility of leaving more quickly, accessing the safer space of the EU or relying on cross-border family and institutional networks becomes an important element of people's survival strategies.

At the same time, this security resource is distributed unevenly. The war and the martial law regime have transformed the Ukrainian–Slovak border into a space of selective mobility, where the possibility of crossing depends on gender, age, legal status, documentation and professional role. Restrictions on the departure of most men aged 18–60 have radically altered pre-war patterns of circular labour migration.[1] Some men have become effectively 'stranded' abroad, as returning to Ukraine would expose them to the risk of mobilisation while preventing them from leaving the country again. Others, by contrast, have remained in Ukraine and have effectively lost access to the cross-border economic and family practices that had been an ordinary part of everyday life before the war.

Against this backdrop, the borderland has increasingly acquired the characteristics of a feminised transborder space. Women have increasingly assumed responsibility for maintaining family, economic and social ties 'across the border': transporting goods, visiting relatives, accompanying children, maintaining contact with husbands or sons living abroad, engaging in volunteer activities and participating in small-scale cross-border trade. Field observations conducted at the border crossing points in Mali Selmentsi and Uzhhorod indicated that women accounted for the overwhelming majority (approximately 85–90 per cent) of those crossing the border on foot or by bus. According to available estimates, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the vast majority of refugees from Ukraine to

EU countries have been women and children. During the first months of the war, United Nations agencies estimated that they constituted approximately 90 per cent of all those crossing international borders in search of safety.[2] Among short-term visitors and those intending to return while crossing from Slovakia to Ukraine at the end of 2024, women accounted for 94 per cent of travellers, while men represented only 6 per cent. Such short visits were most commonly motivated by family reunions (46 per cent).

The feminisation of the border, however, extends beyond the growing proportion of women among those crossing it. Rather, it reflects a deeper transformation of social roles in which women become the principal intermediaries between the internal space of war and the external space of safety, employment and support. Zhurzhenko (2024) describes a similar process in the context of the Ukrainian–Polish borderland.

In terms of mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), these developments can be understood as a transition from pre-war circular migration to a combination of semi-permanent mobility and selective immobility. The border simultaneously opens up new opportunities for some groups while closing them off for others. Consequently, within the wartime borderscape, the border emerges not simply as a line of defence or a channel of evacuation but as a socially differentiated mechanism that reshapes family strategies, gender roles and the political economy of the borderland.

Borderland communities as sources of resilience and solidarity

The experience of Ukrainian borderland communities during the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation vividly illustrates the important role of peripheries as active centres of social resilience and solidarity. In view of the theory of social resilience, which emphasises the ability of social groups to adapt, reorganise and preserve their basic functions and social identity under conditions of external stress (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013), it becomes evident that borderland communities acted not as passive objects of the crisis but as dynamic subjects of collective coping and recovery.

In periods of acute turbulence, such as mass population displacements and the temporary overloading of state and municipal institutions, when public authorities, rescue services and local infrastructure proved unprepared for the scale of population movements and new security tasks, border communities demonstrated the ability to mobilise internal resources, activate horizontal support networks and form new practices of social solidarity. Their geographical location at the edge of state borders not only physically placed them in transit zones but also endowed them with the symbolic status of ‘outposts’ of resilience.

In the first days of the war, according to local residents, Uzhhorod temporarily became a centre of concentration for representatives of the country’s power structures – the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Supreme Court, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), etc.

One of the strongest memories shared by the participants about the first weeks following 24 February 2022 concerns the mass arrival of internally displaced persons and refugees seeking to leave for European Union countries. The borderland became a transit zone for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians in need of immediate assistance, including food, temporary accommodation, medical care and psychological support. However, for local residents, this situation was not merely a matter of observing the transit of people across the border. Rather, it meant their direct involvement in the crisis infrastructure of assistance, often even before formal institutions were able to fully adapt to the scale of displacement.

The following account by a 31-year-old male resident of Uzhhorod, who was involved in the operation of reception and temporary accommodation centres during the first days of the invasion, is particularly illustrative.

> *There were huge queues at the borders. Those who could crossed the border on the first day. Then there were mass arrivals of refugees. Working at the reception point I accommodated 500 people in one night. It was terrible. Women, children, pets. The children often had hysterics, one of their relatives had been killed... Psychological help was needed. It was real hell in the first few days but Uzhhorod coped. Up to 50 thousand people arrived, while the whole city has a population of 100 thousand.*

This quotation is important not only as an emotional testimony to the chaos of the first few days. It also demonstrates how the border city temporarily became part of the humanitarian infrastructure, where local residents, volunteers and municipal service workers performed functions that, in peacetime, was not one of their everyday responsibilities. It is precisely here that the border emerges as a resource of resilience, not only because it opened a route to the safer space of the European Union but also because it activated local networks of self-organisation. This situation caused a significant transformation in the self-perception of borderland communities, actualising their subjectivity and strengthening their internal capacity for self-organisation and resilience.

A similar pattern can also be observed in smaller border communities, where the pressure on local resources was even more pronounced. The testimony of a 64-year-old businesswoman from Velykyi Bereznyi shows that the humanitarian crisis entered not only the institutional sphere of local government but also the everyday lives of borderland residents. For people whose activities before the war had been associated with local businesses or cross-border practices, the first weeks of the invasion meant a profound redefinition of their own role – from economic actors to participants in crisis response.

> *When up to 15 thousand people on foot were crossing the border. And there were cars – a queue 18 kilometres long. This fell on our shoulders – additional burdens. For a week, none of us slept, we were all on duty. We fed people, gave them something to drink.*

This passage demonstrates that, during the first months of the full-scale war, the borderland was not merely a transit space. It became a space of local responsibility, where communities were compelled to rapidly transform existing social ties, business resources, premises, transport and personal labour into instruments of humanitarian response. In this sense, the war not only increased the burden on border communities but also transformed their self-perception: they began to see themselves not as a periphery but as active agents of crisis response, capable of supporting both those who remained in Ukraine and those who continued their journey across the border. Under conditions of extreme pressure on local authorities, communities not only activated internal horizontal networks of solidarity, but also effectively used their cross-border, diaspora and institutional contacts to obtain humanitarian, material and expert assistance from abroad.

At the level of local border communities, one of the most pronounced aspects is the reflection of gratitude towards twin towns and partner organisations from the civil sector that provided substantial support during the crisis. Over the first three years of the war, such support has taken various forms, transforming in accordance with current needs and conditions.

In the first days of the invasion, the local authorities of Ukrainian border communities faced an acute shortage of resources to help the large number of people who were waiting to cross the border. In such circumstances, local administrations were forced to urgently turn for help to their twin towns abroad. In response to these requests, twin towns from Slovakia and other European countries quickly provided diverse assistance. On the one hand, they supplied humanitarian consignments – food products, medicines, clothing and personal hygiene items. On the other hand, partner communities were actively involved in creating humanitarian infrastructures on the Slovak side of the border. Reception and registration points for forcibly displaced persons were organised, where primary assistance was provided – food, warm premises, legal support in processing documents, as well as logistical solutions for the further movement of people to other regions of Slovakia or other countries of the European Union.

In their narratives, the study participants noted that support from twin towns and international partners remained significant even after the flow of refugees decreased. In particular, partners organised leisure and rehabilitation programmes for the children of Ukrainian servicemen. They regularly sent humanitarian consignments – food products, clothing, medicines and personal hygiene items – which were used to meet the needs of internally displaced persons and the military. In some cases, partners provided targeted assistance to medical institutions in borderland communities. Particular attention was paid to security initiatives, in particular projects related to early warning systems. In the city of Uzhhorod, in particular, with the financial support of partner communities, air raid sirens were installed, which became an important element of the local civil protection system (fieldnote, August 2023).

Thus, the cross-border interaction of borderland communities with twin towns and network partners during the crisis period of the war not only significantly mitigated the consequences of the humanitarian crisis but also became an important factor in the formation of new local narratives of solidarity and interaction, strengthening social cohesion and consolidating cross-border social ties.

Affective bordering and the image of the 'other': rethinking interethnic relations during the war

The perception of neighbours – and Slovaks in particular – by residents of the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland is increasingly shaped through the affective 'filtering' of wartime events (Hyndman 2007). In this case, the issue is not merely a change in attitudes towards another national group but the emergence of a new moral scale of evaluation: those who support Ukraine or acknowledge Russian aggression are perceived as 'one of us' or at least as reliable partners, whereas those who display indifference, war fatigue or pro-Russian sympathies are gradually placed in the category of 'others' (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Attitudes towards the war thus become an everyday criterion of symbolic boundary-making.

For the residents of Uzhhorod, who directly witnessed the first waves of humanitarian assistance, Slovak support became important evidence that the border could not only divide but also serve as a channel of moral and material solidarity. This is clearly reflected in the account of a 31-year-old male resident of Uzhhorod describing the first phase of cross-border solidarity:

> *Many Slovaks offered their homes free of charge, organised aid, and set up various social programmes. They welcomed Ukrainians just as warmly as the Poles did. The Hungarians were equally understanding. A huge flow of humanitarian aid came here.*

This quotation captures the moment when, in local narratives, the Slovak side emerges as a space of support and solidarity. Importantly, the informant refers not only to institutional assistance but also to private practices of hospitality, including accommodation, social programmes and humanitarian aid flows. It is precisely such practices that transform cross-border relations from the abstract notion of 'European support' into the realm of everyday experience, where solidarity takes the form of concrete actors, material resources, routes and reciprocal practices.

However, in the 2024 material, this initial framework of solidarity becomes less stable. Some research participants described growing war fatigue, the politicisation of support for Ukraine and the spread of narratives that partly shift responsibility for the continuation of the war onto Ukrainians themselves. Particularly illustrative in this regard is the account of a female representative of the local self-government in Malyi Bereznyi, who has extensive experience of regular communication with Slovak partners at the level of border communities. Her testimony is important not as a representative view of all Slovak communities but as an example of a changing framework of cross-border interaction, in which partner-to-partner communication begins to incorporate elements of moral pressure and political blame.

> *We had a meeting with village heads from Slovakia. They said to us: 'How is it that you, Ukrainian village heads, cannot influence the war? You should write a letter to Zelensky saying that you do not want the war and then the President must end it.*

This episode illustrates the mechanism of affective bordering in practice. A former or potential cross-border partner here begins to speak not in the language of assistance, cooperation or neighbourly reciprocity but in the language of political reproach. Ukrainian local leaders are presented not only as victims of aggression or partners in crisis response but also as people who are supposedly expected to have the ability to 'stop the war'. In this way, the boundary between 'us' and 'them' starts to run not only along the state border but also through moral judgements about responsibility, blame and the legitimacy of Ukrainian resistance.

By the end of 2023, 60 per cent of surveyed Slovaks opposed EU funding for military assistance to Ukraine (compared with only 34 per cent in favour).[3] In addition, public opinion became increasingly shaped by politicised narratives concerning the 'cost' of supporting Ukraine: in 2024, 51 per cent attributed responsibility for the war to the West and/or Ukraine, compared with 41 per cent who blamed Russia. In March 2023, 44 per cent of surveyed Slovaks believed that Ukrainian refugees were 'making the country worse' – the highest proportion among the countries participating in the Eurobarometer survey.[4]

The deterioration of relations between national groups manifested itself in a series of blockades of freight crossings on the Polish–Ukrainian and Slovak–Ukrainian borders. These protests were a typical example of 'bordering from below' whereby local actors use physical control over infrastructure to demonstrate economic nationalism and attempt to renegotiate the rules governing the transit of goods and services. Slovak hauliers linked the increased activity of Ukrainian long-haul truck drivers in the European market to a sharp decline in the value and number of orders in the domestic market. Consequently, the blockade of the border became a form of 'economic weapon' in the struggle for profit. In December 2023, the Slovak hauliers' association blocked the Vyšné Nemecké–Uzhhorod crossing, allowing only limited categories of cargo, such as humanitarian aid and perishable goods, to pass. Its principal demand was the reinstatement of the permit regime for Ukrainian transport companies. According to local residents, this led to confrontations between the protesters and Ukrainian truck

drivers. The latter responded with counter-blockades, threatening to bring traffic on the Slovak side of the border to a complete standstill. This escalation illustrates how a realistic threat – in this case, the fear of losing income – can transform the border into a stage for mutual emotional ultimatums and a rapid redefinition of social roles, from 'partner' to 'competitor'.

At the same time, the war activates not only external boundary-making *vis-à-vis* Slovaks but also internal symbolic boundaries within Ukraine itself. Intensive contact with internally displaced persons, particularly during the first months of the full-scale invasion, contributed to the fact that some residents of Transcarpathia began to articulate their own regional distinctiveness more explicitly. Importantly, local narratives are not limited to the opposition between 'Ukrainians' and 'Slovaks' but also construct subtler, yet clearly discernible, boundaries between 'locals' and 'newcomers', the 'quiet rear' and regions directly affected by military hostilities. Intensive contact with internally displaced persons and the daily observation of queues at the border prompted the inhabitants of Transcarpathia to reflect upon their own regional distinctiveness. In this sense, the war emerges as a trigger for regional articulation and self-identification.

The historical specificity of Transcarpathia – its repeated shifts in state borders, incorporation into different political entities (the Kingdom of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and independent Ukraine) and its multi-ethnic population – has made the region an object of scholarly discussion about its 'particular' form of Ukrainianness (Lozynskyy 2014; Magocsi 2015). In interwar and later writings, Carpathian Ukraine is represented as an exoticised frontier of the Ukrainian nation. Within broader Ukrainian public discourse, this image has been reinforced through representations of Transcarpathia as a 'periphery', a 'tourist province' and a space of 'hybrid' identities (Csernicskó and Laihonen 2016; Dickinson 2010). During the war, these representations acquire an additional dimension through the opposition between 'safe' and 'unsafe' regions and are further reinforced by discussions of the 'quiet rear', mobilisation and irregular border crossing, thereby reproducing an internal regime of 'othering' within Ukraine itself (Balabanov, Pashyna and Lysak 2019; Mylogorodska 2019).

This is clearly illustrated by the testimony of a male customs officer from Uzhhorod, who describes his experience of hosting internally displaced persons in his own home. His account is important because it combines a private practice of assistance with a reflection on the moral differences between regions:

> *I hosted internally displaced persons in my home and let them stay in my house free of charge. They told us: 'You do not treat us the way we would treat you… If you came to us under similar circumstances, we would not have welcomed you like this'.*

This quotation demonstrates the ambivalence of intra-Ukrainian solidarity. On the one hand, it reflects a genuine practice of assistance and openness on the part of a local resident. On the other, the narrative itself constructs a moral hierarchy in which Transcarpathia is portrayed as a more hospitable, more 'European' and more supportive region. Thus, the experience of war not only fosters solidarity but also initiates processes of internal bordering, through which regional identity is reinforced by comparison with other parts of Ukraine. In the same context, it is also important to consider assessments of political attitudes in Slovakia expressed by representatives of the Ukrainian civic sector. Unlike ordinary residents, who more often speak about assistance, personal contacts or everyday conflicts, representatives of civil society organisations interpret the situation through broader political and informational processes. Their perspective is important because it demonstrates how the local

experience of the borderland becomes embedded in broader discourses on Russian influence, disinformation and the political loyalties of neighbouring societies.

> *There are certain problems. They emerged during the war. They did not exist before. I will tell you why. According to their own sociological surveys, especially in the eastern regions, the level of non-support for Ukraine in the war reaches about 70 percent. That is very high compared with Romania. It is five to six times higher than the level of non-support there. And there are still Russian agents operating there. We feel it; we know it… (Male, Uzhhorod, representative of a civil society organisation).*

This testimony should not be interpreted as a neutral description of Slovak public opinion. Its analytical value lies elsewhere, namely in showing that, for some Ukrainian actors in the borderland, political attitudes 'on the other side' of the border become part of their everyday security knowledge. Slovak society thus comes to be perceived not merely as a neighbouring society but as a heterogeneous field of support, doubt, pro-Russian influence and potential threat. In this way, affective bordering (Holzberg 2024) connects personal contacts, media narratives, political assessments and local perceptions of security.

Against this background, the findings of a study examining the transformation of representations of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Slovak newspapers *Denník N* and *Hospodárske noviny* between 2022 and the first half of 2024 are particularly relevant in the context of the full-scale invasion. Despite the electoral victory of pro-Russian political forces in the parliamentary elections, Ukraine remained present in the media agenda; however, the number of publications declined significantly in 2023 and this trend continued into 2024. The study identifies a shift in tone from 'solidarity' to 'fatigue', which has influenced public attitudes in the border regions (Kitsa 2024). A number of anti-Ukrainian narratives can be identified in local media and political discourse, including competition for resources ('They receive benefits and assistance instead of us'); security concerns ('risks to the economy, public health and infrastructure'); cultural distance ('They do not share our values' or 'The fascist nature of the Ukrainian government'); and geopolitical narratives ('Ukrainians are responsible for the war; they stand in the way of peace').[5] Research participants also observed the circulation of these narratives in television talk shows, social media and everyday conversations with relatives and acquaintances on the Slovak side of the border.

Economic transformations, demographic dynamics and mobility in the borderland during the war

In a number of contemporary theoretical perspectives, the border appears not only as a line of separation but also as a structure of opportunities that is activated through the imbalance between the regulatory regimes of neighbouring states. In this context, according to Feyissa and Hoehne (2010), the border can function as a resource that allows local actors to obtain political, economic, identificational and status advantages. This is particularly evident in practices that make use of differences in exchange rates, levels of social provision, prices of goods or excise taxes – the borderland becomes an arena of economic intermediation, where the so-called positional and differential benefits logic is at work (Sohn 2014).

In the pre-war narratives of residents of the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland, this was embodied in practices of legal and semi-legal small-scale cross-border exchange: transporting goods for sale abroad, using several passports or persons (so-called 'jackets') to increase the volumes of permitted cross-border imports/exports. However, these practices have also undergone significant transformation. The

period of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2021) led to the closure of borders, the strengthening of regulatory control and, as a consequence, the mass winding down of small border businesses. A particularly illustrative example is Mali Selmentsi, where fieldwork documented a large marketplace with several dozen shops, a considerable proportion of which were closed at the time of observation. After 24 February 2022, under conditions of martial law, these trends only intensified. As a result, references by the study participants to such ways of earning an income almost completely disappeared. The only exception was sporadic mentions of arbitrage on the exchange rate but this strategy was not widespread either.

At the same time, it is not only the intensity of informal cross-border practices that changes but also the very moral semantics of smuggling. In pre-war narratives, smuggling was often described as a large-scale, semi-legal and, to some extent, normalised feature of the border economy. During the war, however, this interpretative framework changed significantly. Against the backdrop of national mobilisation, strengthened controls and the growing importance of state security, smuggling increasingly came to be perceived not as a 'routine' border practice but as an activity subject to moral condemnation.

Particularly important here is the perspective of a participant – a male Uzhhorod customs officer – professionally connected with the customs infrastructure. His testimony makes it possible to observe not only changes in 'public opinion' regarding smuggling but also shifts in the institutional logic of border control. He describes not simply a decline in the volume of the illegal movement of goods but a transformation of the social foundations that had previously made such practices possible or, at the very least, socially tolerated:

> *Smuggling. One factor affected it, including the war. The attitude of the authorities and the law enforcement agencies has changed dramatically. It has changed a great deal. The old foundations are no longer there, because you understand that you will be condemned for it. Now it is something that attracts public condemnation. And you realise that, God forbid, it could be a military serviceman. You never know who you are dealing with.*

This quotation demonstrates that the war has transformed not only the rules governing border crossing but also the moral order of the borderland. What had previously been perceived as part of local economic adaptation is, under wartime conditions, increasingly evaluated through the prism of loyalty, responsibility and security. The figure of the military serviceman is particularly revealing in this testimony, as it introduces a new moral authority into border practices, before which the informal economy loses its legitimacy. In this sense, the border becomes not only a space of institutional control but also one of moral redefinition of what is considered permissible and impermissible. As a customs officer directly involved in border control, his observations also reflect institutional changes that ordinary residents may not perceive.

Within the concept of borderscapes (Brambilla 2014), emphasis is placed on the temporality of the border, when its functions and meanings are transformed depending on the macro-political context. The concept of 'border temporalities' (Brambilla, Laine, Scott and Bocchi 2015) makes it possible to consider borders not only as spatial but also as temporal phenomena. It draws attention to the fact that borders change over time, have different rhythms of functioning and are experienced by people differently depending on the historical moment, social context or political situation. Thus, the border, which, until quite recently, served as an economic resource and a channel of cross-border everyday mobility and

exchange, under conditions of war actualises a security regime, where the moral dimension and institutional intervention re-define former practices.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has also affected the demographic situation in the Ukrainian–Slovak borderland. In the narratives of residents of rural communities, one particularly prominent theme is the 'draining away' of the young and economically active population. This primarily concerns men of military age, some of whom left the country before travel restrictions were tightened, while others remain abroad because of the risk of mobilisation and the inability to leave Ukraine again if they return. This trend also became evident during the fieldwork itself: in rural areas, it proved difficult to recruit men of military age for interviews which, in itself, points to changes in the demographic structure of local communities. Particularly illustrative is the account of a 45-year-old male resident of Malyi Bereznyi. His testimony is important precisely as a rural perspective, in which demographic change is experienced not as an abstract statistical trend but as a visible absence in the everyday life of the community:

> *From our village of 4,000 inhabitants, 182 people have left for abroad. They are precisely the young male population. If you go out into the village in the evening, apart from people like me – I work officially and have an exemption from mobilisation – there are, figuratively speaking, only disabled people left. All the healthy men are gone. That is because of the war, yes.*

This quotation should not be understood as an emotional exaggeration or simply as a complaint. Instead, it demonstrates how selective mobility and immobility affect the social fabric of rural border communities. Here, the border functions simultaneously as a resource for survival and as a factor contributing to the gradual demographic depletion of the community. For some, it provides an opportunity to remain abroad, avoid the risks of war or support their families from a distance whereas, for the community as a whole, it results in the loss of young men, changes in the local labour market, the weakening of everyday social networks and a renewed sense of peripherality.

At the same time, this demographic dynamic is not uniform across the entire borderland. In rural communities, it is more often described in terms of depopulation and the loss of the active population, whereas in Uzhhorod, alongside the outflow of some local residents, there has also been an inflow of internally displaced persons from regions closer to the frontline. Some of these displaced persons have not only adapted to the new environment but have also invested in the local economy by opening businesses and service-sector initiatives. Thus, the war has produced a heterogeneous demographic dynamic in which rural border communities are more likely to experience population loss, while urban centres may acquire new human, economic and infrastructural resources.

The demographic situation in the borderland, in turn, is closely linked to the changes that have occurred at the level of border-crossing practices after the introduction of martial law. In the pre-war period, the dominant initiative regarding the control of border mobility came from the European Union. After the beginning of the war, in contrast, it was the Ukrainian state that became the key agent of border control, introducing restrictions on the exit of men of conscription age, officials and employees of critical infrastructure. On the other hand, in the first months of the war the EU, in particular Slovakia, demonstrated a regime of humanitarian mobility, which envisaged high permeability of the border for Ukrainian refugees, including the reception of persons without documents, the granting of temporary protection and the institutional infrastructure for their stay. This creates an asymmetrical structure of crossing, when the country of origin (Ukraine) blocks mobility, whereas the receiving country (Slovakia and the EU) stimulates it. As of 2023–2024, according to the study participants, a significant slowing of

border crossing is noted – from the usual 1–2 hours to 3–15 hours of waiting. The procedure of crossing the border itself activates emotions – anxiety, frustration, fear – especially for men, who are under additional pressure of control (fieldnote, July 2024). The border appears as one that is directly experienced on a bodily level, acquiring emotional and temporal dimensions.

Such a border regime testifies to the transformation of the function of the border in a crisis situation – from a simple filter to a dynamic space of social differentiation, where mobility is regulated not only according to legal but also to gender, age and other criteria. As Brambilla (2014) emphasises, borderscapes are not only political or legal formations but also materialised social scenes on which new forms of inclusion, exclusion and bodily regulation emerge.

The regulatory restrictions imposed by the Ukrainian state on the departure of men of conscription age have stimulated the emergence of new forms of illegal cross-border mobility, which have formed a separate sphere or even an industry of shadow border practices. As the participants in the study testify, these practices have not only become part of the local border landscape but have also transformed ideas about illegal migration in the region. Whereas, before 2022, illegal border crossing was associated mainly with the transit of migrants from third countries (in particular Syria and Afghanistan), now the dominant attempts are those of men who are trying to avoid mobilisation and, for this purpose, resort to various strategies of circumventing the restrictions. The state's response to these trends has been to strengthen control within the 5-kilometre border zone, which turns this territory into a space of heightened securitisation (for example, during a field trip between border communities in the Transcarpathian region, three document checkpoints were encountered along a stretch of approximately 60 kilometres) – what Brambilla (2014) calls the material infrastructure of the border. The latter performs the functions of differentiation, control, inclusion and exclusion. It affects both mobility and the perception of the self and the 'other'. In a wartime or crisis context, this system is radicalised through increased control and greater bodily and psychological pressure – and the border itself becomes a dramatic space of life decisions. These are not merely side effects but key manifestations of the functioning of the border apparatus that regulates mobility and creates new regimes of segregation, shaping local ideas about legality, morality and belonging. Thus, the border reveals itself as a socially saturated space where material infrastructure and state practices of control directly interact with the everyday strategies of adaptation of local residents.

Conclusion

The article has analysed how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine transforms the everyday experience and representations of the Ukrainian–Slovak border for residents of borderland communities in Zakarpattia. The semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations have shown that the war changes the border not only as an institutional regime but also as a borderscape – a multidimensional space in which mobility regimes, security, economic practices and affective experiences are constantly renegotiated 'from below', in everyday experiences and narratives. Such an approach makes it possible to go beyond a purely state-centred view of the border and to focus attention on the agency of people for whom the border becomes part of their everyday life.

The empirical material shows that the borderscape of the Ukrainian–Slovak border under martial law is structured by at least three interconnected dimensions. First, the security dimension, in which the border appears as a bodily felt 'shield' against missile attacks and as an infrastructure of potential evacuation and refuge. The mere possibility of crossing the border with the EU becomes, for many of our interlocutors, a symbolic resource of security and a support for building individual and family

trajectories. Second, the economic dimension, where the war changes, delegitimises or completely destroys established informal cross-border practices (petty smuggling, 'grey' trade and seasonal employment). At the same time, new channels of both legal and illegal mobility open up, particularly in view of the restrictions on crossing the border for Ukrainian men and the attempts to avoid mobilisation. The war and the introduction of martial law have significantly transformed the social structure of the borderland space. The Ukrainian borderland has acquired the features of a feminised cross-border space, in which it is women who increasingly perform the function of an intermediary link between the internal and external spaces. Third, the affective dimension, associated with ambivalent emotions of solidarity, gratitude, fatigue and distrust towards Slovaks, EU institutions, the Ukrainian state and internally displaced persons and refugees.

The results of the study complement contemporary discussions on borderscapes, as they specify how, in a border region, the war redefines the balance between humanitarian, economic and security logics of bordering. In the first months of the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian–Slovak border functioned as a humanitarian corridor, where extraordinary flows of people, aid and cross-border solidarity were concentrated. Subsequently, this regime gradually normalised: humanitarian practices now coexist with reinforced security procedures, bureaucratic fatigue and more 'pragmatic' attitudes towards Ukrainians on the Slovak side. Thus, it can be argued that borderscapes, in a situation of uncertainty and protracted crisis, are not reduced either to the rigid 'closure' of borders or to their unambiguous humanitarianisation. Rather, they are dynamic conglomerates in which the logics of protection, assistance, control and economic benefit are layered, conflict and combine over time.

The war simultaneously reactivates not only the external border between warring Ukraine and the safe space of the EU but also the internal symbolic borders within Ukraine itself. In the narratives of residents of Zakarpattia, an imaginary boundary between 'safe' and 'unsafe' regions, between front-line territories and the 'quiet rear', repeatedly appears. This symbolic geography is superimposed on the historical specificity of the region: the experience of Zakarpattia's inclusion in various state formations and the multi-ethnic composition of the population.

The conceptualisation of the border as a resource makes it possible to refine and develop existing approaches in border studies. This study confirms that border communities actively transform and appropriate the mobility regimes introduced by the state. This clearly illustrates the tension between borders as embodiments of state power and borders as spaces of local agency.

Thus, in conditions of war, the Ukrainian–Slovak border appears as a multi-level borderscape of security and selective mobility: from a former economic interface it is transformed into an infrastructure that combines protection, opportunities and control and, in the narratives of residents, economic-pragmatic understandings give way to security-related and affective ones.

At the same time, our study has its limitations: the empirical material covers only the Ukrainian side of the border and does not include a systematic analysis of views from the Slovak side. Further work may expand our conclusions by combining qualitative research on several sections of the EU–Ukraine border with quantitative data on mobility and public opinion, as well as analysis of how borderland experiences return into national discussions on security, migration and European integration. Despite these limitations, the analysis proposed shows that examining the border 'from below', through the lifeworlds and representations of borderland residents, is key to understanding how crisis situations re-signify borders and transform bordering practices.

Notes

1. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has been under martial law which, among other things, prohibits most male citizens aged 18–60 from leaving the country (with the exception of certain categories).
2. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/UNHCR%20Ukraine%20Situation%20Supplementary%20Appeal%202023.pdf.
3. https://enrsi.stvr.sk/articles/topical-issue/348093/majority-of-slovaks-against-giving-weapons-to-ukraine.
4. https://www.euractiv.com/news/slovaks-believe-ukrainian-refugees-are-making-the-country-worse.
5. https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10364_hostile-narrative-brief-a-case-study-of-slovakia.pdf; https://infosecurity.sk/dezinfo/ukrajinski-utecenci-ako-ciel-dezinformacnych-kampani-v-europe.

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ORCID ID

Nataliia Zaitseva-Chipak https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5351-3040

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