

# Border as a Resource: The Case of the Ukrainian-Slovak Borderland

Nataliia Zaitseva-Chipak

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## Abstract

This article examines the Ukrainian-Slovak border through the conceptual lens of borders as resources, highlighting their economic, social, and cultural significance for borderland communities. Moving beyond traditional views of borders as static demarcations, the study focuses on the dynamic interactions that shape cross-border practices. Our main argument is that borders provide specific resources for local actors. We explore how individuals can make creative use of the border and life in the borderland, turning what may appear to be constraints into personal assets. Drawing on interviews with 24 residents of nearby Ukrainian settlements, the study shows how people turn constraints into opportunities, leveraging the border for economic and social gain. The research also considers broader influences – European integration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion – that have reshaped the border’s function, shifting its perception from economic utility to security concerns.

## Keywords

borders, mobility, borderland communities, cross-border interactions, Ukrainian-Slovak border, Zakarpattia.

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## Contact

Zaitseva-Chipak, Nataliia, Ph.D., Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Na Florenci 3, 110 00 Prague, Czech Republic;  
e-mail: n.zaitseva@ucu.edu.ua  
ORCID iD 0000-0002-5351-3040

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## Introduction

Contemporary border studies play a key role in understanding the dynamics of the globalized world, where borders between states and societies appear not so much as physical barriers, but as complex socio-spatial entities which combine both physical and symbolic dimensions. Contrary to the optimistic predictions of the 1990s, when globalization was seen as the path to a world without borders, the current situation shows that borders are not only not disappearing, but are becoming more complex. Borders are no longer simply state lines of demarcation; they have become multi-functional mechanisms that regulate mobility, identity, and social, cultural, and economic relations. In this context, the concept of “bordering” takes on special significance, reflecting the dynamic processes of creating, maintaining, and transforming borders, which act as both barriers and bridges, separating and connecting communities, territories, and ideas.

Using the example of the Zakarpattia region, this article aims to analyze the specificities of cross-border interaction based on the “border as a resource” conceptualization. The concept of the “border as a resource” allows us to rethink traditional ideas about borders and focuses on the active role of borderland residents in using borders as tools to achieve their own goals. Such resources can include opportunities for cross-border trade, employment, education, cultural exchange, and access to services, making borders a crucial element of regional development. Furthermore, the perspective of bordering as a practice allows for a deeper exploration and consideration of the nuances of interaction between physical, imaginary, and actual borders. This approach allows us to understand the complex dynamics of the border process, where borders are not just geographical lines of demarcation, but the result of interactions between different social, political, and cultural factors.

The border between Ukraine and Slovakia is an example of how political changes following the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc can transform a border from a barrier or obstacle into a structure of opportunities which border communities seek to mobilize through appropriate policies and practices. These opportunities arise from asymmetries in prices, wages, taxes, regulatory regimes, and other socio-economic indicators on both sides of the border. This asymmetry is also evident in the field of cultural production, where cultural exchange with neighboring regions of Slovakia becomes a source of income, and border culture is commodified, becoming a marketable product.

In the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, the positional benefits of the border have become significantly more prominent. Previously,

the border was primarily viewed as an economic resource. However, it has now increasingly become a pathway toward safety, providing refuge from military threats and mobilisation. This strategic position allows residents to access protection, security, and new opportunities abroad. Consequently, the positional benefits of the border now surpass its previously dominant differential benefits. At the same time, the border continues to operate as a multifaceted instrument. It simultaneously serves as a barrier, a bridge, a resource for economic development, and a catalyst for shaping cultural identity and facilitating social interactions.

### **Theoretical framework: borders as resources**

Contemporary border studies have expanded from a focus on geographers, cartographers, and diplomats to include sociologists, anthropologists, and social philosophers. Traditionally, borders were seen as physical lines delimiting territories. However, recent research highlights the complex processes through which borders are constructed, maintained, and transformed (Kolossoff 2005; Kolossoff – Scott 2013; Newman 2006; Paasi 2005; 2012).

Borders are now seen as institutions – formal or informal – that mark physical or symbolic differences. They embody norms, values, and rules and become part of everyday life. Borders can be visible, invisible, physical, symbolic, or a mixture of these dimensions (Newman – Paasi 1998: 194). National borders are usually analyzed from the perspective of the state center, neglecting the perspective of the periphery and its inhabitants. (Paasi 2005). However, under the influence of constructivist approaches which focus on the everyday processes of constructing, contesting, and transforming borders, the idea of borders as a source of opportunity for borderlands and communities has been advanced. In recent decades, this approach has gained traction, emphasizing the potential of borders as sources of opportunity and resources for borderlands and their inhabitants.

Among contemporary theoretical approaches, the concept of “border as resource” has the greatest explanatory potential in the context of the specificities of Zakarpattia and the Ukrainian-Slovak borderlands. This approach allows the border to be seen not only as a dividing line or barrier, but also as a multifunctional mechanism that creates opportunities for the economic, social, and cultural development of border communities. Due to its geographical location, historical and cultural ties, and the economic asymmetries between Ukraine and Slovakia, the border there becomes a space of interaction where the active strategies of local residents enable them to use it as a tool for accessing resources and achieving their goals.

The opportunities associated with borders are shaped by the unique nature of borders themselves. This concept refers to what are called “opportunity structures” – a set of constraints and opportunities inherent in border practices that contribute to the formation of borders (Sohn 2020). In particular, differences on either side of a border often serve as factors influencing individual actions. These differences may be economic, reflecting disparities in development, or they may relate to territorial, institutional, legal, or cultural characteristics. The relationship between the degree of openness of a border and the resources which can be exploited there is often inverse; maximizing the benefits of a border requires a combination of its openness and its closure, of opportunities and obstacles. Thus, a border can only be used as a resource if it also functions as a barrier, but this resource must be mobilized by individuals through appropriate strategies and tactics.

Sohn (2020) suggests that every territorial border has an inherently dual nature. Borders can create different opportunities and their meaning can be interpreted in different ways. A border can act as either a barrier or a bridge, either limiting or enabling activities for individuals and communities:

*“Border as connection (bridge) refers to the structures of opportunity associated with the enabling relationships created by borders. However, for these connections to be opportunities, there must also be barriers. Physical, regulatory, and cultural barriers – such as differences in taxation, labor costs or legislation – are the source of the inequalities that actors seek to mobilize. Moreover, these barriers ensure the scarcity of certain resources by limiting their availability.”*  
(Sohn 2020: 79)

The concept of the border as a resource can be further enriched by articulating the practical dimensions of the strategies and tactics employed by borderlanders. In this regard, viewing bordering as a practice offers greater nuance, allowing for consideration of the complex interplay between physical, imagined, and actual borders, and how these practices shape – and are shaped by – the existence of borders. Understanding borders as resources implies a shift in analytical perspective when studying the interaction between borders and local communities. Instead of focusing solely on how borders define and constrain the everyday practices of individuals, research explores the active role of actors in using borders. The central question is how individuals and local communities respond to the existence of borders and what tactics and strategies they employ to use borders to their advantage (Feyissa – Hoehne 2010). Following the aforementioned authors, we see borders as institutions that can be harnessed and borderlands as spaces

of opportunity for their inhabitants. From this perspective, in order to better understand the Ukrainian-Slovak border, it is advisable to complement Sohn's approach with that of Feyissa and Hoehne, i.e., to consider both the structural level and the everyday practices of interaction with the border.

Reflecting on the characteristics of borders which emerge from the activities of different actors, Sohn proposes the distinction of five different ways (or benefits) in which a border can serve as a resource: positional, transactional, differential, symbolic, and what he calls hybridization. Five ways in which a border can serve as a resource are postulated: firstly, a border can serve as a resource in accordance with a specific logic tied to the mobilization of a particular border function or its inherited structure (Sohn 2014).

In the context of the present study, the focus will be on the positional and differential benefits in relation to the Ukrainian-Slovak border.

Positional benefits are the advantages gained by cities or territories which are in close proximity to the border, whereby this proximity itself becomes a resource for economic growth (e.g., transit opportunities, market access, logistics centers), international interaction, and security. Differential benefits refer to those resulting from differing prices, wages, and taxes on either side of the border. The border area, where different regulatory regimes apply, becomes a zone of activity for what is called the "arbitrage economy". This is because it is here that one can most easily take advantage of regulatory discrepancies or "windows of opportunity". This in turn gives rise to various unofficial and semi-official activities, such as smuggling, currency transactions outside banking institutions, or the manipulation of exchange rates.

Our main argument is that borders and borderlands provide specific resources for local actors. In this article, we explore how individuals can make creative use of the border and life in the borderland, turning what may appear to be constraints into personal assets (Feyissa – Hoehne 2010). This emphasis on the micro-level and individual agency is in line with several contemporary studies of border processes.

## Method

The survey was conducted as part of the project "Between 'East' and 'West' – Border Experiences and Narratives on the Czech-Slovak and Slovak-Ukrainian State Borders", which focuses on exploring border experiences and their evolution in times of crisis. The project aims to analyze the changing perceptions, practices, and narratives surrounding these borders, highlighting the impact of geopolitical, social, and economic changes on border communities.

The research is based on a survey of 24 respondents from Ukrainian settlements where border crossings are located: the city of Uzhhorod (13 respondents), the village of Velykyi Bereznyi (3 respondents), the village of Malyi Bereznyi (5 respondents), and the village of Malyi Selmentsi (2 respondents). The respondents included local residents (13 people: 7 from Uzhhorod, 5 from Malyi Bereznyi and 1 from Malyi Selmentsi), representatives of local authorities (3 people: 1 from Uzhhorod and 2 from Velykyi Bereznyi), representatives of border-related businesses (5 people: 2 from Uzhhorod, 2 from Malyi Bereznyi and 1 from Malyi Selmentsi), representatives of NGOs and volunteers (2 from Uzhhorod), and a customs officer. The interviewees were 14 women and 10 men, ranging in age from 20 to 73.

The first wave of the survey (12 interviews) took place from 10–12 August 2023, while the second wave (12 interviews) took place from 10–23 July 2024.

### **The Ukrainian-Slovak Borderland – basic information**

Until 1991, the Soviet Union's borders with other socialist bloc countries in Eastern Europe were as sealed as those with the so-called "hostile West". The situation changed radically after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the USSR in 1991. Since the 1990s, the nature of the Ukrainian-Slovak (until 1993, the Czechoslovak) border has changed dramatically. Whereas before 1989 it functioned primarily as a barrier, it has now become a zone of contact, enabling new forms of political, economic, and cultural cooperation.

The population of the region is diverse in terms of ethnicity: in addition to Ukrainians, there are Hungarians, Romanians, Roma, Slovaks, Germans, Russians, and representatives of other ethnic groups. After independence, Ukrainians were able to move freely across the border with Slovakia thanks to a visa-free regime. Residents of the border area were allowed to travel to the neighboring country using internal passports with special inserts (up to 60,000 such inserts were issued annually by the authorities). The intensity of traffic across the border with Slovakia was extremely high, reaching over 800,000 crossings in 1999 (Malynovska 2022: 74).

In 2000, as part of its preparations for EU accession, Slovakia introduced a visa regime for Ukrainians that reduced the number of border crossings by half. Cross-border movement became even more complicated after Slovakia joined the Schengen area in 2007 and introduced a stricter visa procedure. Consequently, with Slovakia's accession to the EU, the Slovak-Ukrainian border became *de jure* the external border of the European Union.

Cross-border mobility was later facilitated by the Ukrainian-Slovak agreement on local border traffic signed in 2008, which allowed residents of nearly 300 border settlements in Ukraine to travel to Slovak border regions without visas and stay for up to 30 days. To further simplify procedures, this period was subsequently extended to 90 days. In 2017, Ukraine's visa-free regime with the EU significantly expanded border crossing opportunities.

Among Ukrainian researchers studying border regions and cross-border interactions, notable contributions include those of Prykhodko (2013), Ustych (2013; 2014), Benchak (Benchak 2018; 2020) and Zhurzhenko (2010; 2024), Benchak – Ustych (2018). Existing research on borders within Ukrainian sociology and related disciplines focuses mainly on the institutional dimension of cross-border interaction, often using quantitative analytical strategies and statistics. At the same time, the everyday practices associated with the border and the borderlands – along with the unique ways in which the border is perceived and the opportunities it creates – remain underexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap by amplifying the voices of people living in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands and highlighting their perspectives on the border and cross-border integration.

On the Slovak side, we should mention in particular the publications by researchers from the University of Prešov who have been researching the Slovak-Ukrainian border for several years, often in cooperation with Ukrainian colleagues. Their main focus is on Slovak-Ukrainian cross-border cooperation (most recently, for example, Duleba, Lendel, and Oravcová 2023; Székely 2019; Lačný – Polačková 2019). As in the case of Ukrainian researchers, however, most of the texts deal with the topic from the perspective of economic sciences and political science and use quantitative data for analysis. The peculiarities of border perception on both sides of the Slovak-Ukrainian border, including migration, barriers, and border interaction, have been the focus of research conducted by Cirner and Székely (2020) and Lačný and Polačková (2020). Furthermore, these studies present a quantitative survey of borderland residents.

Among the non-Slovak, non-Ukrainian researchers on the border between the Ukraine and the EU, it is worth mentioning the works of the following authors: Joźwiak (2020) is one of the scholars who thinks that the border should be looked at in terms of day-to-day cross-border interactions and practices. Using Zakarpattia and its borders as an example, Joźwiak shows how the borderland can be a resource that helps local residents deal with economic crises or political uncertainty. However, the state border and other national and international policies can also make social inequalities worse by making it harder for people to access this resource (for example, depending on whether they have dual citizenship or visas that allow them

to cross the border more easily). As Joźwiak says, not everyone has the same chances of earning money or leaving the area, which makes life difficult for people who live on the border. People in the borderland are constantly looking for a delicate balance between the ‘benefits’ and ‘obstacles’ that the presence of the border creates.

Polese’s series of articles (2006; 2012; 2021) looks at how informal practices and structures exist alongside state control. These works explore how the Polish-Ukrainian border affects everyday life, and how this creates specific opportunities and challenges. Polese shows how formal and informal restrictions make travel, trade, and finding work more difficult. At the same time, these restrictions lead to “grey” economic practices, which are often a way of making money for people living on the border. Polese also talks about small-scale smuggling of cigarettes or alcohol, for instance, and says many people living on the border do not see such smuggling as immoral. Another important point is that the border is a place where the government’s power meets what people want to do every day, showing that there is a big difference between the official laws and the real way people behave.

Cassidy (2013) provides a detailed analysis of the connection between gender and cross-border economic activity, using the Ukrainian-Romanian borderland as a case study. Cassidy demonstrates how the focus on border control and specific gendered discourses in both formal and informal interactions means that women have fewer opportunities to develop entrepreneurial initiatives. Cassidy extends migration studies by examining how everyday practices and survival strategies in the border region shape local agency and gender relations, all within the context of increasing EU influence on adjacent regions.

Ciapiń (2017) analyses the role of the border between Ukraine (Transcarpathia) and the EU during the crisis triggered by the Maidan protests and the subsequent armed conflict after 2014. Ciapiń explores changes in mobility practices, including daily commuting and semi-formal cross-border exchanges, following the introduction of the visa-free regime. The study highlights new opportunities for local actors and emphasizes the growing importance of security issues in border regions during this period.

It should be noted that the studies of these authors relate to the period before the implementation of the visa-free regime between the EU and Ukraine. In addition, the closure of the borders, first as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and later after the Russian invasion (for men), significantly changed both the general context in the border areas and the daily practices of interaction with the border. In light of these observations, the present study sought to understand how these changes have influenced the perception of the border among residents of border regions and how

the successive opening and closing of the border transforms its resource potential and adds security dimensions.

### **The Ukrainian-Slovak borderland as a resource: differential benefits**

The opening of Ukraine's western border in the 1990s had a significant impact on the inhabitants of these border regions, particularly in the context of the severe economic crisis experienced by Ukraine following its independence. The transition from a planned to a market economy was particularly challenging for regions like Zakarpattia, where factory closures and industrial decline resulted in many residents facing a lack of income.

For a considerable number of Transcarpathians, the capacity to traverse the border has engendered novel prospects for self-sufficiency and familial welfare. This phenomenon can be categorized as a manifestation of the "arbitrage economy" paradigm, which seeks to leverage the disparate advantages and opportunities inherent to the border. Cross-border interactions persistently exhibit asymmetries, a consequence of the considerable discrepancies between the disparate border regions. As Ciapin emphasizes, it is possible to speak of the "differential uses" of "differential spaces". This is because the interface between two spaces with different standards creates opportunities and effects that can be grasped and exploited by individual actors (Ciapin 2017: 182).

The divergent economic characteristics and policies of Ukraine and Slovakia have engendered a range of opportunities, giving rise to considerable price variations for specific goods. Despite facing its own post-socialist challenges, Slovakia was part of the Central European bloc of countries that integrated into the European economic system and rapidly adapted to market relations. Consequently, a substantial price differential for raw materials, fuel, food, and consumer goods emerged between Ukraine and Slovakia.

#### *Informal border economy: smuggling, "jackets", "Euro cars"*

Participants in this study emphasize that the profits generated by cross-border trade and smuggling played a much more important role than simply helping families to survive. They served as a basis for the accumulation of initial capital, which was later invested in other business ventures which were far less dependent on cross-border trade. The proximity of the border is seen not only as a short-term opportunity to earn money in difficult times, but also as a long-term economic resource for local development (Zhurzhenko 2010; Borbély 2015). Participants noted that the existence of

an open border not only stimulates trade and smuggling but also encourages entrepreneurial thinking among the population.

According to the interviewees, border trade and smuggling underwent significant changes during the first decade of the 2000s, evolving from spontaneous practices to larger, more organized operations. What began as informal movements of people carrying small consignments of goods across the border gradually became structured businesses generating new sources of revenue. These trends are also noted in Polese's (2021) studies of informal practices in the Transcarpathian region. He emphasizes that by focusing on the social relations generated by the use of the border, one can try to contextualize "illegal" or "extra-legal" practices which sometimes become legal in another context (Polese 2012).

As noted by researchers from Slovakia in a group monograph, from 2007 to 2020, cigarettes constituted the primary type of good smuggled across the Ukrainian-Slovak border. Notable levels of cigarette smuggling were evident until 2009, after which a decline was observed, attributable to enhanced legislation and control mechanisms (Bratveit et al 2023: 48–49).

Following the introduction of a new Customs Code in Ukraine in 2012, there was a significant decrease in both the number of smuggling incidents and customs violations. For example, in the small village of Malyi Selmentsi, with a population of just 200, the construction of a pedestrian crossing led to the opening of 40 shops catering to Slovaks who travelled to Ukraine to buy cheaper goods (Rusyn 2011). Similarly, shops and petrol stations were built in the village of Malyi Bereznyi. Meanwhile, additional tourist infrastructure (hotels and restaurants) has been developed in Uzhhorod, and businesses offering various services to foreign visitors have sprung up – including numerous dental clinics in border settlements serving both local residents and foreign visitors.

*"They [the Slovaks] bought up half of our market. Our entrepreneurs made money, travelled to Turkey and brought back goods. On Sundays and Saturdays, the place was full of Slovaks who came by bus to shop. Meanwhile, we were buying products from them – things we didn't have. They had European cosmetics shops, and some of them even brought household chemicals."* (W., 52, Uzhhorod, migrant worker)

The transformation of small-scale smuggling from a personal source of income for borderland residents into a systemic phenomenon has marked an important stage in the development of the informal cross-border economy between Ukraine and Slovakia. Over time, this form of "revenue" has in-

creasingly come under the control of “interest groups” based in Ukrainian cities far from the border, leading to the industrialization of smuggling. For example, according to the interviewees, actual underground tunnels used for smuggling have been discovered in settlements near the border.

Between 2008 and 2016, the practice of driving used cars from Europe not subjected to customs duties, known as “Euro cars”, became widespread in Ukraine. This trend was driven by extremely high import duties on new cars in Ukraine, which significantly inflated car prices on the domestic market, sometimes by up to four to five times the price in the EU. As a result, residents of the border regions bought used cars in Slovakia at low prices (EUR 2,000–3,000) and kept them registered in Slovakia. In order to avoid customs clearance, the owners of such cars had to cross the Slovak border every three months in order to continue using the vehicles in Ukraine. Another aspect that is that the owners of such cars often have dual citizenship, which makes registering the car and crossing the border much easier (Joźwiak 2020: 49).

Another notable example of exploiting the proximity of the border occurred in 2023, when some residents of Zakarpattia started travelling regularly to Slovakia to use their Ukrainian bank cards to withdraw euros. This practice became possible because the Ukrainian government had set a more favorable exchange rate for such transactions abroad compared to the domestic market. Although the government has attempted to curb such practices through legislation – by introducing restrictions and regulations on the goods which can be imported without customs clearance, or by increasing customs duties on items with significant price differences – residents accustomed to border trade have found ways to circumvent these restrictions.

These attempts to avoid border trade regulations, including customs policies, have led to the emergence of practices such as “jacketing”, a method of evading or deceiving state institutions. As Wallace notes, “known also as ‘suitcase traders’ or ‘shuttle traders’, these were already visible in the 1980s, but their numbers expanded considerably during the 1990s” (Wallace 2002: 614). This practice acts as a legal analogue to smuggling, where entrepreneurs gain a competitive advantage by obtaining cheaper goods through tax optimization, while the local population benefits from lower prices and makes additional income by crossing the border with goods. A similar dynamic can be observed in the widespread phenomenon of “Euro cars” described above.

It cannot be said that the administrative measures implemented by Ukraine and Slovakia have been entirely ineffective in combating semi-legal and illegal income-generating practices at the border. Measures such

as Slovakia's restrictions on the import and export of food; limits on the permitted import of fuel, cigarettes, and alcohol; the introduction of software to track imported goods; and efforts to combat corruption in customs offices in both countries have not eliminated "grey" or illegal border trade, but they have significantly reduced its attractiveness.

Another key factor contributing to the decline in the economic benefits of border trade has been the reduction of price differentials and the equalization of economic opportunities between Ukraine and Slovakia. The reduced profitability of border and cross-border petty trade has gradually led to a decrease in the involvement of the local population in these practices.

*"This so-called business has now practically disappeared because prices have almost levelled off. A liter of petrol is now more expensive... I mean, there's not enough difference [between the prices] to make it worthwhile. You have to buy insurance, drive your car here and burn fuel. Some people still do it maybe a few, for their own needs – but they just buy something and go home. This business has not existed for a long time, not since 2014." (M., 44, Malyi Bereznyi, ordinary resident)*

The growing prosperity of Ukrainians has gradually shifted their economic priorities, making the use of the border as a financial "tool" or "resource" less important. The development of domestic economic opportunities, along with increased access to local businesses and employment, has resulted in fewer people relying on cross-border schemes to generate income. According to respondents, the number of local residents crossing the border for small-scale trade or other financial transactions has declined significantly and now serves primarily as a source of income for the most vulnerable groups, such as pensioners and students.

In some cases, the interviewees emphasized that the proximity of the border was an important factor in the region's economic development, making it easier to attract investment. The establishment of foreign factories in Zakarpattia has led to an increase in both employment opportunities and wages for local residents. Any restrictions or reductions in border permeability are perceived by respondents primarily through the lens of their economic impact. For example, most respondents view the restrictions caused by COVID-19 and the war instrumentally, focusing mainly on the economic losses incurred. Key concerns include the lack of opportunities to work abroad, the bankruptcy of local businesses, and the sharp decline in the number of retailers operating – for example, in the village of Malyi Selmentsi, only five out of 40 shops remain in operation.

The economic instrumentalization of the border is evident in respondents' discussions of the prospects for Ukraine's European integration and the possible removal of borders with the EU. Most respondents frame these prospects primarily in economic terms. Rather than focusing on the cultural or political dimensions of integration, they emphasize the economic implications – both the potential benefits and drawbacks – of reducing the differences between the institutional environments of Ukraine and the EU.

Concerns about European integration and the potential disappearance of the border between Ukraine and Slovakia include: the risk of losing economic sovereignty through the adoption of the euro (leading to price increases); the alignment of regulations, such as taxes and excise duties, with EU standards (reducing opportunities to profit from these differences); the decline of opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises through the displacement of local businesses by European retail chains; the potential destruction of local agriculture; and finally, the loss of opportunities for small-scale income generation directly related to border activities.

*“And most importantly, those people who have always depended on transporting goods across the border semi-legally will lose their income. What will they do? There will be no point! The prices of all kinds of goods will more or less equalize.”* (M., 37, Uzhhorod, entrepreneur)

The potential economic benefits of accession include economic and investment growth, higher wages, and expanded business opportunities through the right to work in the EU. Another important benefit is the creation of shorter logistics chains due to the elimination of border delays. In addition, service companies can benefit from increased tourism and access to European budget grants, further boosting economic development.

#### Cross-border labor market

Cross-border labor markets are another phenomenon related to differential benefits. Slovakia is among the top five EU countries most actively attracting labor migrants from the Transcarpathian region. Most Ukrainians find work in western and central Slovakia, typically on short or medium-term contracts (12–24 months) as machine operators and assemblers, skilled workers, or craftsmen. After the abolition of visas in 2016, there was a significant increase in the number of Ukrainian workers in Slovakia; however, there was a noticeable slowdown in the influx of labor migrants in 2020–2021 due to the pandemic (Bratveit, and et al 2023). At the end of April 2024, more than 105,000 foreigners were officially employed in

Slovakia, the majority of whom – more than 41,000 – were citizens of Ukraine (Ozturk 2024).

Initially, labor migration from Ukraine was driven by high unemployment, especially in rural areas and small towns. Over time, wage differentials became the main motivation for migration. This issue is particularly relevant for rural residents. Some people commute to work in Slovakia every day and return home every evening. Others spend the working week in Slovakia and return to Ukraine at the weekend.

A third group crosses the Slovak border to travel on to more prosperous EU countries such as the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany. It should be noted that the Slovak border regions lag behind the rest of the country in terms of economic development and, as a consequence, in terms of salaries.

Some border residents who work in Slovakia on a seasonal basis do so without an official work permit. They take advantage of the visa-free regime (formerly known as “small border traffic”), which allows them to stay legally in EU countries for up to 90 days without a work visa. This scheme is particularly beneficial for short-term and seasonal work, such as harvesting or construction. Similar strategies are described in the case of residents of the Ukrainian-Romanian border area, whereby labor migrants spend some time at their place of work but do not give up living in Ukraine. The time spent “here” in Ukraine is dependent on the time spent “there” in Romania (Joźwiak, 2014: 27–39).

*“We had a lot of people who went to work abroad – half the village, really. Men, women, everybody. It’s close enough; you can work during the week and return to your family at the weekend. Some go further. Many are in the Czech Republic, and quite a few in Germany. Most of the work is there, not here.” (W., 33, Malyi Bereznyi, entrepreneur)*

Respondents emphasize that working in the EU is perceived as the most profitable option for Ukrainians, especially if the money earned abroad is spent in Ukraine. This is because salaries are significantly higher in EU countries, especially in Slovakia. However, the cost of living in these countries is also comparatively higher.

The “earn abroad – spend at home” model exploits the socio-economic differences between the EU and Ukraine in two ways. First, it takes advantage of higher wages in Slovakia and other European countries. Second, it exploits the lower cost of living in Ukraine. As a result, the inhabitants

of the border settlements have been able to maintain a higher quality of life. This standard of living is higher than what they could achieve if they earned and spent all their money in Ukraine or Slovakia.

In recent years, after the start of the full-scale invasion, respondents have noted two parallel processes. First, the significant influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Ukraine seeking employment in Slovakia and other EU countries has increased competition in the labor market. This has led to a decline in wages, especially in sectors employing unskilled or low-paid workers. Second, Ukraine is facing a labor shortage, especially of skilled workers. This shortage is caused by the mobilization of the male population, the emigration of workers abroad, and the internal displacement of people from areas affected by corruption. In response to this labor shortage, Ukrainian employers have been forced to raise wages to attract and retain workers. As a result, the narrowing wage gap between Ukraine and Slovakia has reduced the number of border residents seeking work in Slovakia for financial reasons.

*“I wouldn’t say that Slovakia offers significantly higher salaries than Ukraine. In fact, if you are a specialist in Ukraine, you can earn almost the same. In Slovakia, for example, a salary of 1,000 euros is typical. But let’s be honest – 1,000 euros, or 40,000 hryvnias, is enough to find a similar job here.”* (M., 29, Uzhhorod, Ukrainian resident with Slovak roots)

As the wage gap has diminished, the financial motivation to work in Slovakia has declined. Conversely, other compelling arguments in favor of employment in Slovakia and other EU countries are gaining prominence. A salient factor is the enhanced level of security, particularly in the context of the ongoing war. The absence of power cuts, the advancements in infrastructure, and the reduced risks of mobilization render EU countries more appealing to those seeking stability and security for themselves and their families.

In the context of discussions pertaining to employment opportunities in foreign countries, respondents frequently redirect the discourse from the Ukrainian-Slovak border to the merits of pursuing professional opportunities in the Czech Republic, Austria, or other Western European nations. In comparison, employment prospects in Slovakia are perceived as being less lucrative and less appealing.

### Shopping, services, cross-border tourism

When asked about the benefits of living near the Ukrainian-Slovak border, many people talk about the good shopping opportunities, especially the low prices.

Proximity to the border facilitates the availability of a wide range of foreign goods in local stores, goods which are typically only available in the EU. This enables the residents of border settlements to purchase European products at lower prices than in other parts of Ukraine. Additionally, respondents mentioned the opportunity to shop directly at wholesale warehouses or at supermarkets in Slovakia, where prices for certain goods can be significantly lower than in Ukraine due to differences in taxes, excise duties, and sometimes exchange rates. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the categories of food, household chemicals, building materials, and electronics.

It is the respondents' opinion that seasonal and pre-holiday sales, in addition to the regular promotions held in EU countries, provide an additional advantage for those who can quickly and easily cross the border. These events allow people to purchase clothing, appliances, and other goods at significant discounts, making cross-border shopping particularly attractive.

It is important to know that Ukrainians shop in Slovakia not just because of price differences, but also because of EU rules, which include stricter product quality standards. People living in border towns often said they buy certain types of goods in Slovakia like meat and dairy products or household chemicals because these are often better quality in the EU.

The price difference is mostly because of duty-free trade between EU countries. For example, branded clothing from Western European manufacturers is much cheaper to buy in Slovakia, whereas in Ukraine, Turkish and Chinese knock-offs of branded clothing are more common because copyright laws are not strict there. Also, some goods are imported into Ukraine from Europe at lower prices because the EU and the US have lower import duties between them than Ukraine and the US. *“Slovaks used to buy fake Turkish products, like jeans, and other brands. Now, we go there for new products and fashionable novelties from other brands.”* (M., 29, Uzhhorod, a person with Slovak roots)

The devaluation of the hryvnia due to the Russian invasion, higher prices for goods in Ukraine, export restrictions from the EU, and the equalization of prices between Ukraine and Slovakia have diminished the advantages of cross-border shopping for both sides. The reduction in economic benefits has led to decreased interest among locals in shopping across the border, and it is predicted that Ukrainians may increasingly turn to local markets or seek alternative ways to save money, especially during promotional periods.

In addition to facilitating trade, the Ukrainian-Slovak border functions as a conduit for accessing a wide range of services, thus serving as a multifunctional resource for residents of border settlements.

Prior to the Russian invasion, the wealthier residents of Uzhhorod benefited from its proximity to the border, facilitating easier access to European tourist destinations. This is largely attributable to the more developed transport infrastructure of Slovakia and other EU countries, which provides enhanced travel opportunities. Residents of border towns in Ukraine formerly used the airport in Košice, Slovakia, the closest international hub, and also availed themselves of opportunities for recreational trips to neighboring countries. Popular destinations included the Tatra Mountains, water parks, swimming pools, zoos, and other entertainment facilities in Slovakia and Hungary.

The pre-invasion period featured frequent border crossings by Slovaks seeking to avail themselves of the recreational facilities in Zakarpattia, including its restaurants, cafes, and pizzerias. The appeal of Transcarpathian establishments to Slovaks lay in their reputation for excellent value for money. The same thing was true for beauty treatments and dental care. These services cost much less in Ukraine than in European countries. The reason for this was the difference in the wages of people working in these sectors. This was because Ukraine and Slovakia are in different economic systems:

*“People come to Uzhhorod to eat at a nice restaurant. There are some really good restaurants here, with stylish design and great food. They’re amazed by the level of service here, which is much better than in Slovakia.”* (W., 19, Uzhhorod, has family in Slovakia)

*“And beauty salons? Well, they come here for most of the services. The quality of these services is slightly, let’s say, lower in Slovakia than in Ukraine. Here, the services are cheaper, better, and that’s why they come.”* (W., 25, Uzhhorod, ordinary resident)

Another form of tourism in the region that other researchers have noted is what is called memorial tourism (Losonczy 2014).

Compared to the responses provided by this study’s participants, border settlement residents a decade ago exhibited a significantly higher level of activity in crossing the border into Slovakia with a view to diversifying their leisure activities. This cross-border movement was motivated by the superior quality and greater variety of recreational infrastructure offered by the European Union. In recent years, however, a marked decline in the number of such visits has been observed. This phenomenon is partly

attributable to Ukraine's efforts to enhance the quality and availability of its recreational infrastructure. Improvements in domestic tourism services, the growth of the hotel and restaurant sector, the construction of new recreational facilities, and the increasing popularity of Ukrainian resorts have encouraged residents of border regions to opt for leisure opportunities within the country.

A further factor that may contribute to a decline in cross-border traffic is the potential opening of the airport in Uzhhorod and the introduction of European low-cost airlines there. This development would provide residents of Zakarpattia with direct access to international air travel, thereby minimizing the need for trips to Slovakia to avail themselves of transportation. Currently, this is not possible due to the low level of flight safety in Ukraine caused by the ongoing war. Historically, this limitation has been attributed to regulatory discrepancies between the EU and Ukraine regarding access for foreign air carriers.

### **The Ukrainian-Slovak borderland as a resource: positional benefits**

As noted above, border proximity creates positional advantages, i.e., the benefits which flow directly from a strategic location near the border. Such proximity can be an important resource for economic growth, international cooperation, cultural interaction, and security. By virtue of their location, border regions become natural spaces for the promotion of cross-border cooperation, including joint economic projects, educational programs, cultural exchanges, and enhanced security partnerships. In addition, logistical hubs or transit corridors often emerge, enhancing regional competitiveness and economic integration.

Moreover, the positional benefits of the border region have significantly increased in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The border area has shifted from being predominantly an economic resource to being a crucial pathway to physical safety and protection.

An analysis of the relationship between the differential and the positional benefits at the Ukrainian-Slovak border reveals that as differential benefits (e.g., price asymmetries and economic advantages) decrease due to factors such as visa-free travel and price equalization, positional benefits concomitantly increase. This shift is primarily attributable to the Russian-Ukrainian war, during which issues of security and distance from active combat zones have become prominent. Consequently, the border's role as a protective resource for safety has gained prominence.

### Cross-border cooperation: ideas in exchange for money

In terms of its spatial dimension, respondents perceive the Ukrainian-Slovak border less as a boundary with Slovakia and more as a gateway to the European Union. Beyond the physical demarcation that separates “East” from “West”, people constantly define and redefine the social meaning of national communities bounded by borders through the cross-border exchange of goods and ideas (Simonyi – Pisano 2011).

In this context, the border functions as a bridge between Ukraine and the EU, fostering cross-border cooperation and cultural exchange. In respondents’ narratives, the EU is portrayed as a space of shared values and a symbol of cultural and civilizational transition. The region’s historical heritage and its connection to a shared European history prior to Ukraine’s incorporation into the USSR are emphasized: *“We became part of the Soviet Union only after World War II in 1945. Before that, we were part of Czechoslovakia, Austria-Hungary, and Hungary. So, our region developed completely under the influence of Europe.”* (M., 20, Uzhhorod, volunteer)

Transcarpathia is a region where many different cultures meet. It has been part of various countries over the centuries, which has given it its own European identity. Even though it has experienced big political and cultural changes since it became part of the USSR, people there still remember a shared European history, especially in their narratives (Kovalchuk 2019).

The respondents’ narratives reveal an idealized perception of the European Union as a space characterized by stability, security, economic prosperity, and the rule of law. The EU is perceived as a significant source of symbolic capital, playing a pivotal role in shaping the identity of borderland residents. These residents aspire to feel connected to the broader European community, identifying themselves as bearers of European values and practitioners of culturally relevant norms.

*“The city is located on the border of several countries, which has helped it to develop. It could be said that we are lucky to be located on the border with Europe, right in the middle of it. In the past, the circumstances here have always been more influenced by the West, especially in Zakarpattia, which has been part of the European states for a long time.”* (M., 31, Uzhhorod, ordinary resident)

In this context we can mention the study of a Slovak border village by Allina-Pisano (2009), where she shows how the reconfiguring of economic relations, as a result of national political institutions changing, can produce

unexpected shifts in the enactment of ethno-cultural identity in a given territory.

According to Feyissa & Hoehne (2010), border areas can function not only as an economic or logistical resource, but also as a source of status privileges and identities. In this context, the emphasis on “Europeanness” and European identity is used to construct regional specificity and distance from other parts of Ukraine. The sense of “belonging to Europe” can act as a mechanism of social mobility. People who see themselves as part of the European space are more likely to take advantage of opportunities for labor migration, studying abroad, or participating in cross-border scholarship programs. In addition, they can adapt to change more easily because their identity is already oriented towards two (or more) cultural systems.

However, not all borderland residents have equal access to capitalizing on their identity. For example, those who speak Slovak or Hungarian have significantly more opportunities for work, study, and dual citizenship than those who do not.

Another important aspect of the border as a resource is the possibility of acquiring additional rights and privileges through dual citizenship or special cross-border status. In the region it is common to acquire Hungarian or Slovak citizenship, which gives access to freedom of movement, employment, education, and social protection (Hungarian or Slovak pensions) within the European Union.

Individuals possessing Slovak or Hungarian citizenship gain significant positional benefits. These include simplified access to employment, education, and social services within the EU. However, eligibility for obtaining second citizenship is unevenly distributed, leading to emerging social inequalities. Those of Slovak or Hungarian ethnic origin, stronger Slovak or Hungarian language skills, or with family connections in Hungary or Slovakia have greater opportunities to secure these privileges. Consequently, residents lacking such ties face additional barriers. This situation further deepens existing socioeconomic disparities within border regions. Joźwiak (2020) describes similar practices in his study.

In addition to dual citizenship, residents of border regions can take advantage of the local border traffic regime. This regime allows them to cross the border through simplified procedures even after the introduction of visa-free travel. As a result, border-area residents benefit from increased mobility. This enhanced mobility facilitates easier access to neighboring labor markets, goods, and services, and provides residents with more opportunities to adapt to economic changes or pursue employment abroad.

Obtaining additional legal status enables residents of border areas not only to benefit from legal mobility but also to explore alternative ways of utilizing the border as a resource.

Positional benefits are also associated with cross-border cooperation. The border has frequently been mentioned by representatives of local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, students, and ordinary residents of Uzhhorod in the context of cross-border cooperation. This cooperation primarily takes the form of relationships with twin cities or participation in border and cross-border cooperation programs, the latter of which serve as an important channel for building networking connections and developing social capital. Sister cities function as “nodes” in a global network, providing access to resources, knowledge, and cultural practices, thereby strengthening local communities, facilitating the exchange of experiences, and creating opportunities for development. During wartime, despite a certain degree of reduction to these ties, they have gained heightened importance by serving as a critical channel for financial and humanitarian aid.

Cross-border cooperation programs, such as HU-SK-RO-UA (Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine), are viewed by residents of border settlements as a means of attracting funding. Representatives of local authorities and NGOs place significant emphasis on the potential for cross-border cooperation in this regard.

The primary financial underpinning for these programs is provided by the European Union, with the objective of fostering the development of border communities in a range of areas, including infrastructure, environmental protection, healthcare, and business initiatives. The implementation of these programs enables border communities to access such grant funding, thereby addressing their specific needs and facilitating the implementation of local initiatives.

Representatives of Ukrainian NGOs openly acknowledge that cross-border cooperation serves as a tool for attracting EU funds. In this context, Slovak organizations function as intermediaries, thereby enabling Ukrainian NGOs to access funding sources that would otherwise be unattainable due to the absence of analogous funding opportunities in Ukraine. To secure funding for their initiatives, Ukrainian NGOs are tasked with the generation of ideas and the proposal of projects, actively encouraging their Slovak counterparts to collaborate. In turn, Slovak organizations serve as conduits through which Ukrainian organizations can access European grants.

*“Project initiatives have typically come from the Ukrainian side. In terms of project management, we are still significantly ahead, even compared to expert organizations... because we are driven by motivation, whereas many of our counterparts have become complacent due to steady funding from EU structural funds. We usually find partners through personal networks, and only if they are genuinely interested in the collaboration.”* (M., Uzhhorod, NGO representative)

The different institutional environments of the EU and Ukraine encourage cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia. Since there is limited funding, Ukrainian communities and civil society organizations look to EU resources, which they can access through partnerships with their Slovak counterparts. However, Slovakia's accession to the EU has led to a decline in interest from Slovak NGOs in collaborating with Ukrainian ones. This is because they can now access EU Structural Funds, which offer significantly larger financial opportunities than cross-border project funding does. In order to keep working together, Ukrainian organizations often agree to a system where the money comes from Slovakia, but the projects are planned and run by the Ukrainian partner.

This makes Ukrainian NGOs responsible for creating ideas and putting them into action, while their partners in Slovakia provide the money and help to access European grants. Although this model supports activities across borders, it also highlights the differences in how easily organizations in Ukraine can access resources. This makes it hard for Ukrainian organizations to adapt their projects to the requirements and priorities of their Slovak partners and European funding programs.

### Cross-border educational mobility

The border is frequently mentioned in the context of expanded opportunities for higher education in Slovakia and Hungary. Geographical proximity and linguistic affinity play significant roles in shaping the decisions of Ukrainian applicants to pursue studies abroad. According to respondents, the main arguments in favor of studying in Slovakia are based on key differences between the higher education systems of Ukraine and Slovakia.

The number of Ukrainians studying at Slovak universities and colleges greatly increased after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While there were only 5,726 Ukrainians studying full-time or part-time at public and private universities in the 2021/2022 academic year, one year later the number had risen to 10,184. According to data from the Slovak

Centre of Scientific and Technical Information, the number of Ukrainian students in Slovakia reached 10,466 by October 2023 (Minarechová 2024).

Firstly, respondents assert that the quality of education in Slovak universities is superior due to superior facilities, contemporary curricula, and stronger integration into the European educational space. Secondly, they contend that Slovak educational institutions exhibit a lower degree of corruption, resulting in more transparent conditions for admission and study. Easier admission requirements are another argument highlighted by respondents. Admission to Slovak universities is frequently based on an interview or grade point average, without the necessity of passing external, independent evaluations or other entrance exams.

The provision of free education for non-EU citizens constitutes a salient factor that merits attention. As more and more Slovak students also choose to study abroad, universities are motivated to fill that gap with Ukrainian students who then have free access to the labor market. This policy is congruent with the EU's educational strategy, which is oriented towards ensuring access to education and fostering academic mobility. Slovak universities are funded on the basis of enrolment numbers, a measure that serves to encourage them to attract foreign applicants. This approach stands in stark contrast to the Ukrainian system, wherein the number of state-funded places is constrained, frequently necessitating students to shoulder the financial burden of their education. According to respondents, another significant benefit of pursuing academic studies in Slovakia pertains to the international recognition of Slovak diplomas. In contrast to Ukrainian diplomas, which frequently necessitate additional nostrification processes, Slovak diplomas are automatically recognized across the European Union, thus offering access to a seamless academic recognition system.

The analysis of the respondents' feedback indicates that studying in Slovakia offers educational benefits, as well as a heightened level of security and a more extensive range of opportunities in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Young people who choose to study abroad are protected from the immediate risks of war and mobilization. Furthermore, they gain full freedom of movement within the Schengen area, enabling them to bypass restrictions imposed on Ukrainian citizens aged 18 and older, such as the prohibition on leaving the country during martial law. Furthermore, respondents emphasized the opportunities for partnerships between educational institutions due to the proximity of the border, including student and faculty mobility programs, joint curricula, academic conferences, and other forms of cross-border academic collaboration.

In the context of educational mobility, the Ukrainian-Slovak border region constitutes a valuable resource, offering access to free, high-quality

education with prospects for future employment in the EU, as well as a stable security environment amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although educational mobility in the Zakarpattia border region existed prior to the full-scale invasion, it has gained greater relevance and intensity following the introduction of martial law and its associated restrictions (Slobodyan 2018).

In the midst of armed conflict and socio-economic turbulence, an increasing number of families residing in border regions are seeking refuge for their children, hoping to ensure their safety and facilitate their education. Education in the European Union is now regarded not only as a means of enhancing knowledge, but also as a means of ensuring safety and stability.

### *Borderlands and cultural commodification*

In the context of the survey, only a quarter of participants indicated that living near the border enriches them culturally. Respondents occasionally mentioned cultural events, such as festivals, religious holidays, or city days which involve creative teams from neighboring regions or countries. However, these references were largely factual, with little focus on the potential cultural or social benefits of such interactions. Only a small number of participants highlighted the positive aspects of cultural exchange, including fostering good neighborly relations, gaining new experiences, and broadening cultural horizons.

The intensity of cultural contacts has declined since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Restrictions on border crossings, related to the pandemic, significantly reduced opportunities for cross-border interactions, including joint cultural events. This decline was further intensified by the war, which resulted in a shift in priorities and a limitation of cultural initiatives.

Despite the occurrence of cultural exchange, local residents do not invariably perceive it to be a substantial resource for fostering a shared identity or promoting cultural integration. This perception is potentially influenced by economic and social factors which eclipse cultural life in terms of significance. In other words, socio-economic challenges and hardships may divert attention from intangible aspects of cross-border interaction such as cultural exchange and integration.

Processes of the economic instrumentalization and commodification of culture are evident in border regions, as evidenced by the regular performance of several ensembles from the Berezhany district and Uzhhorod at festive events in Slovakia. These performances have become a significant source of income for members of these creative groups. This example high-

lights those cultural ties which, while playing a crucial role in preserving identity and fostering good neighborly relations, also often acquire an economic dimension. The participation of cultural groups in cross-border cultural events can serve as a mechanism for cultural production, thereby providing additional financial support, particularly in instances where local funding is limited. This represents a commodification of culture (Appadurai 2003), where cultural practices and traditions, once symbolic for the community, are reinterpreted as commodities and marketed to a target audience of consumers.

The proximity of the border is of particular value to young people and higher-income residents of Uzhhorod, as it facilitates travel and the expansion of horizons. For these groups, the primary advantage of residing near the border is the opportunity to explore new cultures, gain knowledge, and integrate European values, standards, and practices into their communities. The border's function extends beyond mere geographical convenience, serving as a conduit to the EU, thereby facilitating access to modern technologies, markets, and information resources. This connection plays a crucial role in driving the economic development of the region.

### *Security dimensions of the border*

In addition to its economic significance, the border also holds critical importance as a security resource. This dimension has become increasingly relevant following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent situation changed the migration pattern, converting Zakarpattia from a sender to a receiver of migrants (IDPs) (Koroutchev 2024). For the majority of interviewees, this was how security emerged as a central aspect of their perception of the border.

As a member of both NATO and the European Union, Slovakia is regarded as providing a superior level of protection, thereby rendering it an appealing security resource to the residents of Ukraine's border regions. It has been observed that proximity to the Slovak border engenders a perceived protective effect against potential missile attacks from Russia. It is hypothesized that the risk of striking a NATO member acts as a deterrent to such attacks in the border areas.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has had a significant impact on the perception of the border, which was previously viewed primarily as a source of economic opportunities through the differ-

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1 As of 1 January 2024, there are more than 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, who moved to the territory of Transcarpathia as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

ences in the legal, economic, and cultural systems on either side (differential benefits). However, the security component has now taken priority, emerging as a key factor in population movement (refugees or internally displaced persons) and the formation of new types of cross-border interactions. In the context of the ongoing military actions and the imminent threat of mobilization, the Ukrainian-Slovak border has evolved into a strategically pivotal locale, serving as a “path to protection” (a positional benefit). For men of conscription age, the proximity of the border offers an additional opportunity to potentially avoid mobilization.

*“The first thing you notice is how our people behave. They don’t worry about what might happen tomorrow that could harm them, and I’m not just talking about the war — I mean anything. If, God forbid, something happens to Ukraine, people don’t worry because they have somewhere to go. They can leave in an instant.”* (M., 45, Malyi Bereznyi, ordinary resident)

Similar narratives are also found in the study of the Ukrainian-Polish border after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Zhurzhenko 2024). Proximity to the EU border is generally perceived as an important factor for individual security, and for some, it even contributes to a sense of collective security.

In the wake of the recent socio-political upheaval, a notable shift in border mobility has been observed, with many individuals who previously engaged in business or regular work trips now crossing the border as refugees. The war led to an intertwining of migratory flows: Transcarpathia became both a place of refuge for Ukrainians from outside the region and a point of departure for the part of the local population who emigrated (Farbar 2023).

By mid-2012, almost 1.5 million Ukrainians had crossed the border from Ukraine into Slovakia, with around 1.26 million subsequently returning. About 118,900 people have registered in Slovakia under temporary protection programs. Currently, Ukrainians are the second largest minority in Slovakia, albeit unofficially, after Hungarians, making them a significant demographic group on Slovak territory (Papcunová 2023). This process has led to a notable shift in the focus of cross-border programs, which have begun to take a more active role in humanitarian initiatives, in contrast to their previous emphasis on economic issues.

The growth of the Ukrainian community in Slovakia and other neighboring countries has resulted in the emergence of a new cultural space, where the Ukrainian language, students, and entrepreneurs have come to play a significant role. These processes also have implications for the future of

border regions, as some displaced persons may opt to remain in the EU on a permanent basis, thereby altering the demographic and economic situation in both border areas.

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the border with Slovakia is perceived by local residents not only as a geographical barrier, but also as a symbol and a crucial security resource. However, as the war ends and the security situation stabilizes, the importance of the border as a source of security may diminish and differential benefits may come to the fore again. This shift could prompt a rethinking of the border's role in the lives of local communities, with other factors of cross-border interaction potentially taking precedence. This observation underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of the perception of the border by the local populations, where its significance and function are adapted to external circumstances and the internal requirements of the communities.

## Summary

Contemporary border studies conceptualize borders not as static physical boundaries, but as dynamic socio-spatial entities with multiple social, economic, and cultural functions. This perspective has gained prominence in the face of globalization, increased cross-border mobility, and the expanding role of state institutions in providing security and control.

Modern scholarship highlights the relational and fluid nature of borders. Depending on the context, borders can act as barriers or bridges, dividing or uniting groups. They emerge from the social practices, discourses, symbolic acts, institutional decisions, and networks of interaction which define their existence. Borders are more than physical demarcations; they are complex social constructs which reflect relationships between social groups, nation states, economic actors, and international institutions. They need to be understood in terms of their capacity to produce social meanings and maintain power structures that regulate access to resources, territories and opportunities.

The concept of borders as resources offers a new perspective on their significance to border communities. Rather than emphasizing constraints, this approach highlights the active role of individuals in using borders as tools to gain specific benefits. Depending on the strategies employed by local residents, the border can function as either an obstacle or an opportunity. Participants in this study perceive almost every aspect of the border instrumentally, evaluating it through the lens of tangible and intangible benefits. Their focus is primarily on the economic, social, and security opportunities created by proximity to the border. The Ukrainian-Slovak

border is seen as a resource that provides access to cheaper goods, higher quality services, increased security, and educational opportunities. In this context, the results of our study confirmed the main theses of the authors mentioned in the bibliography.

Informal practices in border areas have become an important means of survival for residents in times of economic instability. The opening of the border in the 1990s created opportunities for smuggling, cross-border trade, and participation in the illegal labor market. Border residents exploited price differences in fuel, alcohol, food, and other goods to make a profit, laying the foundation for the region's informal economy. Although these practices often bordered on the illegal, they provided economic stability for many families in the border regions. The border was seen as a long-term economic resource, adaptable to different activities depending on the circumstances. Even after Slovakia's accession to the EU and the Schengen area, involving stricter border controls, local residents continued to find loopholes and to exploit economic, regulatory, and legal asymmetries on both sides of the border. These are a "coping system", a "bricolage", an improvement of the ordinary situation for those inhabitants of Transcarpathia who would have liked to work on the other side of the border and to become "European", but cannot because this possibility is rare (Ciapin 2017).

Another aspect is related to the fact that the Ukrainian-Slovak border is seen less as a space for interethnic interaction and more as a line dividing Ukraine and Europe, or as a "door" to the European world, enabling integration into its socio-cultural and economic space. The study of the Ukrainian-Slovak borderland reveals the dual nature of borders as both barriers and bridges, presenting challenges and opportunities.

Amid economic instability, war, and general uncertainty, borderland residents increasingly prioritize aspects of interaction which offer practical benefits. This reflects a gradual pragmatization and instrumentalization of their relationship with the border, whereby personal and cultural ties have become less prominent than tangible advantages.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly changed the perception of the border with Slovakia, which was previously seen mainly as a source of economic opportunities due to differences in the legal, economic, and cultural systems on either side. Now the security component is coming to the fore, becoming a key factor of migration and the formation of new types of cross-border interaction. The Ukrainian-Slovak border has become a strategically important point that serves as "protection". In this context, the border functions not only as a geographical boundary, but also as a symbolic barrier, offering access to a safe environment during times

of crisis. The geographical distance from Russia and from the frontline is generally perceived as a security advantage.

The combination of “differential” and “positional” benefits shows that the role of the border changes depending on the political, economic, and security situation. In times of peace, economic aspects may come to the fore, while in times of crisis, security and humanitarian aspects may come to the fore. It is this flexibility that makes the border a special space, where the inhabitants are constantly looking for a balance between opportunities and risks.

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