

## Border divergence or convergence in the context of integration: A case study of the Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borderlands

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### Abstract

A state level integration process should first and foremost have a positive impact on the border areas. The current Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borders acquired the status of ‘state borders’ in 1991 as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Russia and Belarus immediately embarked on the path of integration in the 1990s, effectively cancelling border controls, Russia and Kazakhstan were forced to resolve border security issues by strengthening their border and establishing customs control processes. The launch of the Customs Union in 2010 partially removed the existing trade contradictions, and the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 significantly strengthened interstate interactions. However, despite the declared integration, it could not compensate for the dividing role of the border which separates the diverging political, legal, and economic spaces of the three countries. The purpose of this study is to determine whether divergence or convergence occurs in the considered border regions, as seen through the prism of demographic, ethno-cultural and economic changes. We rely on the results of a multi-year field research in various regions of the Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borderland (2014–2018), data from official statistics, and some conclusions based on the authors’ findings as part of their work on previous collective research projects. We found out that demographic processes became one of the reasons, as well as the main driver of divergence. The active depopulation evidently decreased the potential for cross-border cooperation (especially at the local level). The Russian-Belarusian borderland is still rather homogeneous in sociocultural sense, and the border between Russia and Kazakhstan is characterized by an increase in ethno-cultural divergence. The post-Soviet period of nation-building in Kazakhstan was a period of the revival of the national language and *kazakhization* of the public space. Our analysis demonstrates the crucial importance of path dependence in the economic cooperation on the whole and in the specialization of interregional interactions. We observed both autonomization and absence of cross-border cohesion in the economic sphere, and in many cases, we saw examples of competition.

**Keywords:** divergence, convergence, integration, post-Soviet borders, cross-border regionalization, Eurasian integration, EAEU

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### Introduction

Border regions often benefit from integration at the state level. For instance, intensive cross-border cooperation is observed along the borders within the European Union. Cross-border interactions have always played an important role in European integration. Even

long before the massive enlargement of the EU in 2004, the border regions of Poland, the Czech Republic and other countries were “rising” to the level of a neighbour due to the instruments of cross-border cooperation. This topic was discussed in many research papers (BARTHEL, M. 2017; WOJCIK, M. *et al.* 2018; VAISHAR, A. and ŠT’ASTNÁ, M. 2019).

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On the contrary, some studies disprove the idea of the borderless world and ubiquitous convergence along open borders (Kolossov, V. and Scott, J. 2013). Cooperation across borders can be achieved through “multilevel, multi-sectoral and long-term approaches that involve transformation at the international, national and local levels” (Kolossov, V. and Scott, J. 2013). The case of Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borderlands is a practical example of this theoretical discourse.

We can consider these border areas from two positions. On the one hand, convergence and divergence are consequences of the common Soviet past and the processes of disintegration of a single economic, political and legal space. Strengthening of sovereignty could not go hand in hand with convergence in the 1990s, and further rapprochement was largely the restoration of previously created cooperative and social ties. On the other hand, convergence and divergence can also be considered in the context of traditional integration theory, comparing the processes taking place here with the experience of the European Union and other integration associations in the world. This is acceptable, since the integration processes of the 2010s in the Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borderlands were not based on the Soviet past and were built on completely new principles. Moreover, within the European Union there are also examples of the development of convergence in the border areas of the countries that have survived the collapse (the case of Czechoslovakia).

Russia and Belarus border each other along six regions (*oblast*), three on each side of the border (1,239 km). The Russian-Kazakhstan border is the longest continuous land border in the world (7,598 km) which includes 12 regions on the Russian side and 7 regions on the Kazakhstan side.

For a long time, it seemed that the integration aspirations of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, as well as the common historical background of their joint incorporation in the USSR, would allow to pursue the path of convergence. However, it later turned out that greater in-

tegration does not necessarily lead to convergence of the border areas of the three countries.

Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borders acquired the status of state borders in 1991. During the first years after the collapse of the USSR, disintegration of both political and economic spaces took place. The borders formally remained transparent in terms of movement of people, but the opportunities for employment, education, and business development with neighbours were precipitously decreasing. The situation with regular cross-border traffic was worsening rapidly as well. Even on the border with Belarus, the end of suburban railway line (1993) and a fourfold reduction of cross-border bus routes led to an actual paralysis of cross-border contacts as early as in 1993–1994 (Katrovsky, A.P. 2015). Since 1995, the integration aspirations of Russia and Belarus brought about abolition of the border regime. At the same time, along with the integration processes between Russia and Kazakhstan in the second half of the 1990s, the reinforcement of border control took place. This was primarily caused by the lack of effective mechanisms to solve border security issues (Smith, J. 2017).

In 1995, the first attempt was made to create a Customs Union with the participation of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (joined in 1996) and Tajikistan (in 1999). However, the activities of this organization turned out to be ineffective: it proved not possible to solve the problems of non-tariff regulation, as well as the issues of unification of a number of customs rules. In October 2000, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed the Treaty on the Establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC). A milestone for both sections of borders was the 2010–2011 period, when the Customs Union began its work, and customs control along the internal borders of the union was eliminated. In 2012, the Single Economic Space was launched introducing in addition to the free movement of goods, the freedom of movement of capital, services and labour. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 gave a

start to the functioning of the Eurasian space on the principle of “four freedoms”. First of all, this allowed the participating countries to make a significant progress in trade integration. The movement of goods could now be carried out without state control (transport, phyto-sanitary and veterinary) (MORACHEVSKAYA, K. et al. 2018). On the contrary, single customs tariffs were characterized by a large number of exemptions and restrictions since countries initially agreed to allow such exemptions (KARPENKO, M.S. 2019). They were used to protect the internal market on both sections of the border.

Despite the common history and the Eurasian integration of the post-Soviet period, today’s cross-border cooperation practices are extremely fragmented making it difficult to speak about convergence unequivocally (KOLOSOV, V.A. and SEBENTSOV, A.B. 2020).

The objective of this paper is to determine whether divergence or convergence in terms of Eurasian integration occurs in the border regions in reality. We will try to answer several questions. How do these processes differ in the Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borderlands? How are these processes running in the demographic, cultural and economic senses?

We rely on the results of a multi-year field research in various regions of the Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Kazakhstan borderland (2014–2018), and on the expert interviews with representatives from the government, business, and non-profit organizations in particular. 55 interviews were conducted in all regions of the Russian-Belarusian borderland and 46 interviews – in different regions of the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland. The key topics of the interviews were formats and spheres of cross-border cooperation, benefits and costs of integration, obstacles for mutual trade and business cooperation. To achieve the aim of this paper, we also used the data from official statistics, as well as the regulatory legal acts of integration initiatives. Moreover, some conclusions are based on the authors’ results as part of their work on previous collective research projects (Cross-Border

Cooperation Between the Regions of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine [2013] supported by the Eurasian Development Bank, and Russian Borderlands: Neighbourhood Challenges [2014–2019] supported by the Russian Science Foundation<sup>3</sup> and some others).

In the first section of the paper, we briefly describe theoretical approaches to the discussion on convergence or divergence of the border regions. We analyse how these issues have been discussed in the context of European integration. In the second section, we consider the demographic aspects of border regions comparison. Then we try to figure out the role of national (ethnic) and cultural policies in the convergence/divergence processes. The objective of the last section is to reveal whether any intensification has been taking place in cross-border economic cooperation during the period of integration processes at the state level (since 2010).

## Theoretical approaches

In spatial economics and economic geography, convergence is often defined as spatial equilibrium, and divergence – as spatial disequilibrium (LIPSHITZ, G. 1992). In the economic context convergence means the process of reducing or eliminating regional inequality. This is achieved thanks to the free movement of production factors. If we are to talk about neighbouring territories, the concept would mean close economic ties at all levels. Regional divergence appears for instance when governments intervene in the spatial flows of production factors. Institutions, including integration units, could also determine the processes of convergence or divergence and act in combination with geographical factors, e.g. centre-peripheral differences. The removal of administrative

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see Cross-Border Cooperation of the Regions of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, 2013. Available at <https://eabr.org/analytics/integration-research/cii-reports/prigranichnoe-sotrudnichestvo-regionov-rossii-belarusi-i-ukrainy/> (In Russian); and KOLOSOV, V.A. et al. 2018.

barriers as part of an integration process often contributes to cross-border mingling, enhancing interactions. But the real (not de jure) integration process that leads to convergence should go hand in hand with eliminating discrimination for economic activities on both sides of the border.

From a sociological point of view, the key idea of convergence is the idea that societies move toward a condition of similarity (HERKENRATH, M. *et al.* 2005). In the integration rhetoric, this means the prevalence of common values over national cultural policy.

A detailed contemporary analysis of the interpretation of “convergence” and “divergence” concepts was carried out by BENEDEK, J. and MOLDOVAN, A. (2015). They suggest a “multidimensional perspective on convergence and divergence that means a combination of social and economic dimensions”. BENEDEK and MOLDOVAN emphasize the “interrelatedness of social and economic factors influencing development”.

EU enlargement sparked a large number of studies on convergence and divergence (BENEDEK, J. and MOLDOVAN, A. 2015; LANG, T. 2015; ČELAN, T.J. 2016). It was shown that despite the growth in funding for cross-border cooperation projects, “the huge geographical handicap, the transport and language barriers and in general the strong periphery status of the border area in comparison to the capital” did not allow to achieve the convergence outside the internal borders of EU-15 (ČELAN, T.J. 2016).

VAN NIJNATTEN and BOYCHUK contributed to the discussion about convergence and divergence of the border regions in terms of integration at the national level. The case of Canada and the USA shows that convergence may exist at the state-province level and not be evident in national-level patterns (VAN NIJNATTEN, D.L. and BOYCHUK, G.W. 2004). The intensively debated question is also evident in the regional identities in regard to social convergence and deterritorialization (BUFON, M. 006). Some authors proved that the course of convergence or divergence between regions depended on human capital,

investments, population dynamics, and spillovers (CARTONE, A. *et al.* 2021).

The problem of convergence and divergence in the border regions is often associated with the centre-peripheral paradigm. According to BENEDEK and MOLDOVAN “polarization should be considered a special case of economic divergence” (BENEDEK, J. and MOLDOVAN, A. 2015). Some researchers focus on the problem of regional equalization that suffers under the influence of urban agglomeration growth (MÁLIKOVÁ, L. *et al.* 2016; FEDOROV, G.M. and MIKHAYLOV, A.S. 2018; KOLOSOV, V. and MORACHEVSKAYA, K. 2020). This leads to the peripherization of the territories far away from capitals, such as border regions.

LIPSHITZ suggested to define four spatial outcomes related to the relations between convergence and divergence: paired combinations of economic development dispersion, population dispersion (rooting peripherality), economic development polarization, and population polarization (outflow to centres and capitals) (LIPSHITZ, G. 1992). Following LIPSHITZ’s concept, we are attempting to find out the results to which the post-Soviet period led in the demographic sense, as well as economic interactions.

The border sections under consideration described in the context of integration have already become the objects of several separate studies. The level of centralization differs between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and affects the current state of cross-border cooperation. Despite the relatively high level of centralization in modern Russia, it is even higher in neighbouring countries with a unitary form of government (VIEIRA, A. 2017). In any case, this does not contribute to the institutionalization of cross-border interactions at the local and regional levels. Belarus and Kazakhstan are characterized by a weak level of legal support for cross-border and inter-regional cooperation, and all three countries have fears of granting regions and municipalities additional opportunities in carrying out foreign relations (SEBENTSOV, A.B. 2018).

The project of the Union State of Russia and Belarus in the context of Eurasian integration

was studied by many scientists (NIKITENKO, P. and VERTINSKAYA, T. 2006; CZEREWACZ-FILIPOWICZ, K. and KONOPELKO, A. 2017; VIEIRA, A. 2017). Most of them came to the conclusion that the tendency of divergence existed in opposition to the primary premise of the project. VIEIRA showed that the present state of the Russian-Belarusian cooperation looked like “medium-term bilateral trade-offs” and did not focus on common integration.

Issues of Russian-Kazakhstan relations in the context of integration were considered in the works of VARDOMSKY, L.B. *et al.* (2019). Economic issues are also reflected in publications by the Eurasian Development Bank and some other authors (LIMONOV, L. *et al.* 2012; VINOKUROV, E.YU. *et al.* 2015). Security and cooperation issues were discussed in the works of GOLUNOV, S.V. (2005), and the weakness of the institutions of cooperation was studied by one of the authors of this paper (SEBENTSOV, A.B. 2018). However, a comprehensive analysis of two different parts of the borderland within the Eurasian Economic Union has not yet been carried out. We will try to fill this gap in this work.

### **Depopulation and demographic divergence**

Depopulation and peripheralization on the Russian-Belarusian borderland are historical in nature. The abolition of serfdom, agrarian overpopulation and rapid development of the largest cities – Saint Petersburg and Moscow – contributed to the drainage of the rural population into the cities. The subsequent construction of railways to the Volga region and Siberia strengthened these processes. One of the border regions with Belarus – the Pskov region – became “a population donor” for growing Saint Petersburg in 1870s and from the 1920s till the present it has steadily declined in population (MANAKOV, A. 2016). Similar processes were observed in the Smolensk region: by the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relatively high natural population increase could not compensate for the migration loss (FEDOROV, G.M. *et al.* 2020).

The migration outflow in the adjacent Belarusian regions was less intense due to the relative remoteness of the largest cities of the Russian Empire and became noticeable only after 1897 when the Belarusian border residents began to move to agricultural (Siberia, Far East of Russia) and industrial (Donbass) regions. However, earlier (in comparison with the Russian side of the borderland) Soviet industrialization made it possible to retain and even attract population to the newly created industrial enterprises, while strong agricultural sector made it possible to avoid large-scale depopulation.

The Russian-Kazakhstan borderland has been the area of intensive settling since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kazakhstan’s incorporation into Russia (1730–1880s) played a significant role in the formation of the settlement system. The military fortifications that arose during the colonization period became the basis for urban settlement system. Railway construction at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resettlement of peasants, industrialization and cultivation of virgin lands led to the influx of more and more settlers. As a result, in all regions of the borderland population was observed to multiply several folds during the Soviet period.

The collapse of the USSR led to fundamental changes in the dynamics of demographic processes. What contribution have these changes made to the divergence of the border regions?

The depopulation trend in the Russian-Belarusian borderland has strengthened. As for the Belarusian side of the border, depopulation was about two times higher than the national average, while in the Russian part – almost eight times higher. The main reason for the population decline was natural decline. At the same time on the Belarusian side, the state still dominated the economy, so it was possible to preserve the largest industrial and agricultural enterprises and retain the rural population (GORBACHEV, O. and LIN, D. 2013). Therefore, the demographic situation was more favourable. However, in the period from 1991 to 2020, although rela-

tively stable in the demographic sense, the Belarusian part of the borderland lost about 18 percent of its population compared to the Russian – 27 percent. This difficult demographic situation became a real challenge for the socio-economic development of the borderland (ZEMLYAK, S.V. et al. 2018).

The greatest changes were observed in the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland where the population began to decrease rapidly, especially on the Kazakhstan side. During the first stage (in the 1990s), the border regions lost more than 800,000 people as a result of the first wave of emigration from Kazakhstan. Most of the migrants were ethnic Russians, as well as Germans, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Koreans and some other ethnic groups. High net reproduction rate is a characteristic feature of ethnic Kazakhs, but it was insufficient to compensate the population losses. In the Russian part of the borderland, natural population decline is observed in the majority of the region. At the same time, the flow of migrants from Kazakhstan (Central Asia) to the border regions of Russia throughout the 1990s remained a significant factor in compensating for the migration and natural losses (MKRICHYAN, N. 2002). In the 2000s, this flow sharply decreased, although the general outflow of population from the border regions continued.

The main consequence of the current demographic situation is a reduction in the social capital of cross-border cooperation. Depopulation of rural areas and relocation of their residents to large cities reduce the intensity of everyday contacts, which are some of the most important indicators of the real existence of cross-border communities (ZOROVA, M. et al. 2018). Depopulation and peripheralization are becoming more and more significant factors in the divergence of the border regions under consideration.

### Nationalities and cultural policy as divergence factors

Integration in the economic and political spheres and the state building processes con-

tradict each other in a number of aspects. These contradictions are often visible in the borderlands as places for the manifestation of state power, or of a special state policy (linguistic, historical, cultural, symbolic), which leads to ever greater divergence (PAASI, A. 2009).

The situation on the Russian-Belarusian borderland is relatively neutral in this matter. In the 1990s–2000s, there were organizations and active residents who promoted national traditions, but such movements were not supported by the president of the republic. However, in recent years, *belarusization* has become increasingly evident (ПОСОКХИН, I. 2019). The Belarusian leadership began to support an integrated national identity using the system of education, media, historical narratives, as well as to keep distance from Russia if the geopolitical situation in the world became unstable.

However, during the period covered in this study, there was no evident influence of the *belarusization* on the border interactions. It is partly explained by the fact that in ethno-cultural terms the Russian-Belarusian borderland is a zone with blurred borders (GRIGORYEVA, R. 2020).

Cultural divergence was most clearly manifested in the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland. From the very beginning of the 1990s, the process of *kazakhization* began. Its leitmotif was building a “new statehood based on the ethnic identity of the titular nationality” (PETRENKO, E. 2011)<sup>4</sup>.

First of all, *kazakhization* manifested itself in a new educational and language policy. Thus, in all border regions, an effort to reduce the number of “Russian” schools were undertaken, which was officially explained by a decrease in demand for Russian-language teaching. The expected transition of Kazakhstan to the Latin alphabet is also considered by many Kazakhstan researchers as a necessary meas-

<sup>4</sup> The term *kazakhization* is used in the context of nation-building in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and the Kazakh ethnic identity (SVANBERG, I. 1994; KAISER, R. and CHINN, J. 1995; BREMMER, I. and WELT, C. 1996; DAVENEL, Y.-M. 2012). The concept of *kazakhization* is discussed in detail in (SARSEMBAYEV, A. 1999).

ure to strengthen the common Turkic identity (KADYRZHANOV, R. 2009).

Another sphere affected by *kazakhization* was the toponymic landscape. During the years of independence in Kazakhstan, many geographical areas were renamed. Of the 92 municipal districts located in the borderland of Kazakhstan, 43 districts have been renamed. In a number of cases, the renaming took place without involving the democratic choice of the local population, and in some exceptional cases, even in spite of it.

Great success has been achieved in *kazakhization* of the administrative elite in the border regions. The tradition of using clan ties as a social lift “allows Kazakhs to dominate numerically in the political system, even in those regions where the Kazakh ethnic group is not the majority of the population” (KADYRZHANOV, R.K. 2014).

Changes in the territorial division and the resettlement policy are also often viewed as part of *kazakhization*. Thus, due to consolidation of several northern border regions in Kazakhstan, there are no regions left with a clear predominance of the Russian population. For instance, as a result of the inclusion of the Semipalatinsk region into the East Kazakhstan region in 1997, the share of Kazakhs in the united East Kazakhstan region increased from 27 percent (1989) to 49 percent (1999), while the share of Russians fell from 66 percent (1989) to 45 percent (1999).

The policy of *kazakhization* along with the infringement of the non-titular population rights (BREMNER, I. 1994; LEBEDEVA, N. 1995) have been the main reasons for emigration intentions among the non-Kazakh population (primarily Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Germans). After the first waves of emigration in the 1990s, the intensity of the migration outflow has noticeably decreased. Currently, the bulk of emigrants are Russians from four border regions of northern and north-eastern Kazakhstan. In 2019, they accounted for 60 percent of the total flow of emigrants, of which 88 percent moved to Russia.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia did not take special measures to strengthen national identity on the borders with Belarus and Kazakhstan. However, on the Russian-Kazakhstan border, some civil activists note the lack of “Kazakh schools” or at least separate Kazakh-speaking classes (GERASIMENKO, T.I. 2020). At the same time, local residents and experts in interviews noted that such classes are not popular, and “Russian Kazakhs”, if they have a choice, prefer to send their children to the “Russian schools”.

### **Cross-border economic cooperation: Did intensification take place in the context of integration?**

Cross-border economic cooperation between Russia and Belarus has always been carried out in the forms of mutual assistance. In Soviet times, the industrial complex of the Russian-Belarusian borderland was not highly integrated. Economic cooperation (including cross-border) between Russia and Kazakhstan, on the contrary, was well-developed, and the production ties of individual enterprises were very tight. What has changed during the post-Soviet period?

After the collapse of the USSR, an active transformation of the economic structure went on in all regions of the borderland. The main direction of this transformation was a gradual decrease in the share of agriculture and industry with a simultaneous increase in the share of the service sector. In the Belarusian part of the Russian-Belarusian borderland, this process progressed slowly due to the protectionist policies of the central authorities. In contrast, a deeper decline was observed on the Kazakhstan side of the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland. However, de-industrialization and the decline of the main industries were followed by the rapid development of raw materials production, especially in the energy sector.

Today, in Belarus economic potential is concentrated in capital city and its surroundings (Minsk and Minsk region). However, border

regions with Russia are leading in a number of indicators (for instance, share in the volume of industrial production) and count 25 percent of the GDP. The percentage of total GDP for Kazakhstan associated with their borderlands is 37 percent, thus, they concentrate the economic potential of the country.

For Russia, the role of border regions in the economy is much lower. For Belarus, 0.9 percent of the Russian GDP and for Kazakhstan, 12 percent. In terms of GRP per capita, Russian and Belarusian regions differ from each other by just a little. However, for the Russian-Kazakhstan border area, the situation is much more variable (*Figure 1*).

Today, there are quite a lot of enterprises with Belarusian investments in the Russian border regions. Most of them are small enterprises in the food, chemical and wood-working industries. In fact, there are only two examples of large-scale cooperation – a joint venture Bryanskselemash (agricultural machinery) founded in 2005, and the Amkodor-Bryansk Plant (loaders) founded in 2009. In both cases, the creation of joint ventures has a positive effect for both Russian and Belarusian sides. For Russia, it includes creating new jobs, increasing tax revenues to the regional budget, and for Belarus – access to the Russian market and Russian support programs. Intensification of industrial cooperation has slowed down in recent years.

Belarusian small business is widely represented in the Russian part of the borderland where it has been attracted by more favourable taxation and enterprise registration requirements. Our interviews with representatives of small businesses showed that the Russian border regions are not the main arena for Belarusian business development, but rather a test site of access to the Russian market. The experts we interviewed, as well as representatives of governmental bodies often noted that there are also many cases of enterprises being registered in the Russian border regions, yet their operations' sites are difficult to determine for taxation purposes. Under such conditions, it remains unclear whether the local economies benefit from such small businesses sig-

nificantly. In addition, due to the protectionist nature of the Belarusian economic interactions, there is a noticeable asymmetry in the counter part of Russian small businesses on the Belarus side of the border.

In the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland, the strongest economic interactions have been established in the fuel and energy complex. The experts we interviewed in 2017 repeatedly mentioned natural gas from the West Kazakhstan region (Karachaganak) being processed at the Orenburg gas processing plant as one of the most successful examples.

Economic cooperation in the oil sector is associated with Russian oil processing at the Pavlodar Refinery. As compensation for oil supplied from Russia, Kazakhstan provides about 5 million tons of its own oil to the Atasu-Alashankou export oil pipeline, thus fulfilling part of Russia's export obligations to the Chinese side of the arrangement (KARPENKO, M.S. 2019). Along with this, Kazakhstan oil companies provide raw resources for Russian refineries in Samara and Orenburg regions.

The trend of recent decades has been the gradual autonomization of the economic life of the border regions in the "old" areas of cooperation. Among the most notable is the reduction in Kazakh coal volumes used as fuel at Russian power plants. Some of the Russian power plants in the border regions of Russia have already switched to alternative fuels (gas and oil) (KARPENKO, M.S. 2019). At the same time, the nationalization of production (for example, the creation of an aluminium cluster in Pavlodar region) contributed to the formation of more advanced industrial cooperation schemes, including those with partners from the EAEU countries (Russia).

Foreign trade is one of the best indicators of converging or diverging economies. The case of the Russian-Belarusian borderland shows that on the whole, the inherited (from the USSR) functions of the regions in trade turnover persist. The export potential of the Russian regions is limited due to the low industrial capacity and geographical position (MORACHEVSKAYA, K.A. et al. 2018). On the con-



Fig. 1. Gradients of GRP (PPP) per capita between the border regions of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2019 (USD). Source: Compiled by the authors based on the data of the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, the Federal State Statistics Service of Russia, the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

trary, the economy of the Belarusian border regions is export-oriented towards Russia.

Contradictory trends are noticeable in the dynamics of exports and imports. The share of imports from Belarus in all border regions of Russia was growing in 2010–2019. Calculations based on the data of the customs services show that it varied from 20 percent in Pskov region to 70 percent in Smolensk region. On the contrary, exports to Belarus increased during this period only in Smolensk region (from 30% to 40%), which played an important role as a transit territory to the Moscow Capital region. In the Pskov region, exports to Belarus decreased twofold (from 50% to 20%). All Belarusian regions experienced a slight decrease in the share of exports to Russia in 2010–2019. This can hardly be associated with diverging economies, but is more likely due to exchange rate fluctuations and a decrease in purchasing power in Russia. Imports from Russia increased notably only in the Gomel (Homiel) region (from 71% to 83%). It can be stated that the mutual importance of the border regions in terms of trade volumes is still high. Fluctuations are not related to the changes in convergence or divergence of the regional economies, but to external factors. Only the Mogilev (Mahilioŭ) region has a positive trade balance in recent years.

The leading position in commodities flow in the Belarusian border regions has not changed. The largest share in exports is represented by chemical products, petroleum products (mostly produced from the Russian oil), metals and related products, food products, pulp, and paper. The commodity structure of foreign trade in the Russian border regions has been more volatile. While in the past, products with high added value prevailed in exports from the Pskov region, it is metal scrap that dominates the export market now. The Russian border regions also export chemical products, timber, and goods made from precious metals (Smolensk region) to Belarus.

There are amazing examples in trade relations that are poorly visible in statistics, but seriously affect cooperation. One such example is associated with the traditional

sphere of trade relations between Russia and Belarus – food products. Since Soviet times, large food enterprises in Belarus have focused primarily on the Russian market. In the post-Soviet period, the Belarusian enterprises have been receiving governmental support. One of the unforeseen effects of the interstate integration has manifested itself in the opportunity to re-export cheap Russian oil and its refined products, resulting in Belarus receiving funds for the development of its own agriculture, and agricultural products going to the Russian market. Consequently, Belarusian products flooded the Russian market, resulting in many processing enterprises in the Russian part of the borderland to be forced out of business. This phenomenon is most acute in the Smolensk region, where, along with competition, deficit of raw materials is serious especially in the dairy industry. Thus, the share of food items in the import from Belarus is consistently high (and the highest in the Smolensk region – more than 40%).

The lack of customs control even in the 1990s allowed Belarusian enterprises to obtain exclusive access to the huge Russian market for many years. Since the late 2000s, there are so-called “milk wars” in relations between Russia and Belarus, expressed in the temporary bans on import of certain products into Russia (most often – dairy products). These bans seriously complicate the situation of Belarusian enterprises, whose exports are strongly oriented towards Russia. The periods of prohibitions, which according to the official position are associated with technical and sanitary requirements, coincide with the time of tensions in the interstate relations. These events force Belarusian businesses to look for new markets (for example, China and Venezuela), but so far, a massive export reorientation has not happened due to Belarus’ inland geographical position.

Restrictions on food imports from Western countries (in response to sanctions against Russia) have caused additional tensions in trade relations with Belarus. Taking advantage of the transparency on the border,

Belarusian manufacturers repackaged goods imported from the EU, selling them in Russia under their own brands. Such processes make foreign trade relations less open, less predictable and transparent. It also affects the level of trust between economic actors in the borderlands.

Thus, on the one hand, the border regions of Russia and Belarus are long-standing trade partners. On the other hand, conjuncture processes, fluctuations in political relations between countries, repeated unsolvable contradictions (such as “milk wars”) often affect foreign trade between the two countries. Moreover, changes in the export structure from Russia to Belarus are associated with the state of enterprises on the Russian side. The negative state of equipment manufacturing, for example, has reduced its share in exports. At the same time, changes in the export structure from Belarus to Russia are associated not only with the export opportunities for Belarusian enterprises, but with the volume that the Russian side is ready to consume (taking into account the level of income and the financial capacity of potential buyers).

The case of the Russian-Kazakhstan border area is different. In 2016 and 2019, almost all regions of the Russian part of the borderland had a positive trade balance, while Kazakhstan regions had a predominantly negative one.

For a number of Russian regions, Kazakhstan is a key trade partner, the relationship determined by the trade structure preserved here since the Soviet times. Thus, the mutual trade between the Chelyabinsk and Kostanay regions is 80 percent formed by the supply of ore minerals from Kazakhstan and finished metallurgical products from Russia. Since the Soviet times, the Pavlodar region has been supplying thermal coal to Russian power plants in the Urals and Siberia. Russia is also one of the key importers of alumina and unprocessed aluminium, ferroalloys and chemical products (aluminium oxide, etc.) from the Pavlodar region. The export opportunities of the Aktobe region are represented mainly by various types of raw materials – various ores and concentrates,

ferroalloys, the main market for which is in Russia (including enterprises located in the border area). In total, three border regions – the Kostanay, Aktobe and Pavlodar regions form 87 percent of the export potential of the Kazakhstan side of the borderland, while the remaining four regions hardly participate in export at all. The largest role in the mutual trade between the Russian regions and Kazakhstan belongs to the Chelyabinsk region (in 2019), which forms 37 percent of exports of the entire border area.

Since 2018, Kazakhstan has repeatedly resorted to short-term bans on the import of fuels and lubricants from Russia by rail in order to avoid overstocking the domestic market. According to some experts, the forecasted balance of fuel supplies from Russia to Kazakhstan will “rapidly tend to zero”<sup>5</sup>. The modernization of oil refining capacities in Kazakhstan allows to completely abandon the import of those types of fuel, including Russia’s, which Kazakhstan is now able to produce in sufficient quantities independently.

Recently, similar bans have appeared in the field of exporting scrap to foreign countries by rail and road. Metallurgical enterprises located in the regions of Russia bordering Kazakhstan suffered more than others (Russia imported up to 94% of scrap metal from Kazakhstan). The issue was resolved (October 2020) and the supply of scrap metals to the domestic market of the EAEU countries resumed.

Our interviews in Kazakhstan showed that for local entrepreneurs, as well as on the border with Belarus, the greatest problem is related to the access of local agricultural products to the Russian market, since Russia is overuse phytosanitary restrictions. Official authorities also note the unequal conditions for charging cargo carriers from Kazakhstan for travel on Russian roads, problems with access to cheap Kazakhstan alcohol on the Russian market, etc.

<sup>5</sup> <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/indikativnyj-balans-po-postavkam-gsm-mezhdu-kazahstanom-i-r>

As in the Russian-Belarusian borderland, the integration processes did not have a noticeable impact on the change in the foreign trade structure in the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland. In addition, the dominance of raw materials in mutual trade still remains here. The dynamics and volumes of mutual trade depend on the current situation in the world economy, economic crises and contradictions both at the macroeconomic and international levels.

## Conclusions

The processes of post-Soviet integration have long been considered an instrument of the “civilized divorce” of the former Soviet republics. Eurasian integration became a new step that provided for the free movement of goods and services, as well as common policies in the energy, foreign trade and investment, customs, technical regulation, and other sectors. It was expected that the key beneficiaries of these processes will be the internal border areas of the EAEU between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. However, it later became clear that the removal of border barriers was not a cure for peripherality. We found many examples proving that the regions continued to diverge without the planned benefits of integration. The drivers of this discrepancy are measures of national-state construction implemented with different intensity in the economic, institutional, social and political spheres in each state, as well as depopulation and limited examples of economic cooperation.

The most noticeable discrepancies appeared in national and cultural policies. The Russian-Belarusian borderland is still rather homogenous in the sociocultural sense. The ethnic composition of the borderland population, the close identity of the Russian and Belarusian peoples, openness of the border, and maintenance of a high level of cross-border mobility explain a less pronounced state policy of *belarusization*. The Russian-Kazakhstan borderland, on the contrary, is

characterized by the increase of the ethno-cultural divergence. The post-Soviet period of nation-building in Kazakhstan is a period of the revival for the national language and *kazakhization* of their public space. The growth of ethnic barriers on the Russian-Kazakhstan border is caused by the ongoing outflow of the Russian population.

Demographic processes have become another kind of manifestation of divergence and at the same time a driver of it. In the Russian-Belarusian part of the border area, depopulation has a large historical backdrop, but it has increased significantly in the post-Soviet period and continues to do so to this day. In the Russian-Kazakhstan borderland, a settlement zone during the Soviet era, depopulation trends are relatively new. While in the 1990, the massive outflow of the Russian population from the Kazakhstan side of the border area alleviated the effects of depopulation on the Russian side, today it is the Russian side that is losing its population especially quickly. An important problem for all considered sections of the borders is the depopulation of the border zone itself, which reduces the potential for cross-border interactions and depletes the demographic base essential to the local economy.

Integration processes have not had a significant impact on the nature of economic cooperation in the border regions of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan so far. Economic cooperation is still determined by the ties developed during the Soviet era. Examples of new economic cooperation projects are rare. Moreover, the number of such examples is decreasing. Integration rhetoric contradicts with the increasing competition in cross-border sales markets. For instance, significant preferences provided by the government of Belarus to local agricultural enterprises (direct subsidies, reduced VAT rates, etc.) in spite of the similar specializations in the nearby Russian regions have a negative impact on their development. This model of economic cooperation influences foreign trade of the three countries, which on the one hand, is characterized by the similarity of the

sectoral structure of trade, and on the other hand, depends strongly on changes in the macroeconomic situation.

On both sides of the borders, integration is perceived by local communities not as a mechanism for finding common approaches to solving common problems, but as a realization of the competitive advantages of one of the parties to the detriment of the interests of the other. The asymmetry of benefits and costs forces parties to resort to the use of non-tariff measures to regulate foreign trade.

Our investigations demonstrate that national policies still greatly prevail over common interests. This fact, as well as the history of the relations between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, shows that the experience of the European Union cannot be copied in the border areas of these countries “in the mechanical manner”. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that EAEU probably needs more time to develop a policy for convergence of its own internal border regions, which are still outside the attention of both the Eurasian Economic Commission and the countries’ central governments.

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