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– STRETCHING THE BORDER: Shopping, Petty Trade and Everyday Life Experiences in the Polish–Ukrainian Borderland

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Abstract

This article examines the practices and experiences of Ukrainian border crossers who are engaged in informal small-scale economic practices, namely shopping and petty trade, at the Medyka border crossing in Poland. By examining the societal, network and territorial embeddedness of the economic activities of these border crossers, we aim to shed light on the practices and experiences that form part of their daily lives. For many, the presence of the state border has become a resource for shopping and petty trade. People share a common purpose of making the most of their border crossing; they work together to plan and coordinate, or improvise and semi-plan, in the borderland and beyond, to supplement their income or to make a living. As a result, daily life for these border crossers occurs on both sides of the state border, 'stretching' the border in both a mental and a physical sense, despite the controlled institutional demarcation between Poland and Ukraine.

Introduction

> 'As long as there is a border, there will be trade … There will always be trade, and there will always be wheeling and dealing.'
> Authors' field notes, conversation with Ukrainian border crosser (b. 1966) from Mostyska, 24 June 2015.

The presence of a state border can contribute to the emergence of transitory and thriving spaces, where daily life experiences and practices take place across the border. Löfgren (2008: 196) calls people who make use of a state border 'regionauts': 'people who develop skills of using the world on both sides of the border [by] exploring differences in anything from the legal system to market conditions'. This phenomenon is visible in a particular way in Central and Eastern Europe. In Soviet times, people engaged in small-scale cross-border economic practices such as shopping and petty trade to supplement their income and to distribute or redistribute scarce goods (Czak and Sik, 1999; Sik and Wallace, 1999; Egbert, 2006; Vianello, 2013; Pine, 2015). Differences resulting from the presence of the state border gave rise to this kind of cross-border mobility, both formal and informal. Within this context, Pine (2015: 28) refers to 'grey zones' where 'ambiguous economic practices [take place] that are not necessarily illegal, but which may be shrouded in informality'. These practices played an important role in daily life during the Soviet period, and they continue to exist as a coping mechanism to deal with the uneven economic development that can be attributed to post-socialist transformation problems (Yükseker, 2007; Marcińczak and van der Velde, 2008; Bruns *et al*., 2011; Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012; Xheneti *et al*., 2012; Polese *et al*., 2016; Stern, 2016; Karrar, 2017).

Past research on shopping and petty trade in post-Soviet states mostly analysed processes of transformation and the informal economy (Sik and Wallace, 1999; Wolczuk,

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2002; Xheneti *et al*., 2012; Pine, 2015), the change from daily small-scale economic practices to longer-distance work and migration flows (Vianello, 2013), mobilities and interactions at border crossings (Egbert, 2006), and the reasons for border crossers engaging in small-scale informal practices in the borderlands (Bruns *et al*., 2011; Stern, 2016). These studies have in common that they focus on the cross-border practices people engage in and the meanings they attach to these daily experiences. However, there has been a lack of attention to the ways in which border crossers become spatially embedded in and give meaning to their daily life spaces in the borderland through shopping and petty trade practices. In this context, the agency of border crossers can influence the institutional and social reality of a borderland, and vice versa, colouring the specific nature and dynamics of a borderland and its spaces (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; van Schendel, 2005; Newman, 2010; Rumford, 2014). This focus on the agency of border crossers resonates with the argument that simultaneous with the institutional approach towards borders a relational one can be identified. Such a relational approach opens up new ways in which borders are perceived. Instead of understanding borders as fixed territorial entities, they are understood relationally as mental representations, or mental maps, that are continuously evolving (Migdal, 2004; Newman, 2010). Borders are also constructed and reconstructed through dynamic social processes and practices of differentiation (Migdal, 2004; van Schendel, 2005; Paasi, 2009; Newman, 2010; Jagetić Andersen *et al*., 2012; Harrison, 2013; Varró, 2014; Brambilla, 2015; Konrad, 2015).

In this contribution, we examine the Polish–Ukrainian borderland by focusing on the daily life practices and experiences of Ukrainian regionauts who engage in shopping and petty trade at and around the Medyka border crossing. After numerous rounds of enlargement and the extension of the Schengen agreement to Central and Eastern Europe between 2004 and 2008, the border between Poland and Ukraine became a new external EU border, governed by border control policies. Despite these policies, local regionauts have remained actively involved in cross-border practices in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland (Polese, 2011; Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012). They are motivated by the opportunities the presence of the state border affords them, which results in their daily lives occurring on both sides of the state border, thus 'stretching' the border in a relational sense. We distinguish between a mental and a physical stretching of the border by examining in what way border crossers construct and reconstruct borders through their own mental representations, and how the Polish–Ukrainian borderland where these people work and live represents a distinctive space with its own social and spatial dynamics. We try to unravel the mental and physical stretching of the border in more detail using Hess's (2004) conceptualisation of societal, network and territorial embeddedness. These three forms of embeddedness represent three different facets of the daily lives of border crossers and how they are embedded in a borderland: the cultural background of the border crossers, their social ties and networks, and their attachment to the particular territories or places in the borderland, respectively. This not only helps us gain a deeper understanding of *who* borders but also *how* bordering takes place in relation to an institutional border. This provides insights into how everyday borderwork in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland coincides with a stretching of the border.

Embeddedness as a way to understand the stretching of the border

When border crossers engage in small-scale economic practices, they are not only physically involved in crossing a state border; they also mentally experience the differences and similarities that may be found in a borderland. People develop their own perceptions and considerations of a particular border—as a barrier or a source of opportunities, or both at the same time (Yuval-Davis, 2004; Newman, 2006b; Rumford, 2006; 2009; 2014). In other words, they decide and act on their own notion of a border within the intertwined institutional and social realities of a borderland (Brunet-Jailly,

2005; van Schendel, 2005; Rumford, 2014). This context, in conjunction with the agency of the border crossers, may contribute to the mental and physical stretching of the border. A mental stretch is evident in the way the two sides of the state border become part of daily life, and in how border crossers construct borders through mental representations. While the institutional state border remains, the physical stretch occurs when border crossers act upon the state border through daily cross-border practices and create a new space with its own social and spatial dynamics. Migdal (2004: 7) calls these borders 'mental maps' and 'checkpoints'. Mental maps reflect the meaning people attach to social and spatial configurations, whereas checkpoints indicate 'the sites and practices that groups use to differentiate members from others and to enforce separation'. The concept of embeddedness (Hess, 2004), borrowed from the field of economic geography, links agents, in this case border crossers, to structures—in this case the particularities of a borderland where these small-scale economic practices take place. The way border crossers are embedded in a borderland can contribute to our understanding of the emergence of new spaces through a multi-actor process involving not only state actors but also ordinary people (Rumford, 2014).

In respect of societal embeddedness, the border crossers' cultural background plays an important role in the way they deal with the differences and similarities that are found in the borderland. People are 'likely to encounter discontinuities and contradictions between values and attitudes that are transmitted through different spaces' (Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012: 2051). In these areas, called 'contact zones' (Yeoh and Willis, 2005), where people meet and interact with different others, border crossers may feel the need to adjust their behaviour and to accommodate different languages, social rules, norms and values, as well as habits and traditions, when encountering different others. Molinsky (2007: 623) calls this 'cross-cultural code-switching'. Over time, however, people may become accustomed to these discontinuities and contradictions in which their cross-border practices take place, and no longer pay attention to, for instance, different social and cultural norms and values or languages. As a result of frequent interactions and routine repetition of practices, border crossers can develop feelings of familiarity and find spaces of comfort and ease in the borderland and beyond the state border (Szytniewski *et al*., 2017; see also Wise, 2009; Cresswell, 2010; Blokland and Nast, 2014).

Languages, social rules, norms and values, and habits and traditions that are of importance for societal embeddedness are both conditions and sources for the network embeddedness of border crossers. This form of embeddedness centres on the structures and evolution of social ties and networks. According to Rumford (2014: 32), 'People can "invoke" the scale of the border themselves: as a "local" phenomenon, a nation-state "edge" or as a transnational staging post, thereby allowing them to reconfigure the border as portal [for transnational or global connectivity]'. Social ties and networks can then connect different individuals in their practices across state borders and provide opportunities for interactions beyond the territoriality of a place or region (Amin, 2004; Newman, 2006a; Jones, 2008). The economic outcomes of these opportunities depend largely on the strength of the social ties between the actors who are involved in the activities (Granovetter, 2005). These social ties may be formed through family relations and networks of friends, identified as strong ties, and contacts and interactions with people from outside the personal circle or group, recognized as weak ties. Weak ties have been recognized as even more important than strong ties for obtaining new information, improving productivity and profit, and furthering social networks (Amin and Cohendet, 1999; Granovetter, 2005). Trust building between actors within a network is particularly important for the durability and stability of interpersonal relationships and the success of common economic practices (Granovetter, 1985; Hess, 2004; Putnam, 2007).

Whereas social ties and networks emphasize relationships between the different actors involved in cross-border practices, there is also the relationship of border crossers

with the particular territories or places where their daily lives take place, which Hess (2004) calls territorial embeddedness. Borderland societies can emerge with social and cultural systems straddling a state border (van Schendel, 2005). In some cases, people may even feel closer to a particular border region that straddles both sides of a state border than to the state in which they live. This form of regional attachment can, for instance, result from a tradition of daily life practices in the borderland that contribute to the development of shared narratives, regional histories and everyday familiarity with the border (Szytniewski *et al*., 2017). The meaning that border crossers give to a borderland and the presence of the state border is then closely linked to their feelings of belonging within and beyond the state in which people live (see also van Houtum and van der Velde, 2004; Paasi, 2009; Konrad, 2015). Such territorial embeddedness related to borderlands depends on how border crossers interpret and act upon the institutional and physical permeability of the state border. Some border crossers consider travel regulations and border policies as constraints, because custom checks and visa controls, for example, hamper their mobility. Others take these constraints for granted and find ways to profit from cross-border differences in prices and products, and are able to participate in the economic activities and social dynamics that are already in place in the borderland (Hess, 2004; van Schendel, 2005; Löfgren, 2008; Terlouw, 2012). This latter group is what Rumford (2014) might call 'entrepreneurial' cosmopolitans, who by means of a border establish encounters and networks of connectivity. Through what is known as borderwork, they even 'construct, shift and dismantle physical borders' (Rumford, 2014: 26).

We considered the three aforementioned forms of embeddedness, and their interconnectedness, to gain an understanding of the daily life practices and experiences of Ukrainian regionauts. The three different facets of the daily lives of border crossers allow us to interpret the small-scale economic activities in a borderland and shed light on the mental and physical stretching of the border through their borderwork. After describing our methodology, the subsections that follow consider empirically the three forms of embeddedness in relation to shopping and petty trade in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland.

Ethnographic research at the Medyka border crossing

The border crossing at Medyka, a small Polish village on the border between Poland and Ukraine, served as the case study for this article. The village lies about 12 kilometres from the closest Polish city, Przemyśl, and about 100 kilometres from the Ukrainian city of Lviv. The Medyka border crossing is noteworthy, as it is the only border crossing of six between Poland and Ukraine that is open to pedestrians (Stokłosa, 2013). According to the most recent report on cross-border mobility between Poland and the external borders of the EU with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, in 2013 the largest number of border crossings into Poland were made at Medyka: 4.4 million people crossed the state border here, in comparison to, for instance, the Polish–Belarusian border crossing at Terespol, which recorded 2.3 million border crossings. Of the border crossers at Medyka, 61% crossed the state border a few times a week and 28% did so a few times a month. Almost 90% of all visits by Ukrainians to Poland were related to shopping (Statistical Office Rzeszów, 2014). There are, however, certain restrictions on the value and weight of goods that people are allowed to take back into Ukraine: individuals travelling by road, rail or sea are allowed to import goods worth up to a maximum value of 500 euros and up to 50 kilograms in weight. This is also the limit for tax-free shopping (State Fiscal Service Ukraine, 2014).

The high number of crossings across the Polish–Ukrainian state border is related to the local border agreement between the two countries that was signed after Poland's accession to the Schengen area in 2008. The agreement enables Ukrainians who have lived for at least three years within the border zone—which extends 30 kilometres

from the state border—to obtain a special identity card for local border traffic, the MRG (Mały Ruch Graniczny). In contrast to those without a card, local Ukrainians with an MRG can travel freely across the border without a visa (Witkowski, 2014; Mikołajczyk, 2015). Besides the MRG, which is based on residence, people who speak Polish and have relatives in Poland are eligible for what is called a 'Pole's Card', based on their cultural relationship with the Polish nation. The card allows them, among other things, to work and set up a company in Poland in the same way as Polish citizens, and gives them the option of obtaining a fee waiver or reimbursement of visa costs (Mikołajczyk, 2015). There are more detailed differences between these two cards, but for the purposes of this study, they are referred to as a means to ease cross-border mobility.

Data collection consisted of two field studies, during April 2015 and June 2015, with an ethnographic approach. The first phase of data gathering also entailed exploratory observations of and conversations with people, both Polish and Ukrainian, at the Medyka border crossing. The aim of this fieldwork was to achieve a good understanding of people's cross-border practices (namely, who is involved and in what way). We observed interactions between border crossers in four areas around the border crossing: the car park next to the pedestrian border crossing, at the pedestrian border crossing itself, in and around the supermarket, and in the queue of cars at the car crossing point (see Figure 1). We therefore focused on situations where 'two or more persons are in [each other's] immediate physical presence and strive to maintain a single (ordinarily spoken) focus of mutual involvement' (Lofland *et al*., 2006: 124). The main places of interaction were also the places where we approached Ukrainian border crossers engaged in their practices, and Polish entrepreneurs working in areas such as the car park or the supermarket. The fieldwork was carried out in an overt manner by showing interest in the practices from a researcher's perspective and establishing a notetaker role from the beginning. Based on Cloke *et al*. (2004), our daily field notes included information on the physical space of the border crossing, the interactions between the border crossers, the researcher's participation in these interactions, and reflections on the position of the researcher and the research process. As a result of our daily presence in the field, at times the researcher became a participant in the interactions occurring on site, as discussed by Emerson *et al*. (2011). This reduced the distance between researcher and border crosser, and thus contributed to a natural environment in which the border crossers felt they could speak freely.

The exploratory observations and conversations from the first phase of the fieldwork were used to develop a plan for the second phase, during which the focus was on Ukrainian border crossers. In addition to the observations we recorded and the conversations we held during daytime hours, in the second phase of data gathering we conducted in-depth interviews at the border crossing during the day. In total, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews while people were engaged in their cross-border practices. Nine women and seven men were interviewed at the aforementioned places of interaction at the border crossing. We covered in more depth topics such as cross-border shopping and petty trade practices, familiarity, cultural and social differences and similarities, social networks and interactions, daily life and feelings of home. The respondents' ages ranged from 27 to 64 years, and they all lived in the Ukrainian borderland. The interviews were held in both Ukrainian and Polish. In keeping with the informal character of the cross-border practices, we made no voice recordings of the interviews but drew up field notes to cover all the topics discussed with the respondents. This procedure contributed to establishing a relationship of trust. Such a trust relationship was already in place with some respondents as a result of small talk in which we engaged them during the first phase of data gathering (see Bruns and Miggelbrink, 2012, for the importance of trust building in similar ethnographic case studies). After the field study, all field notes regarding the observations, conversations and interviews were digitally processed and analysed. As the interviews had a

semi-structured form, we organized the interview notes according to the various topics we discussed with the respondents. We were then able to look for patterns in the opinions of respondents and apply a selective coding approach by relating the data step by step to societal, network and territorial embeddedness. Based on Emerson *et al*. (2011), we created field note excerpts that comprised the building blocks for the empirical section. It should be mentioned here that the daily field notes already included a first layer of interpretation from the researcher as a result of choosing the words to describe a situation or writing down an interview. To remain close to events in the field—in this case, the daily life practices and experiences of Ukrainian regionauts at the Medyka border crossing—we visually separate the excerpts from the analytic commentary in the section that follows.

Shopping and petty trade at Medyka

The field study clearly showed that shopping and petty trade practices were spread across the area of the Medyka border crossing, but that certain types of practices tended to be concentrated in particular places. Figure 1 shows the research site and highlights three specific places at the border crossing. First of all, there is the private car park next to the pedestrian crossing. We often found it to be full of cars, and people were continuously coming and going. Some people were waiting for their associates in the various parts of the car park, others simply parked and walked to the pedestrian crossing with their goods. Secondly, there was the queue at the car crossing point. Here, border crossers gathered and waited for a ride. They often had not arranged a lift in advance, but we were told that people usually managed to find a lift and only occasionally had to return on foot and catch a bus on the Ukrainian side of the border. During the day, the atmosphere was relaxed, but when the day was almost over and many people were still waiting, some border crossers seemed to become anxious about getting home. Thirdly, there was the area around the supermarket, which often seemed chaotic and busy. At the entrance of the supermarket, different groups of border crossers were collecting and redistributing goods among their associates. Some were using their cars as storage space to do so, while others used the space next to the entrance to the supermarket where trolleys were usually kept.

– Places and practices

The various economic activities undertaken by the Ukrainian regionauts can be broadly categorized as planned and coordinated practices or improvised and semi-planned practices. At first glance, it seemed that the border crossers were involved in one practice or another, but it soon became clear that practices and people were often interconnected or supported each other.

Improvised and semi-planned practices were found in particular among those who used the pedestrian border crossing—a long open tunnel of almost one kilometre with two checkpoints, one Ukrainian and one Polish. Many crossed the state border on a daily or weekly basis to buy some groceries at the supermarket. We observed a small group of these pedestrians engaged in petty trade by taking two cartons of cigarettes and a litre of vodka—the maximum permitted amounts—to sell illegally on the street just past the pedestrian border crossing. Instead of the hustle and bustle that was found at the border crossing point, this street was rather quiet and empty. Most days some locals were hanging around, and once an hour a local bus stopped to drop off a group of pedestrian border crossers who had visited Przemyśl or another Polish town.

Besides buying groceries or engaging in petty trade, the pedestrian regionauts mostly walked over to the car crossing point and tried to get a lift home from someone waiting in the queue (see Figure 1). Most of them lived within 30 kilometres of the Polish–Ukrainian border and had an MRG card for local border traffic. Getting and offering lifts was quite profitable for both pedestrian border crossers and those crossing by car. Each additional passenger allowed border crossers who were travelling by car

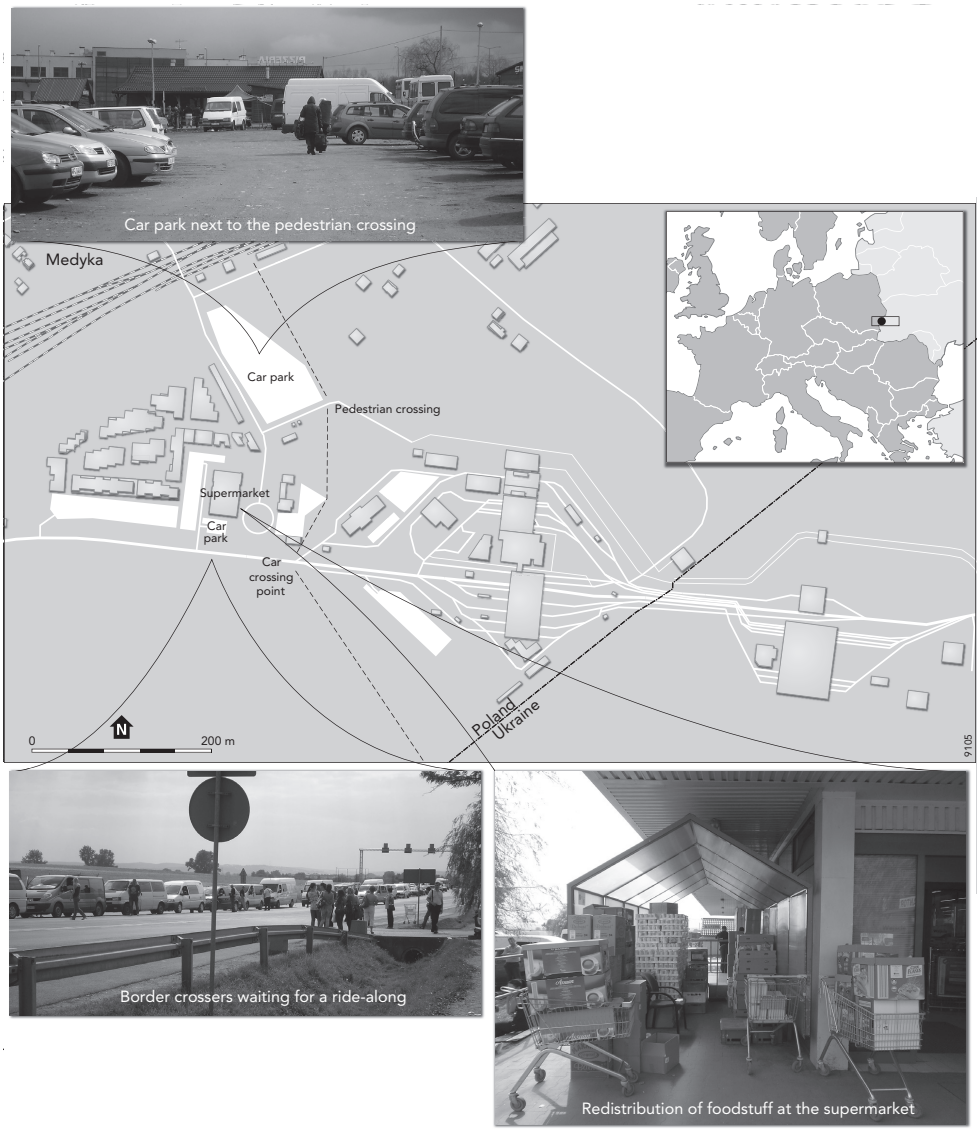

FIGURE 1 The Medyka border crossing in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland (*source*: based on OpenStreetMap, © OpenStreetMap contributors, adapted by the Communications and Marketing Department of Geosciences at Utrecht University; photos by Bianca Szytniewski, April and June 2015)

to increase the amount of goods they took across the state border. Pedestrian border crossers saved on local public transport and because they were also paid a small fee they enjoyed a slightly larger income. Sometimes these additional passengers were part of an organized party.

Several informal small-scale economic practices were performed in a planned and coordinated way, individually or as part of an organized group. These practices ranged from tax-free shopping to purchasing and redistributing goods between individuals, for transport to shops, supermarkets, restaurants or wholesalers in Ukraine. Border crossers who were involved in tax-free shopping were usually independent individuals or part of a small group. Conversations and interviews revealed that the

goods purchased by these border crossers were mostly electronics, such as televisions, laptops and phones. Some of the goods were for private use, but most were for resale in Ukraine. Price differences and fluctuations in exchange rates played an important role, as the prices of these products were mostly higher in Ukraine than in Poland. When people engaged in tax-free shopping, they did not immediately receive a tax reduction in the Polish shops, but needed to take the goods across the state border into Ukraine, obtain a stamp at the border crossing and return to Poland within two months to receive a tax refund. It turned out that many used this as an opportunity to combine this return trip with another trade and shopping trip.

> A local trader (b. 1966) from Mostyska was waiting next to the supermarket. He worked in construction when work was available. That day, he had crossed the state border early in the morning to pick up his tax refund from a shop in Przemyśl. He had then stopped by at a car shop to look for tyres, ending up in Medyka where he had just arranged a lift home from his friend and would receive 10 hryvnia, the Ukrainian currency, for the lift (field note, 24 June 2015).

This extract illustrates how the practice of tax-free shopping was extended over time and connected with the often improvised and semi-planned practice of offering and getting lifts.

Planned and coordinated practices were also found among another group of border crossers, whose goal was to transport large amounts of goods across the Polish–Ukrainian border and then resell them. Various goods were being transported across the state border, but two types stood out: foodstuff and consumer goods, and home appliances and car parts. Foodstuff and consumer goods that were most commonly bought in Poland ranged from fruit, vegetables and dairy products to washing-up liquid and cleaning products.

There were always cars and lorries crammed with foodstuff and consumer goods parked close to the car crossing point, and the area around the supermarket was often used as a redistribution point (see Figure 1):

> During the second week of fieldwork, a woman in her early twenties occupied the space next to the entrance to the supermarket where trolleys are usually arranged. For a whole week, she spent every day collecting and redistributing foodstuff among other border crossers. Some were acquaintances, others strangers, but all became associates in the cross-border trading. The young woman recorded all people who were to transport these goods across the state border by writing down their names, ID numbers and the amount of foodstuff taken. People were to deliver the goods at a collection point across the state border, where they would receive a small payment (field note, 23 June 2015).

The car park adjacent to the pedestrian crossing was another meeting place for organized traders. These traders mostly dealt in new and second-hand home appliances (such as fridges, freezers and washing machines) and car parts, ranging from tyres to bumpers. Different groups of traders met at the car park to transfer goods to their associates:

> A couple of border crossers who were engaged in their practice of redistributing new and second-hand car parts at the back of the car park, explained how they usually met once every week or two with a group of friends and acquaintances in the car park in Medyka. One of them was a man (b. 1964) from Mostyska, who had been involved in the practice for 20 years. The group waits for the arrival of the supplier, who mostly transports his goods from Western Europe, from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and

> the Czech Republic. Upon arrival, they empty the van, weigh and redistribute the goods among themselves, and transport the goods across the state border (field note 10 April 2015).

These practices were rather ambiguous but not necessarily illegal, creating spaces of informality, as Pine (2015) argues too.

The Medyka border crossing is a lively one. Here, different informal small-scale economic practices are spread across the border crossing point and connect people and their practices at the car park, the pedestrian crossing point, the supermarket, and the car crossing point. The improvised and semi-planned practices we found were related to giving and getting lifts, or to the spontaneous involvement of individual border crossers in taking some additional goods across the state border. Planned and coordinated practices could be recognized in the collection and redistribution of goods at the border crossing or the transport of goods across the state border as part of an organized group. In all practices, the Ukrainian individuals shared the common purpose of making the most of their border crossings. They worked together in a planned and coordinated manner, or in an improvised and semi-planned way, to supplement their incomes.

– Societal embeddedness: cultural attachment and daily life

Our fieldwork revealed that the informal small-scale economic practices of Ukrainian regionauts took place in an environment that was regarded as familiar and normal, and as part of their daily lives. In contrast to Molinsky (2007), who noted the possible need for cross-cultural code-switching when in a foreign setting, more cultural similarities than differences were recognized by the Ukrainians in this particular borderland. They recognized cultural commonalities in language, social rules, habits and traditions, as well as a common past:

> In our conversation about cultural differences and similarities between Poland and Ukraine, one woman, who was probably in her late fifties, stated genuinely that there were no differences. She referred to the common past of the region and the rich Polish heritage in the city of Lviv, which had been part of Poland before the second world war. She also had many Polish friends and did not experience any differences. She considered the Polish culture, Polish churches and Polish schools as normal parts of everyday life (field note, 23 June 2015).

Many Ukrainian regionauts spoke Polish and had relatives and friends in Poland. As a result, many border crossers experienced a form of cultural attachment to Poland and Polish culture. This degree of cultural attachment contributed to the normality of the informal small-scale economic practices. Many had come to regard Medyka as part of their normal working day. Shopping and trading practices were especially attractive to those who lived in the borderland and were unemployed or being paid very little in their regular jobs:

> During the second field visit in June, the aforementioned group of border crossers that was redistributing new and second-hand car parts was again found at the back of the car park. One of the members (b. 1964), who lived in Mostyska, explained that there was no work in Ukraine, but there was always work here [at the border crossing]; it was his way of earning a living (field note, 24 June 2015).

Although the frequency of trading often depended on the availability of goods and trade opportunities, the economic activities of the regionauts were a clearly repetitive routine. The border crossers had become used to going about their business in the borderland as part of their daily lives:

> At the car crossing point, a young border crosser (b. 1988) from Mostyska was engaged in organizing the transport of goods across the state border. He had become involved in these activities a few years earlier as he saw that others from his village were involved in the practice. When asked about how he felt about being in Medyka, he said he felt at ease. He explained that this feeling mostly stemmed from being familiar with the work environment and with working together with other Ukrainians, some of whom were his neighbours (field note, 24 June 2015).

Like Szytniewski *et al*. (2017), we found that the daily nature of cross-border practices contributed to spaces of comfort and ease in the borderland and beyond the state border. In this study, we found that these spaces of comfort and ease were realized not only through frequent interactions and routine, repetitive practices, but were also the result of cultural attachment. Ukrainian regionauts felt familiar with Polish culture and had relatives and friends in Poland, and they therefore knew how to interact and behave in Medyka. Moreover, as shown in the previous extract, their shopping and trading practices had become part of their normal working day and involved cooperation with other Ukrainian regionauts. This contributed to their network embeddedness.

– Network embeddedness: social ties and networks

The social networks found among Ukrainian regionauts were not merely situated around the state borders of the Polish–Ukrainian borderland: they had a larger geographical reach, connecting individuals, organized parties, supermarkets, restaurants or wholesalers in Ukraine to suppliers in Western Europe. Earlier we mentioned that car parts that were being transported across the border came from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and the Czech Republic. Border crossers reconfigured the border as a portal for their practices (Rumford, 2014). In our field study, we also found that the Ukrainian regionauts had many contacts in the borderland and other parts of Poland, and used these contacts to work on short notice and sometimes on an ad hoc basis:

> In one conversation at the border crossing, a young regionaut (b. 1987) in possession of an MRG card explained that he did not have a regular job and had been involved in these cross-border practices for the past three years. His economic activities in the borderland usually took place as follows: wholesalers or individuals who are low on goods contact him, upon which he gets in touch with the suppliers in Poland. He orders the goods, arranges a price and sometimes puts down an advance payment. On the day of the conversation, he had travelled to Kraków to fetch fruit and vegetables and was redistributing the goods among the border crossers who were interested in delivering the goods at the collection point in Ukraine for a small payment. He hoped to get all the goods across the border within three days (field note, 27 June 2015).

Many border crossers had established contacts and interactions with other regionauts, partaking in shopping and petty trade across the border crossing point. This contributed to flexible and permanent social ties and networks. Flexible social ties and networks, also called weak ties, were found in the improvised and semi-planned practices mentioned earlier, such as giving lifts, or through the planned and coordinated redistribution and transport of goods across the state border. Trust-building processes between these two practices varied. Pedestrian border crossers had to trust their drivers to drop them off at the agreed locations, whereas goods for redistribution and transport were recorded and controlled, such as the redistribution of foodstuff described above. Previous studies already

pointed out the relationship between trust building and the success of common economic practices (Granovetter, 1985; Hess, 2004; Putnam, 2007); additionally, we found that the common purpose of making the most of a border crossing was important for establishing interpersonal relationships and engaging in common cross-border practices:

> When discussing trust at the car crossing point, a man in his early fifties (b. 1964) from Mostyska said that by looking at people you can tell whether it will be possible to arrange something with them. According to him, most of the time people are honest (field note, 25 June 2015).

Based on the daily nature of their engagement in cross-border practices, border crossers had built more permanent interpersonal relationships, or strong ties, mostly in the form of organized groups. These permanent social networks contributed to engagement not only in shared economic activities, but also in information sharing. For instance, people were well aware of who the border guards were and differentiated between the lenient and the strict ones. Information about the schedules of border guards travelled fast between friends, acquaintances and family, making strong ties, in addition to weak ties, important for successful economic outcomes:

> In a conversation with a young man (b. 1985) from Lviv about knowing people at the border crossing, the social network was regarded as very valuable for his cross-border practices. The border crosser considered the long queues on the Polish side of the border as very tiresome and unnecessary. To reduce the waiting time, he used to call a friend or acquaintance to find out which border guard was working and whether he should wait or not (field note, 25 June 2015).

During fieldwork we also found that border crossers, besides waiting at the state border for a specific customs officer to come on duty, also believed that certain goods were easier to transport at particular border crossings along the Polish–Ukrainian state border:

> While standing in the car park next to the pedestrian crossing, one of the border crossers (b. 1971), who lived about 200 kilometres from the state border, said that every Pole and Ukrainian here had his or her own contraband, from second-hand goods, car parts and building equipment, to fruit and meat. According to him, some goods crossed the state border here, but for other goods the circumstances at the other [car] crossing points were better. It was easier to cross (field note, 26 June 2015).

These Ukrainian regionauts were constantly aware of the state border and how best to work around it. By consciously delaying or speeding up cross-border practices, or deciding on a specific border crossing or on which goods to focus, they aimed to create favourable circumstances that would facilitate successful economic activities. The social networks among different border crossers and their suppliers and customers arose from a common purpose to transport goods across the state border and earn some money from it. This generated not only trust and ties across borders, but also spaces of connectivity (Rumford, 2014) in the form of a platform among border crossers who mutually explored economic opportunities beyond the territoriality of the state.

– Territorial embeddedness: borders, borderland and belonging

Most goods in Medyka were bought in other parts of Poland or in Western Europe, and the border crossing area was where these goods came together to be redistributed and transported to Ukraine. The regionauts, rather than allowing themselves to be constrained by the non-EU membership status of Ukraine, interpreted

and acted upon the institutional and physical permeability of the EU border in such a way that it facilitated and supported shopping and petty trade across the border. Polish territory became part of many Ukrainian border crossers' daily life space. Some obtained the MRG or Pole's Card we referred to earlier in this article, which eased cross-border mobility. The Pole's Card acknowledged and formalized the relationship between Ukrainian border crossers and the Polish nation, as noted by Witkowski (2014) and Mikołajczyk (2015). Furthermore, our field study revealed that shared car ownership between Ukrainian and Polish nationals also contributed to people's territorial embeddedness in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland:

> In one of the conversations with a young Ukrainian border crosser (b. 1988) from Lviv, the principle of shared car ownership was explained. He had bought a car in the Netherlands for 2,000 euros, as a similar car would cost around 8,000 euros in Ukraine. The car was co-owned by his Polish relatives, who lived in the Polish–German borderland. The Ukrainian authorities, however, had introduced legislation requiring Ukrainians who drive a car on Polish number plates to cross the state border every five days (field note, 23 June 2015).

Sharing a car with a Polish national was found to be common practice among Ukrainian regionauts who had relatives or friends in Poland. Moreover, it increased the frequency of and people's motivation to engage in cross-border mobility. Similar to the return visits that were related to tax refunds as part of tax-free shopping, the necessary border crossings encouraged the Ukrainian border crossers to engage regularly in informal small-scale economic practices in the borderland. The tradition of extended daily life practices across the borderland contributed to a degree of regional attachment to the territories where the cross-border practices took place. These practices strengthened the societal embeddedness of Ukrainian regionauts, and thus contributed to a feeling of belonging to places across the state border and Medyka in particular as part of their territorial embeddedness:

> While talking about being in another country, one of the pedestrian border crossers (b. 1964) from Mostyska said that she felt at home in Medyka, which was only 15 kilometres from home. She explained that when you were there every day, you got to know the place and the people. She saw similarities between the Polish and Ukrainian culture and her son-in-law was Polish too. She associated the border crossing with 'little Ukraine', as shop assistants understood Ukrainian, and Ukrainians also attended church in Medyka (field note, 22 June 2015).

Some people noted that they saw their neighbours more often at the border crossing than in their own town or village in Ukraine. While they were engaging in their daily cross-border practices, they regarded these familiar faces and the Ukrainian language as contributing to their experience of Medyka as a 'lived extension' of Ukraine. Within the Polish–Ukrainian borderland, Ukrainian border crossers recognized in the Medyka border crossing point a distinctive space with its own social and spatial dynamics. This confirms van Schendel's (2005) notion that borderland societies can emerge within social and cultural systems straddling a state border.

Conclusion and discussion: stretching the border through daily practices and experiences

This case study demonstrates the persistence not only of a phenomenon that was already in place in Soviet times (Yükseker, 2007; Marcińczak and van der Velde, 2008; Bruns *et al*., 2011; Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012; Xheneti *et al*., 2012; Polese *et al*., 2016;

Stern, 2016; Karrar, 2017), but also of the practice of 'bending rules and identifying loopholes' (Löfgren, 2008). For years, Medyka has been a workspace that is part of daily life for many Ukrainians who live in the Ukrainian borderland. These traders, called regionauts, explore opportunities afforded by the presence of the state border and are involved in informal but often highly organized economic activities that contribute to the permeability of the institutional border between Poland and Ukraine. Societal, network and territorial embeddedness (Hess, 2004) has proved to be a useful and meaningful framework to shed light on *who* borders and *how* bordering takes place in relation to an institutional border. These three forms of embeddedness represent three different facets of how border crossers can be embedded in a borderland, namely through their cultural background, their social ties and networks, and their attachment to the particular territories or places in the borderland. By unravelling these three forms of embeddedness together, we may show how structure and agency are mutually shaping borderlands (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; van Schendel, 2005; Rumford, 2014). Structuring characteristics, such as formal and informal institutions and social interactions, coexist with the daily practices of Ukrainian border crossers. The agency of the border crossers, in particular, illustrates that ordinary people construct their own borders, engage in cross-border practices in their own way, and give meaning to the places where their social practices take place—in this instance, at the Medyka border crossing point in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland. By unravelling the three forms of embeddedness, we also unravelled how everyday borderwork in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland coincides with a mental and physical stretching of the border.

The mental stretching of the border was reflected in the daily life experiences of the Ukrainian border crossers, their cultural and regional attachment, and their consequential feeling of belonging in Medyka. Ukrainians who were involved in informal small-scale economic practices were familiar with the borderland and experienced the places where they worked as spaces of comfort and ease; shopping and petty trade had become part of their normal working day. Social and cultural differences concerning the other side of the state border were considered small because of their cultural attachment with Poland and the Polish culture. Most border crossers spoke Polish and had relatives and friends in Poland, which contributed further to the societal and network embeddedness of their economic activities. Many Ukrainians translated this feeling to a feeling of being 'at home'. Regardless of the institutional line running through the Polish–Ukrainian borderland, border crossers established their own borders, which can be understood as mental representations, or mental maps (Migdal, 2004; Newman, 2010; Rumford, 2014).

The border was also physically stretched and created into a new kind of space at the Medyka border crossing point through its specific characteristics of shopping and petty trade. Border crossers experienced a form of regional attachment and belonging to places across the state border, and in particular to the hustle and bustle of the Medyka border crossing. The border crossing point was experienced as a 'lived extension' of Ukraine and physically part of daily life, despite its institutional and physical location across the state border in Poland. This territorial embeddedness was found in different spaces of informality around the car park, the pedestrian crossing point, the supermarket and the car crossing point, where planned and coordinated or improvised and semi-planned practices took place, and border crossers worked together. Contrary to Migdal's (2004) view that checkpoints enforce separation, spaces of connectivity (Rumford, 2014) emerged at this border crossing point, as Medyka had become a place where social networks connected people and places far beyond the state border, from Ukraine to Western Europe. These different spaces together characterize the Medyka border crossing point as a distinctive space with its own social and spatial dynamics within the Polish–Ukrainian borderland.

Our study on shopping and petty trade in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland leads to a number of recommendations for future research. In this study, we focused

on the personal experiences and practices of daily border crossers in Medyka. When we considered the rules and policies regarding tax refunds as part of tax-free shopping, shared car ownership, and the MRG or Pole's Card, we found that these institutional measures contributed to a high level to cross-border mobility in this particular borderland. Further research into the practices and experiences of customs and border control officers, including their perspectives on and interactions with regionauts, may provide more detailed and valuable insights into the institutional embeddedness of informal small-scale economic practices in borderlands. In addition, our fieldwork was conducted in a public setting and focused on the visible interactions between border crossers during the day. Practices beyond the border crossing, within and beyond the borderland, or those that are hidden from sight or take place during the night, were not taken into account. Insight into these matters could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the practices and experiences of borderwork. It will also be worthwhile to extend the field study to other border crossing points along the Polish–Ukrainian border, or to the EU's external borders in general. In our case study, we focused on the daily life practices and experiences at the Medyka border crossing. However, the findings from our fieldwork suggest that people obtain their goods from contacts in Poland and Western Europe and deliver their goods to various parties in Ukraine, using Medyka as a point of redistribution and further transport. The extent and structures of social networks demonstrate the connectivity and larger geographical reach of these economic activities. Cross-border practices and experiences are thus not confined to borderlands but connect many people and places throughout Europe, also across the borders of the EU.

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