

Travelling along Borders
Erika Fatland interviewed for
NuBE – Nuova Biblioteca Europea

Erika Fatland (1983) is a Norwegian writer and anthropologist specialised in foreign politics and particularly interested in Russia and post-soviet Europe. The great success of her prize-winning travel book Sovietistan (2014; eng. Sovietistan, MacLehose Press 2019, transl. by Kari Dickson; it. Sovietistan, Marsilio 2017, transl. by Eva Kampmann) has been confirmed by the following Grensen. En reise rundt Russland gjennom Nord-Korea, Kina, Mongolia, Kasakhstan, Aserbajdsjan, Georgia, Ukraina, Hviterussland, Litauen, Polen, Latvia, Estkand, Finland og Norge samt Nordøstpassasjen (2017; eng. The Border. A Journey around Russia: Through North Korea, China, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Norway and the Northeast Passage, MacLehose Press 2020, transl. by Kari Dickson; it. La frontiera. Viaggio intorno alla Russia, Marsilio 2019, transl. by Sara Culeddu, Elena Putignano, Alessandra Scali). Grensen is a fabulous report about the author's journey along the longest border on earth, the Russian one, 60.932 km from North Korea to Norway. Her latest work is called Høyt. En reise i Himalaya (High up. A Journey in the Himalaya); it has been published in Norway in October 2020, and it is expected in Italy in 2021. The following conversation with the author is about the border both as a philosophical concept and as a concrete place.

SARA CULEDDU: In your book *Grensen* you report about your travel along a border which is at the same time *one* border and a *multiplicity* of borders. What I mean is that you travelled along the Russian border, while travelling also along and across the borders of all the countries bordering Russia: a constellation of nations, communities, ethnic groups, cultures, histories and stories. Reading your book, I felt that at each and every step the One and the

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Many somehow merged with each other. If there is a dominant role in the relationship between the One and the Many, is it always the One who plays it?

ERIKA FATLAND: It's impossible to answer this question briefly – I have written more than 600 pages to explain the different experiences and attitudes along the Russian border. The biggest difference is between the former Soviet republics, which constitute 10 of the 14 countries along the Russian border, and the other four: North Korea, China, Finland and Norway. North Korea is in a league of its own, naturally, and cannot really be compared to any other country, isolated as it is.

Today, China is economically stronger than Russia, which makes the balance between the two giant neighbours very interesting to observe, as China is the only country along the border which is stronger than Russia – and it has not always been like this, far from it. In the 19th century, Russia occupied large parts of Northern China. Today, Russia is dependent on China, but China is not as dependent on Russia. There is also the aspect of racism, which I believe would be equally distributed in China and Russia.

Norway is Russia's little brother, but historically the relationship between the two countries has been a good one, especially up north along the border region. Among the 14 neighbouring countries, Norway is the only one that has never been occupied by Russia nor at war with Russia. This says it all about what it means to be the neighbour of Russia.

SC: Does the influence of a solid centralized culture only result in the partial equalization of the multiple ones around it, or do the different bordering cultures also permeate the single national identity instilling diversity into its outskirts?

EF: During the Russian Empire and the Soviet period, Russian culture and ethnic Russians spread to the outskirts of the gigantic Empire. Even today, about 25 per cent of the population in Estonia and Latvia are ethnic Russians. During the Soviet period, Russian was the lingua franca and Russian culture was the dominating culture. This has changed after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and many of the Russians who are living outside of Russia, in former Soviet Republics, struggle to accept this change of status. They used to be the “leaders”, part of the dominating culture, and everyone had to learn their language. Nowadays, they find themselves a minority in a small, independent country. Many of the Russians in the Baltic states and in Central Asia never learned the national language. In Estonia many of them don’t even have an Estonian citizenship, as all Russians who migrated to Estonia after 1945 need to pass a language test in order to get Estonian citizenship. In Narva, a border town in eastern Estonia, almost the entire population consist of ethnic Russians. All the signs are in Estonian, but all you hear when walking in the streets is Russian. The Russians growing up here are growing up in a Russian bubble “trapped” in the European Union.

SC: How did you place yourself with regards to the observed interacting subjects? Was your point of view always detached, as if you were a distinct third element to the “encounter” at the border, or did you feel yourself involved to some degree? In other words, do you think that the border can be fully understood without standing on one of its sides?

EF: I always try to be neutral. I’m not sure if it’s possible to be 100% neutral at all times, probably not, but my method is to inspire the people I meet to tell *their* stories. I rarely enter discussions with the people I meet, I simply try to understand what the world looks like from their point of

view. While traveling along the border, my aim was to meet as many different people as possible. For instance, I met Russian soldiers in the breakaway republic Donetsk, in Baku I talked to Azerbaijanis who hated Armenians and in Nagorna Karabakh, another breakaway republic, I talked to Armenian separatists who hated Azerbaijanis.

In Latvia I met Latvian nationalists who feared Russian aggression and ethnic Russians living in Latvia who mentally lived in Russia. In Belarus I talked to human right defenders and opposition politicians, and I tried hard to find supporters of Lukashenka, in order to understand their point of view, but didn't succeed in finding any ...

The question is complicated: neutral writing in its purest sense does not exist. We all come from somewhere, we all have opinions and values. But I never stop trying to see the world from different viewpoints and I always do my uttermost to try to understand why the people I meet along the way see the world the way they do.

SC: To what degree did you perceive the border areas as places of meeting and harmonious merging of different cultures? And to what degree as places of conflict and cultural polarization?

EF: Historically, the border of Russia has changed position numerous times during the centuries, and it is still moving. Borders are not passive and eternal "facts", they are constructed by politics and wars, and they are often contested. During my travel along the Russian border, I visited three breakaway republics, and I interviewed a man who was trapped on the other side of the border fence in the fourth breakaway republic – it's impossible to visit South Ossetia from Georgia, so I could not enter myself. I had five minutes to do the interview, otherwise the Russian soldiers would come and we would all be in trouble. In both Donetsk and Nagorno Karabakh war is raging as we speak, so the Russian border is still far from

being a peaceful border. All of the present day conflicts are rooted in the Soviet Union. Borders are political entities, but the ones suffering are always the individuals living along the contested borders.

SC: While the border can also be analysed as a theoretical concept, you crossed a lot of real, dangerous, and militarised borders; and experienced them as concrete, real-life places. Could you share the memory of a particularly striking experience from the border?

EF: We rarely cross borders nowadays – in Europe, most of the border crossings are now permanently open, and when we travel further away, we usually travel by plane. However, crossing a “proper” border is among the most fascinating experiences I can imagine. Physically, you don’t travel very far, a few hundred meters, maybe a couple of kilometres. The landscape naturally therefore remains the same, but everything else suddenly changes: the language, the alphabet, people’s faces, fashion, historical references, the currency... It’s always difficult to be properly prepared.

For instance, crossing the border from North Korea to China was a shock, but in a positive sense – suddenly there were neon lights everywhere, cars, fat people, and we could walk about freely, without strict guides! In North Korea it was pitch dark after sunset. Then again crossing the border from China, the most populous country in the world, to Mongolia, one of the least populous countries in the world, where there are more sheep than people!

SC: Did the real experience of crossing borders changed your way of “thinking” about borders?

EF: Yes, definitely. As I described above, it’s hard to underestimate the contrasts and the cultural shock that traveling the few hundred meters

from one border station to the next may constitute. Also, when crossing a physical border, the traveller is more often than not met with extreme suspicion. The border guards will ask numerous questions, check everything in your luggage, examine the books carefully... When you arrive by plane, you normally just walk through customs and nothing happens, but when physically crossing the border, for some reason you need to be prepared for a very thorough check.

SC: Travelling along the Russian border you met a great amount of people living there, inhabiting the border. What does it mean in your opinion to inhabit a border, to be “border people”?

EF: As already noted, many of the people living close to the Russian border are ethnic Russians, living in Russian enclaves, in parallel societies, often mentally closer to the Russians on the other side of the border than the people of the country they inhabit. Several places along the border there are special agreements for the people living close to the border – they may cross the border without a visa and therefore often visit “the other side”, mostly for shopping purposes. This is true for Kirkenes in northern Norway, for instance. All signs in Kirkenes are both in Russian and Norwegian, and most of the shops are dependent on Russians “border-shoppers”. The same goes for the Russian shops on the other side. In Kirkenes, the relationship with the Russian neighbours is a good and close one, and the “border people” are often critical to how the politicians in Oslo, in the south, talk about Russians in what they see as an unnecessary negative tone. If you meet your neighbour regularly, the border becomes less threatening and scary.

SC: How would you describe the Russian border from a linguistic point of view? Is it a place of conflict and segregation be-

tween languages, or is it the natural environment for cross-border languages as we may expect?

EF: In the former Soviet republics, Russian is still the dominating language. Even in China, I met people (mostly shop owners) who could communicate in Russian. But several of the former Soviet states are now distancing themselves from the Russian language. In Kazakhstan, they just changed from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, and everyone who wants a job in the State, needs to master the Kazakh language. The conflict in eastern Ukraine is more of a conflict between languages than between ethnicities. Most of the people in eastern Ukraine have Russian as their mother tongue and feel distanced and different from the people in western Ukraine, who mostly speak Ukrainian.

SC: How did you manage to communicate during your trip along the border?

EF: In North Korea I travelled in a group, and we were always accompanied by an English speaking guide. China was quite difficult – I don't speak Chinese, and even small, practical things like ordering a cup of tea or taking a taxi could be quite difficult. From Kazakhstan to Estonia, all of them former Soviet republics, I could usually talk to people in Russian. In Finland, people would normally speak either English or Swedish.

SC: If I may throw in one last thought for further reflection: after your experience with *Grensen*, would you confirm a tight connection between the concepts of *border*, *confines* and *confinement* as the words themselves suggest? Can the border experience also be a confinement experience, a restriction of one's freedom?

EF: Of course. A border separates countries and it separates people. This became particularly obvious when I travelled along the Norwegian-Russian border. In Norway, you are allowed to move freely until you reach the actual border, but if you cross it, even with just a centimetre, you are in trouble and will probably need to pay a heavy fine. When kayaking up the border river, I used a GPS and was always nervous to involuntarily cross the border – it's obviously not possible to see the actual border in the river, but it is still there!

North Korea is another example, and a harsh one. For most North Koreans, it is simply impossible to cross the border and leave North Korea. They are confined inside the borders of their country.

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