

Klaudia Kosicińska

***Everyday life between borders. Mobility and translocal practices in southeastern Georgia***

Supervisor:

dr hab. Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska

The purpose of the dissertation, consisting of five chapters, is to analyze the phenomenon of mobility and translocal practices among the Azerbaijani community in the Marneuli municipality in Georgia. It fills a gap in ethnographic research on this community from the perspective of social anthropology. The work also contributes to theories of mobility and translocality.

The main research question was how the phenomena of mobility and translocality that I identified affect the social lives of the subjects – their relationships to the physical and imagined spaces they inhabit and their self-identification. I look at everyday life of the borderland and how it is perceived by its inhabitants. An important role in the work is played by the reflection on borders in their symbolic and material dimensions. The border in my research is understood both as the border of two countries – in this case, Georgia and Azerbaijan – and as various types of boundaries within the community I study: ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic, which affect people's daily practices. The primary research question, then, is how everyday life for Azerbaijanis between borders in a multi-ethnic community in southeastern Georgia is organized through practices of mobility and translocality between Georgia and Azerbaijan, and how they are affected by living in a multi-ethnic neighborhood.

I conducted in-depth ethnographic research from 2018 to 2023 in Georgia, during which I interviewed more than forty representatives of Azerbaijani community of different generations and diverse socioeconomic standing, mostly living in the Marneuli municipality. I also conducted individual interviews with people living in other areas of Kvemo Kartli (Dmanisi and Bolnisi municipalities) and in Tbilisi. I conducted the interviews mainly in Russian and English, with occasional use of Azerbaijani, and, less frequently, Georgian. Sometimes the narratives were conducted simultaneously in two languages. An important part of gathering material for the work

was the observations collected during intensive field research, which I wrote down in the form of a field diary and notes.

Two events that took place in 2020 proved to be turning points in the course of the research: these were the closure of the land border between Georgia and Azerbaijan after the outbreak of the pandemic, and the Nagorno-Karabakh war. They influenced the reflection on the concept of the border, the way it is felt by residents and its conception, causing its materialization. It also imposed questions how its current status affects relations between communities of different ethnic backgrounds.

The chapter “Introduction to the Site,” which opens the dissertation, situates the Kvemo Kartli region in humanistic and social studies. Its essential element is a critical review of selected texts. This part of the dissertation also includes the purpose of the research, the questions posed and the theoretical framework, the methodology, and the rationale for choosing the research area and the criteria for selecting interlocutors. An important part of the chapter is also an analysis of my social positioning in the field as a researcher who comes from outside the Azerbaijani community and holds a different nationality than my interlocutors.

The second chapter, “Ethnic Minority and the Nation-State,” describes the formation of the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia. I show that Azerbaijanis are an ethnic minority characterized by a distinct language, cultural-religious rituals, attachment to territory and belief in a common origin. I also describe ethnic politics within Georgia and the situation of ethnic minorities at the end of the USSR and today, focusing on the Kvemo Kartli region. In the chapter, I also analyze the discourses operating among the Azerbaijani minority concerning origin and attitudes toward Georgia, as well as strategies for dealing with exclusion and discrimination.

The next chapter (“Migration in the experience of Azerbaijanis from Georgia”) introduces the issue of migration within Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region. I review the stages of migration of Azerbaijanis between Georgia and Azerbaijan and analyze the reasons for leaving Georgia in historical and social terms.

In the fourth chapter, “Mobility and related translocal practices,” I present the problems of researching the phenomena of mobility, transnationalism and translocality in social research. I then address the dimensions of mobility and translocality practices of Azerbaijanis in Georgia. I

highlight factors that I believe are determinants of their embeddedness in translocality – the way they celebrate selected social, cultural and religious events, and strategies for maintaining family ties. The dimensions and limitations of mobility by the gender of the interlocutors and their socioeconomic position are also relevant. I also analyze the different ways in which research partners express translocal belonging and translocal being.

The final chapter, “Border Delimitation,” addresses issues related to the perception of borders understood both as a physical separation of Georgian territory from Azerbaijan, as well as borders in an abstract dimension, related to the social and political situation of Azerbaijanis in Georgia. The closure of the border crossing between Georgia and Azerbaijan at the time of writing has brought it into focus. I analyze the development of border visibility, which began in 2020 with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the land crossing between Georgia and Azerbaijan. Despite the end of the pandemic and the abolition of mandatory testing for the virus, as well as the absence of a vaccination certificate, the status of the border is still the subject of many questions. The border is open on a regular basis only to people leaving Azerbaijan who are not Azerbaijani citizens (the exception is the status of being married to a citizen of Georgia). Previous mobility practices between Georgia and Azerbaijan have become impossible for most Marneuli residents. “Invisible” trips to Azerbaijan often also referred to as family get-togethers and not categorized as “trips abroad” have been partially replaced by types of mobility, such as the growing popularity of economic trips to European Union countries in recent years.

I also look at boundaries related to Georgia's language policy and linguistic competence. The ideologies and linguistic practices of my interlocutors, as well as the linguistic landscape in which they reside, occupy a particularly important place in my reflections. I also refer to Georgia's linguistic diversity and post-independence situation. The final part of the work is a reflection on ethnic boundaries in a community based on a multi-ethnic neighborhood.

The title of the work “Everyday Life Between Borders. Mobility and Translocal Practices in Southeast Georgia” indicates that the goal was to examine how the residents of a border-based, multi-ethnic and multilingual community interact with these different borders, how they deal with the discrimination associated with them, and how these borders are changing. I present the linguistic and social situation in Georgia in terms of the different dimensions of borders and what kinds of processes affect them. It was also important to give a voice to minorities and show the different

dimensions of discrimination, and on the other hand, the way a multi-ethnic border neighborhood functions. I also wanted to elevate the voices of actors involved in the issue of minority language rights and language policy. The participation of minorities in the public and political life of the country is still negligible. This situation is very much influenced by language issues and related constraints, originating in the socio-economic situation of the Azerbaijani-speaking community in Georgia. This leads to discrimination, contributing to the consistently low presence of representatives of this minority in public and cultural spaces. In the paper, I also try to draw attention to the memory of ethnic conflicts taking place in the 1990s, such as violence and change of toponyms, and from contemporary phenomena, among others, functioning linguistic ideologies, lack of trust in the state, insufficient competence of teachers teaching Georgian as a foreign language, and a sense of alienation in the Georgian-speaking space outside the Kvemo Kartli region.

In the conclusion, I summarized the work, and highlighted issues that I believe are worthy of future research.