

# Institutionalization of cross-border space as a frontier movement

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**Abstract.** The article presents theoretical and methodological aspects of analyzing sustainable development of the cross-border space on the basis of symmetry and asymmetry of institutional proliferation in the territories of border regions of neighboring countries. According to the authors, the institutionalization of cross-border space determines the level and degree of development (frontier) of adjacent territories in the process of interregional interaction of Russian and Chinese territorial entities. This approach allows us to identify the main contradictions and threats of cross-border cooperation for sustainability and self-sufficiency of the Russian regions and the development of preventive measures to eliminate them.

**Keywords:** frontier, cross-border space, sustainable development, cross-border regions

## 1. Introduction

The past decades show significant changes in the regional picture of the world, which do not always have a positive vector. The “renaissance” of the research program of “safe and sustainable development”, declared as early as the beginning of the 90s already in the new global and regional realities, is a consequence of this. These realities demonstrate the aggravation of contradictions with an emphasis on the regional component, reproducing the problem of correlation between the community of civilizational development with its regional plurality.

In the traditionally declared thesis that “the border not only separates, but it also unites,” the dominant research basis is the unification as a positive and potential for developing cooperation. But this theoretical and methodological trend of regional studies is most often refuted by political and socio-economic practice, at least in the tactical behavior of cross-border territorial entities. Therefore, the concept of “frontier” seems appropriate to use in the methodological toolkit in the dynamics of a cross-border space. Because in its historical etymology and semantics, it inherently contains a component of aggressiveness in its goal-setting and fixation of results.

With many models of regional development in their structures, the institutions that form certain conditions for region’s functioning are present as an obligatory system-forming component. Cross-border regions are not an exception. Therefore, the institutional concept should be recognized as the most universal to be used as a methodological platform in determining the relationship and measurability of the interaction of cross-border regions of any size. In the process of such interactions, the geographical advancement of institutional constructs of cross-border regions occurs. Institutional interpenetration is not proportional and asymmetrical, which determines the level of advantages and threats for cross-border regions.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Retrospecting the methodological foundations for the problem of sustainable development goes back to the materials of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development Agenda 21 (1992), which became a productive scientific substrate not only of global studies, but also of regional studies (regionology, regionovedeniye, regionalistika, regionika). But already in the “zero years,” the scientific “mainstream” began to be determined by the reincarnation of institutional theory, in which “rational sociality” is conceptually related to the main humanitarian messages of sustainable development. The concept of “a frontier” has undergone even greater metamorphosis. Having emerged as a concrete geographic and historical phenomenon, its spatial semantics was transposed into scientific studies, which operate with such concepts as the boundary of comparable or opposable objects, processes, and so on. With this quality, the concept of “a frontier” was claimed by the political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural Regionalistika.

Thus, regional externalities of sustainable development are a combination of polymorphic problems of interdisciplinary nature [1]. Therefore, in this work, general scientific, private scientific methods, as well as methods of systematic and comparative analysis and interdisciplinary synthesis were applied.

## 3. Results

One of the fundamental characteristics of the region is the quality of self-sufficiency as a necessary condition for the preservation of territorial, historical and cultural integrity, opportunities for enhanced socio-economic reproduction and safe and sustainable development. In the context of the stated perspective, this quality must be interpreted as the ability of the regional system to maintain its homeostasis regarding external influences. It is obvious that the institutional component, on which the “seismic resistance” of regional self-sufficiency depends, is an immanent element in the region’s “architecture.” This is a universal and common to all situations. However, for transboundary (transnational) regions, it is repeatedly updated because they are in contact with a foreign environment; therefore, they are in an area of increased risk and potential conflict.

A transboundary space can be defined, first, as a geographical contiguity of two regions of different state affiliation and separated by the state border. Second, it is a territorial aggregate of such regions in the form of a common field of interregional interaction links. At the same time, the second definition does not cancel the first one in the general field. In particular, all independent actors do interact, maintaining their state and territorial “residency” and realizing their goals and interests in the “non-resident” territory. Thus, the activity boundary moves to the territory under development and is transformed into a frontier.

The frontier promotion parameters as an area of development are determined by an indefinite set of conditions, but not least by the state of the institutional environment in which the promoter can take the position of either an actor or an agent. As an actor, it is an exporter of institutions, introducing them into the existing institutional system in accordance with his goals and objectives. As an agent, it is forced to adapt to the institutions of the frontier’s territory, which complicates its progress.

Taking into account the objective, geographically determined interest in the mutual advancement of the frontiers, we can assume that the parity of effectiveness of cross-border cooperation is the zero balance of export-import institutional exchange. And accordingly, the negative balance leads to unpredictable transformations of the region’s institutional system, reducing its self-sufficiency due to the frontier’s advancement.

To remove this contradiction, the scheme of transforming border regions into cross-border ones is usually proposed. In the most common and operational definitions, a cross-border region is determined by independent administrative and socio-economic status, differences in living space on both sides of the border [2].

The implementation of such transformation is proposed through the institutionalization of what was defined above as the “general field of interaction” of resident and non-resident subjects. The process of institutionalization of the common space and the main areas of life involves many institutional actors and institutional agents, the interaction between which forms a new institutional space that

should interact in one modality. But even if we hypothetically allowed the existence of this model of cross-border institutionalism and appropriate methodologically, it would resist the inertia-dominant institutional system of the region. Since not all regional actors and agents have an interest in foreign economic relations of the region, they could easily oppose it. This opposition may have different motivation, but such opposition acts as a form of regionalism (regional patriotism), performing a protective function of regional space and regional self-sufficiency from promoting a cross-border frontier.

Theoretically, institutionalization of a common transboundary space declares equality of opportunities for the advancement of frontiers, but this is denied by practice, which can be argued at least by the following provisions;

1. Cross-border institutions are formed as a consensus of regional institutions at different levels of economic and socio-cultural development from the standpoint of mutual external participation. But this does not exclude one party's dominance, which can lead to the asymmetry of following institutional arrangements.
2. Institutionalization of the general field of interaction between the border regions may acquire formalization in the form of normative documents or not. There may be differences in law enforcement, etc., which provide different degrees of freedom for subjects in the means and methods of cross-border cooperation. This also creates inequality conditions for the effectiveness of the same institution in the territories of cross-border regions.
3. A thesis that different institutions have different effectiveness is adopted as a general proposition of institutional theory. Therefore, in the institutional system of the cross-border space, institutional actors can "create" temporary institutions as cooperative conditions of activity for obtaining entrepreneurial income, which are maintained until the formation of alternative institutions.

It should be recognized that the illegal and semi-legal norms of cross-border cooperation are relatively symmetrical within the framework of cross-border territories. These norms are superior to legal institutions, in their institutional content, since the zones of influence are determined, measured, and controlled [3].

In regional studies, two types of borders are distinguished, namely European and Asian [4]. For Russian regions, this typology is preserved by the criterion of civilizational socioculturality. Differences in the co-development between the Russian and Chinese regions in comparison with the co-development of the Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and even Baltic regions are obvious. Therefore, the western type of border implies greater transparency, and the possibilities of integration and institutionalization of the western cross-border regions have a much greater divergence than the eastern ones along the Russian Chinese border, first of all.

Unlike the European model, in Russia, institutional mechanisms for transboundary relations with China practically do not work. In China, the strategy and tactics of developing cross-border regions has been developed. These strategies and tactics are institutionalized in the concept of "external regionalization" and formalized in the content of the concept "supranational cross-border region." By definition, a "supranational region" may extend to the territory of neighboring states, thus going beyond the institutional boundaries of its country. Such a policy of "cross-border regionalism" is based on the modern geopolitical ideology of China, which is rooted in the traditional historical Chinese centrism. For China, the outer border of the "supranational cross-border region" is the Chinese frontier on various components of distribution, for example, Confucian culture. It is obvious that such a movement requires institutional support, the formation and development of which in China is stimulated by state actors and is easily perceived by institutional agents, in accordance with Confucian principles.

One of the distribution areas of the Chinese frontier is the economic space of Russia, which is intensively mastered by China. The ideologems of the "strategic partnership" and "complementarity of the Russian and Chinese economies" contributed a lot to the development of Chinese business in the territory of cross-border regions in the development of "san do" or "three lots" in Russian minerals,

forest, sea resources. This is originally incorporated into the mechanism for implementing Chinese cross-border regionalism, focused on the appropriation and absorption of foreign resources and the spread of its influence.

Despite the fact that strategic partnership and cross-border cooperation presupposes equality of opportunities, achievements of Russia in China's border territory are disproportionately less. This is due to the general monitoring of cross-border relations and the developed system of legislative and institutional norms regulating economic relations with non-residents. Moreover, Chinese monitoring has an operational function, i.e. it involves tracking economic relations and contacts so that these processes do not go beyond the established limits. If this happens, appropriate correction mechanisms are applied, including formal and informal institutionalization. But, describing the regulation of activities of Russian economic entities in the cross-border provinces of China, we must state that it has a largely restrictive and discriminatory functionality. Moreover, the tendency to limit parameters of conducting Russian business in a cross-border area is observed. For this reason, the Russian frontier in the northeastern provinces of China is not significant, even though certain sectors of the economy are dependent on the supply of raw materials and materials from the Russian border regions.

#### **4. Discussion**

The development of inter-country relations in the perimeter of the transboundary space is a reflection of the objective socio-economic processes of international integration, cooperation, and specialization characteristic of the globalizing world and its regional dimension. Partnership and cross-border partnership should be based on the unity and adaptation of the parties' interests for the purpose of mutually beneficial cooperation in adjacent territories and their parallel economic growth, while respecting the parameters for sustainable and safe development of the regions. But at the same time, transboundary cooperation, a priori aimed at positive effects, immanently contains a disparity of advantages and threats for the interacting parties.

Cross-border cooperation between Russian and Chinese regions demonstrates a clear asymmetry of benefits and advantages towards China [5]. This creates a potential danger of self-sufficiency of the Russian regions and a threat to their sustainable development, which is manifested in economic expansion, which has, among others, negative social and environmental consequences and makes it necessary to monitor the activities of Chinese business in Russia. The need for control implies a transformation of the legislative and regulatory framework and institutional environment to protect its economic space, particularly in order to advance its interests in China.

#### **5. Conclusion**

A cross-border region is a potential space that is organized by two adjacent territorial entities of different state affiliation on the basis of achieving consensual socio-economic goals. The consensus requires a common institutional environment for legitimizing and rationing activities in a foreign territory, which should ensure equality of opportunities for the parties in the realization of their interests, their promotion and consolidation as a frontier zone. As a result, asymmetry of cross-border interaction arises, which is the basis for conflict and can pose a threat to self-sufficiency and sustainable development of the region.

This provision is valid both Western and Asian transboundary model. But this is mostly clear in the cross-border relations between the Russian and Chinese regions. In these relations, the Chinese side is the main beneficiary with the tendency of economic dominance in the Russian territory of the cross-border space, which creates threats not only to regional self-sufficiency, but potentially to regional identity.

To dampen the dangers of cross-border cooperation with China, the neoliberal component of the institutional space of the Russian regions must be reformatted into a pragmatic protectionist. The state, prospects, and directions of cross-border interaction are determined by the policy and ideology of the authorities at all levels and the internal political and legal regime of the region, which must not only be adequate to the Chinese ones, but they must surpass it in its controlling and protective functions. Only

such an approach will ensure regional stability in the context of possible escalation in the Chinese frontier.

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