

East of a New Eden



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DOCUMENTED JOURNEY ALONG THE EXTERNAL BORDER OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2001-2002

Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea: where the external border of the European Union lies. Seven countries are to be found between the two seas; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, without forgetting the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. For more than fifty years they formed the buffer zone of the former USSR. Now, more than ten years after the decline of the Soviet Empire, these countries will become the buffer zone of a new empire: the European Union. Today, the reason for reinforcing the surveillance of this region is to better control the massive immigration coming from the East.

What is happening in this zone where men who have been accustomed to the standards of the ancient regime are suddenly following the rules of the European Union? What happens when a former “no man’s land” becomes a free zone? How many watchtowers will still be built by Europe?

We chose to show the actual state of the border by keeping an analytic and neutral distance, closer to contemporary photography than to classic reportage. We also took pictures of the people closely related to this border; the guards and illegal immigrants. They are all both witnesses and actors of what is happening on the east side of Europe now. We wanted to experience every day life of this border with the people who work on it. Car, hovercraft, snow-scooter or foot patrols are assisted by electronic devices that are set along this limit. Thermo-vision and infra-red cameras hidden in the woods or in vehicles, form a huge security net covering the entire region.

We decided that each of us would begin at one of the ends of this border, one from the North, the other from the South, meeting midway, most likely somewhere in Poland. Each time we would take a picture and note our GPS position in order to show exactly where the border was.

We began a very tedious task of asking for authorizations and then departed for a long trip in the frozen landscape of Eastern Europe.

Countries which are encouraged to watch the external border of the UE are sometimes providers of illegal immigrants themselves. They have the double duty of watching the foreigners coming from the East and trying to keep their own people from going to Western Europe. Romania is one of them. Equipment is not up to date there and guards have to patrol by foot along the border in order to protect us, Western Europeans, from the “barbarians” coming from the East. In Estonia at the opposite end of this same border, guards patrol with hovercrafts on the ice of Lake Peipsi, while cameras keep an eye on the white desert. On the subject of border control Hungary is a good student. No less than 1200 night-vision cameras operate along its eastern border.

The Union has not found a solution to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, an “island” wedged between Poland and Lithuania, and in the middle of a changing European Union.

Our trip continues towards Poland. Since this latter has a common border with Germany, it is the most desirable country for a majority of the illegal migrants to reach. It is also the most difficult of the buffer-zone countries to enter. It is hard to imagine the number of people who try to come into Western Europe each year. The International Organization for Migration estimated that 1,6 million people crossed Ukrainia in the year 2000. It is also interesting to know that a one-way ticket paid to a smuggler costs from 2500 dollars to 10000 dollars depending on the length of the journey and its difficulty. The poor that frighten us so much in Western Europe are certainly not the poorest in their countries if they can afford, even with great difficulties, their passage to the “Empire”.

After one month and a half we met at the crossing point of Poland, Ukrainia and Bielorussia in a barren landscape of yellow grass. We both checked our GPS and saw that we each had almost the same distance written on the screen: 860km. More than 1600km in all. Both of us took a picture at the same spot to mark the end of our journey.

Human beings have built a lot of frontiers during their history, always because they were afraid of something; poverty, aggressivity or unknown countries. The story of borders are not new. A limit running from the Black Sea to the North Sea already existed during the Roman Empire. It had 900 watchtowers, and many fortresses and garrisons. This border merely marked the limit between the civilized world and the Barbarians. The latter were not the bloodthirsty people we usually fantasize about, but rather simply people who just happened to be living in the territories which were not occupied by the Roman Empire. Human beings still have a lot to learn.

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