

Corruption and Control Define Russia's Border Zones

By [Howard Amos](#)

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A view of Blagoveshchensk at night. Visitors to the city enjoy complete freedom of movement because it is inexplicably exempted from the usual border zone limitations.

On the face of it, there are few similarities between the city of Blagoveshchensk, located in the Far East, and the country's natural gas capital of Novy Urengoi, 3,000 kilometers away in the tundra just below the Arctic circle.

But both cities are part of official border zone territory: areas of land abutting Russia's borders that are closed to visitors and under the direct control of the Federal Security Service, or FSB.

Frequent changes to the exact boundaries of border zones and arbitrary enforcement of access suggest that they are a source of large scale corruption and designed to control population movements rather than being a necessity for national security, according to experts.

The difference between the restrictions in Blagoveshchensk and Novy Urengoi reveal some of this ambiguity.

Visitors to Blagoveshchensk, which sits on the other side of the Amur River from the Chinese city of Heihe, enjoy complete freedom of movement because it is inexplicably exempted from the usual border zone limitations.

The Federal
Security
Service's
arbitrary use of
border zones
has some
experts
suggesting
there is more
than meets the
eye.

Novy Urengoi, in contrast, saw roadblocks go up on its outskirts last year as officials activated its border zone status that had lain dormant for five years. Novy Urengoi is thousands of kilometers from the nearest foreign country.

"It is the lite version of the Soviet Union," said Natalya Zubarevich, director of the regional program at the Independent Institute of Social Policy.

In place since the 1930s, border zones, or *pogranichnie zoni*, were abolished in 1993 after the fall of Communism but re-instated in 2006 under President Vladimir Putin.

To enter the zone, all non-residents, foreigners and Russians alike, must obtain a special permit from the FSB — a procedure usually requiring about a month to complete.

The limitations on entering border zones are one example of a panoply of Soviet-era restrictions being enforced with increasing zeal in modern Russia. Legislation to broaden the significance of the residence permit, or *propiska*, is currently moving through the State Duma and is expected to come into force later this year.

In recent years, there has been a steady growth in the intensity with which restrictions on movement in border zones have been applied by the security services.

In 2007 just 13,364 people were caught illegally entering border zones. But this rose to 33,797 people in 2012, according to statistics provided to The Moscow Times by the FSB.

"They need to show that they are catching more and more people," said Andrei Soldatov, a security expert and founder of the Agentura.ru think tank.

"Especially in the regions, the mindset of the FSB is the same as it was in the Soviet Union."

The restrictions only apply to people visiting a border zone with no intention to travel farther: those passing through a border zone in order to enter or exit Russia are unaffected.

Of course, in Novy Urengoi, on the fringes of the icy Kara Sea, there are no onward destinations.

Novy Urengoi's border zone status was implemented as way of combating high levels of immigration, rising crime rates and an increase in radical Islamism, according to officials.

The authorities have put checkpoints in place for those entering the city by road, rail and air.

The Yamal-Nenets autonomous region, of which Novy Urengoi is the capital, is rich in natural gas deposits that generate significant wealth and have created job opportunities for migrant workers, including many who have been arriving from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Putin defended the new measures during a December press conference.

"I know that a significant number of people living in this area wanted these restrictions," Putin said, according to a transcript on the Kremlin website. "I don't see any violations of the law; therefore I look on this positively."

The border zone rubric suddenly began to be used in Novy Urengoi simply because it was convenient, said Zubarevich. "This law is being used in such a way at the moment because there is no other legal basis to limit the entry of immigrants."

Border zones are guarded by the Border Guards Service, a branch of the FSB. The fines levied for unsanctioned visits are usually up to 600 rubles (\$19).

Although it effectively amounts to tens of thousands of square kilometers, the exact size of territory covered by border zones is unclear: the breadth of the zone varies from region to region. In some places it can exceed 100 kilometers.

It covers almost all the islands off the Russian coast, including the Kuril Islands in the Far East that are the subject of a sovereignty dispute with Japan. Affected areas in the North Caucasus include Mount Elbrus, Europe's highest mountain, the hinterland around Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan, and much of the region's Caspian coast.

An exemption is in place for the capital of the Amur Region, Blagoveshchensk. Other major cities near borders such as Saint Petersburg, Vladivostok and Pskov are also not affected.

But confusion over the restrictions is fueled by the presence of checkpoints in some areas and not in others. Sometimes there may be warning signs on roads leading into border zones, but clueless would-be visitors can buy train tickets without a problem.

There are also regular legislative revisions to the exact delineation of border zones, with the most recent coming into force in January 2013.

The shifting and arbitrary aspects of border zones make them a significant source of corruption, according to experts.

"When such a barrier is put in place, people find their way around it," Zubarevich said. "They find fictional relatives, they give bribes ... you can do everything for money."

But border zones are also a *raison d'être* for Russia's sprawling security services and a mechanism for endemic criminality, said independent military analyst Pavel Felgengauer.

Huge profits can be made through the manipulation of revenues from real estate and natural resources within and adjacent to border zones.

"The leftovers of authoritarian control are used today for different purposes," said Felgengauer. "The only real reason [for their existence] is corruption."

Contact the author at h.amos@imedia.ru

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