The Russo–Polish borderland of the 1760s was subject to longstanding competition for land and resources between the Russian Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was an example of a borderland peculiar to Europe before 1700, one that Daniel Power and Naomi Standen have described as a buffer zone between two states whose populations experienced intense interaction, while also being influenced by the core areas of their respective states. The Russo–Polish competition for control led to long-running disagreement over border demarcation.

In 1770, local Russian authorities of the Kyiv province in left-bank Ukraine described the unsatisfactory state of the border in reports that aimed to attract the attention of central imperial officials to border insecurity, and at the same time petition them for improvements to be made to this state of affairs. The reports suggested that the border meant little to local inhabitants. Indeed, in some areas on the right bank of the Dnieper River, Russian and Polish villages were located in such close proximity that peasants could easily exchange goods, use common grasslands, rivers, and forests, and go fishing together.

According to the Russian administrators, local peasants were not even aware that a legal border existed between the two states. Polish subjects captured by border guards during cross-border pilgrimages to Kyiv, visits to relatives, or fishing activities were not able to tell whether they lived in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Russian Empire; nor were they able to discern where the Empire ended and the Commonwealth began.

The disappointing state of border security improved dramatically in the last decades of the eighteenth century, when the Russian Empire created a definitive border with the Commonwealth. The introduction of a vicegerency in the Kyiv province of the Russian Empire in 1782 secured this territory for the empire. The creation of the new province increased the empire’s presence in the borderland, and blocked Polish conquest and colonization in the central
Map 6.1 The Kyiv Vicegerency of the Russian Empire and the Kyiv Palatinate of Poland-Lithuania, 1782