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BorderObs

BorderObs is a place for the publication of observations and scientific comments on current societal developments. BorderObs is open to all members of the network and project UniGR-CBS as well as to guest authors.

The short articles are written in simple language, can be of essayistic character and refer to borders and border spaces in the Greater Region and beyond. Proposals can be sent in German, French or English to borderstudies@uni.lu.

> Borderland experiences – an interim balance of the impact of Covid-19 on the interlinked SaarLorLux region (Florian Weber, Saarland University), 22/07/2021

> European Border Region Studies in Times of Borderization (Christian Wille, University of Luxembourg), 20/06/2021

2020 was the first time since the nation building that the borders of so many countries were closed at the same time. This event can be seen as the (preliminary) climax of a whole series of territorial (self-)securitizations, which calls into question the idea of the "borderless world" that emerged in the 1990s. For while territorial borders had seemed to lose their meaning under the influence of the expanding Internet, the fall of the Iron Curtain, growing mobility as well as global climate and environmental issues, a renaissance of borders has indeed been observed for around two decades. This stems largely from more recent social and political developments, such as the sudden increase in terrorist attacks in the 2000s or the migration management by western states which has, with increasing clarity, turned into a crisis. These developments have not only brought about the accelerated digitalization of the border regimes, the temporary reintroduction of border controls in the Schengen Area and the sealing off of the EU external borders, but also led to a multiplication of border infrastructures.

This development suggests that we have entered an age of borderization. Border (region) studies is also reacting to this and has been working for some time with concepts that detect borders in social processes and thus divert attention from the territorial edges to those social "arenas" in which and through which borders "take place". When dealing with such "arenas," two tendencies can be identified: While international border studies, under the influence of refugee movements and migration research, focuses primarily on the mobility and diffusion of borders and their establishment, stabilization and infiltration, European border regions studies – guided by the ideal of a "Europe without borders" – is particularly interested in what is happening on the territorial edges within the EU and in the gradual relativization of their separating effects. The latter orientation has been evident since at least the 1980s, when legal issues of cross-border cooperation became more important and the understanding of the EU's internal borders changed from "dividing scars of history" to "connecting seams" (Courlet 1988). This conception of borders as permeable bridges was solidified in the 1990s as the integration process progressed, in which border regions played an important role from then on. The political importance of border regions, which has also persisted during the waves of enlargement, is still reflected in European border region studies to this day. It is closely interwoven with the political project of European integration, which explains the focus on destabilization processes, the permeability of borders and a certain normative orientation of the numerous and often unrelated studies of (trans)border regions in Europe.

Borderization in European Border Regions

With this in mind, it seems as if European border region studies has been overtaken by global developments that have ushered in an age of borderization. This impression is reinforced in light of the familiar guiding principle of a "Europe without borders," which has lost a lot of its appeal with Brexit, growing Euroscepticism and an increasingly expensive EU border regime. It was first startlingly questioned in 2015 when, due to the refugee movements and terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, some EU member states reintroduced border controls. Five years later, the EU's internal borders were once again reactivated, although this time much more drastically and with an entirely new topic of (in)security. While security was established in 2015 with reference to that which is foreign, security provisions for a country's own population were legitimized in 2020 via the external virus (Nossem 2020). This refers to the hitherto unprecedented "covidfencing," a term which Medeiros/Hublet et al. (2020) use to describe the extensive border closings during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. Of the EU members, Slovenia was the first to close its border on March 11th, followed by Denmark on March 14th, and by the end of the month all of the other EU states – with the exception of Luxembourg, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden – imposed drastic entry restrictions at their borders as well.

While the timeline of the border closings is now well documented, the act of processing the experience of these covidfencing actions in the Schengen Area has only just begun. These include, for example, recording the socio-economic effects in border regions (MOT 2021), the proposals for strategies to jointly manage the socio-economic effects across borders (Medeiros/Hublet et al. 2020), for improved cross-border crisis management (Coatleven/Ramírez et al. 2020) or critical considerations of hasty covidfencing with regard to its efficiency in containing the virus. One aspect of covidfencing processing that has so far not been addressed concerns the limitations on the daily lives of the border region inhabitants. Apart from a few episodic insights (BIG-Review 2020; Opiłowska 2020; Ulrich/Cyrus et al. 2020; Wille/Kanesu 2020) in the experience and the handling of the border closings, there are still no systematic studies of the everyday realities in the border regions as "arenas" of borderization and deborderization. However, numerous developments and events since March 2020 offer starting points, from which a few examples will be named in the Greater Region SaarLorLux and on the German-Polish border.

The explosive nature of the everyday dimensions of covidfencing was evident in the border region between Germany, France, Belgium, and Luxembourg (Greater Region SaarLorLux), especially in April 2020 on the German-French border and in September 2020 on the German-Luxembourg border in connection with cross-border commuters for work and recreation. At that time, they became a reference to resentment that had long been believed to have been overcome, the articulation of which the press pointedly referred to as "corona racism" (Drobinski 2020). Borderization in the course of the pandemic not only manifested itself in the form of strict filtering checks, but the observed distancing from the 'other' can be qualified as an "arena" of covidfencing. There is no information (yet) available on the spread of such mechanisms of (self-)securitization in European border regions (and the possibility of them leaving long-term traces). However, Opiłowska (2020: 9) also states with regard to the border closings on the German-Polish border "that these top-down decisions [border closures] 'are fueling the narrative that foreign people and foreign goods are a source of danger and vulnerability' (Alden 2020) and thus construct the social boundaries of the 'others' as a threat."

As a result of covidfencing, border region residents have also initiated actions aimed at processes of deborderization. In response to the top-down measures, solidarity and affinity with the people on the other side of the border were articulated, which can be explained by the experience of restricted freedom of movement in everyday life and work across borders and/or a heightened awareness of a "Europe without borders." For example, in the spring of 2020 in the Greater Region SaarLorLux and on the German-Polish border, large banners with expressions of solidarity were hung, which were visible from central locations or hung directly on the affected borders:

- at a motorway entrance to the German city of Trier with the inscription "L'Europe, c'est la liberté, l'amitié et la solidarité. Metz + Trèves pour toujours" (Europe is freedom, friendship and solidarity. Metz + Trier forever);

- at the Friendship Bridge over the Saar River, which connects the German Kleinblittersdorf with the French Grosbliederstroff: "La Sarre ou la Lorraine. Aidez-vous les uns les autres et restez fort!" (Saarland or Lorraine. Help each other and stay strong!);
- on the city bridge between Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany and Słubice in Poland: "Im Herzen vereint und gemeinsam stark. Wir sehen uns bald wieder! | Razem łatwiej przetrwać najtrudniejsze chwile. Do zobaczenia wkrótce!" (United in heart and strong together. We'll meet again soon!);
- on the banks of the border river Oder between the German Frankfurt (Oder) and the Polish Słubice: "Bleibt gesund, Freunde!" (Stay healthy, friends!), "Wir gehören zusammen" (We belong together).

Various protest rallies and symbolic actions, such as the one on the German-Polish border on 24/25 April and 9/10 May 2020, were noticeably sharper in tone and can be seen as explicit challenges to covidfencing. There, the border area residents and cross-border commuters protested against border closings and quarantine requirements with the slogans "Don't separate families," "We want to work and live with dignity," "Let us go to work" and "Let us go home" (Opiłowska 2020: 7). Similar challenges to the border closings took place in the border tripoint of Germany, France, and Luxembourg: In April the "Schengen is alive" campaign was initiated here, in which the border region residents in the Luxembourg wine-growing village of Schengen and the surrounding communities raised awareness for weeks on freedom of movement as a European achievement worth protecting. On the German-French border between Saarland and Grand Est, activists from the transnational youth association "Young European Federalists" dismantled the barriers on 3 May 2020 in a symbolic action at two closed border crossings and sprayed "#DontTouchMySchengen" onto the asphalt.

Image 1: Demonstration "Grenzen auf! Otwarcia granic!" (Open the borders!) on 24 April 2020 on the city bridge between Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany and Słubice in Poland, photo © Janek Coppenhagen

Image 2: Protest "Grenzsturm im Mai 2020" (Storm the border - May 2020) of the youth organization "Young European Federalists" on the German-French border on 3 May 2020, photo © Young European Federalists

Image 3: Demonstration "Tous ensemble – Alle zusammen" (All together) on 6 March 2021 on the German-French border (Saarbrücken / Stiring-Wendel), photo © Pierre Hilpert

Image 4: Protest of the "Comité de Défense des Travailleurs Frontaliers de la Moselle" on 20 March 2021 on the German-French border (Rilchingen-Hanweiler / Sarreguemines), photo © Laurent Molinier

Protests in border regions have been observed again in 2021 as a result of covidfencing. Although the Schengen internal borders have been largely reopened since June 2020, with a few (temporary) exceptions, many border area residents feel that the quarantine requirements in the event of a possible border crossing and the current testing requirements are de facto covidfencing. This mainly affects cross-border commuters, who usually cross a state border every day and are therefore particularly entangled in the quarantine and testing regulations. The rallies by cross-border commuters from the French department of Moselle, who have been required to submit a negative PCR test every 48 hours after entering Germany since March 2nd, testify to this. At the protest rallies in the spring 2021, the French border area residents protested this requirement, which, despite the German-French test center set up especially for this purpose at the border, has turned out to be impractical in everyday life. They demand a reduced testing frequency or even the abolition of the testing requirement.

However, a number of the slogans that have been used make it just as clear that the entry regulations into Germany are perceived as inadmissible bordering or even violent categorization. Slogans such as "Tous ensemble – Alle zusammen" (All together) or "Nous ne pouvons pas être séparés, même pas par un test PCR." (We cannot be separated, not even by a PCR test.) emphasize a currently "interrupted" sense of belonging, but also a "resistant" affinity with the residents across the border. The call for de-differentiation comes on the one hand from the decades-long tradition of employing French cross-border commuters in the neighboring German state of Saarland and, on the other hand, above all from the perceived stigmatization of cross-border commuters as 'dangerous others.' In businesses and companies in Germany, cross-border commuters work side by side with non-cross-border commuters who are not (yet) subject to a test in their country of residence in March 2021. Thus, the protests of the French cross-border commuters should be understood as a challenge to everyday covidfencing, which implicates the selective testing regulations and, in the end, turns out to be a biopolitical othering. This is especially evident in the slogans used, "Vous tracez une nouvelle frontière – Ihr zieht eine neue Grenze" (You're creating a new border), "Le test PCR n'est pas un passeport." (A PCR test is not a passport) or "Nous ne sommes pas des pestiférés ! Assez de discrimination !" (We are not lepers! Enough with the discrimination!)

Challenges for European Border Region Studies

The outlined logics of borderization that (should) generate definiteness and certainties via external reference subjects (terrorists, virus, the 'other') illustrate the dynamics and complexity of bordering processes, as they have so far been primarily addressed by international border studies. Also primarily found in international border studies is the contestation of borders and thus also the question of who can and does participate in what way and with what interests and effects in (de)bordering practices. Civil society actors with their activist or artivist initiatives as "arenas" for political intervention is particularly emphasized. In response to covidfencing, however, such interventions can now also be observed in European border regions, which have generally had little experience with civic contestation of borders. These initiatives have so far not been taken into account in European border region studies, neither in the context of covidfencing processes nor otherwise.

However, in light of the forms of protest mentioned that are likely to intensify in border regions, European border region studies is well advised to deal more with the establishment and stabilization of borders but also with their civic undermining and contestation. After all, the age of borderization has now progressed through global migration, Euroscepticism and the pandemic to the nucleus of European integration – into the border regions. A corresponding expansion of the research agenda to include the contested dis/orderings of borders does not mean, however, that European border region studies must drop its normative requirement or that it must emancipate itself from the political project of integration and the guiding ideas associated with it. Rather, the perspective should be broadened, which covers the "arenas" and logics of border (de)stabilization in border regions, provides alternative concepts for cross-border civil society and European citizenship and thus helps to understand the interrelationship between processes of borderization and deborderization in the Schengen Area. To what extent European border region studies will be inspired by international (and critical) border studies remains to be seen.

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