European Border Region Studies in Times of Borderization: Overview of the Problem and Perspectives

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Since at least the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of borders could no longer be overlooked. This global development has also penetrated the European border regions along with the virus. There, European border region studies is now confronted with events that it has thus far hardly had to deal with. This article addresses such events and elaborates on the interplay of borderization and deborderization processes in the context of "covidfencing". For this purpose, social negotiation processes of border closures in the Greater Region SaarLorLux and in the German–Polish border area are discussed as "people's resilience". This article considers how European border region studies can deal with events and questions in times of borderization. Drawing on international border studies, the research agenda can be extended to everyday cultural issues. In addition, the common concept of borders can be adjusted in order to make the border more accessible as a subject of everyday cultural negotiations.[1]

Borderization and Border (Region) Studies

The COVID-19 border closures can be seen as the (preliminary) culmination of a whole series of territorial (self-)securitization measures that undoubtedly call into question the idea of a "borderless world" (Ohmae 1990) which emerged in the 1990s. For while territorial borders seemed to lose their significance under the influence of the expanding Internet, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and increased mobility, as well as global climate and environmental issues, a renaissance of borders has indeed been observed for around two decades. This is mainly due to recent events, such as the sudden rise in terrorist attacks after the turn of the millennium,

burgeoning nationalism, growing social inequalities, and the ongoing migration management crisis in Western countries. These events have not only brought about the accelerated digitization of border regimes, the temporary reintroduction of border controls in the Schengen area, and the sealing off of the European Union's external borders, but have also led to increased uncertainty, social fragmentation and, in the end, to a multiplication of border infrastructures (Vallet 2019). Benedicto et al. (2020) speak of a "walled world" when they take stock of the construction of border walls over the past 30 years: between 1989 and 2018 their number

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worldwide increased from six to 63, of which 14 were erected in 2015 alone at the peak of the 2010 refugee movements.

The outlined "border transition" (Andersen Jagetic & Prokkola 2022, 3) suggests that we have entered an age of borderization. This also challenges border (region) studies, which partly responds to this transition with concepts that locate borders in social processes and thus divert attention from the territorial edges to those numerous social "arenas" where borders are effective (Wille 2020; 2021). When dealing with such "arenas", various orientations can be identified: while international border studies, under the influence of refugee movements and migration research, focuses primarily on the mobility and territorial diffusion of borders as well as their stabilization and contestation, European border region 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 their permeability. The latter orientation has been seen 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 so-called "dividing scars of history" to "connecting seams" (Courlet 1988). This understanding of borders as bridges or interfaces was solidified in the 1990s as the integration process progressed, in which border regions were now attributed the role of laboratories of Europeanization (Ruge 2003). The political importance of border regions gained in this way, which also persisted during the waves of enlargement, is still reflected in European border region studies to this day. It is closely intertwined with the political project of integration (Wassenberg 2021), which explains the focus on the permeability of borders and the normative orientation of numerous border area analyses on the deborderization narrative (Wille & Connor 2019, 260).

With this in mind, it seems as if European border region studies had been overtaken by the aforementioned developments, which portray a "world of borders" (Nail 2020, 203). This impression is reinforced, on the one hand, in light of the 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 (Bürkner 2020; Klatt 2020; Yndigegn 2020; Kasparek 2021). On the other hand, borderizations seem to have mutated into a political strategy for Europe (Bayramoğlu & Castro Varela 2021, 127). The guiding principle of open EU internal borders was put to the test for the first time in 2015, when some EU Member States reintroduced border controls as a result of the refugee movements and terrorist attacks. Five years later, the EU's internal borders were once again reactivated, although this time much more drastically, and guided by a new (in)security narrative. While security was established in 2015 with reference to the foreign as an "emotional home" (Schwell 2021), giving one's own population a sense of security was legitimized in 2020 with reference to the external coronavirus (Casaglia & Coletti 2021; Singh 2022; Nossem 2023). This was a call for what is known as "covidfencing", a term which Medeiros et al. (2021) use to describe the hitherto unprecedented border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both 2015 and 2020, with their drastic events in Europe, can be regarded as "symbols of bordering" (Svensson & Balogh 2022, 83). They stand for an age of borderization that has now also encompassed the nucleus of European integration: the border regions. This development, which is promoted by the unilateralism of the EU member states and "vaccine nationalism" (Mylonas & Whalley 2022) during efforts to control the pandemic, confronts European border region studies with events and issues that it has hardly dealt with thus far.[2] This article presents such events on the basis of everyday observations in the years 2020 and 2021 and illustrates the interplay of borderization and deborderization processes in the context of covidfencing. For this purpose, social negotiation processes of border closures in the Greater Region SaarLorLux (Wille 2015) and in the German–Polish border area (Opiłowska & Sus 2021) are discussed as "people's resilience" (Jagetic Andersen & Prokkola 2022, 6). The cultural dimension of everyday life is still rarely considered in European border region studies. Inspired by international border studies, suggestions are made to extend the research agenda of European border region studies to everyday cultural questions for dealing with events and issues arising in times of borderization.

Covidfencing and "People's Resilience"

Territorial borders and social demarcations have suddenly and dramatically become more relevant in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been reflected in the categorizations implemented during the pandemic (vaccinated/unvaccinated, vulnerable/non-vulnerable, etc.), which sometimes have significant consequences for those who have been categorized (Volkmer & Werner 2020). In the same way, borders were (re)activated as supposed protective shields against the virus, so that our highly mobile global society was transformed overnight into an "inmate society of national state compartments" (Mau 2021, 17). In Europe, Slovenia was the first to close its borders on March 11th, 2020, 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 (e.g. Carrera & Luk 2020; Reitel et al. 2020; Wille & Weber 2020) and the closings are undisputedly seen as the "comeback of borders to Europe" (Böhm 2023, 491), the examination of covidfencing in the Schengen area

is only just now taking shape. This includes, for example, recording the socio-economic effects in border regions (MOT 2021), the proposals for jointly managing the socio-economic effects across borders (Medeiros et al. 2021), the analyses for improved cross-border crisis management (Coatleven et al. 2020; Theis 2021; Weber et al. 2021a; Kajta & Opiłowska 2022; Böhm 2023), and the critical considerations of hasty covidfencing with regard to its necessity and efficiency in containing the virus (Eckardt et al. 2020; Duvernet 2021).

One aspect that has hardly been examined concerns the restrictions on the daily lives of the residents of border regions. Apart from a few episodic insights into the experience and handling of border closures (BIG-Review 2020; Ulrich & Cyrus 2020; Wille & Kanesu 2020; Opiłowska 2021; Weber et al. 2021b), there are still only a few systematic studies of the realities of life in the border regions during the pandemic (e.g. Tarvet & Klatt 2023; Böhm 2022; Renner et al. 2022). However, a number of events that have rarely been observed in European border regions offer starting points for further examination: "When border communities and mobile people need to cope with man-made material border infrastructures, renewal and resistance may emerge as a response to such border transitions" (Jagetic Andersen & Prokkola 2022, 5). This quotation refers to the restricted freedom of the movement of people and the resulting reactions of border residents, which were expressed, for example, in actions of resistance and/or solidarity in the sense of European guiding principles. The tense interplay of borderization and deborderization processes is hereinafter understood as "people's resilience", which stands for a perspective that focuses on the self-organization and resources of civil society actors when it comes to overcoming difficulties or threats and securing community: "Different social groups' ability to self-organize and mobilize skills and resources to create opportunities when faced with adversity and to act in solidarity when their community is disturbed and even disrupted". (Jagetic Andersen & Prokkola 2022, 7) The following events from the Greater Region SaarLorLux and the German–Polish border region illustrate such "people's resilience" in the context of covidfencing.

The everyday cultural dimension of covidfencing became virulent in the border region between Germany, France, Belgium, and Luxembourg (Greater Region SaarLorLux), especially in April 2020 at the German–French border and in September 2020 at the German–Luxembourg border in connection with cross-border workers and leisure commuters. At that time, the regions reverted to a nationalist resentment that was long believed to have been overcome (Dylla 2021, 269–270; Freitag-Carteron 2021, 298), the articulation of which the press pointedly referred to as "corona racism" (Drobinski 2020). Weber and Dittel (2023, 219) state in this context:

Hostility from parts of the German population towards French cross-border workers was perceived as particularly shocking, for example in the form of verbal abuse or graffitied cars in front of supermarkets. French citizens were stigmatized as the people who were bringing the virus to Germany and therefore as a 'danger'.

There is little information available on the distribution of such mechanisms of (self-)securitization in European border regions (e.g., Novotný 2022). However, it can generally be observed that strategies of "othering" (Reuter 2002, 20; van Houtum & van Naerssen 2002) have become effective as identity-creating mechanisms both in the everyday discourse of border residents and in the discourse of regional actors (Steinhoff 2023). Bayramoğlu and Castro Varela (2021, 105–109) as well as Mau (2021, 74–77) support this observation, since they show from a historical perspective that health risks are always located externally, among the "others". Opiłowska (2021, 9) states in this context at 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".

"People's resilience", though, can also take on inclusive forms. For example, border residents also initiated campaigns that aimed at deborderization as a result of covidfencing. In response to the top-down measures, solidarity and affinity with people on the other side of the border were articulated, which can be explained by the partly new experience of restricted freedom of movement in cross-border everyday life and work and/or an awareness of a "Europe without borders" gained through this experience (Duvernet et al. 2021, 5). For example, in the spring of 2020 in the Greater Region SaarLorLux and on the German–Polish border in Frankfurt (Oder)–Słubice, 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).

Sharper in tone and seen as explicit challenges to covidfencing are the "people's resilience" actions reflected in protest rallies and symbolic campaigns on April 24–25 (Figure 1) and May 9–10 of 2020 on the German–Polish border. 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 2021, 7). Similar initiatives that reflect the controversy of 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 area 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 May 3, 2020 in a symbolic action at two closed border crossings and sprayed "#DontTouchMySchengen" onto the asphalt (JEF 2020) (Figure 2).

Protests in border regions as a result of covidfencing were observed again in 2021. Although the Schengen internal borders have been largely reopened since June 2020, with a few (temporary) exceptions, many border area residents experienced the quarantine requirements in the event of a possible border crossing

and the testing regulations that started in 2021 (Weber et al. 2021a, 13–16) as de facto borderization. This mainly affected 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 were required to submit a negative PCR test every 48 hours after entering Germany starting March 2, 2021 (SR 2021), testify to this. At the protest rallies in the spring of 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, turned out to be rather impractical in everyday life (Thiercy 2021). They demanded a reduced testing frequency or even the abolition of the testing requirement. However, the slogans used make it clear that the introduction of entry regulations into Germany were perceived as drastic borderization. Thus, slogans such as "Nous ne pouvons pas être séparés, même pas par un test PCR" (We cannot be separated, not even by a PCR test) challenged the experienced demarcation and at the same time emphasized affinity with the residents on the other side of the border. The "people's resilience", which manifests itself here in the issue of deborderization, is fed in part by the decades-long employment of French cross-border commuters in the neighboring German state of Saarland (OIE 2021), and above all by the categorization—or rather 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 were not subject to a test in their country of residence in the spring of 2021. Thus, the protests of the French cross-border commuters (Figure 3 and 4) should be understood as "people's resilience" that resulted from the selective test regulations and turned out to be a bio-political othering (Foucault 1977, 67). This is especially evident in the protest slogans used: "Vous tracez une nouvelle

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

Figure 2. Symbolic action, "Grenzsturm im Mai 2020" (Storm the border May 2020) on the German–French border on May 3, 2020. Image: Young European Federalists in Rhineland Palatinate (CC–BY–4.0) 2020.

Figure 3. Protest rally, "Tous ensemble—Alle zusammen" (All together) on the German–French border (Saarbrücken–Stiring-Wendel), March 6, 2021. Image: Pierre Hilpert © 2021.

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

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), and "Nous ne sommes pas des pestiférés! Assez de discrimination!" (We are not lepers! Enough with the discrimination!)".

This cursory overview of various forms of "people's resilience" illustrates recent and hitherto unknown events in European border regions. They can be located on an everyday cultural level between borderization and deborderization and are embedded in socio-cultural and geopolitical power relations. The empirically observable negotiation practices—more precisely, the experiences, narratives, strategies, and challenges of borders articulated in "people's resilience"—provide information about this meshwork of relationships and its dynamics:

> It is possible to gain understanding of the entanglement of the resilience processes with the long-lasting socio-cultural and geopolitical power relations and contestations by analyzing how these relations are manifested in border experiences and narratives providing guidance to adaptive pathways and resistance. (Jagetic Andersen & Prokkola 2022, 6)

In European border region studies, however, "people's resilience" has so far not been considered either as a complex meshwork or as a "simple" event. However, it can be assumed that borderization in cross-border regional everyday realities will remain relevant even after the pandemic and will become the subject of social negotiation processes. This is indicated, for example, by political unilateralism, persistent Euroscepticism, and increasingly widespread populism against the background of continuous refugee movements and increasing social inequality. European border region studies would therefore do well from now on to deal with the resurgence of borders and the associated (new) events—such as the civil society challenge of border(ing)s—both empirically and (more intensively) theoretically-conceptually.

Perspectives for European Border Region Studies in Times of Borderization

The starting point of this article was the finding that borders have (once again) become more important in recent decades. This development, which can be easily reconstructed on a global level, has now also reached the European border regions, at the latest with the COVID-19 pandemic: "The pandemic re-introduced borders back in the EU" (Böhm 2023, 487). Examples of this include the instances of "people's resilience" listed here, which refer to two problems of European border region studies: the inadequate consideration of the everyday cultural dimension, and the understanding of borders generally applied. Both problems, which are virulent in light of the recent and more foreseeable borderization, will be discussed in this final portion of the article.

The overview of the scientific reviews of covidfencing has shown that the first studies on the closures of the EU's internal borders mainly deal with socio-economic issues or with governance issues and/or cross-border crisis management. Everyday cultural issues, which include the bordered everyday lives of border residents, their border experiences, or "people's resilience" have so far hardly been systematically considered. Initially, this may have been due to the explosiveness and unprecedented nature of the pandemic situation. However, in European border region studies—in its application, orientation, and normativity—a pronounced interest in socio-economic issues and institutional structures can generally be observed (Wassenberg & Reitel 2020; Gerst & Krämer 2021, 135). This finding, which comes at the expense of the everyday cultural dimension, can be explained by the political project of Europeanization, the implicit "debordering mainstream" (Böhm 2023, 500), and the underlying understanding of borders. But, most recently, the events in the course of covidfencing, which the rebordering processes and their challenges as hitherto unknown events bring into focus, show that the previous position of European border region studies falls short.

It is important to pay more attention to the border residents and their everyday realities in order to see and understand the dynamic and tension-filled interplay of borderization and deborderization. For this purpose, inspiration can be taken from international border studies, which is increasingly turning to the everyday cultural dimension of borders: "[C]ontemporary and increasingly interdisciplinary border studies […] observes bordering not simply in the distant geopolitical affairs of (and between) territorial states but in the messy here-and-now micro-politics of everyday life practices and experiences" (Cooper & Tinning 2020, 1). According to this orientation, the concept of "border experiences" can be made productive in European border region studies, which locate borderization or deborderization in everyday realities. This concept focuses on border efficacies, attributions of meaning, and the power to act in or from the perspective of those who are entangled with the border:

> The concept of border experiences ties in with the idea of the border as a social (re-)production […]. Border experiences strengthen […] the role and agency of those who 'inhabit' the border, meaning those who are entangled in them and who with their (bodily and sensory) experiences or generation of meaning in and through everyday practices, narratives, representations or objects continuously (re-)produce them. It is an approach that focuses on 'border(lands) residents' and their border experience in order to better understand the modes of action and function […] in which borders are appropriated and thereby produced. (Wille & Nienaber 2020, 10)

This approach—practiced very early on by anthropological border scholars (e.g. Martínez 1994; Alvarez 1995; Wilson & Donnan 1998)—highlights the everyday practices, narratives, and representations of border residents as observable modes of border experiences, border challenges, and/or border negotiations. "Border experiences" thus forms a connection to "people's resilience" and opens up a point of access that empowers border residents to take on the role of agents when it comes to borderization and deborderization, allows them to empirically capture their appropriations and resistance, and understands borders as resources—in the sense of spaces of possibility (Brambilla 2021, 15; Jagetic Andersen & Prokkola 2022, 7). The concept thus enables European border region studies to gain differentiated insights into social negotiation processes, into issues of social cohesion and finally into the progress of European integration at the EU's internal borders. It also makes it possible to consider the permeabilities and durabilities of borders in equal measure and to convincingly integrate the everyday cultural dimension.

As an access point to border regional everyday realities, "border experiences" ensure an increased gain in knowledge of (new) events and questions in times of deborderization. However, the concept also implies a concept of border, which in many places has not yet prevailed in European border region studies and calls for a specific methodological perspective. This addresses the trend established in international border studies to open up borders towards the spatially and socially diffused "arenas" of their effectiveness (Wille 2021; 2024), a trend that easily conflicts with European border region studies. For while a border for the latter merely exists as an unquestioned and static line that marks the edge of a precisely encircled unity of territory, state, and nation, international border studies has largely emancipated itself from this idea: "[I]t is not the lines on the map […] that we need to focus on only when studying power geometries, but also how, when and where spatial power differentials are given meaning and being translated in daily practices by people". (van Houtum 2021, 35–36) The border understandings only hinted at here can be characterized as positivist and constructivist (Scott & van der Velde 2020, 143). They imply a research perspective that assumes the border to be a territorial, political and social reality compared to a research perspective that overcomes the border as an ontological fact and sees it as a product and producer of social (negotiation) processes. In this latter perspective, the focus is less on fixed line-like borders and more on social processes that create borders: "This more process-based understanding of bordering shifts the focus from existential research questions (i.e., borders are this or that; borders are things that function like this or that) to studies of border's processes of emergence or becoming" (Kaiser 2012, 522). International border studies therefore no longer focus on the border as an ontological object at the territorial edge, but on the processes of its establishment and/or (de)stabilization: on border practices (Parker & Vaughan-Williams 2009). Early work by Henk van Houtum and colleagues, who have worked out the relationship between border practices (bordering), boundary demarcations (othering), order productions (ordering) and space productions (space), paved the way for this change of perspective (van Houtum & van Naerssen 2002; van Houtum et al. 2005). This so-called "bordering turn" (Cooper 2020, 17) realized in international border studies assumes a socially-made nature of the border and consequently allows us to conceptualize the residents of border regions as agents in the interplay of borderization and deborderization. Against this background, a European border region studies that wants to deal with current local issues in a future-oriented manner by integrating a border experience approach needs to question its concept of border. This should not involve hastily replacing the border concept that has developed based on socio-economic and institutional issues or pitting different epistemologies against each other. Rather, ways to establish theoretical-conceptual connections to the "bordering turn" (Cooper 2020, 17) in times of borderization should be sought and found in order to open up European border region studies to border regional everyday realities as "arenas of the border".

The outlined perspectives for European border region studies in times of deborderization are by no means intended to call into question the established references to the political project of European integration and the normative guiding principles associated with it. Nor are any theoretical-conceptual bottlenecks suggested. Rather, what is proposed is an expansion of the research agenda to include everyday cultural questions, which, embedded in socio-economic and institutional contexts, promise to provide insights into the European idea in times of borderization. In this context, an adjustment of the border concept used was also proposed in order to make the border accessible as a subject of everyday cultural negotiations in European border regions. To what extent European border region studies will actually take inspiration from international border studies remains to be seen.

Notes

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2 Beurskens et al. (2016) can be mentioned as one of the rare examples. In the face of an emerging discourse on border crime at the German–Polish border in the early 2010s, they investigate processes of borderization by civil society actors (vigilante groups, security partnerships, information management specialists).

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