BORDERS AND BORDER REGIONS IN EUROPE
Changes, Challenges and Chances
Arnaud Lechevalier, Jan Wielgoths (eds.)

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Content

Introduction
Jan Wielgoś and Arnaud Lechevalier | 9

Theoretical Perspectives on Borders

Border Types and Bordering Processes
A Theoretical Approach to the EU/Polish-Ukrainian Border as a Multi-dimensional Phenomenon
Bastian Sendhardt | 21

Qualities of Bordering Spaces
A Conceptual Experiment with Reference to Georg Simmel’s Sociology of Space
Sabrina Ellebrecht | 45

European Border Regions as “Laboratories” for Cross-Border Cooperation

Euroregions
Emerging New Forms of Cross-Border Cooperation
Barbara A. Despiney Zochowska | 71

Territorial Cohesion and Border Areas
Roswitha Ruidisch | 95
IDENTITIES AND STEREOTYPES IN EUROPEAN BORDER REGIONS

Identities and Stereotypes in Cross-Border Regions
Antje Schönwald | 113

Between Borders
France, Germany, and Poland in the Debate on Demarcation and Frontier Crossing in the Context of the Schengen Agreement
Angela Siebold | 129

Cultural Distinction and the Example of the “Third East German Generation”
Jaqueline Flack | 145

VIEWS ON THE HISTORY OF POLISH-GERMAN BORDER REGIONS

Anthropology of Borders and Frontiers
The Case of the Polish-German Borderland (1945-1980)
Agata Ładykowska and Paweł Ładykowski | 159

The Dynamics of Unfamiliarity in the German-Polish Border Region in 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s
Bianca Szytniewski | 183

Historical Culture and Territoriality
Social Appropriation in the German-Polish Border Region in the 19th and 20th Centuries
Thomas Serrier | 201

The View of French Diplomacy on the German-Polish Border Shift, 1940-1950
Eloi Piet | 217
CROSS-BORDER INTERACTION IN EUROPE’S NEIGHBOURHOOD

Borders, De Facto Borders and Mobility Policies in Conflict Transformation
The Cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
Giulia Prelz Oltramonti | 237

“Good fences make...”
The Separation Fence in Israel and its Influence on Society
Simon Falke | 255

Authors | 267
Introduction

Jan Wielgohs and Arnaud Lechevalier

Border studies involve scientific research on the creation, perception, destabilization, relocation, transgression, opening, or dissolution of borders. Since the 1980s, they have advanced to prominence within many academic disciplines and in a broad variety of interdisciplinary endeavors. The rise of border studies during the last twenty to thirty years can be attributed mostly to the acceleration of globalization processes since the 1980s and the end of the Cold War in 1990 (see Sendhardt in this volume). Conventionally, we think of borders as territorial borders between nation states or state-like political entities such as the European Union. However, globalization has made these kinds of borders increasingly permeable for people, goods, capital, social practices, ideas, symbols etc. On the one hand, territorial borders have lost some of their salience as separators and dividers because new spaces for economic, political, administrative, and cultural cooperation have been created (see Albert/Brock 2001: 33). On the other hand, because the increasing permeability of territorial borders has been accompanied by uncertainty about the perceived and real destabilizing effects of economic competition, migration, and multiculturalism, there has been a reactivation of “national ‘policies’ as well as processes of exclusion based on culture, nation, or ethnicity” (EUV 2012: 9). These ambiguous and puzzling effects of globalization lay behind the current burgeoning of contemporary border studies, first in the USA, where the new

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dynamics of the US-Mexican border attracted the attention of social scientists and cultural anthropologists. In this context, new conceptual and analytical perspectives on borders were developed and authors eventually went beyond the traditional, static understanding of territorial borders as separators to pay more attention to the social practices that continually create and recreate symbolic borders or the varied spatial dimensions of physical borders (ibid: 10).

The end of the Cold War unexpectedly opened new opportunities for overcoming the territorial borders that separated east from west. These borders insulated Eastern European societies from global developments and clove the European continent. But the borders that had served as barriers before 1989 changed thereafter into zones of contact in which new opportunities for cross-border mobility and cooperation emerged. At the same time, the collapse of the imperial power structure of the Cold War left some geopolitical disorder in the region, which gave rise to “spontaneous” processes of territorial restructuring in Europe as national borders were redrawn either by negotiation as in Czechoslovakia or by violence as in Yugoslavia and some of the post-Soviet territories. The eastern enlargement of the EU (2004/7) and the European Neighborhood Policy (launched in 2004), despite having been driven also by the internal logic of European integration (Vobruba 2008), can be understood as part of a strategy to reduce the disorder and uncertainty created by the end of the old east-west conflict. These policies of integration and stabilization were inevitably accompanied by significant “rebordering” processes as the EU’s external border rolled eastward. Moreover, The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 as well as the lingering conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno Karabakh clearly indicate that territorial restructuring in the wider European context is nowhere near to completion. The belief that a “borderless world” will emerge in the 21st century was widely held just after the end of the Cold War but since proved to be illusory. Border conflicts have in fact increased worldwide during the previous two decades, accompanied by the construction of new border fences and walls (see Falke in this volume).

In the context of globalization, accelerated European integration, and the ongoing territorial and political restructuring of the European continent, border regions have become subject to intense multidisciplinary research by European scholars, too, in recent years. What makes these
regions interesting is that they are emerging, dynamic social spaces. Newly created border regimes define the new opportunity structures framing cross-border cooperation, and residents and their representatives decide continually anew how to react to them. In this volume, the problems of different types of European border regions are analyzed. The opening of the internal borders within the EU and within the Schengen space have set off a new dynamism in economic and cultural cross-border cooperation. But a reluctance to fully use the newly available opportunities also has been revealed. This reluctance is perhaps rooted in inherited stereotypes, institutional inertia, or structural legacies. As a result, the EU is experiencing new challenges. In the aftermath of the recent extension of its external borders to the east and southeast, the EU is struggling to balance its internal security needs, economic growth targets, and normative power ambitions. The limited usefulness of its traditional “soft power” approach now seems to have become quite obvious at its periphery.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Borders**

In the first section of this volume, theoretical approaches commonly used in border studies are discussed. Bastian Sendhardt introduces the concept of Debordering/Rebordering. Based on modern systems theory, it has had increasing influence within border studies since the end of the 1990s. The major advantage of this constructivist approach, he argues, is that it helps us to grasp the constantly changing interplay between territorial, functional, and symbolic borders with a single, internally consistent theoretical framework. It helps us interpret the apparent contradictions in the EU’s attempts to both tighten its external borders and promote cooperation across them. The same contradictions are also evident in the policies of those member states situated at the external EU border toward their non-EU neighbors.

Interested in the intellectual benefits that could accrue to border studies from the sociology of space, Sabrina Ellebrecht experiments with using Georg Simmel’s concept of qualities of space for analyzing the EU border regime in the Mediterranean Sea. This way of linking border processes to their spatial fulcrum, she argues, could help to highlight the particular logics by which border regimes function and by which borderlands develop. Examples include the way in which persons are enabled or allowed to
cross the EU border into the protected internal space of EU territory, the diversification of bordering processes, the geographic transfer and externalization of border control functions to third countries, and the asymmetric distribution of resources for moving across borders. The later is, according to Bauman (1998: 86), “the key variable to stratify societies in a globalising world.”

**BORDERS AS “LABORATORIES” OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

The second part of the book is concerned with recent developments between and within border regions as they emerged after the external EU border was moved eastward amidst much public debate. In this context, Euroregions were created and promoted through European Regional Policy programs. These were intended to enhance economic, cultural, and political cross-border cooperation, to gradually reduce economic gaps among the border regions along which old and new EU member states are adjoined, and to counterbalance the negative effects of restrictive protection measures at the EU’s new eastern border. Barbara Despiney-Zochowska compares the development of two Euroregions with Polish involvement: the Neisse Euroregion in the Czech-German-Polish triangle and the Carpathian Euroregion, which includes local communities in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine. Returning to the concept of the “industrial district” developed by Alfred Marshall (1920), she explores prospects for cross-border economic cluster building through the revitalization of local productive systems. For this purpose, the creation of networks of small and medium-sized companies, supported by cross-border cooperation between local administrative authorities, is thought to be crucial. She identifies some important barriers to the proliferation of clusters in the investigated regions, including local governments that do not appreciate the role they could be playing in economic development and the absence of a tradition of cooperation among competing companies. Her analysis shows that socio-economic structures inherited from the past largely determine the sectoral mix of clusters and their chances of success in any given region. Another approach to cross-border regional cooperation is presented by Roswitha Ruidisch, who discusses the concepts of “territorial cohesion” and “territorial capital,” both of which are key con-
cepts in recent European Regional Policy. EU documents contain no clear definition of “territorial cohesion,” she argues. Using the example of the Czech-German border region, she shows that EU measures to increase territorial cohesion are swayed by competing interests and that these interests are not always compatible with the goal of reducing regional disparities.

**THE AMBIGUOUS WORK OF STEREOTYPES**

If national borders within the EU are losing relevance for the everyday life of borderland inhabitants, and if prospects for socio-economic development in such areas increasingly depend on cross-border cooperation, the construction of collective identities there will inevitably be affected. The social environment for identity-building is thus becoming more dynamic and more complex and, despite persisting traditional categories of collective identity such as nation, ethnicity, and language, the emergence of multidimensional identities is becoming more likely. In this context, stereotypes, understood as positive or negative images of “the other,” play a major but ambivalent role. Stereotypes can, as Antje Schönwald argues, enhance cross-border cooperation in that they systemize and simplify complex information and thus help residents deal with cultural boundaries. Using the example of the “Greater Region,” comprised of Saarland, Lorraine, Rhineland-Palatinate, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, and Wallonia, Schönwald examines factors that encourage the emergence of multidimensional and patchwork identities and presents a typology of sub-identities in this region.

Stereotypes can, of course, impede integration and cooperation, as they block receptiveness to change in the social environment and promote negative discrimination. A case in which stereotypes had rather negative effects is the subject of the analysis of French, German, and Polish media debates on the Schengen agreement presented by Angela Siebold. The Schengen Treaty was signed in 1985, long before the fall of the Iron Curtain. When it was implemented in 1995, the circumstances had changed radically. The major reason for the protracted implementation of the treaty, in fact, was the fear of mass immigration from Eastern Europe after German Unification. Thus, the central topic in the French and German
print media was the issue of effectively protecting and consolidating the German-Polish border, i.e. the new external border of the EU. Here, it was said, “the poor and the rich part of Europe” meet (Siebold). In Siebold’s interesting observation, in the run-up to Poland’s accession to the Schengen agreement in 2007, the same fears were raised in regard to the new external border of the EU where Poland meets Ukraine, White Russia, and Russia. In both cases, fears centered on migration and insecurity. She writes that in media assessments, “persistence of Western stereotypes and of the idea of a divided Europe” was manifest. Before 1989, the Schengen project seemed to interest technocrats only. It lacked public resonance. This changed when the new internal EU border was opened in 2007. Reporting became loaded with symbols of the bright future of a united and prosperous Europe. At the same time, however, the print media raised again concerns about mass migration and crime from the East, whereas in Poland unlimited drug trafficking from the Netherlands as well as an expected loss of general national sovereignty became important Schengen issues. These triggered long debates on identity and security.

Stereotypes can persist and reproduce themselves over generations, even long after national territorial borders disappear. From the perspective of the “Third East German Generation,” born between 1975 and 1985 and socialized in the 1990s, Jaqueline Flack analyzes the emergence and articulation of a common self-perception among this group of young adults as they respond to the images of East Germans constructed by West Germans in the mass media. Whereas the collective identity of young adults from the former East Germany is mainly shaped by the rapid and all-encompassing changes they experienced during the transformation of East German politics, economics, administration, education, and daily life after German unification, the image publicly ascribed to them is largely a reproduction of old West German stereotypes of GDR citizens. These differences and ongoing processes of mutual cultural contra-distinction create a cultural boundary that will continue to impair the formation of a common national identity, at least among this generation.