

Jean Monnet 'New European Borderlands' Network - Making Sense of the European Union's Emerging Internal and External Borders - BORD(EU)RS

The 2015 "migration crisis" put unprecedented pressure on the European Union's (EU) institutions. The then current migration regime failed utterly, and the uncontrolled inflow of migrants and refugees showed the inherent problems of the Schengen system all too clearly, leading to political tension among member states, with some opting for open door policies, and others securitizing migration as a threat to national security. These opposing points-of-view are seldom reconcilable, and have since contributed to the continued extreme politicization and securitization of migration within the Union, while fueling heated debate about the responses the EU and its member states should take. Meanwhile, short-term policy answers to the crisis have diverged considerably.

On the nation state level, some member states decided to erect border fences and introduce/improve border control mechanisms. Though border protection is the sovereign right of each member state, it is still striking to witness the construction of physical borders not just on the external borders of the EU, but also within the Schengen area – a process we call the re-Westphalization of state borders. This return to the territorial Westphalian nation state hinders the free movement of people, therefore it stands in stark contrast to the essence of a borderless Europe.

Meanwhile, the EU itself—mainly due to the pressure of its biggest member states—is continuing to externalize its borders by creating "new borderlands" in North Africa, in Turkey and the Balkans. Partner countries in these regions receive certain benefits from the Union—preferential treatment, economic aid, or the promise of future membership—in exchange to policing and managing the EU's borders beyond European territory. Continued proposals on the establishment of external hotspots, the signing of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal or the cooperation between member state forces, FRONTEX and border guards in the Balkans all exemplify this trend that runs parallel to internal re-Westphalization. Nevertheless, these new borderlands differ in terms of the nature of the EU-partner relationship: the Balkans in particular represent a new chapter in border externalization as the region is essentially turning it into an enclave within the EU, and is therefore the subject of both parallel processes.

Researchers of the BordEUr network believe that the European Union and its quest for secure borders in the wake of the so-called migration crisis can serve as an illustration of more global trends. As a starting point, it should be noted that the term "migration crisis" itself is highly contestable: rather than as a crisis bound in a specific point in time, or a description of a very particular challenge, we see the events of the past three years as yet another instance of the continued crisis of liberal democracy at large. Therefore, we propose to situate current problems the Union is facing in this multi-faceted global crisis of capitalism, democracy, and the middle classes. This global crisis resulted in a worldwide pushback against globalization taking multiple forms, but populism and its European variant in particular merit attention as populist elites seek to translate worldwide perceptions of crisis and disillusionment for the masses. European populism received considerable momentum with the construction of the events of 2015 as a migration crisis with the contentious imagery of a "flood" or even a "siege".

This particular right-wing populist interpretation of current European politics puts the focus squarely back on nation states, away from the EU as a supranational unit: first, only nation states can erect and maintain borders, and second, the threat itself (terrorism and a threat to national identity) is also primarily framed on the state level. Thus, the project seeks to situate the question of "new borderlands" partly in this populist pushback against a crisis-ridden liberal European status quo by disentangling how populists utilize migration for justifying a return to the Westphalian nation state, and how they create further insecurities in order to try to maintain a sense of threat and uncertainty. Doing so, we aim to highlight how the refugee and migration issue goes well beyond policy and institutions, and rather highlights a fundamental uncertainty that affects not just the EU, but liberal democracy in general.

The project will answer the following research questions:

- I. What meaning do the European Union, its member states and partner states assign to the border and to EU bordering policies?
- II. To what extent does the sense of a European community represent a framework that can be used to avoid the increasing risk of a collapse of the perspective of integration; a risk that is fueled by populist politics which manipulate the false nexus "migrants' invasions/threat to national identity/security?
- III. What does the current European politics of borders mean in terms of the EU's identity as an international humanitarian actor? How could a perceived gap between promoted identity and policy practice affect the relationship between the Union and its partners?

In answering the research questions, the project will rely on a country case study method, centered around new and re-emerging borders writ-large as its core concepts. Each case study will engage the three questions in the context of one of the participating states (The United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Republic of Macedonia, Greece and Turkey). Each case study will deal with three distinct, but interconnected levels:

1. local processes of (re)construction of borders in terms of practices,
2. cognitive representations of the European Union, borders, migration and national identity on the state level, and
3. EU policy and discourse on borders and the Union as an international actor.

Research results will be shared through a series of conferences, a webpage that includes a database on research materials, social media profiles with media content, a policy paper, and an edited e-publication that incorporates all case studies and situates those in the wider context of European Politics and Migration Studies.

Researchers of the BordEUR Network strongly believe that current mainstream theories of European foreign policy, such as Normative Power Europe, are overly optimistic and do not allow to put into focus certain dynamics which are crucial to understanding and addressing challenges the EU is facing. Hence, the proposed research seeks to highlight gaps in the literature and critically engage the dominant body of works. Our aim is to devise a novel, multidisciplinary approach to the study of borders that can contribute to both academic and policy debates. Instead of relying on mainstream, problem-solving theories that do not question the status quo, BordEUR challenges the political myth that controls are linked with the place where the borders of the European Union lie, and understands borders more generally, with a special emphasis on how societal cognitive dispositions on the national level influence the way the meaning of borders, nation states and the European Union are established in countries affected by the dual process of emerging and re-emerging borders.

Our analysis is explicitly aimed at the constructive criticism of EU and member state practices in order to help bridge the threatening gap between the EU's self-definition as a humanitarian actor, and its operational conduct. We propose that in-depth academic analysis can help create context-contingent alternatives to building walls, militarizing the sea, and establishing hotspots as constructed safe places in third countries that are in fact often unsafe for migrants.

By pooling talent from European Studies, Migration Studies, Security Theory, Political Economy and International Relations, we strive towards creating an academic network that can serve as a reference point for researchers seeking an integrative approach to the academic study of the European Union that emphasizes interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and policy relevant insight.