



BorderObs

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

BorderObs is a section on the website of the UniGR Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS). It is a place for the rapid publication of observations and scientific commentaries on current affairs. The short articles are written in simple language, can have an essayistic character and relate to borders and border areas within and outside of the Greater Region.

Observations in Times of COVID-19

Borders – Boundaries – Border Regions

Within just a few days, the coronavirus pandemic has already profoundly changed our lives. Some social science and humanities scholars have responded immediately and have launched various initiatives. The UniGR Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) is convinced that border research also has an important contribution to make in the current situation and should thus speak up. After all, territorial borders and social demarcation processes are becoming dramatically more important these days. At the same time – and especially in border regions – new (cross-border) alliances and solidarities can be seen.

This call for contributions seeks contributions that look at the current crisis situation from the perspective of territorial borders, social demarcations, and (dis)continuities in border regions. This is not about elaborate empirical analyses that would currently be premature, but rather about critical observations, scientific commentaries, and (future-oriented) classifications of border (area) dynamics in times of the global corona pandemic.

Territorial Borders

It is rather absurd that the 25th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement commencement coincides with border control tightening and the closure of internal EU borders. The “Guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services”

issued by the EU Commission on March 16th, 2020¹ currently ensure that despite the re/bordering processes, the borders remain open for tightly timed supply chains, cross-border commuters, and for a country's own citizens. However, these so-called “corridors” remain closed to those seeking protection, i.e. to “foreigners,” and the nation states are currently concentrating on their own interests. When it comes to the procurement of medical supplies, national protectionism and selfishness appear currently to be at the foreground, for example when export bans are announced or protective masks are confiscated. Such renationalization processes – or rather: the preoccupation with the nation – also mean that no government is committed to opening the borders for refugees. They remain in camps on the Greek islands, on the Turkish-Greek border, and elsewhere in cramped quarters in severely unhygienic conditions and it is only a matter of time before a humanitarian disaster breaks out there.

At the same time, there is a certain degree of solidarity can be seen between the EU countries, which, at the end of March, slowly seems to be picking up speed. This includes not only the increasingly articulated concern to act in a coordinated manner both with the containment matters and the exit strategy. It is also shown in the increasing admission of critically ill patients from neighboring countries and the dispatch of medical supplies to particularly affected areas in other countries. The EU Commission has not failed to use its PR tools to emphasize the advantages of the union of the European countries: for example, regarding the concerted #FlattenTheCurve, the coordinated return of citizens abroad via charter flights, the provision of aid packages, or the joint procurement of medical equipment. Is it possible that the corona crisis, with its reflex to isolate oneself on the one hand and its so-called #EUSolidarity on the other hand, offers an opportunity to revive Europe?

Social boundaries

Social boundaries are made relevant in the current situation as categorizations, and sometimes in a dramatic way. One distinction that can be observed here is the one between essential workers on the one hand, who are often celebrated through new forms of collective solidarity as “everyday heroes,” and, on the other hand, the less essential workers who work in a more-or-less secure home office à la #SocialDistancing. This distinction, which also reflects a classification of the privileged and the less privileged, further points to questions of (in)equality: to what extent are we (un)equal in the face of the viral disease and why is it that the less privileged now by and large turn out to be systemically important?

In addition, the vulnerability of people – usually measured in terms of age and pre-existing conditions – is another criterion for the b/ordering processes that can be observed: People are divided into risk groups and are therefore particularly worthy of protection or less worthy of protection, although this division does not prove to be all that reliable. Because even in young people, the infectious disease can become severe. Furthermore, social boundaries are drawn, some of which are fatal, due to the ongoing pandemic and increasing overload of health systems. Doctors have to decide who will be treated on an

¹ Guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services

outpatient basis and who will be admitted and who will get a ventilator and who will not (anymore). Such classifications, which (can) represent borders between life and death, raise ethical questions.

In addition, categorizations that project “the other” as a threat or a cause of the viral disease must be critically examined (othering). A few weeks before the drastic protective measures were taken, Chinese restaurants were being avoided, there was talk of a “Chinese virus” (D. Trump) and the Mexican beer “Corona Extra” was left sitting on the shelves. Such observations may seem unimportant at first, but it is probably only a matter of time before right-wing populist forces mobilize similar categories of the constitutive other and position them for their own interests.

(Dis)continuities in Border Regions

Measures to contain the virus have paralyzed the economy and will have serious repercussions for employment and the labor market. After the initial slumps on the stock exchanges, businesses have cut their production, public facilities have switched to emergency mode, and workers have been urged to stay healthy by working from home in order to replace those on the front line who could become infected. The socio-economic ecosystem has gotten off track and the virus has revealed its fragility. This is particularly evident in border regions that are now more or less cut off from their neighbors due to border closure or reinforcement. For example, the German state of Brandenburg is suffering enormously from the closure of the German-Polish border, which immediately resulted in car and truck traffic jams lasting 15 to 20 hours, corresponding delivery delays and difficulties for commuters.

With a special certificate, cross-border commuters can use the border corridors, although fiscal problems can arise for those who work from home: After a certain number of days worked in the country of residence, the work is taxed according to the rules of the country of residence and the tax paid there too. This problem, which is problematic for cross-border commuters in Luxembourg, for example, even during virus-free times, was quickly resolved: Belgium and France have assured Luxembourg that they will not apply this taxation rule during the pandemic. The Luxembourg government advocated for this because Luxembourg’s dependence on its neighboring countries has never been clearer than it is now: approx. 70% of the workforce in the health sector is made up of cross-border commuters (mostly from France), the absence of which would be fatal – they are essential in the truest sense of the word. It is therefore not surprising that the Prime Minister of Luxembourg personally thanked the cross-border commuters for their work in the Grand Duchy and assured his citizens that he has it on top authority that the border to France will remain passable for cross-border commuters. Such dependencies have also become virulent in Switzerland, which is why cross-border commuters continue to be admitted to the Alpine Republic and – just as in Luxembourg – considerations are being made as to whether cross-border commuters (with their families) can be accommodated in hotels at their place of work during the pandemic.

The pandemic certainly makes it clearer in border regions than elsewhere the extent to which joint action is necessary in the current crisis situation – but also afterwards. Current initiatives of this kind include mutual support in health care, such as the admission of critically ill people from Grand Est in

Baden-Württemberg, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, or Luxembourg. Or the establishment of the “Cross-Border Task Force Corona” between North Rhine-Westphalia, the Netherlands and Belgium for a coordinated approach to contain Covid-19 in the border area.

Post-Corona

It is to be expected that Europe and societies worldwide will change as a result of the viral disease and the drastic measures that have been implemented to combat it. This is already indicated by the current rhetoric that uses the term “crisis,” which, etymologically speaking, means nothing more than “decisive turn.” However, it is not yet clear in which direction such a turn will point. Will the experience of the pandemic raise awareness of unfettered globalization and thus demand more rules or supervision and control in the future? Will the shared moment of crisis and (cross-border) solidarity bring EU countries and border regions back together or closer together? Or will nationalisms continue to emerge and continued processes of renationalization characterize the post-corona era?

This is also connected to the question of the future of the Schengen area, which had already been hit during the so-called “migration crisis”. On the occasion of its anniversary on March 26th, 2020, the Luxembourg foreign minister, Jean Asselborn, pointed the way: “The rules of the Schengen area provide the framework for cooperation which will enable us to face this unprecedented challenge together. Therefore, I call upon all to restore Schengen without delay. The reintroduction of border controls at our common borders can only be occasional and temporary and must be done in accordance with the Treaties.”

The members of the steering committee of the UniGR-Center for Border Studies
www.borderstudies.org | www.uni-gr.eu

Information for authors

The pandemic is pervading all areas of life, which is why the spectrum of topics that are relevant in these days is very broad. The focus of this call, though, is on topics related to borders or social boundaries or (dis)continuities in border regions. In addition, the spread of the infectious disease is very dynamic and the political and social situation changes daily. The aspects addressed in this call can therefore quickly become obsolete and should be viewed as impulses for developing your own topics.

The authors are responsible for the linguistic quality and the correctness of the facts presented. They may express their own opinion, which may not necessarily correspond with the opinion of the UniGR-CBS.

The contributions are to be written in gender-neutral language and are based on the main focus areas of the UniGR-CBS. The scope of the contributions should be compatible with standard online reading habits; footnotes are not to be used.

Contributions for publication in BorderObs can be sent to borderstudies@uni.lu in German, French or English.

Contact person: Christian Wille (christian.wille@uni.lu)