



# The Covid-19 crisis: the end of a borderless Europe?

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## ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and border control measures on the narratives and experience of territorial borders and the social construction of boundaries. The Covid-19 crisis has revealed how strong and durable territorial borders still are and how rapidly the idea of a borderless Europe might change in divided Europe. The imposition of border controls and the temporary closure of borders in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus was particularly problematic for border region residents who live transnational lives and who share a common space by working, shopping and having friends and family on both sides of a border. The revival of territorial borders has demonstrated not only the power of national states, but also how interwoven the border regions have become. Hence, the article sheds light on the potential consequences of re-bordering processes for borderlands, presents public and ontological narratives that have emerged as a reaction to border closure and outlines new research fields.

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the lives of millions of people across the world, but especially those living in borderlands. The reintroduction of border controls and the subsequent closing of borders overnight made the everyday life of countless cross-border commuters and other borderlanders difficult to bear. Although member states of the Schengen Agreement have the capability to temporarily reintroduce border controls at the internal borders in the event of serious security threats, as some of them did as a result of the 2015 migrant crisis (European Commission 2016), for numerous borderland inhabitants the total closure of the borders was a peculiar and incomprehensible experience. Previously, threats posed by ‘others’ – refugees, migrants or terrorists from outside Europe – served as a pretext for limiting the free crossing of borders –

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or at least this is how it was presented in public discourse. Now, the potential risk could be spread by their neighbours from the other side of a border. As a result, many borderlanders were cut off from their friends and family, jobs and everyday routines taking place on both sides of the border. With little or no warning, they experienced what seemed unbelievable, especially for the young generation – the erection of border fences or use of security forces to control the flow of people. The idea of a borderless Europe was suddenly challenged by security procedures and national interests whose guardians seemed to be predominately states. Thus, it is noteworthy to consider possible consequences for the European integration process. It should be underlined that from the beginning the European Community was determined not only to create supranational institutions, but also to ‘lay the foundation of an ever-closer union among the people of Europe’ and to ‘eliminate the barriers which divide Europe’, as it was declared in the preamble of the foundation treaty (*The Treaty of Rome 1957*). Against this backdrop, borderlands were regarded as laboratories of European integration (Roose and Opiłowska 2015) where at least two societies may in everyday practices experience contact with the ‘others’ and develop transnational ties. The abolishment of physical barriers in the Schengen area as well as EU programmes such as Interreg devoted to cross-border cooperation have widely supported the development of cross-border institutions, people-to-people projects and social integration. Thus, researchers have predicted the Europeanisation of border regions (Scott 2011) and the flourishing of transborder cooperation and transnational lifestyles (Martinez 1994), manifested under the term ‘borderless world’ (Ohme 2008).

Nevertheless, the refugee crisis, Brexit, the revival of nationalist movements across Europe, and especially the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting re-bordering measures have demonstrated that borders have remained strong and are still governed centrally by nation states. In a risk situation a neighbour on the other side of the border becomes a stranger who can spread the plague, at least in the opinion of national authorities. How did the borderland inhabitants and local authorities react to the imposition of borders? How was the border closure constructed in the ontological and public narratives? What will be the likely consequences on post-pandemic cross-border integration?

This early research article aims to shed light on the situation of borderland societies faced with the challenge of suddenly closed borders. The main focus is laid on the German–Polish borderland, which for a long

time symbolised the East–West divide but since 2004 has represented an example of a successful reconciliation process (Opiłowska and Roose 2015). The methodological angle facilitates the concept of narratives, which has been used by researchers as a tool to analyse respondents' experiences of a wide range of social issues (Esin *et al.* 2013) by focusing on the content analysis. Of the two main approaches to narrative analysis – one rooted in structuralism and concentrating on the narrative structure, and the other drawing on phenomenology and exploring the perspective of the narrators, his/her intention and social reality – this article applies the second one (Kulas 2014). Against this backdrop, it focuses on two dimensions of narratives as proposed by Somers (1994: 618–19) – ontological and public. Whereas the former is constructed by individuals and shaped by their experiences, the latter is linked to various cultural, social and institutional systems.

Thus, public narratives function at local, national and global levels and may reflect power relations and legitimise the projects and activities of authorities (LeRoux-Rutledge 2016). It is worth noting that both ontological and public narratives are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. In this paper, public narratives on a borderless world, integrated Europe, border regions as microcosms of European integration and their devaluation by re-bordering practices as introduced by state authorities are confronted with ontological narratives as used by social actors living in borderlands.

The article is based on a preliminary review of reactions of borderlanders in the period from 27 March to 15 June, when a mandatory 14-day home quarantine was introduced for people crossing the German–Polish border. The sources for the analysis are social media entries – posts and comments on Facebook profiles from Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice (*Frankfurt und Słubice: Doppelt schön* (16 entries) and *Nasze Słubice.pl* (42 entries)) that reflect the individual narratives as well as selected local media reports on the situation in the borderlands (*Berliner Zeitung*, *Märkische Oderzeitung* (6 articles); *Gazeta Lubuska* and *Gazeta Wyborcza – Zielona Góra* (5 articles)) where the voices of public narrators were presented. The hermeneutic content analysis of the sources aims at reconstructing main narrative threads that have emerged with reference to the border closure. Moreover, secondary literature outcomes are included in order to broaden the reflections on new dimensions of borders. For reasons of brevity, the article does not intend to analyse in depth the processes taking place in borderlands, but to grasp the changes and outline prospective research strands.

## Theoretical framework

The changing significance of European borders has been followed and elaborated by borderlands studies that have in recent times spread across various disciplines (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012). Borders have thus been explored from different perspectives, and some new concepts such as (re-)bordering, borderwork, borderscapes (Brambilla 2015) or borders as resources (Sohn 2014) have been developed (cf. Vollmer 2017). Studies on network society (Castells 1996), risk society (Beck 1992) and banopticon (Bigo 2006) have also changed the prism through which borders are perceived. In an integrated Europe, by taking into consideration vanishing border controls and restrictions, borders as a material manifestation of state sovereignty seemed to lose their importance in favour of transnational flows of capital, goods, services and people. However, for the purpose of this article the distinction between boundaries and borders might be relevant. In highlighting the former we can refer to the seminal work of Fredrik Barth (1969: 15), who defined social boundaries as a counterpart to territorial ones. Social boundaries determine membership and ways of ‘signaling membership and exclusion’. Despite cross-border interactions, boundaries remain because they constitute the identity of a group and the dichotomisation of others as strangers; they are constantly produced and reproduced. Drawing on Barth’s concept, Richard Jenkins (2015: 15) claims that boundaries shape both ‘what is inside the boundary – collective self-identification or “groupness” – and what is across the boundary, the identification of “us” by Others’. Whereas boundaries are socially constructed, borders concern the political geography of nation states and territories. They are usually associated with a material reality (Jenkins 2015). Against this background, it can be argued that within the European Union the material symbols of borders have been removed and the narrative of an integrated, networked Europe was predominant. However, this did not mean that social boundaries had also been abolished. Considering boundaries as social constructions, scholars emphasised the stubborn persistence of mental and language barriers, cultural differences and historical trauma (Roose 2010), even though cross-border practices such as shopping, tourism, commuting or using services on both sides of a border have become an everyday practice for many borderland inhabitants (Szytniewski and Spierings 2014).

In this light, it is important to examine how the reintroduction of border controls and the closing of the border (even if only temporarily

due to the Covid-19 prevention measures) as well as the discourse on security have impacted the situation in borderlands. This is what the next section aims to outline.

### **Revival of borders and its consequences for border region residents**

In the middle of March borders in the Schengen area were closed, border controls introduced, and the freedom of movement restricted. Twenty-five years after the implementation of the Schengen agreement in Western Europe, a re-bordering process could be observed. Invisible borders again marked their presence in public space and became the focus of attention of policymakers, the media and ordinary citizens. Against this background, they demonstrated the power of states that use borders as tools to protect their territory from the spreading of the virus. In this way, neighbours from the other side of the border, who might be to borderland inhabitants emotionally closer than their countrymen from the rest of the country, have been marked in the public narratives as strangers who possibly pose a threat. Thus, states imposed not only territorial borders, but also socially constructed boundaries. It should be noted that the process of bordering and othering not only took place in borderlands, but also inland through the issuing of entry permissions only for citizens, and by categorising citizens into those who should be specially protected or those who can potentially spread the virus because of their trips abroad. As mentioned above, these restrictions and bordering processes were particularly severe for border region residents whose everyday lives take place on both sides of the border. And indeed, borderlanders reacted to the situation by organising protests against border closures and by manifesting their solidarity and integrity with the neighbours.

On the German–Polish border, which serves here as a case study, criticisms of the closure were to be noticed. Up until this point the residents of these borderlands had lived their lives on both sides of the border, as evidenced by the results of the Eurobarometer survey on cross-border cooperation (Eurobarometer 422 2015). According to the results of the survey over 50% of respondents claimed that they cross the German–Polish border for purposes such as undertaking leisure activities, going shopping or visiting friends or families. Good neighbourly relations may also be indicated by the level of social trust: the majority of residents of the German–Polish borderland agreed with the statement that most

people could be trusted. Furthermore, the borderlanders admitted that they accept each other in the social role as a neighbour and consider living on the border more as an opportunity than as an obstacle.

Hence, after the long and difficult process of reconciliation that the residents of the German–Polish border regions could only start in the 1990s and that seemed to be to some extent completed with the accession of Poland to the Schengen area in 2007, the returning of borders in the form of mobility restrictions, physical barriers such as fences as well as in the social construction of the ‘others’ was a shock for many of them. In an integrated Europe which for many citizens symbolises ‘space of flows’ (Castells 1996) and ‘fluid identities’ (Bauman 1996), borders manifested themselves again primarily as key institutions of the sovereign state, a space of law, authority and responsibility that is ‘organized around the exclusion of others’ (Salter 2010: 515).

The data have been examined using the Atlas.ti programme according to qualitative data analysis methods (Flick 2015) by applying (1) open coding which was helpful in data categorisation and discovering the main processes in the data and (2) selective coding, during which initial codes were sorted, synthesised and integrated in order to develop significant categories (Charmaz 2009). The study of narratives has identified two narrative strands (Kajta and Opiłowska 2021). The first one was anchored in a normative positioning and was represented particularly by elites as part of public narratives. Local authorities and public actors expressed their support for border region residents by referring to catchphrases such as ‘united Europe’, ‘twin cities as one organism’ and ‘transnational life of borderlanders’. They criticised the decision on border restrictions and demanded the opening of the border. For instance the Chairman of the Board of the Federation of Euroregions of Poland demanded the lifting of the prohibition on crossing the border for inhabitants of Euroregions (*Gazeta Wyborcza – Zielona Góra* 2020). The director of the clinic in Schwedt and the dean of the Pomerania Medical University in Szczecin wrote an open letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Polish President Andrzej Duda claiming that the decisions taken in Berlin and Warsaw ‘put at risk the long-term achievements of border region integration’ (*Märkische Oderzeitung* 2020). The prime ministers of Saxony and Brandenburg also criticised the Polish government for the introduction of quarantine and stressed the transnational life of border region residents (*Deutsche Welle* 2020). Michael Kurzwelly, a performance artist and founder of the project *Stubfurt* in Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice, argues that the border closure has

demonstrated how closely linked both cities are and how much borderlanders share a common space. In his view the situation made the authorities aware that twin cities cannot easily be separated over the heads of citizens (Barański 2020). Furthermore, some inhabitants also followed the argumentation strategy of local elites and put to the fore the unity of borderlands, which the following Facebook entry exemplifies: '[...] we are Europe, and Europe is unity, cooperation, not division and closed borders' (FB\_Nasze Słubice\_9.5.2020).

The second narrative strand was based on pragmatic arguments and individual stories. It represented predominately by residents, but with the support of public actors. The statement of Marta, a Zgorzelec inhabitant who works in Görlitz, illustrates this positioning. She emphasises in a report in the *Berliner Zeitung*:

This closing of the border has affected me personally very much. Also because I no longer thought I would have to experience something like this myself in the 21st century, with the stories of my parents and other generations about closed borders in the back of my mind. (Opielka 2020)

For her the river is not a border river any more, but a river of connection. The two cities of Görlitz and Zgorzelec form a unity in which one lives, acts, works, shops. Similar opinions were expressed by inhabitants of other twin cities.

Apart from commenting on the new situation, borderland residents also expressed themselves through performative acts. During the lockdown they organised protests on 24–25 April and 9–10 May with the slogans 'Don't separate families', 'We want to work and live with dignity', 'Let us go to work', 'Let us go home'. The protesters demanded the abolition of forced quarantine for people living and working in the border area. Since neighbours in the twin cities were not allowed to meet, they showed their solidarity with each other through banners, as the photos from Słubice and Frankfurt (Oder) below demonstrate (Figures 1 and 2).

The reactions to the border closure as well as problems faced by the residents of the German–Polish borderland are similar to those from other European border regions such as the German–French, German–Swiss, Danish–German, Dutch–Belgian and Italian–Slovenian border regions – as demonstrated by the critical observations and scientific comments in the 'Borders in Perspective UniGR-CBS Thematic Issue. Bordering in Pandemic Times: Insights into the COVID-19 Lockdown' (Wille and Kanesu 2020). The people's 'cross-border life worlds were



**Figure 1.** 'Stay healthy, friends'. Photograph by Daniel Szurka. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/NaszeSlubicePL/> (23.04.2020).

suddenly irritated by closed borders and police controls' (Wille and Kanesu 2020: 4) and they have also shown civil society activism in the form of protests and symbolic actions against the re-bordering practices of nation states.



**Figure 2.** 'We belong together'. Photograph by Linda Pickny. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/frankfurtoderslubice/> (25.04.2020).



## Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic has again demonstrated that the idea of a borderless Europe and deterritorialisation is not resilient to crisis. Territorial borders are still perceived by national states as providing security, and in a risk situation they are used as a control mechanism to protect national interests. Klatt argues that the state 'has returned as single actor, replacing practices of cross-border multi-level governance. Measures were taken from a state centered perspective, regarding the state as a bordered container' (Klatt 2020: 46). It can be argued that these top-down decisions '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.

However, the territorial borders as well as the boundaries socially constructed at the national level by public authorities have clashed with the collective experience and perception of border region residents, for whom people from the other side of the border are close neighbours and not foreigners. What is more, the imposition of borders has also shown how interconnected European border regions already are and how transnational border spaces have become. The re-bordering measures made the inhabitants of the borderlands more aware that their lives take place on both sides of the border and that they share a common space. Thus, the decisions of national authorities triggered clear reactions from border region residents, who organised protests and symbolic acts of solidarity across borders to protect the achievements of the European integration process. Against this backdrop, it is essential for scholars of border studies to carefully observe the situation in borderlands and to explore the new changes and experiences. Will the crisis lead to greater European integration or, on the contrary, to increased nationalist tendencies? How has the re-imposition of territorial borders changed the perception of boundaries as well as of Europe among the borderlanders and other citizens across Europe? Who is regarded as belonging to 'us' and who is constructed as 'a stranger'? Will the actions of borderlanders against the governmental decisions lead to deeper integration and solidarity across the national borders? It is noteworthy that for sociologists the bottom-up perspective might be particularly interesting: scrutinising new emerging narratives, social identities and practices of border region residents who are facing the challenge of re-bordering in order to confront their experiences with public narratives on security and national interests. Answering these questions in

detail would exceed the scope of this article, so it is a recommendation for future research.

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