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The European Integration – limits and borders. Introduction to the special issue

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1. The comeback of borders (but they were never away)

The construction of borders on the outside and the dismantling and differentiation of borders on the inside are core elements of establishing and consolidating political authority. This is the thrust of historical-comparative social research (Bartolini, 2005). Borders, however, have long been sidelined in the public debate and even in social sciences (Immerfall, 1998). According to a 2005 New York Times bestseller, the world is "flat" – or at least "flattening" – in the sense that people from different corners of the world can collaborate and compete on equal footing and in real time (Friedman, 2005). Borders become less and less important because "in a flat world you can innovate without having to emigrate" (ibid, 216). Yet, history took a different course. Western democracy's supposedly unstoppable triumphal march after 1989 came to a grinding halt and globalisation turned out to be a project for segregation and polarisation as much as for connecting places and people.

The significance of location and place is still with us and so are borders. Only recently there has been a remarkable resurgence in border research (Mau, 2021; Gerst et al., 2021; Berlinghoff et al., 2023) even though territorial borders and their effects had long been an important topic of sociology (Eigmüller & Vobruba, 2016). Given the continuing and even increasing significance of space, territory and borders, this special issue aims not only at the scientific relevance of the territorial approach but also at its potential for analysing the European Union. A few words may suffice here to sketch out the territorial approach.

2. The territorial approach

Territory means bounded and marked social space. The basic proposition of the territorial approach is that territory constrains, structures and limits social behavior.

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While there is no single, clear-cut territorial approach, there are certain basic features shared by all of its varieties (this section is based on Immerfall, 2010):

- Territory is space claimed through demarcation. Territory stands for the social use of space.
- Political territories are attempts to affect or to control resources and people by controlling space.
- Space, boundaries, boundary control and boundary transgression are the key words of the territorial approach.
- Territory both constrains and impacts movements. It is important to emphasise that none of these are naturally given. Territory is not a given or fixed part of the earth's surface but a system of social relations.
- Territoriality refers to human behavior as it is spatially organised or oriented.

Stein Rokkan in particular drew attention to the interaction of external demarcation and internal boundaries in state- and nation-building or – generally speaking – in centre-building of which the European integration certainly is an example (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983; Rokkan et al., 1987; Rokkan, 2000). Rokkan's geoeconomical-geopolitical approach analyses conflicts between the pursuits to minimise and to strengthen boundaries. These conflicts lead to the breaking up and to the reorganising of territories. The making of territories may thus be seen as a sequence of successes and failures to allow for certain kinds of border transgressions, to control other flows and to ban some types of movements altogether. It is important to keep in mind that there are different kinds of borders transactions (and corresponding sets of control measures): goods and services, persons, and messages, ideas and information (Rokkan, 2000, 132–138). The history of a given territory is essentially a story of successes and failures in the conflict between cross-border movements and border-preserving counterforces, between border differentiating mechanisms and border controlling technologies.

An important characteristic of border making and border maintenance refers to the distinction between geographical spaces and membership spaces. Geographical space is about physical boundaries, membership space is about social and cultural membership. This innovation of differentiated border control dates back to the ancient city (Rokkan, 2000, 136). It exerted strict control over its membership while keeping its borders open for all kinds of transactions. Generally, membership spaces (social and political boundaries) are more difficult to overcome than physical boundaries (borders).

3. European Integration as centre building

From such a historical-comparative point of view, border construction and border control are pivotal for centre formation. Resolving internal and external border is-

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sues, strengthening the control mechanisms of outside borders, and the dismantling and differentiation of borders within a polity – these elements are seen as preconditions to the evolution of some sort of community. We think this perspective quite useful for analysing the European Union and its predicament (see also Bartolini, 2005; Ferrera, 2005; Duina & Mérand, 2020).

The border/boundary perspective may serve as a springboard to probing current predicaments of European integration. Ensuing questions concern (a) consequences of the removal of mobility barriers in the internal market, (b) the strengthening of external borders and (c) the possibility of constructing European loyalty – or even solidarity. A few examples of issues at stake may suffice (for literature see Immerfall 2018; Büttner et al., 2022).

(a) The single market and the free movement of persons are probably the most crucial community pillars of the European Union. Yet questions are increasingly being raised about the single European market and its promise to lifting all boats. European economic integration, in large parts unfettered by social regulation, has been addressed as a possible cause for deteriorating work-conditions. In addition, rulings of European court of justices seem to favor a very liberal interpretation of the four market freedoms at the expense of social regulation.

(b) Border issues and asylum policies in and of the European Union and its member states have been controversial from the beginning. While individual entries into the EU territory are still controlled by the member states, the European border police Frontex has been rapidly expanding, notwithstanding the fact that the geographical outline of the EU remain undetermined.

(c) In contrast to nation-state building, the European Union has only limited means of social membership construction at its disposal. While the institutionalization of organised European solidarity has made great strides, with the *NextGenerationEU* as the most recent example, findings on transnational European notions of belonging remain contradictory. The compatibility of national welfare states and the inclusion of internal migrants remain contentious issues. Given the large and persistent social and economic differences between the member states, disputes over entitlements are of particular importance.

4. The issue and its contributions

The special issue brings together contributions on all three questions concerning the making of borders as a performative element of Europeanisation. The issue starts with topics on *removing and differentiating internal barriers and borders*, that is., for the most part, the single market program and attending harmonization of worker rights. In a painstaking analysis on the basis of the Europe-wide Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), *Marin Heidenreich* finds that EU migrants fare better that non-EU migration. In other words: European citizenship makes a difference. As the rights coming with EU-citizenship reduce the risks

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of downgrading migrants' qualifications, this difference could become even more important in a longer perspective.

Before concluding that all is well, one has to keep in mind that *Heidenreich* focuses on differences between EU-migrants and non-EU-migrants – and that things appear in a different light when looking on particular groups. In addition to traditional long-term labor migration, EU legislation recognises three other forms of labor mobility: seasonal workers, posted workers, and self-employed. Germany is one of the main destination countries on all three forms of mobile workers. Despite increasing legislation on mobile labor, as both *Assmus* and *Schmidt/Blauberger* show, the most vulnerable groups receive the least protection. Can civil society actors help out to fill the gaps in securing entitlements in a cross-border context? While applauding the efforts of such groups, *Josephine Assmus* points to structural conditions which continue to favor precarious working conditions for mobile workers.

Susanne K. Schmidt and *Michael Blauberger* also point out that poor working conditions of EU-migrant workers in Germany are both well-known and widespread. There is legislation, but poor oversight drives down wages bolstering Germany's export-dependent capitalism. Yet, in the instance of the German meat industry, things completely changed. Unfortunately, *Susanne K. Schmidt* and *Michael Blauberger* also explain why the the potentially path-breaking reform of labour regulation in the meat sector will remain solitary.

The second section of the revolves around *borders practices and strengthening EU's external borders*. In this context, the construction of the EU as a political territory is enforced not only by national agencies guarding the EU's communitised border. Instead, the establishment of a standing corps of a dedicated European Border and Coast Guard increasingly contributes to the EU's ambition to underline the EU's centre-building capacities. Describing the public representation, border-controlling practices and formation of identity of this "de facto European border police" as an element of "supplementary institutionalisation", *Isabel Hilpert* points out the problematically underregulated nature of a border regime that is gradually deepening, but lacks in democratic and legal supervision.

The final section is about *notions of belonging*. *Saskia Langer* reports on the results of a survey on lower secondary school students living in the Rhineland-Palatinate border region. For most of them, belonging to Europe is understood more as a fact – and a right, such as to travel freely – than as a feeling. Criticising school curricula that set the formation of a European identity as an educational goal, Langer proposes a reflective approach to teaching about Europe.

In the final essay, *Léa Bendele* draws on a study on migration from Romania to Germany. Using the case of a newly arrived family of EU citizens who lose their personal contact early on, she describes and discusses the significance of social networks for navigating bureaucracy, housing and the job-market.

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Beyond the special issue's focus on borders and territoriality, but still firmly in the social-scientific realm of inquiries into the current state of European Integration, *Johannes Gerken* adds to the debate on the European Green Deal (raised previously in *Vol 7, No. 2*.), which he discusses as a starting point for a new hegemonic moment.

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