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Border Studies in 2024: Where are we now?

Conference report: “Disruptive Borderlands. Unpacking the innovative potential of transbordering practices, imaginaries and policies”, September 4-6, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

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Mélanie Sadozaï explores the evolving nature of border studies in the context of the 2024 LISER conference on “disruptive borderlands.” The event underscored key themes, such as the duality of rebordering and debordering amid contemporary geopolitical disruptions. In her analysis, Sadozaï highlights Eeva-Kaisa Prokolla’s emphasis on borders as sites of crisis and resilience, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions reflected on how borderlands act as dynamic zones of socio-political interaction, balancing exclusion and connectivity. The conference showcased interdisciplinary research on border narratives and climate securitization, emphasizing “transbordering” practices fostering cross-border cooperation. Mélanie Sadozaï’s investigation of the field underlines the importance of integrating border community voices in policies to promote social cohesion in increasingly fragmented global landscapes.



i

A view from Schengen, by Mélanie Sadozaï

Borders studies continue to witness tremendous changes. Emerging as a byproduct of political geography, once entrenched in the spatial determinisms and imperialism of the 19th century, the field has proved sensitive to major geopolitical disruptions over the 20th and 21st century. Indeed, *disruption* is the key term that an important border studies conference looked to conceptualize over three days. Exploring cases of “disruptive borderlands” around the world, the conference at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) was organized by Dr Christophe Sohn.

Within the field, then, the interplay of rebordering/ debordering tensions are reflected. By paying more attention to the voices of border scholars and, through them, those of border communities, stakeholders and policymakers have the power to create an environment encouraging more social cohesion and dialogue in border areas-much needed in such a *disrupted* world.

In her keynote speech, Eeva-Kaisa PROKOLLA (University of Oulu) underlined that borders form the core of both crises but also resilience strategies.[1] This becomes evident in transdisciplinary research showing that borders and their surroundings, or borderlands, are key sites for approaching the diverse aspects of disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic, she argued, revealed the dual aspect of borders. Seen on the one hand as a shield against this threat, border scholars’ critiques also highlighted borders’ limited effects: does a virus know administrative, political, juridical or even corporal boundaries?[2] Equally, despite the imposition of frontiers, borderland communities demonstrated senses of togetherness. This suggests a definition of borderlands as communities that coalesce around an emotional idea of shared problems.

Against a backdrop of geopolitical disruption, border regions have faced rebordering, characterized by the reinforcement of national boundaries and increased border controls, generating complex socio-political and economic challenges. However, as framed by Christophe SOHN (LISER) in his opening speech, various “transbordering practices, imaginaries, and policies”, have emerged, aimed at fostering cross-border cooperation and mitigating the adverse effects of rebordering. These practices include cross-border economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, and collaborative governance frameworks that transcend traditional national boundaries. As human creations, borders possess dual aspects, with debordering and rebordering coexisting even as nationalistic narratives are strengthening around the world, employing borders as instruments of exclusion, otherness, and repulsion both actively and in performative discourses.[3]

Developing this theme, Massimiliano DEMATA (University of Turin) showed how methods of sociolinguistics could reveal the discursive legitimations of border walls and fences in Trump’s and Netanyahu’s narratives. Some very promising research was also presented by doctoral student Sonja Pietiläinen (University of Oulu) on the securitization of climate change by Finnish far-right actors to justify border policies.

Several conference presentations in Luxembourg showed that imaginaries of transbordering have also concomitantly evolved, promoting a vision of border regions as dynamic zones of interaction, enabling connectivity, collaboration and integration within and between communities, rather than division. A panel devoted to transbordering mobility practices drew on cases in the Lorraine-Luxembourg border region, the Irish borderlands, the Czech-Polish border, and the Swedish-Danish border, emphasizing that policies supporting cross-border initiatives have been implemented at various levels, from local to international.

These diverse examples highlight the importance of regional integration, sustainable development, and social cohesion in Europe. They reflect how efforts to focus on borders as connectivity devices have flourished over the past twenty years, bringing to the forefront a localized view, to make clear the need to “study borders from the border.”[4] As critical cartographer Henk van Houtum has notably stated recently: “what is dominant now is a more inclusive and interdisciplinary study of how human practices imagine, constitute, and represent differences in space, where the border is the assemblage with which socio-spatial differences are communicated.”[5] Indeed, border studies are now fully acknowledged as an interdisciplinary field,[6] providing not only diverse empirical scholarship furthering understanding everyday life in borderlands but also contributing to knowledge and debates across the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, the field is building bridges beyond these disciplines as scholars now explore the non-human components of borders, bringing in environmental studies, for instance. During LISER conference, in the thought-provoking case of the Poland/Belarus border, Olga Cielemecka argued that this translates into a weaponization of the borderland forest, where violence is outsourced to nature in order to stop undocumented migrants entering EU territory.[7]

“Borders are not just imposed on us,” concluded James W. SCOTT (Eastern Finland U) in his closing plenary speech, “they are actively appropriated through vast repertoires of political, cultural, and social practices in order to define who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’”. This statement offers a good illustration of how this international conference successfully provided insight into current scholarship and emerging trends in border studies. Borders might be perceived as peripheral or marginal areas, but they are actual vibrant spaces of innovation and possibilities. Presentations of major European Union-funded projects, as a concluding note of the event, are indicative of the consistent interest of European funding bodies for borderland-related topics.[8]

Still, there remains a certain friction, namely whether such scholarship can help implement bottom-up policies or whether it might serve to reinforce security measures at national and European borders. Within the field, then, the interplay of rebordering/ debordering tensions are reflected. By paying more attention to the voices of border scholars and, through them, those of border communities, stakeholders and policymakers have the power to create an environment encouraging more social cohesion and dialogue in border areas-much needed in such a *disrupted* world.

Notes

- [1] See the project on Cross-border region resilience that Pr. Prokkola is currently leading:
<https://www.oulu.fi/en/projects/cross-border-region-resilience-cross-border-governmental-economic-and-cultural-agencies-north>
- [2] Brunet-Jailly, E. (2022). International Boundaries, Biological Borders, and the Public Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Are We Entering a Whole New Era?. In: Brunn, S.D., Gilbreath, D. (eds) COVID-19 and a World of Ad Hoc Geographies. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94350-9_1
- [3] Osuna, J. (2024). Populism and Borders: Tools for Constructing “The People” and Legitimizing Exclusion. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 39(2), 203-226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2085140>
- [4] Mogiani, M. (2022). Studying Borders from the Border: Reflections on the Concept of Borders as Meeting Points. *Geopolitics*, 28(3), 1323-1341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2026329>
- [5] Van Houtum, H. (2023). *Free the Map. From Atlas to Hermes: a new cartography of borders and migration*. Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 25.
- [6] Wilson, T. M. (2023). *Borders, Boundaries, Frontiers: Anthropological Insights*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- [7] See Dr. Olga Cielemecka’s current research on this border:
<https://uefconnect.uef.fi/en/person/olga.cielemecka/>
- [8] See for instance the b-solutions project: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/about>

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