

BordEUR: New European Borderlands Project

**Shifting Borders,
Border Control Externalization
and Solidarity in the EU and
its Neighborhood**

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This policy brief is one of the deliverables of a three-year long (2019–2022) research project entitled “BordEUr: New European Borderlands.” BordEUr is a collaborative project of nine universities that documents and assesses the proliferation of new borders in the aftermath of the EU’s recent crises, with a special emphasis on the so-called migration crisis. The project analyzes the symbolic role of borders in ontological narratives (those of both the EU and its member states), as well as the bordering policies that these narratives enable. You can read more about the project on the project website at www.bordeur-project.com.

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Executive Summary

The BordEUr research network of nine universities addressed the impact of recent developments and ‘crises’ on “bordering practices”, in the EU, its member states and in its so-called ‘neighbourhood’. It focused in particular on how these practices were framed in various national contexts and at the EU level (see online publication).

Taken as a whole, the project shows us that it is far from easy for the EU institutions to pursue a consistent and clear set of policies in relation to borders and mobility. Notwithstanding extant integration in these areas, these are often highly politicised issues on which member states frequently cannot agree and on which they often fail to maintain a consistent policy even in the national context. Humanitarian and security concerns compete and conflict with each other at various levels of governance. And migration has frequently been exploited by nationalist and/or populist actors across the EU and beyond for political gain.

Such discord and politicisation in part explains the proliferation of borders in the aftermath of the 2015 so-called migration ‘crisis’ and the continued proliferation in the context of the pandemic. Among various other dynamics we saw a hardening of external EU borders, the reappearance of internal (Schengen) borders, and the externalisation of EU borders to non-EU states.

In what follows we tentatively propose just some of the ways in which greater solidarity in relation to these issues might be promoted in policy terms, both within and among member states and in the broader EU neighbourhood. We are very aware, however, that we face a situation in which the very lack of solidarity that these policies aim to overcome may be that which prevents them from being realised in the first place.

Introduction: Shifting Borders

In the aftermath of the 2015 so-called migration ‘crisis’ (and then the pandemic) many states’ migration policies were politicized. Intra-EU and extra-EU migrants were ‘securitized’ in a number of national contexts; often in contexts of economic downturn, they were cast as a ‘threat’ to the integrity of polity and economic wellbeing (or, as we describe it in the project, threat to a so-called ‘ontological security’).¹

State reactions to ‘crises’ were grounded in a security and ‘bordering’ logic. Internal borders rematerialized and free movement was limited, threatening the Schengen system. Likewise, borders were also pushed further outside, through an externalization of border control, towards what the project conceives as ‘New Borderlands’ in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and North Africa.² At the same time, the population of one of the EU’s largest states, the UK, voted to leave the EU, with the pro-BREXIT narrative largely built on anti-migration sentiment and a desire to restore borders (and an associated ‘sovereignty’).

These political dynamics led to a hardening of a sovereign governing logic at both state and EU levels. Internally, within the EU, the rules on the free movement of people hardened with recent CJEU case law³, permitting greater levels of discrimination of non-nationals by member states. Schengen and non-Schengen EU member states reintroduced border technologies after the 2015 refugee crisis began, further threatening

1 Szalai, A, Parker, O; Lucarelli, S; and Prodromidou, A (eds.): Fences, Refugee Boats, and the New Borderlands: Making Sense of the European Union’s Emerging Internal and External Borders. BordEUr: New European Borderlands Project, september 2022 (online). Available at: www.bordeur-project.com

2 ibid

3 A line of cases following Dano 2014.

free movement internally. Externally, the EU extended its cooperation with external partners, including EU candidate countries: the 2016 for instance, the EU-Turkey agreement as well as, the case of various Western Balkan states, like North Macedonia and Serbia, adopting the quotas system in the hope of improving their chances of gaining EU membership.

The BordEUr project has documented the proliferation of these ‘bordering practices’ in national contexts both within and outside the EU, as well as at EU level.⁴ Various chapters of our online publication offer in-depth analyses of narratives and practices on bordering across cases where old borders reappear and/or new borders are established narratively, or even physically. The publication shows that dissolving borders within the Union for instance mean different things for Schengen member states that are “frontier states” and experience migration flows directly (Italy and Greece), states that are target states and have re-established internal borders (Austria), and transit states that represent the external border of the Schengen Zone (Hungary).

Similarly, EU member states that are outside of Schengen but actively seek to join (Bulgaria) enjoy a different dynamic between European and national policies. Meanwhile, one of the EU’s most influential states, the United Kingdom, has left the Union largely due to an effective narrative campaign that securitized migration, and sought to “take back control” of national borders.

To bolster border control within the Union, the EU has sought to actively export border control to New Borderlands (Turkey and the states of the Western Balkans), which gave our project its title. But we also should not forget that bordering does not only unfold at state borders, but is exercised more diffusely, on multiple levels, ranging from the EU to local communities. To illustrate the role of borders in migration policy on a local level, the project turned to Barcelona as an illustrative case.

Policy Recommendations

Countering Populist/ Nationalist Discourse

As noted above, various crises have raised the profile of populist and nationalist actors. Such actors represent a threat to the genuine needs and interests of migrants and refugees, while also—as the case of Brexit shows us in particular—constituting an existential threat to the EU project itself. The Russian invasion of Ukraine—a huge challenge in so many ways—presents an opportunity for the EU and other actors to present (reframe) migrants and refugees in humanitarian rather than security terms. This is important in broader EU efforts to assert itself as a collective normative power in the face of populist/ nationalist narratives. The possibility of such discursive framing will depend on nurturing greater solidarity within the EU among its member states and between member states and relevant partners (as outlined below).

Greater Solidarity I: Redesigning a Common European Asylum System

The EU needs to redouble efforts to create a collective asylum system that is perceived to be fair across all member states (including external border states, internal transition states and destination states). This would involve a shift away from Dublin, towards the (further) development and implementation of an EU-wide quota system in order to reduce pressure on national systems and on Schengen. Such policies go hand in hand with efforts to delimit the attractiveness of populist-nationalist narratives. Ideally such a system would also allow the EU to take far greater collective responsibility for refugees and limit the externalisation of migration policy to third countries (although the political conditions for any such shift are, admittedly, tough).

4 Szalai, A, Parker, O; Lucarelli, S; and Prodromidou, A (eds.): *Fences, Refugee Boats, and the New Borderlands: Making Sense of the European Union’s Emerging Internal and External Borders*. BordEUr: New European Borderlands Project, september 2022 (online). Available at: www.bordeur-project.com

Greater Solidarity II: Building Practical Capacity at National Levels (Internally and Externally)

Many states encountering significant flows of refugees across their borders from 2015 were not equipped to manage those flows. The EU has a greater potential collective role to play at the external border in terms of supporting humanitarian (and not only security) efforts at points of arrival (Greece and Italy). It also has a role to play in non-Schengen transition states such as Bulgaria and Schengen transition/destination states, such as Austria. As long as the EU continues to outsource its policies to third countries beyond its borders—including Turkey, the Western Balkans and various North African states—it also has a continued and greater role to play in supporting capacity (financially and otherwise) in those states, both in terms of processing asylum applications and, where relevant, integrating refugees into local societies. Many of these states have a limited capacity to deal with these and broader developmental issues without EU support. Such support should be based on partnerships and on developing an understanding of local contexts. Generous and sensitive support would also serve to increase backing for the EU and/or EU membership in the European neighbourhood.

Greater Solidarity III: A Credible Enlargement Policy

A realistic and credible prospect of membership for candidate states will be an important component of blunting the populist-nationalist threat in the Western Balkans (and, potentially also in Turkey and Ukraine in future). Encouraging those states to Europeanise, including in relation to humanitarian aspects of their migration policies, will be important for regional stability. Excessive continued 'outsourcing' of responsibility by the EU, with limited financial solidarity, could, on the other hand, bolster internal nationalist forces that are in some cases receiving important backing (financially and in terms of propaganda) from Russia.

Greater Solidarity IV: Using and Supporting Local Resources

Even where the EU (especially the Commission) is at odds with member or neighbouring states, it may find opportunities to support humanitarian and integration initiatives at local levels. As the project has shown (in the case of Barcelona), in some instances, at the local level—perhaps especially in big diverse cities—attitudes towards migrants and refugees may be more amenable to humanitarian responses and to supporting integration. Such support might also be usefully targeted at localities (for instance in the Western Balkans) with limited capacity and/or where there is evidence of abuse of newly arrived migrant populations (see above).

Greater Solidarity V: Championing Internal Free Movement of People

The UK case offered a stark example of the potential consequences of concerns relating to the internal free movement of people within the EU. The idea that poor EU citizens were moving to the UK to claim social benefits and/or having negative impacts on local labour markets was widespread, but largely false. The EU institutions should continue to champion the case for non-discrimination and free movement for all EU citizens. They should robustly counter misperceptions of the sort we saw proliferate in the UK prior to the Brexit vote.



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