

Researching cross-border cooperation under the shadow of COVID 19 pandemic: scientific report from e-conferences and blog-reflections produced between 14 March and 21 June 2020

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to try to summarize, how the scholars researching border studies and cross-border cooperation practitioners reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic during the period from 16th of March to 21st of June 2020. As it was not possible to follow all the texts (often published without peer-review in thematic blogs) and events, the overview is not exhausting. Another goal of this text is to synthesize the main messages of those texts and events and to identify possible future trends in border studies. We will most likely experience the discourse change which will lead us towards studying impacts of re-bordering rather than de-bordering. We can also expect the lower engagement of the local and regional actors in cross-border cooperation, which will be in some border contexts considered as unnecessary luxury.

Keywords:

pandemic, cross-border cooperation, border studies, border regime, COVID-19, re-bordering

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In 1588, Montaigne, recounting his journey across Europe, describes his physical and metaphysical concerns in a time of plague. The only real borders then in Europe were those formed by nature: a hill, a river, etc. There were also walls, serving as protective belts. The plague formed a much more formidable border, barring access to the infected city and inspiring fear of quarantine, a curative confinement

(Berrod, Bruyas 2020)

The border closures of March 2020, which were imposed as an immediate reaction to the pandemic as a universal panacea for the whole EU, reminds us very much of the role of the border as a barrier to protect oneself from a neighbour

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– implicitly suspicious to be the infected one. It also constitutes a textbook example of applying the “us and them” logic (van Houtum & v.d. Velde 2004), which is a major mental cooperation obstacle.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives and introduced many limitations that we have had to accept. We mostly felt that the quality of our lives decreased, despite the fact that most people were probably not facing a real health-risk. The principle measures to fight the pandemic based on social distancing complicated our normal routines and their consequences have prepared highly interesting challenges for scholars of all social science disciplines. As the one-sided and widely accepted unilateralism started to become the main response to the pandemic from almost all European governments, the cross-border cooperation started to become almost impossible or at least highly complicated as the closed borders caused by the pandemic also posed a challenging agenda for us, border scholars.

The aim of this paper is to try to summarize, how, the scholars researching border studies and cross-border cooperation practitioners, reacted to the pandemic during the period from 16th of March to 21st of June 2020. As it was not possible to follow all those texts (often published without peer-review in thematic blogs) and events, the overview cannot be absolutely exhausting. The author worked exclusively with texts in English for the EU/world context and Polish and Czech for the Polish-Czech context. Another goal of this text is to synthesize the main messages of those texts and events and to identify possible trends in our field of study.

Important papers written during the pandemic and their key messages

Most of the border scholars observed in their texts or e-presentations massive re-bordering tendencies, as most of the applied measures based on social distancing were done on strictly national bases and contradicted the steps desired by the European institutions (Brunnet-Jailly & Vallet 2020). The border closures caused by the pandemic occurred mostly with support of most of the public in the EU Member States, irrespective of the fact whether the country is a part of the “old EU 15” or the “new EU”. Most European citizens have accepted the necessity to close the border due to public health reasons.

These measures made cross-border cooperation physically impossible or at least very difficult to implement. Moreover, the pandemic has introduced a new level of uncertainty in all international – including cross-border – and global affairs and has led many to question whether citizens will be able to continue enjoying the freedom of movement once the crisis is over (Calzada 2020).

The pandemic asks the EU to redefine the function of borders as a health and safety mechanism of the utmost importance. In this regard, the EU has been overtaken by its member states who were quick to order the closure of their national borders as the threat of COVID-19 became clear (Berrod & Bruyas 2020). The pandemic showed us that national states continue to be the basic “social containers” that define the world system (Rufi et col. 2020) even in the European Union. When the Danish prime minister presented her government’s original four phase plan to reopen Danish society, opening the borders was not even on the agenda of phase four (Klatt 2020).

The border scholars will certainly present their COVID-19 related findings in their articles, which will be published once the peer-review processes allow for it. In the meantime, the scientists used the possibility to present their findings and confront them in blogs, webinars and e-conferences, which often replaced the events which had to be cancelled due to the pandemic.

The BorderObs blog is run by the universities, who cooperate in the border studies field in the Greater Region. Their texts in English, French and German can be found on <http://cbs.uni-gr.eu/en/resources/borderobs>. Christian Wille underlines “Luxembourg’s dependence on its neighboring countries: 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” (Wille 2020). The BorderObs also published texts of authors, who come from different border regions (Klatt 2020, Berrod, Wassenberg, Chovet 2020, Unfried 2020). We can say that most of the contributions reflect upon the contexts of the integrated border regions, where the level of cross-border flows and cross-border integration is high also in the labour market (see Böhm, Opióła 2019). Therefore, the authors express their concern related to the impact of the pandemic, which has influenced the very cooperation core.

The blog of the European University Viadrina B/ORDERS IN MOTION research centre focuses (mainly, but not exclusively) on the context of the German-Polish border and identifies the closed borders as the “comeback of the dark times”. In one of the English-written contributions, Jaroslaw Jańczak underlines that “... border areas need to be more vocal in articulating their interest vis-à-vis central authorities. Their future activities will determine whether they become an element of multi-level governance in its cross-border form, or whether they end up (again)

as the interface of the state, with their main role being to protect the mainland” (Jańczak 2020).

Important events held

Both scientific as well as the practitioners’ community adapted to the new situation by moving their discussions from physical to the virtual space, which allowed for better possibilities to follow those debates. The whole community of border scholars could thus have followed the discussion under the framework of the Association of Borderlands Studies Summer Webinars, which discussed the borders in the time of COVID-19 in most of the continents. Despite the contexts of Israeli/Palestine, Pakistan/India or USA/Mexico, the borders are different from borders of the EU, yet the key words were surprisingly similar: new narratives, lack of trust, resilience of borders. Unfortunately, there is no record of the debates held during the conference (to my knowledge).

The University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań organised its e-conference on the COVID-19 impact on the field of science where their own Jarosław Jańczak organised a panel called “Coronavirus and global re-bordering: cross-border cooperation under stress”, where six scholars (including the author of this article) exchanged their views on the impact of the pandemic on the cross-border cooperation².

Other events were held at the initiative of the Association of European Border Regions, who gather cross-border practitioners from all over Europe³. The practitioners underlined their concern about the new situation and pointed to the most serious problems that were caused by that new situation. The most accented ones were the problems related with the functional aspect of the CBC, more concretely in the cross-border labour market faced by the cross-border commuters and the (unexpected) resilience of the national border, which are still very much in the minds of people. “Trust is a vulnerable plant. Don’t take it for granted” (AEBR 2020, presentation of Frederic Siebenhaar).

2 The record of the debate could be found here: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=246409096581222&ref=watch_permalink.

3 The record of their debate, which can be of a great help for many cross-border cooperation researchers, can be found on: <https://www.facebook.com/AEBR.AGEG.ARFE/videos/2624424017826813/>.

Polish-Czech context

In the Polish-Czech context, the representatives of the Czech-Polish Euroregions and other prominent stakeholders from that border were invited to participate in an e-meeting of the applied geography section of the Czech Geographical Society, held on 2nd of June 2020. The author of this paper acted as a moderator and structured the debate along the impact of the pandemic on the five roles of the CBC: 1) a multi-level governance of a territory, 2) regional development tool, which is mostly based upon mutual complementarities, 3) the prominent paradiplomacy tool, 4) the post-conflict reconciliation and 5) Europe-building tool, which is a combination of all previous four roles (Böhm 2020). The discussants came to an agreement that the pandemic damages all of those roles and the mutual trust. Cross-border cooperation might be according to the involved experts considered “expendable” or unnecessary. Many public bodies will due to their budgetary constraints caused by the pandemic resign from their international and cross-border activities. At a Czech-Polish context we may expect continuation of cooperation in the context of the divided town Český Těšín/Cieszyn, as there seems to be the sufficient critical mass of borderlanders/regionauts and also cross-border commuters, which could also have been observed in the media discourse during the pandemic. We can expect continuation of the mutual cooperation based upon the joint regional development and joint economic market. We can expect that the joint cross-border cooperation will continue in regions with a higher number of Polish cross-border commuters in Czech companies – except for Tesin/Cieszyn Silesia, and this will also be the case for Euroregions Silesia, Glacensis and Nisa/Nysa/Neisse.

Pandemic consequences

In the post COVID-19 era, the EU, much like other polities around the world, will anyway have a desperate need to regain legitimacy, support and trust. Resorting to borders, as powerful symbols of political order and stability, may be a tempting option (Castan Pinos, Radil 2020). In the field of border studies, we will most likely experience the dramatic discourse change which will lead us towards studying impacts of re-bordering rather than de-bordering – or in other terms, we will study the boundarisation rather frontierization processes, as Jańczak (2014) puts it. We can also expect the lower engagement of the local and regional actors in cross-border cooperation, which will be in some border contexts – mainly those with the lower level of functional integration – considered as unnecessary luxury.

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