Making light of borders
The case of the external EU border | BASTIAN A. VOLLMER [*]

Abstract

The notion of borders will be questioned in this paper by depicting an ethnographic journey from which a counter-discourse emerged, a discourse that contradicts with the currently acknowledged discourses of borders. Border discourses are dominated by security and threat, by the meaning of the bulwark that surrounds nation states in physical, legal, political and ideational terms. Scholars have examined borders from various different perspectives and within the framework of different disciplines; academic discourses have emerged over the years (such as on securitisation), while national governments across the globe as well as the European Union (EU) attempted to seal their permeable borders. They have introduced ever more legal obstacles and enforcement measures to put their goal into practice: preserving sovereignty. The commonly acknowledged discourses on borders will not be challenged per se in its existence, but empirical data will be used to demonstrate a different account of the notion of borders. This account makes light of the notion of borders as travellers followed their every-day business and dealt with the bulwark of the EU, the EU external border, with ease and amusement.

Keywords: border discourses, counter-discourse, securitization, EU external border, ethnographic journey.

The EU external border – securitization and maintaining sovereignty

The meaning of borders has changed in the modern world in terms of its power as well as governance (Barry et al. 1996; Dean 1999; Foucault 1990, 1991; Rose, 1999). The understanding and nature of state borders become challenged in the 'advanced industrialized regions of the world' (Andreas 2003; see also Sassen, 2006, 2007). Not only at discourse levels, new legislative measures, budgets of law enforcement, the deployment of sophisticated surveillance and information technology and the inclusion of the military reinvigorated the discussion around the 'reordering of the state' (see particularly Andreas and Biersteker 2003; Walters 2006). Borders were increasingly uttered with its underlying aim of controlling or more effective controlling. This process has been elaborated upon and empirically examined by a whole range of scholars including inter alia Adey (2004), Bigo (2002), Düvell (2006), Guiraudon (2003), Guiraudon and Lahav (2000), van der Ploeg (1999) or Salter (2003, 2004). One element of these discourses is for instance securitization or the assumptions that the theory of securitisation puts forward. It addresses various ways by which areas of the political arena and its processes can be formed by the framing of political discourses in terms of existential threat and the language of survival (see also Vollmer 2010). The language of security and

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the objects that are addressed by it play a decisive role, and one of these objects are borders and the maintenance of such borders. A creation of linkages between diverse policy areas, technologies and agents surrounding this discourse of securitizing border constitute a part of the 'security continuum' and the 'governmentality of unease' as Didier Bigo put it (2002). Borders became an affair of identity/culture politics and economic welfare but ever more an object of military and policing which increasingly involves an widening scale of actors (Andreas and Snyder, 2000; Bigo, 2000; Düvell and Vollmer, 2011; Lutterbeck, 2006; Neal, 2009; Vollmer, 2010; Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006). Deploying military forces and police units is not only limited to 'points of entry', i.e. border-crossings, but was extended farther into the territories of countries where surveillance technology as well as administrative mechanisms were increasingly advanced for this purpose. Nevertheless, at border-crossing the responsible enforcement units execute their checks on goods and people, a selection process that makes this point along the border an exceptional space and place. Border crossings represent a node in the border system or border regime which is the focal object in the framework of this paper.

In practice, EU Member States and the EU as a whole attempted to control borders/border crossings and the creation of new legal measures, the advancement of technology and the employment of an increasing number of enforcement personnel aims at this endeavour (Düvell and Vollmer, 2011). At border crossings the management and control of the arrival of people from outside the EU relies partially on conventional checks (passport and visa controls) but also on electronic controls based on data bases (Schengen Information System, Eurodac), advanced passenger information and digitalised IDs (chips, iris scanning). Carriers and cargo are checked with heartbeat and mobile carbon dioxide detectors (Frontex, 2010). A number of newly established institutions and operations have been introduced that implement these checks and develop furthermore efficient control measures. Among others, the RABITs (Rapid Border Intervention Teams) of Frontex is an EU network of over 700 personnel and technical equipment (aircraft, mobile RADAR units, heartbeat detectors), while EUROSUR (European External Border Surveillance System) aims to enhance border surveillance through technical advances (e.g. earth observation satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles, etc.) (see European Commission, 2008). Budget and resources were mobilised over the years and distributed into programmes such as ARGO (2002-2007), €25 million, which is an action programme for administrative cooperation in the fields of external borders, visas, asylum and immigration. It aims to 'strengthen the fight against illegal immigration networks and prevention of illegal flows of immigrants. AENEAS (2004-2006), €120 million, was another programme providing financial and technical assistance to third countries in the areas of migration and asylum. Projects included return to Morocco and Albania, border controls between in Libya and Mali. Meanwhile, borders became increasingly a natural order in various dimension of social reality and lives of people (see Malkki, 1992), however consequences or 'side effects' of border regimes, such as the

EU external border regime, become visible. One of such visible side effects are more than 14.000 deaths (between 1993-2011) that were documented on their way to cross this very border or on their way reaching this border and dreaming of successfully crossing it (UNITED, 2011). Contemporary borders and the politics of these borders have the power to kill (see also Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2003). Discourse on borders and the self-perpetuating construction of the meaning of borders is not only at a discursive level a negative one but the current reality of borders across the globe and the external border of the EU is a dismal and horrifying one.

Research background and methods

In this paper the above elaborated elements of border discourses will not be rejected in their entirety; neither will these be challenged as such. It will however shed a different light on the notion of borders, a contrasting angle. A snap-shot of 25-hours social reality serves as the source of data. This condensed data collection represents a situated knowledge of detailed social life in a coach and its surrounding environment: a coach journey of 25 hours between a non-EU city and an EU-city (anonymous countries, cities, routes and passengers will be used). A thick description (Geertz, 1973) or 'slice of life account' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998b) of this journey was used as methodology. A less 'mediated framework' (Vidich and Lyman, 1998), i.e. less second-hand world of meanings but a more direct access to realties' as Denzin (1997: 246) put it, will be offered. A 'ethnographic recording of lived experience' (Willis and Trondman, 2000) within this particular 25 hours social reality accounts for an experience of a border that is recurrently discussed as one of the hottest borders across the globe: the EU external border. This paper will question the notion of borders and its meaning by demonstrating one of its 'own realities' and this is the travellers' or migrants' routine of circumvention which was accommodated with an ease of everyday business. The border as bulwark, as a wall or a fence around the EU, as 'exceptional space' - where checks and controls are made; where suspicion, authoritative hierarchies and fear of detection dominate personal relations -, was made light of in this way. The symbolism of security and protection of the EU identity was by-passed by a simple organisation similar to played out routines, by people who know their routes in and out of the 'exceptional space'. Three examples will be presented as to how this circumvention of the bulwark of the EU was taking place. The three cases will depict the people's attitude and ease which became increasingly evident during their routine businesses across the EU external border. Notably, these exemplifications were not pre-selected before the journey but the three cases arose during the journey. They are bribery, smuggling/trading, and sham marriage. The conclusion will draw these three parts together and will add final analytical thoughts.

133

The 25 hours coach

At the busy coach station situated 15 minutes outside the non-EU city (the starting point of the journey), mostly small buses for shorter routes, i.e. nationally travelling buses, were frequently arriving and departing. But also coaches travelling to various international destinations left from the station. Some passengers had no luggage, only a small bag with food and drinks, some other passengers had up to four over-sized suit cases that sometimes hardly fit into the coaches' luggage compartment. My international coach arrived and it was full, not a single seat was free: 59 non-EU nationals, one EU national (the author), and two coach drivers. Single men and young women travelling alone; male sportsmen, older couples, teenagers, children; aged from 4-75, i.e. a heterogeneous group of travellers.

Bribing

Bribery or the action of bribing has different nicknames and code names that vary at different borders crossings across the globe. For instance, in Cantt Station in Pakistan bribing airport officials is called 'kharidan-e forodgah' (literally 'buying the airport') (Khosravi, 2010: 32), the money used for the bribery at this border crossing was simply called 'a gift'. Khosravi (2010) and Thuen (2002) inter alia referred to bribery among border guards and officials as a popular source of additional income and most other accounts read as a treacherous and dangerous business. In contrast to the following: an easy-going well-structured affair of trading money for 'a blind eye'.

134

The coach drivers and their announcements about the journey were entertainment, they handled the microphone like show masters and this also included when they announced the potential organisation of bribing the customs and immigration officers at the border. They underlined that this is solely the business of the passengers and that they shall organise this themselves. Within five minutes a young man collected 5 Euro notes in his baseball cap. Everybody knew how much they were expected to give, apparently the usual amount that is needed at the border. None of the passengers hesitated to join the bribery of the border and customs officers. It was handled as a routine, as an entry for a cinema which movie nobody would like to miss. This bribery was part of the process of crossing the border. It was a norm and handled with ease. Regardless of how the full amount of this bribery will be distributed among the border and customs officers, the total amount of € 295 equals approximately an average per capita monthly salary in countries at the fringes of the EU. "If you would see the houses of these border officers, […] their houses are very nice and very large, […] not because of the salary" – communal laughter followed. Some passengers shook their heads about these circumstances, but they all agreed that they have to take it as it is – the border is there and the officers are there, "so we need to deal with it" was the credo of these travellers. Approaching the border, endless queues of lorries started to appear. It took approximately five hours to pass through the border, although

the customs check and the passport check went smoothly. Nobody was questioned or needed to answer general inquiries by the border guards. "Without 'the gift' we would wait until tomorrow morning", I was assured. This was underpinned and demonstrated by another coach stopping next to our coach. The passengers themselves of this coach as well as their luggage were checked thoroughly. These travellers were treated in an unfriendly way and some passengers were interrogated by the border police. In our case, it was unclear when and how the bribery was taking place, nevertheless it showed its effects. Nobody talked about it again; the entry for the 'full contents' of the coach including all unauthorised items on the coach (see section below) was paid for. A quite evidently bogus check was carried out for our coach, i.e. a customs officer went carelessly though the coach with a torch, seemingly trying to put on a very serious face, but evidently pretending to do an appropriate check. "One only needs to know how it works", I was told.

Smuggling/trading

Petty smuggling and trading are ubiquitous cross-border activities. Consumer goods such as food, clothes, household utensils and tools but also all sorts of spare parts for automobiles are typical cross-border trading goods. Konstantinov (1996) examined the specific studies on the skills, specific knowledge and types of organization to be successful in this particular kind of trading, i.e. cross border trading. The following observation will not add to the enrichment of such professionalised strategies of cross border trading, but will describe the ad hoc communal organisation that it requires as well as the opportunity, instead of the obstacle, that the EU external border represents.

135

One elderly man sitting in my radius of perception uttered loudly: "Haha, I have 5 kilos of ham in my bag." Communal laughter followed and a tacit agreement that it is very understandable to bring the good ham through the border. Shortly before approaching the border and the customs check, passengers distributed cigarettes to other passengers, everybody agreed upon what to do and why this practice is necessary when approaching the border. The rule is to have only a certain amount of cigarette packages/per person in possession when crossing the border and when the customs officers might go through the coach, I was told. Some individual passengers have far more than the allowed limit and "so we need to pass them on" and "distribute them among us". Passengers smiled and found this arrangement rather amusing, since it seemed too simple to circumvent. Similarly, three men (who likewise arranged collecting the bribe) turned out to be car traders who go back and forth between the non-EU city and a number of EU cities. "It is a good business" and unfortunately we also have to do "things on the side". All of them smiled at once. They explained that they would need another two additional jobs in their non-EU city of residence, but "this border allows us to work on this kind of business". The border itself created this kind of business, which is less complicated and less problematic than finding a job "back home", I was

assured. The border represents an opportunity for such car traders as also found for other traders and social groups (see also Konstantinov, 1994; Ledeneva, 1998). As we approached the stops in the EU countries more and more frequently mobile telephones started ringing. I was asking why the phones kept ringing and I was explained that "other customers were calling". It became clearer when the coach stopped at some irregular stops where small bags were unloaded. People approached the coach from nearby parking vehicles and disappeared with such small bags in a swift manner. Everything made the appearance of well-advanced communicated arrangements. At a regular stop in an EU city, a larger and very heavy cargo item was moved hastily from the coach into a parallel parking mini-transporter. A handshake sealed the deal, which was worth a couple of thousand Euros (the amount was counted before the coach arrived at the station); only the receipt was missing, a formal-informal trade.

Sham marriage

Alex, another passenger, crossed the border with a "not entirely legal document". Alex explained her/his migration project and how s/he found out about what is 'legal' and what is 'illegal' in Alex's EU country of residence. As regards Alex's currently "not entirely legal document", Alex told an anecdote of moving from one house to another one and how the breach of a highly specific administrative regulation can lead to a new, irregular migration status. "I have changed my address" and this "I should have reported to the authorities", Alex concluded. "I basically didn't report that (for many other reasons) and I am fully aware of it. I should have told them and I will do so very soon", but for this moment the only important issue is that the "officers at the border do not check my address", but "I will be fine" Alex assured me, "the money will do its job". Alex exactly knew which regulation was important and which regulation was critical and complicated to disguise. A simple matter of knowledge and organisation, Alex explained. On a further note, Alex elaborated on her/his decision to get married in the EU-country where Alex lives. "It will be organised by a good agency and I am very happy about it." Alex has another two friends who will also get married. They live in the same EU-city and they will get married to EU citizens. "They don't know their future spouses yet, but they will soon - haha", Alex added. "There are many others who only come to the EU in order to get married"; some only see this opportunity to obtain a residence permit in the EU. "They want to move on, and also I want to move on; I do not want to sit and wait, and do not know what is going to happen. I want to have a quiet life a, good life. […] I might even move to another EU country at a later point in time, I will see. […] There is so good food in some EU countries and in Southern Europe it is warm and the people are so friendly."

Arranged sham marriage or 'bogus marriages' is a common strategy to gain a 'full' citizenship in many EU Member States. Notably, this strategy is dis-

tinctively different from 'forced marriages' (see also Phillips and Dustin, 2004). Studies in Austria (Digruber and Messinger, 2006), Belgium (Foblets and Vanheule, 2006) and the UK (Wray 2006) have indicated an increasing body of legislation and enforcement measures towards sham marriages in the past recent years. Counter measures in these EU countries were introduced in order to verify that marriages are 'real'. Special enforcement units were introduced which have developed sophisticated tests that aim at proving a 'love marriage'. One of the parameters that are used to test a 'real marriage' is a 'shared domicile' for instance (see Council of Ministers 1997: Article 2; or other legal provisions such as in Germany: Foreigner Law, Article 41). Acting as an agent of arranging such bogus marriages can be treated as criminal offence, for instance in Germany where this can be charged with fines or imprisonment (Foreigner Law, Article 113). However, most of these "organisers of such marriages do a good job, it is only a price difference" as Alex assured me. At a stop in an EU-city, Alex left the coach and met up with another person who was already waiting for Alex. They went to the toilet together and afterwards they had a brief conversation. Alex explained that this person needed a document that "you would not obtain here in the EU. […] I organised it in my country to get the document. My friend needs this document so I brought it for her through the border, so she can get married to another person here in the EU. I know a lot of people from my country living here in the EU, [...] we are a closely-knit network and help out when someone needs help, [...] next time she might help me out to get something through this border." Although "I have to say she should have talked to me earlier, she paid too much for the marriage, haha, I got a better deal!"

After talking for a longer time, Alex referred to likewise hazardous journeys. These became evident when Alex talked about these "other stories" that Alex has heard about. "It is a very different story from my story" Alex said. "There are some people I have heard about who go to non-EU countries" where border guards remove passports of persons who seem vulnerable. "They were forced into prostitution" and this was not the only occasion that Alex was told about such incidences. "The network and friends is important", Alex pointed out. Alex smiled and looked out of the window. We have already passed through the EU border a long time ago.

Conclusion

The external border of the EU and various other borders across the globe represent dismal and horrifying discourses. The notion of borders is security/threat-driven across the globe. This paper did not intend to challenge securitisation theory or the established account of the notion of borders. Nevertheless, it points to a reality and an underlying discourse that was highly different from commonly acknowledged discourses of borders. This three-parted account demonstrated how a group of every-day travellers made light of the bulwark of the EU. The first part showed practices of bribing and in particu-

137

lar at which ease and in which routinized way these practices were processed – no inquiries were made; no one hesitated to engage in the bribing. Secondly, smuggling/trading signified a 'window of opportunity' instead of a repressive confinement which the border represents according to common discourses. The border became a 'job-creator' for some people on this coach which they do not want to be missing. Thirdly, the narrative on sham marriage depicted the structured and systematised organisation of a migration strategy that facilitates the passage through the border as well as a potentially advantageous prospective in the EU country of residency - a phase of a well-planned stage in a life-project in which the border plays a role but does not hamper the ambitious aspirations of these people.

Gradually, a contrasting meaning that resembles a counter-discourse emerged in the light of the established discourses of borders. Although the examples of bribery, smuggling/trading and sham marriage, referred only to one particular border crossing, they illustrated a counter-discourse that represents a stark contrast to the discourse of 'fortress Europe', a metaphor that stands for the insurmountable barrier, a line that cannot be crossed and which people respect and fear. This contrasting or counter-discourse is dominated instead by ease and composure. Travellers went through their routines that circumvent this border. They built their ways and strategies around or through it. The border exists but they deal with it. Well-organised formal-informal affairs and businesses were handled and accommodated with laughter. Moreover the practices were routinized, facilitated by a corrupt system (the border and customs officers at the EU external border), almost ridiculed but indeed questioned the notion and very purpose of borders. In this counter-discourse, the meaning of the border becomes a hump on the street, a hump where all involved persons need to apply exceptional rules. For a short period of time they float in a space and place that is exceptional, is different and very specific in its nature but not dismal and horrifying.

Acknowledgments

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138

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