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# MEDIATING THE SPATIALITY OF CONFLICTS

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# Border Drift: The Multiplication of Liminal Spaces in the Time of Migrant Crisis

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## Abstract

The paper offers an introduction to the Ph.D. project, which investigates the interaction between nation-state borders and human migratory flows as a process of space production. In particular, the project looks into the implementation of strategies of border reinforcement, at various spatial and social scales, and their interference with practices of crossing, legal and illegal. The study of border reinforcement in relation with human mobility offers the possibility to highlight not only the multiplication of border functions, but especially their operative variations across space, according to the encounter with migrants' agency. Spatial dynamics are sought in-between borders' roles and physical features; they are analyzed as intersecting and colliding fields of interactions, where existing and missing links can be mapped to connect the existing and the potential. Spatial analysis is proposed as the means to search for multiplicity and openness in the stiffness of fortified border structures, as well as for the permanence of material traces of violence and the emergence of zones of conflict far from national limits. The doctoral project is aimed at building an alternative research model, which makes use of space to bridge the logics and materiality of mobility with those of border reinforcement.

The present paper offers an overview of the preliminary definition of problems and questions of my doctoral project, which is aimed at mapping and analyzing how politically decided boundaries, both visible and invisible, produce new spatial structures in the name of security. In particular, the project focuses on the physical reinforcement of borders between neighboring nations at the territorial scale. The topic has received special attention across Europe in the last few years, especially in relation to the 'refugee crisis' that began in 2015. As a consequence many disciplines from political science and geography to anthropology and migration studies put political boundaries at the center of their inquiries. However, the material spatial consequences of border reinforcement, in connection with emerging migrant flows, are still scarcely considered in contemporary border studies.

Therefore, the doctoral project aims to go beyond the mere institutional and political definitions to investigate borders in their role as performative zones in spatial terms. Taking the complex social and spatial dynamics produced along political frontiers as its objects of inquiry, and analyzing in depth the case of the Hungarian-Serbian border, the project aims to understand how the knowledge on border zones, when seen from an architectural and urban perspective, may inform and assist in the interaction between policies and practices, the production of space, and the material implications of surveillance, in the context of exceptional events and intensified human migrations.

After having presented a preliminary inventory of the many different shapes that European borders have assumed in the last decade as products of the interaction between security measures

and increased mobility, this paper proposes a reading of the border's spatial features in the form of research questions. As the title of the paper suggests, these questions address the engagement of the ongoing research in redirecting border discourse and guiding it through space, moving across a wide interdisciplinary system of knowledge production.

### **Background**

In the summer of 2015, when more than a million people moved towards Europe by sea or land routes, to escape war, persecution, environmental catastrophes, and poverty, the term 'refugee crisis' started to dominate the media and political discourse. In this scenario of securitarian and humanitarian emergency, the European Union has proven the contradiction of its border policy, between openness and free movement of people and goods across internal borders, and restrictive measures along the external frontiers. A look outwards also reveals a lack of uniformity among member states, displayed through a continuous transfer of responsibility and the fragmentation of interventions. Properly the lack of a decisive and coherent approach has contributed to turning crisis discourses into an instrument of rule, legitimizing austerity and exceptional measures.<sup>1</sup>

In this political scenario, Hungary represents an emblematic example of the way tensions came to the extreme: political narratives of protection and control merged with social prejudices, historical memories, and the discontent of the population, ending in the building of a razor-wire fence along the Southern border with Serbia. The initiative of the Hungarian government marked one of the major steps in the formal closure of the so-called Western Balkan Route<sup>2</sup>, a very busy corridor that during the last decades has constituted the path of a diverse group of migrants, including people fleeing the violence of the Arab Spring, and Syrian nationals, as well as residents of the western Balkan states (mainly from

Kosovo), Asians, and Eastern Africans heading to Europe from the Bulgarian-Turkish and Greek-Turkish borders. Nevertheless, the closure of the border did not stop people from attempting crossing; it made the venture more dangerous, slow, and expensive. Cities and crossing points initially intended for transit turned into places of timeless waiting, where makeshift camps started to proliferate. On the other side of the fence, the entire Serbian territory has progressively turned into a buffer zone and the need to reorganize existing structures of reception became urgent. While 'jungles' were spreading at the edges of the country and new routes started to divert to Bosnia, in the core of the nation, Serbian authorities passed from an attitude of non-interference to a securitarian approach, which testifies not only a shift in border policies, but also a change in residents' perception and, accordingly, in the management of the spheres of legality and illegality.<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of the Western Balkan Route temporarily shifted the focus of refugees' migrations to Europe, from the sea routes to the Balkan territory, showing the impossibility of referring to a single central axis of access to the continent. In addition to this, the formation of new routes contributed to transforming the original external border limit into a more extended and internal area of transit. In this zone, the border reveals its appearance in many different forms: as a transit camp, a 'jungle', a document check, a military outpost. It proves the ability to take the shape of a diffuse and dynamic spatiality, assume multiple functions, and reorganize existing temporal and spatial structures.

Zooming out from the Hungarian-Serbian frontier, the foundations of current European border strategies and their emphasis on security and control can be traced back to the origin of the Schengen Agreement, in 1985. Since then, the development of smart borders, intended for speeding up processes for EU citizens and

‘wanted travelers’, has been accompanied by a progressive militarization of external borders to stop ‘unwanted arrivals’. In the early 1990s, the expansion of border control reached the African territory for the first time, with the construction of the double-walled fences in Ceuta and Melilla. This intervention contributed to the introduction of metaphors such as ‘Fortress Europe’ or ‘Gated Continent’, to conceptualize European policy along external borders and its attitude towards African migration.<sup>4</sup> The goal of expanding border control to non-European countries consists of preemptive actions, meant to stop migrant flows before they reach the European territory, using third countries as outpost guards. Similar strategies are also linked to the multiplication of hotspots-like spaces, such as Lesbos Island in Greece, or Lampedusa in Italy. In these sites norms of detention and identification are reconfigured, and the disruption and channelization of humans are enabled.<sup>5</sup> In the continuous redirection of migratory routes and with the emergence of new flexible checkpoints, the ‘fortress’ appears to be more porous and mobile than what the term suggests, showing a certain degree of ambivalence in the exercise of functions of connection and separation, control and expansion on overlapping geographies.<sup>6</sup>

Expanding the discourse on mobility and control to the global scale and taking into account not only people’s movements but also goods, information, money, and data flows, the geography of borders and national states intersects with the digital space and witnesses a spatial stretching through technologies of surveillance and dataveillance.<sup>7</sup> By means of risk profiling and governing mobility, which have been specially implemented after the terrorist attack of 9/11 and in conjunction with the War on Terror, borders have morphed into a more extensive zone of control, diffuse and digitally sophisticated.<sup>8</sup> Through extensive bordering, the boundary turns into a quantifiable event, a calculable

data derived from the number of crossings, the measurement of body features of the suspect, and relations of distance between points. Control is modulated through the implementation of techniques of identification and localization, able not only to pinpoint but also to trace and track, keeping personal information in a constant flow from the body to the database and back again.<sup>9</sup> In the digital system, the border’s scale is reduced and individualized per object or person, facilitating, in this way, the multiplication of border events and encounters at the smallest scale and in various instances of everyday life. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the digital border systems still present some gaps, which can be found in the ambiguity or double use of technology. It does not matter how perfected surveillance systems are, they still leave space for differential experiences.<sup>10</sup> An example of such situations can be found in the way migrants themselves rely on GPS technologies and digital platforms to subvert authorities in a continuous redefinition of their trajectories. In other cases, artists, activists, and ‘hacktivists’ turn technologies into ‘tactical media’ to facilitate migrant journeys across the extensive border zone, while producing a counter-knowledge of the digital border. As power and control techniques are rendered increasingly networked and mobile, so sites and tactics of resistance expand and move from streets and public squares to the web, generating a swarming mode of conflict, heterogeneous but strategically coordinated.<sup>11</sup> Digital resistance and tactical media are conceived as forms of activism and insurgency aimed at suggesting new modes of seeing, understanding and interacting with the given authoritarian system, setting the path for new socio-political imaginations. In the field of border reinforcement and extensive control, digital activism intervenes as a form of exploration, seeking for a different understanding of the border through a series of material and symbolic tactics,

challenging the most rigorous networks of security, and interacting with uncontrollable risks, with the unforeseeable and the incalculable. Such modes of resistance are subtle, pliable, performative, never finished but in becoming.<sup>12</sup>

### **Questions of space**

Fence building and externalization strategies materialize border spatiality through the clear delineation, the militarization or even the fortification of space. These spatial transformations create zones of increasing tension and high concentration, where surveillance and control are exercised through the physical limitation of movement and differentiation processes operated directly on the bodies of individuals under observation. These forms of bordering generate specific zones of emergency, or exception, marked by the reaching of a critical point of tension, both in time and space, in which an abrupt transition from the previous condition is made visible. On the other hand, we have seen how the implementation and technological development of digital bordering widens the range of modalities of exclusion and control. While searching for a scientific and quantitative knowledge of border events, the digital space introduces more fluid processes of bordering and crossing, opening the discussion toward the unpredictable and the possible.

In the manifold of bordering forms and strategies, a growing number of concepts have emerged in different academic fields, showing an increasing interdisciplinary character of border studies and social sciences.<sup>13</sup> In the mapping of theorizations and developments related to particular border conditions, what can be noticed is the tension between logics and practices of reinforcement and those of migration. The first testify the permanence of a topographical conception and design of border structures of separation, whether they are border fences or database for national security, which rely on distances, exact

locations, and numerical data. The second, on the other hand, challenges the opposition between inside and outside, center and periphery, and shifts the perspective on the dynamics of lived experiences. Logics and practices of migration call into question the flattened view of reinforcement, in favor of a relational, topological spatiality, which refers to the border as an open-ended process of social interactions.

The recent political events related to the 'refugee crisis' are exemplary of the way borders can operate in an intricate web of relations, which includes discourses, political strategies, social practices, and shifting spaces of operation. These relations can be mapped at the intersection of different spatial and functional scales, moving from a global scale of discourse and political narrative of protection and threat, cutting across the national and transnational scale of strategy, until reaching the local level of struggle and material violence. The intersection of scales and the mutual influence of relations highlight the impossibility to address the study of the border either from the perspective of reinforcement or from the side of migration dynamics. Therefore, architectural discipline and spatial analysis are chosen to deal with both reinforcement structures and migration dynamics, not only to address new ways of thinking socio-spatial demarcation but also to acknowledge and analyze the multiplicity of spatial outcomes. But, what are the challenges and opportunities for the discipline of architecture to rethink the way borders are studied, and to reorient the understanding of borders from the political to the spatial discourse?

To guide the research in the answering of this question, six spatial characters of the border have been introduced: namely, multi-dimensionality, measurability, plasticity, excess, scalarity, and visibility. They serve as a starting point to investigate patterns of correlation, which can emerge in between apparently distinct border forms. In particular, multi-

dimensionality calls attention to the possibility of moving forward the linear understanding of borders and dealing with a space in dynamic formation over time. Measurability, or better un-measurability, points out the need to search for additional tools of analysis and representation which can address a space-time and mobile understanding of the border. The character of plasticity refers to the ability to morph through the articulation and modulation of flows, while excess emphasizes the production and reproduction of spatial forms per effect of the execution of multiple functions of demarcation and differentiation. Scalarity addresses the emergence of borders far from national limits, through conducting everyday formal and informal practices of reinforcement and resistance. Finally, the character of visibility questions the spatial dimension of surveillance and its influence on life along borders.

The characters listed above do not refer to a number of features that the border can assume. Rather, they question the possible opening of new fields of interaction, which link existing material, visible, and functional border structures with a number of potential, multiple, indeterminate, spatial systems to investigate. In this intertwined net of fields and spaces, the reorientation for a new understanding of the border is proposed through the building of a critical research model, which sets three main objectives for the doctoral project.

First of all, the project wants to move the discourse on borders across space, intended as in dynamic construction. Through spatial theory, in fact, border formation can be conceived as the struggle between quantitative logics of reinforcement and qualitative logics of migratory flows. However, one must not forget the material dimension of the struggle and the physical strain embedded in migratory practices. Spatial traces of material processes are left on the site and can be examined with the

tools for spatial analysis. In these terms, the study of border spatiality is proposed to search for multiplicity and openness in the stiffness of fortified border structures, as well as for the permanence of traces of violence and the emergence of conflicts far from borderlines themselves. Secondly, the research has to engage with a wide range of modes of inquiry and disciplines. In fact, the dynamicity and complexity of borders cannot be inscribed into the exclusionary frame of a single disciplinary view. The project needs to function as a bridge, building a methodology that provides for the inclusion of multiple perspectives and cases. Lastly, a critical engagement to the study of borders also needs to reconsider traditional approaches to their representation. As previously mentioned with respect to the notion of 'measurability' and 'multi-dimensionality', the consolidated understanding of cartography and scale has to be confronted with alternative, non-linear, mapping processes. Suggesting mapping as an epistemological device would help to no longer locate the border, rather question the way it is produced and how it operates. The development of the present doctoral project as a critical research model allows reframing the shift from the ontological to the epistemological approach to border studies in spatial terms, which means through an in-depth analysis of the productive character of borders. Moreover, the research serves to test a critical methodology on a specific border condition, namely the Hungarian-Serbian frontier, as the prototype for further case research. In this process, space is offered as a medium for connecting various forms of knowledge through a wider range of architectural analyses and experimentations, both theoretical and practical.

### **Methodological explorations**

The renewed interest in the study of borders and the growing number of concepts and definitions pose several challenges

to the positioning of the research and to its methodological development. One of the main methodological disputes might concern the deepening of a functional analysis of border roles, above referred to as notions of 'excess' and 'scalarity'. This question implies taking into account the existence of a variety of boundaries at different spatial and societal levels, including the impact of problems of a more general nature and the specificity of local border conflicts. In this regard, an interesting answer has been proposed by Vladimir Kolossov, under the name of 'policy-practice-perception' (PPP).<sup>14</sup> This approach tries to bridge the latest theoretical achievements of border studies with more traditional approaches, which still prove their validity in functional terms. It guides the analysis of boundaries from the global scale of legal and institutional roles to the local level of social interactions, in an integrated system. A relevant aspect of this approach can be found in its non-hierarchical ordering of functions and scales, which favors the establishment and transformation of relations between multiple functions, practices, and symbols of borders. An interesting application of the policy-practice-perception method could be seen in the challenge of dealing with topological thinking and topographic interventions at the border, as previously exposed in more conceptual terms. This would mean searching for a multi-scalar understanding of the spatiality in which policy, practice, and perception become operative, preventing the method from turning into a categorization of separate spatial scales and domains. As to avoid a separation of surfaces and scales that strive to discover a 'deeper', determining level of knowledge, a topological reading of the three analyses seems promising in order to account for variation and connectivity of spaces, bodies, and objects. However, questions remain open for what concerns the way policy, practice, and perception perform in relation to one another, how their

operations produce new spatial formations and, finally, how they can relate to the temporality and the experiential dimension of ongoing bordering processes. Moreover, even though the PPP approach guides through a variation of border performances across different spatial scales, it still needs to be integrated with other tools of spatial analysis to properly unfold the border as a spatial system. As to connect the analysis of interrelated functions and meanings with their spatial outcomes, a critical methodology has to include both literary documentation and more subjective forms of narration, such as visual communication materials, able to go beyond the two-dimensional cartographic representation of borderlines. The complexity and dynamicity of bordering processes require the capacity of tools of analysis to actively monitor transformations and interactions, which means facilitating a more flexible investigative procedure and accounting for the uncertainty of results. In the discipline of architecture and urban studies, mapping is recognized as the tool that better reflects this potential. Whilst cartography favours order, structure, and geometric restitution, mapping techniques have been tested not only to collect and catalog information on space, but rather to build a relational narration of spatial transformation, hybridizing quantitative data with perceptive information.<sup>15</sup>

### **Overtures**

This paper presents an insight into the process of developing a doctoral project, starting from the observation of borders at different spatial and social scales: from the global discourse on security and national protection to the urban dimension of conflicts along militarized frontier zones. These socio-spatial levels do not represent separate categories of boundaries; rather they interact, collide, and overlap to form specific border conditions. The identification of spatial characters and scales of functional analysis serves to visualize the



possibility of building a transversal system of knowledge, which cuts across fields of interaction and proposes new connections.

In the evolution of border discourse from the 1980s to current days, borders have been recognized as complex phenomena related not only to the sphere of geography and politics but also to the organization of society and more intimate aspects of human psychology. However, scholars struggle to reach an agreement on common definitions, concepts, or principles. Many aspects fundamental to the understanding of the formation and implementation of boundaries are analyzed and compartmentalized, but their interaction is still in need of further explorations. In the aim of the doctoral project, the spatial dimension of borders invites to review current approaches to the study, the understanding, and the representation of border zones, suggesting an open research ground, in which to observe the interaction of various agents

involved in the production of space. Moreover, through the study of borders as lived spaces and the in-depth examination of the Hungarian-Serbian frontier, the project aims to shed light on the importance of considering everyday life along borders. Acknowledging borders as lived and inhabited spaces means to recognize the dignity and the collective agency of migrant communities in a process of spatial redefinition and adaptation. Spatial analysis, differently from the common approaches to migration, does not look into quantitative aspects of movements, such as the number of individuals involved, their countries of origin, and their destinations. On the contrary, performance and production of space resulting from social interactions are at the center of the inquiry and aim to respond to questions on what migration can do, which mechanisms it might trigger in terms of adaptation and evolution, and what forms of living spaces are brought about by migration.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Bauman, Z., and Bordon, C. *State of Crisis*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).
- 2 The European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX lists and names five major migration routes toward Europe: the Western Balkan Route and the Eastern Borders Route, representing the two main land routes, and three maritime routes constituted by the Western, the Central and the Eastern Mediterranean Route. The Western Balkan Route has been one of the main migratory paths into Europe, reflecting the influx on the Eastern Mediterranean route. However, after the peak of arrivals in the European Union reached in 2015, the number of illegal border crossings on this route has reduced steadily.
- 3 Cf. Stojic Mitrovic, M. & Meh, E. (2015). "The reproduction of borders and the contagiousness of illegalisation: A case of a Belgrade youth hostel". *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta*. 63. 623-639.
- 4 See: Castan Pinos, J. (2014). "La Fortaleza Europa: Schengen, Ceuta y Melilla". Instituto de Estudio Ceuties.
- 5 See: Tazzioli, M. (2018). "Containment beyond detention: The hotspot system and disrupted migration movements across Europe", in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*.
- 6 Cf. Mezzadra, S. and Neilson, B. (2012). "Between Inclusion and Exclusion: On the Topology of Global Space and Borders". *Theory Culture and Society*, 29: 58-75.
- 7 See Amoore, L. (2005) 'On the Line: Writing the Geography of the Virtual Border', in Johnson, C. and Jones, R. "Interventions on rethinking 'the border' in border studies", in *Political Geography* 30, 61-69.
- 8 Cf. DeLanda, M. Space: 'Extensive and Intensive, Actual and Virtual', in Buchanan, I., and Lambert, G. (eds). *Deleuze and Space*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2005).
- 9 Cf. Deleuze, G. (1992). "Postscript on the societies of control", in *October*, 59, 3-7.
- 10 Topak, O. E., Bracken-Roche, C., Saulnier, A. and Lyon, D. (2015). "From Smart Borders to Perimeter Security: The Expansion of Digital Surveillance at

- the Canadian Borders". *Geopolitics*, 20:4, 880-899.
- 11 Cf. Raley, R. *Tactical Media*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- 12 Cf. Garcia, D. and Lovink, G. (1997) *The ABC of Tactical Media*. <https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html>
- 13 See Kolosov, V. (2005). "Theorizing Borders. Border Studies: Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches". *Geopolitics*, 10: 606-632.
- 14 Ibid., p. 625. See also Kolossov, V. (2006). "Theoretical Limology: Postmodern Analytical Approaches". *Diogenes*, 210: 11-22.
- 15 Cf. Bunschoten, R., Takuro, H., Binet, H., and CHORA. *Urban Flotsam: Stirring the City*. (Rotterdam: 010, 2001).