Processes of bordering and the Narva border

The why and how of bordering

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Geopolitics of Bordering

Word count: **1872**

Wednesday 2 November 2022

In the 30+ degree heat I was sitting in a bus heading from Tallinn bound for St. Petersburg, Russia. This border crossing journey took more than 10 hours, of which around 6 hours were spend in an Estonia-Russia border limbo. Other more convenient options of travel were no longer available. The various sanctions imposed on Russia have meant that most alternatives were no longer possible. Yet the need for crossing borders in the age of globalization did not suddenly stop. Other means of transport, like the bus I was on, saw a skyrocket in demand. (Interfax, 2022). Border crossings seem to indeed be a fact of our time, where people consistently navigate the (im-)possibilities and the (im-)mobility of the border. This border in particular sees vibrant online communities discussing various issues of the border (*Граница НАРВА-ИВАНГОРОД | Facebook*, n.d.).

When I was at the border crossing point, the *Narva-Ivangorod* border, what really struck me was the securitization of the border. Giant fortresses on either side of the river serve as a reminder of who's in power, with big flags waiving high in the sky, claiming the territory for the nation state. The border fence itself is further securitized by various scanners, scanning both the body and the luggage, and making decision on who is welcome and who is not. Afterwards it turned out, many were not welcome, judging by the empty seats on the bus. Some had invalid visas', some answered a question slightly wrong, some had the wrong luggage, and some missed one of the 50+ pieces of paper required. In this way the border serves as a merciless machine ruthlessly denying entrance for some and allowing entrance for others. Though, thirty years ago, this border crossing point looked dramatically different. During the soviet times, the border was marked as non-existent: "*there was no division, two towns like one.*" (Pfoser, 2015, p. 1690) states a woman living there at the time.

In thirty years, a lot changed. If anything, it highlights the dynamic process of the border, and how the border is not "*fixed in space and time*" (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002, p. 126). This dynamic nature of the border is precisely what this essay concerns itself with. In this essay I take under investigation the constant re-construction of the border by theorizing the border and asking the question **why and how do people politically border territories?** Using the case of the Narva-Ivangorod border I will zoom in on the theoretical meanings of "borders" and answer the *why* and the *how.* Finally, I will briefly conclude and provide thoughts on the future of this border.

Theorizing Bordering processes

The word *borders* as Van Houtum & Van Naerssen (2002) rightly states, creates this assumption that they are conceived as a fixed and finite divider of the nation-state demarcating the end and start of sovereignty. Yet, this border but also many other borders

through the rise in globalisation, trans-national flows, and the idea of cosmopolitanism meant that scholars began to think beyond the nation state (Rumford, 2006). Developments like diaspora communities, growing economical flows of goods and people, remittance, and other developments all highlight the increased mobility between cultures (Rumford, 2006). Attempts to reconceptualize the border came in many forms. One of this is seeing the border as a verb: *bordering*. This notion very well acknowledgement that borders are never finish, and acknowledges that bordering, is also a form of ordering. Ordering a certain space demarked by bordering processes. Furthermore, Van Houtum & Van Naerssen (2002) also rightly argue that these processes necessarily also are a form of *othering*. If you create a barrier, there is an *inside* and an *outside:* an *us* and a *them.*

As already alluded to earlier, the border is not just a line in the sand. Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy (2020) in their paper operationalise this in many ways through the *Paper*, *Iron* and *Camp* border. Firstly, The paper border, the fiercest border of them all (van Houtum, 2021) prevents most people from crossing the border. The paper border here represents the need for *visas'* which are often neigh on impossible to get; bureaucratic problems such as no appointments, ridiculously high fees or even the inability to get a visa purely based on the "*lottery of birth*" (van Houtum, 2021, p. 40). It is also a very clear demarcation of who is wanted, and therefore also who is unwanted.

Secondly, they discuss the Iron border which, essentially is where me and many others were held up for hours in attempts to cross it. It where one is subject to (bio-)scanning of your everything. Your body and your luggage in search for unwanted-ness. Being at mercy of border guards to grant you passage. The iron border is always where much violence happens (The Migrants' Files, 2022) to attempt to keep the scary other on the outside.

Thirdly and finally, van Houtum and Bueno Lacy describe the camp border. which represents the many camps where refugees and migrants are *waiting* for their verdict: are they wanted or unwanted?

Yet, what the, the Narva case specifically highlights is that these three border types are all subject to the *payment* border. Sanctions imposed against the Russian economic have undoubtedly hit many Russian citizens, as well as many European citizens. Electronic payment through Visa and Mastercard are blocked, buying roubles and euros are hard on either side. Crossing the border with Euros is not allowed by the EU (Estonian Customs Board, 2022), and subject to much scrutinization by Russia. Furthermore, payment for Visas has become hard: most visa places require Visa or Mastercard accounts in Russia (see e.g., UK visa process). Payment anywhere in the EU is also impossible with the Russian *mir* leaving little options left for refugees. In this sense therefore, the payment border I argue has proved to be a massive limitation of mobility.

Though, these are not the only manifestations of borders. Processes of bordering happen also in more symbolic and discursive sense (Laine, 2017, p. 13). Nation states continuously attempt to create and reinforce the social construction of an imagined "we-community" and thereby *ordering* but also constructing an outside *other* (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). This construction is done through everyday geographical imaginations like flags, language, monuments, education and the selective use of history (Laine, 2017; van Houtum, 2021). The flag, and the fortress are examples of such forms of *ordering*. An example I would like to specifically zoom is the news that a WWII soviet tank monument was recently removed from Narva (ERR News, 2022). This, I argue, is a perfect example of symbolic and discursive

b/ordering and othering. In an interview a Russian speaking Narva resident explains how they felt that the government was "*at war with history*" (Easy Russian, 2022). The tank was a symbol and memory of their grandparents and how they fought in the great patriotic war against fascism (idem). The removal of the monument for them felt like another way to "*get at them*" (idem) marking them as the unwanted others. The government – and with the agreement of many Estonian speaking citizens on the other hand – decided that the monument was a memory of the occupation of the Soviet Union, and thus found it inappropriate to keep it (ERR News, 2022). This monument in many ways attempts to represents and constructs an imagined community. Yet, the removal of this monument can be seen as a *(re-)bordering* of the *us* and *them.* This monument, and its recent removal is therefore a statement of belonging just as much as it is a statement of not belonging. It highlights the selective use of history to re-narrate an *us* and a *them.* Which is why the verbification of the *border* (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002) is such an important development to understand the border.

Symbolic and other manifestations of the border are important ways in which nation-states politically border. Yet, why is this the case? What makes border such important and omnipresent markers?

In 2016 a retired politician held a powerful plea for the return of a "*string through the mailbox*" (Terlouw, 2016) on public TV. This metaphor of the string (which, when attached to the doorknob can allow others to open the door) is a powerful metaphor. It highlights how people have perhaps become more fearful of the unknown other, and like being enclosed by the walls of their house, in complete safety from the scary outside. He argues that people have become too *paranoid* and desire to be enclosed in the safety of the box rather than interact with the *other*.

Although this is not about international borders, it can in many ways be equated to what the border is. All the border checks, requirements, and processes, I argue represents a fear of the *unknown other* and a fear of the disappearance of the ordered we-community and therefore a desire for b/ordering. In this way, the feeling of "*psychological comfort and sense of control*" (Laine, 2017, p. 11) that borders bring "*reduce[s] some of the vulnerability and doubts that one lives with*" (van Houtum, 2019, p. 188).

Pfoser's (2015) interview of Sofia, an ethnic Estonian living and growing up in Narva, very well highlights some of these paranoid desires: "*Yes, I don't want the border to be open, …. Russia is such a huge thing, I think that there you have even more of this disorder*" (Pfoser, 2015, p. 1694). She sees Russia as this scary "huge" entity, that can only bring about *disorder*.

But then, if one likes to feel enclosed, why do so many people go on holiday? From young to old, from a near too far, almost everyone goes on holiday. A whole range of youth just like myself like to "*reinvent*" themselves by backpacking the world around. In search for meaning, in search for the "kick" of the unknown, the unexpected and the other (van Houtum, 2022). Van Houtum (2019) argues that indeed, there is another side to this paranoid view of the world: Schizoid. He elaborates that there is a human need "*to desperately long to be somewhere else, to experience and live the personal freedom despite or thanks to the fear of the unknown, the nonroutine.*" (van Houtum, 2019, p. 191).

Conclusion

Bordering processes can be seen through the continuum spectrum of paranoid on the one hand, and the schizoid on the other. It attempts to explain *why* me, and many others were subject to hours and hours of waiting (both near and far from the border), (bio-)scanning, and strict visa regimes. It highlights why the *other* is seen as so scary.

What this essay also highlights is that bordering processes are not static, this border has undergone tremendous changes in a relatively short time. They are indeed not static, nor fixed in time and space. Bordering processes furthermore happen everywhere. Symbolic manifestations of these processes can come through forms of *claiming.* Claiming a selective historical narrative in the form of the WWII tank for example. But also, discursive practices like flags, language and education continuously re-claim and reinforce this imagined we-community called the nation-state. It shows that bordering processes per definition indeed are subject to *ordering* and *othering*. Borders inherently create an *us* and a *them,* a *native* and a *non-native.*

Bordering processes are being (re-)negotiations and (re-)constructs through everyday discursive practices. Because they happen all around us, it also possible to see the border not as a barrier, an obstacle, but rather seeing the border as a resource. Alternative imaginations of the border in this way do exist. The borderscape concept is an example hereof (Laine, 2017). However, if the paranoid views will continue to have the upper hand perhaps, as the title of Rüdiger Safranski's book rightly asks, the question we should ask ourselves is "*how much globalisation can we actually bear?*" (Safranski, 2005)

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