A “border for the people”?  
Narratives on changing eastern borders in Finland and Austria

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A “Border for the People”? 
Narratives on Changing Eastern Borders in Finland and Austria

Lena Laube and Christof Roos*

Abstract
The fall of the Iron Curtain and the border regime of the European Union have changed perceptions of borders. This study compares border narratives on two Eastern borders in Austria and Finland in order to find out how such narratives picture the changing functions of the borders. The qualitative data gathered from interviews with border policy actors in both countries reveals that the shared narrative of the Iron Curtain is in the process of being substituted by a narrative which suggests a “border for the people”, a border managed according to the border-crosser’s demands. However, this emphasis on mobility depends on the section of the border the interviewee focuses on. Land borders are connected with the classical security and control functions of borders to stop unwanted border crossings. Yet, the border crossing points are meant to enable and encourage wanted flows. The same border can have very different functions, depending on where the observer is focusing. Analytically, those differing foci have to be distinguished in order to better interpret border narratives.¹

1. Introduction
European borders have seen significant changes over the last sixty years. A number of different events have changed the current understandings of borders, specifically the dismantling of borders within the EU-Schengen area and the erection and eventual fall of the Iron Curtain. The fall of the Berlin wall and its commemoration reveal a liberating momentum when walls and fences are overthrown. However, some borders in particular have an impact on contemporary Europe since they still cause conflicts, as can be seen at the Spanish border with Gibraltar or the borders between the Balkan countries. In the light of the dissolution of borders in contemporary Europe and ongoing border disputes, we seek an understanding of borders through analyzing discourse on borders and their change.

We studied how borders and the perceptions depicting them have changed in order to understand how a border is supposed to function. We used two borders as examples of those which were formerly part of the Iron Curtain, the Austro-Hungarian border and the Finnish-Russian border. Austria and Finland share the Cold War history of highly controlled borders to the East and rather permissive borders to their Western neighbours. Political neutrality was chosen by both countries to safeguard their friendly relations with the Eastern bloc. In the course of the political and societal reordering of Europe, the Finnish border with Russia became an external border of the EU and the Austrian border with Hungary became an EU internal border. Considering these developments, we ask how these borders and their changes are perceived by actors? And, what meanings are given to the borders over the course of their change today? In our fieldwork, we studied border perceptions held by societal and policy actors and found “border narratives” (Pickering 2006, 45; Paasi and Newman 1998, 196) that establish an understanding of what borders are and how they are meant to function.

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First, we will locate our research on border narratives in the literature on borders and moreover show how we proceeded theoretically and methodologically. Then we will give brief accounts of the actual historical developments at the borders in question in order to distinguish between the established readings of the developments and the perceptions of the individual actors. Thirdly, we will present the identified border narratives and our two main findings.

By comparing the two cases, the Finnish side of their border with Russia and the Austrian side of the Austro-Hungarian border, we found that the understanding of the contemporary borders is lead by a shared ‘border narrative’: the border as a facilitator of mobility. The border is even labelled as “the border for the people”. Our initial idea was to find an Austrian narrative depicting the dissolution of borders and a Finnish narrative that reflects the fact that its border with Russia represents an external border to the EU. Instead, we found a common border narrative which encompasses the functioning of both very different borders studied. Apparently, this narrative is a recent narrative and substitutes the old narrative of the Iron Curtain. The old narrative was dominant for the Eastern border before the Communist bloc dissolved between 1989 and 1991.

Highly controlled state borders and the facilitation of mobility seem to be contradictory. However, these two competing ideas lead us to an understanding of how a border is meant to function today. This understanding is connected to our second, more conceptual finding: The understanding of a border is dependent upon the border section which is considered. This means that the perceptions of borders differ when they focus on different parts of the border. Therefore, the border section must be considered: if a perception is focused on border crossing points it is often connected with the idea of mobility, if the land border sections between the crossing points are considered they are generally connected to the idea of control. While this observation fits the contemporary border in particular, it can also be applied to the border of the past, such as the ‘impermeable’ Iron Curtain. Consequently, borders can be pictured as open as well as closed for cross-border movements. The contradiction can be explained if the perspective of the narrator on the border section in question is known.

2. Understanding Borders

Borders are constructed in many different societal spheres by narratives that “are mediated through a large number of social and political institutions which experience perpetual development and transformation” (Paasi and Newman 1998, 195). These narratives are formed in a range of fields – from “foreign policy discourses, geographical texts and literature (including maps), to the many dimensions of formal and informal socialization” – and affect our understanding of borders and territory (Paasi and Newman 1998, 201). Border narratives are understood as reoccurring issues in discourses and have been identified in a couple of works, foremost in the field of critical political geography. This field studies how discourse in society and politics establishes a relationship between the individual and a national territory, leading to “boundary-related narratives” separating the self from the other, the ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Paasi and Newman 1998, 196).

The study of borders goes beyond studying the establishment of the border and entails the question of how the border is actually managed (Newman 2003, 131). The functioning of the border itself as a highly or non-controlled border which regulates cross-border movements permissively or restrictively is equally as much to be found in border narratives. Accordingly, Pickering and Bigo analyze how borders in Western Europe and Australia became filled with meaning in terms of security narratives, justifying the closure of borders or the exclusion of certain groups (Pickering 2006; Bigo and Guild 2005). The discourse of policy actors is thereby of particular importance. Pickering considers how the border is narrated in public discourse and finds that “narratives of the border, particularly those of security and the state practices in
the borderland, are primarily about the justification of border policing measures” (2006, 56). While both of their studies focussed mainly on refugee policies, our study has a broader scope. We study the change of border regimes in general meaning and, thus, consider any regulation targeted at cross-border movements. Therefore, all individuals who potentially want to cross a border are part of our design. A diversity of individuals cross borders every day: ‘wanted’ ones such as tourists and business people, as well as ‘unwanted’ ones such as refugees and illegal immigrants. This comprehensive scope makes it possible to find narratives calling for the closure, as well as for the openness, of borders. A better understanding of how a border is supposed to function is gained if one considers both types of narratives.

2.1 Border Policy Actors and Border Narratives

In order to understand how a border is supposed to function today, we studied how borders and the perceptions depicting them have changed. Therefore, our focus is on the actors’ perception and, in particular, on the way they narrate the border (Pickering 2006, 45). We considered state borders and crucial actors influencing the discourse on borders, namely policy and civil society actors. By policy actors, we are referring to appointed officials, the bureaucrats of the border. These policy actors actually design the instruments that define how the border functions. They do not only assist the executive in the decision making process, but also influence the policies maintaining a border (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 67-69). The other group we consider, civil society actors, are included in our research because they have the function of supporting or criticising the executive during the creation and implementation of policies. At the same time, many civil society organisations obtain information and knowledge about particular border issues that bureaucrats have limited access to, or would not talk about (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 70). Consequently, we focus on both types of policy actors: We conducted interviews in ministries concerned with designing the functions of the border: for example, Ministries of the Interior, Foreign Ministries, and Ministries of the Economy. Influential civil society actors were found in interest groups like Amnesty International and migrant associations. A further perspective on human rights and migrant issues was added by international organisations such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Red Cross, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Since every organisation has its principles, norms, and ideas the perception of the actors on the border is certainly influenced by their organisational background (March, Schulz, and Zhou 2000). Many actors from different organisations were taken into account in the sample for this study, so we retrieved different statements on the border in question. We collected statements that are linked to the general formulation of national and EU policies on borders, as well as statements about the interviewees’ personal border experiences. Strikingly, some of these statements reoccur in the different organisational settings and lead us to believe that a shared discourse on borders exists. According to Foucault, if we find congruencies in the type of statements, terms, and thematic choice, then we face a ‘discursive formation’ (Foucault 1972 [1969]). Policy and civil society actors communicate the statements which form the border discourse. These statements are embedded in their institutional context (Keller 2007, 57) and personal experience on the border in question. While a dialectic relation between actor and discourse can be assumed, we first focus on the statements of actors establishing the discourse. The sample of actors that we compiled represents a share of the expert community that help shape the respective state borders. The acknowledged expertise of politicians, the media and others is part of the particular ‘border discourse’ in the respective countries. In order to gain an overview of the political developments and the respective border narratives in Austria and Finland, 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2008 and 2009. These interviews took place in Vienna (14), Helsinki (13), and St. Petersburg (2). We worked to ensure that the respective ministries (Foreign Ministry, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of the Economy, etc.)
or non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Organisations (IOs) were equally covered in both countries. In all these interviews, we asked those policy actors to identify the major changes at their borders over the last 40 years. Their statements revealed significant congruencies, which lead us to belief that we found a shared narrative and understanding of what the border is and how it functions.

2.2 Researching Narratives on Eastern Borders

By choosing Austria and Finland we selected two cases which have only partially attracted scholarly attention. The Finish-Russian border has been quite thoroughly researched (Liikkanen 2007; Eskelinen 2000; Paasi 1996 and others), while the Austro-Hungarian border has received less attention. Comparative work on the two countries’ Eastern borders is absent. Yet, the comparison of their border narratives reveals something about the supposed functions of these borders in the past and present.

Anssi Paasi has studied border narratives that are attributed to the Russian-Finnish border. In the middle of the 1990s, he had already noted that the former narrative of exclusion was being substituted by the notion of "increasing interaction" (Paasi 1996, 305). The analysis in this article will show how this border narrative of ‘interaction’ has been further developed towards a narrative in which the border is seen as a ‘facilitator of mobility’. The contemporary Finnish border has been researched in particular by scholars focusing on cross-border-cooperation (CBC) and region building (Anderson/ O’Dowd/ Wilson 2003). Instead of studying particular types of interactions across borders, we take a closer look at the way the border itself is supposed to function as a link between two states and their societies. Following the current literature on the EU external border (e.g. DeBardeleben 2005) we also considered the impact of Finland’s accession to the EU, since this supranational institution puts its own border narratives on the eastern Finnish border (Woltersdorfer 2001, 87). At the same time, we will consider how the changing socio-economic conditions in Russia during the last 20 years have impacted on the border discourse.

As for Austria, historians have accounted for the political developments referring to the Austro-Hungarian border (see Heindl and Sauer 2000, Haslinger 1999, Haslinger 1996). After 1989, more research was undertaken by social scientists on the social and economic structure in the borderlands (see Langer 1999; Seger and Beluszky 1993). In the realm of critical discourse analysis, several studies on political processes within Austria have been conducted (Wodak and Meyer 2001). However, these studies have analysed discourses on institutions such as sovereignty and neutrality and their meaning in Austria (Bischof, Pelinka, and Wodak 2001). Furthermore, a quantitative study on attitudes towards the border in Burgenland revealed that social relationships developed again after the fall of the Iron Curtain, as the knowledge about former ties and family relationships still existed (Langer 1996: 133). However, there is a dearth of studies that particularly focus on border narratives attributed to the Eastern border by border policy actors.

Still, it is an interesting case, especially in comparison to Finland, since the border to Hungary was not only opened but has even become an EU internal border. In the next section, we will give a brief account of these two borders and their historical developments in order to understand the context to which the statements of the interviewees refer.

3. Three Phases of Border Regime Change in Finland and Austria

Two major historical incidents suggest a chronological division of the developments at the Eastern borders. For the cases discussed in this article, these incidents are the end of bloc confrontation in 1989 and 1991 and the accession of Finland and Austria to the European
Union in 1995. These events indicate three distinct phases of change: the decades before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the time period between 1989 and the EU and Schengen accessions, and the time which has passed since these accessions. Most descriptions of the two borders in question follow this sequence (Liikanen 2007; Eskelinen 2000; Langer 1999, Weichhart 1999). In addition, these three time markers were recurrently used by our interviewees who had been working on border issues for quite some time; some had even been part of the opening of the Eastern border in 1989 and the following reorganization of the management of the borders. This periodization of border change helps us to structure the interview material and to better capture the variance within the respective border over time.

Before we analyze the border narratives, we need to understand the political and historical context in which the actors situate their perception. The next two sections give a description of the developments at the Eastern borders in Austria and Finland within these three phases. These descriptions are retrieved from the existing literature and official documents.

### 3.1. Three Phases of Border Regime Change in Finland

Finland is situated at Europe’s northern periphery and is significantly influenced by its two neighbouring countries Russia and Sweden. This influence, and the continuing socio-economic ties, is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that Finland was first part of Sweden, until 1809, and later of tsarist Russia, until 1917 (Jakobson 1999).

In its historical which dates back to the 14th century, the Russian-Finnish border has been occasionally contested. The Finnish state border was finally established as a state border with the country’s independence from Russia in 1917. The location of the contemporary borderline was drawn in September 1944 as a consequence of a truce agreement between the Finnish and Russian governments. The border mainly runs through uninhabited areas and has an actual length of 1324 kilometres. After the Second World War, in 1948, Finland and Russia concluded a “Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance”. The treaty signifies Finland’s first steps in its urge for neutrality and independence from the Soviet Union, a status few neighbouring countries with Soviet Russia were able to achieve (Liikanen 2007, 62-63; Jakobson 1999, 56-63). The border was profoundly affected by this bilateral agreement. Since Finland was not incorporated into a military co-operation with the Soviet Union, unlike many other Northern and Eastern European countries, its shared border with its communist neighbour was heavily guarded by the Finnish border guard and the Russian military (Liikanen 2007, 63; Niemenkari 2002). Scholars even hold that Finland was only a semi sovereign state under heavy influence from the Soviet Union (Törnudd 2005). Therefore it is contested if the border actually established a demarcation line between East and West during the Cold War. The militarized border, though, emphasized both Finland’s western orientation and its sovereignty in relation to the Soviet Union. On both sides of the border, uninhabited frontier zones were established and varied from five hundred to a couple of thousand metres in width. Few crossing points allowed for cross-border movements and those were subject to tight visa regulations. The border itself remained ‘closed’ for cross-border movements, despite of the official rhetoric of friendship and cooperation in the 1960s and 1970s (Paasi 2002; Liikanen 2007, 63).

In 1991, the second phase of border regime change began. Communism collapsed and with it so did hard edged borders and intensive control on cross-border movements between East and West. Although the post war border of 1948 has not been disputed, the shape and function of the Finnish eastern border was much debated. In the beginning of the 1990s, fears of deepening the gap in living standards by keeping the border closed were raised in Finland (Paasi 1998, 674). The “neighbouring area co-operation agreement of 1992”, which aimed at cross-border co-operation between public authorities, business, and citizens in the Finnish-Russian border region, was the first bilateral attempt to open up the formerly closed border (Paasi 1998, 673).
The development of a so-called “cross-border region” remained a political project which has not yet been realized (Eskelinen 2000; Liikanen 2007). However, apart from political programmes, cross-border movements and traffic have grown enormously since the 1990s. Total border crossings by passengers rose from 0.96 to 4.1 million between 1990 and 1996 (Paasi 1998, 673). Presently, Russians represent the largest group of visitors to Finland, with more than half a million overnight stays per year, not counted the numerous Russian day tourists crossing the border for shopping purposes (Finnish Tourist Board 2008, 66). The 1990s mark a decade of paradigmatic change at this border, not only because it encountered unprecedented cross-border movements, but also because the political regime governing control at the Finnish borderline and at points of entry along the border transferred from the national into a supranational realm.

In 1995, Finland joined the EU and has consequently implemented the Schengen agreement in 2001. In this third phase, not only the form and function of this border changed, but also the border regime, as the decision making structures became Europeanized. The former “outer Nordic frontier” (Turack 1972, 84) became substituted by the EU external border, at the time the only EU border with Russia. The take over of the Schengen border code and the common visa policy meant that one third of the border stations were closed and sophisticated technical surveillance systems were installed. Fewer, better functioning crossing points were deemed more efficient than many small border stations. Compared with the control enforced before EU accession, Schengen membership did not mean stepping up control efforts to meet the EU’s demands, as it had in many other EU member states sharing parts of the EU external border. In fact, the border remained heavily controlled before and after Schengen accession (Niemenkari 2002, 7; The Finnish Border Guard 2010).

However, the Finnish border guard cooperates quite well with its Russian counterparts. Bilateral cooperation on border control goes back to the “border regulation agreement” of 1960, which was amended in 1997. The basic aim of the agreement is the exchange of information on control procedures and illegal border crossings (Konenenko and Laine 2008). Although cooperation between Russia and Finland is described as being “very satisfactory” and functional (Niemenkari 2002, 12-13), the mandatory visa for Russians has not yet been abolished. Any Russian who wants to cross the EU external border into Finland has to apply for an EU Schengen visa. The number of visa applications has therefore almost quadrupled in the last fifteen years; while the St. Petersburg consulate processed 154,445 visa applications in 1995, in 2009 this number rose to 546,520 (Foreign Ministry Finland 2010). Calls from Finnish politicians to exempt Russians from the Schengen visa list have not yet been taken up by the EU Council (Helsinki Times 2008). Likewise, Russia imposes a visa obligation on EU citizens. Finnish efforts towards a further opening of the border are embedded within a larger foreign policy framework in which Finland is actively promoting closer EU-Russia ties (Liikanen 2007). The development of the Finnish-Russian border as an EU external border shows that, despite high control standards and rather complicated crossing procedures, the border is heavily crossed and remains permeable.

The changes the Finnish border with Russia underwent in the three phases depict a specific reorganization of border control that has not only been Europeanized, but also has focused more on managing the flows of people. The former political-military function seems to be less central to the meaning of this border. Before studying how policy actors interpret the changes, we will look at the development of the Austro-Hungarian border in order to lay the ground for the comparison of border narratives in the two countries.

### 3.2 Three Phases of Border Regime Change in Austria

The republic of Austria is located in central Europe and is now surrounded by eight neighbouring countries. Some of its borders, like the 336 km Austro-Hungarian border, have
been contested over centuries before becoming the line of demarcation between sovereign nation states. After WWI and the end of Austro-Hungary, it took until 1922/23 to finally decide which parts of the region Burgenland belonged to the Republic of Austria and which to Hungary. In the end both countries acknowledged the demarcation. This mutual recognition laid the basis for the maintenance of personal ties between people living in the border area. Moreover, small trade and smuggling preserved personal contacts, but these connections between the former parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire came to an abrupt end after 1945 (Wastl-Walter, Váradi, and Kocsis 1993, 239-40). The border between Austria and Hungary has since seen dramatic changes, which are traced in the following sections. Since these developments are also emblematic for the border regime change in central Europe, Austria qualifies as an interesting case for the change of perceptions on borders formerly located at the Iron Curtain.

After WWII, Hungary became part of the Eastern bloc, although not part of the Soviet Union. This fundamentally changed the geopolitical situation at the Austro-Hungarian border, as the Austrian territory was partly encircled by the Iron Curtain. This border was chiefly characterized by restrictive controls by Hungarian border officials. A barbed wire fence was built at the land border and the border was even covered with anti-personnel mines until 1965 (Lang 1992, 142). Yet, compared to Finland’s border, the Austrian border with Hungary was rather permeable in both directions throughout the time of the Cold War, especially for persons’ mobility within the borderlands. Official crossing points and roads connecting the two neighbouring countries remained intact. This occurred because Austria’s relations with Hungary stayed much friendlier and more cooperative than the relationship with the other Eastern bloc countries that shared a border with Austria (e.g., Czechoslovakia). After signing the Moscow Memorandum in May 1955, Austria added the idea of ‘everlasting neutrality’ to its constitution in October to declare its political neutrality. Although Austria decided to stay neutral in the political conflict between East and West, this neutrality was not reflected in terms of mobility and free movement. The Austrian approach towards its neighbouring countries in the West was much more liberal than towards its Eastern neighbours. While Austria had already agreed on visa waiver agreements with Switzerland and Liechtenstein in 1950, it was not until 1979 that a similar agreement was signed with Hungary. Subsequently, the number of border-crossings increased. Tourist arrivals of Hungarian citizens to Austria grew from about 70,000 per year in the 1970s to more than 106,000 tourist arrivals in 1979 (Statistik Austria, 2009). The ever growing tourist arrivals to over 280,000 until 1988 indicate the later opening of the Iron Curtain between Austria and Hungary (Statistik Austria, 2009).

Between World War II and the fall of the Iron Curtain, Austria saw three major waves of political refugees (1956 from Hungary, 1980/81 from Poland, and 1986 from Czechoslovakia), from which most refugees moved further to other countries or returned to their home country after the political situation had settled again (Heiss and Rathkolb 1995).

Since the early 1980s, immigration in Austria has shifted from mainly transit migration to mainly immigration, because refugees from Eastern Europe simply stayed. Apart from refugees, Austria received a large number of migrant workers (Gastarbeiter) first of all from former Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s. After it became obvious that these migrant workers were going to stay longer than it was politically intended, Austria was increasingly perceived as a country of immigration. Following from that, restrictions on mainly the Eastern borders were implemented to reduce unwanted mobility and migration flows, which had hardly been regulated before (Fassmann and Münz 1995).

The second phase of border regime change began in August 1989 when the border between Hungary and Austria was opened for the first time and sounded the bell for the fall of the Iron Curtain. Since then more and more people crossed the border, but they were less and less welcome to enter and stay. Austria, thus, aimed to more strictly control the border after the
initial short period of euphoria over the dismantling of the Iron Curtain had passed (Langer 1999, 36; Langer 1996). The political demand for better border control infrastructures grew louder and louder. Eventually, measures demanded by the public that were designed to restrict entry were implemented in the following years. For example, the Assistenzeinsatz (assistant deployment), a military mission aimed at securing the border against illegal crossings coming from Eastern European countries, was deployed in 1990 (Seger 1993, 33). Central Europe had become a region of transit migrations (Castles and Miller 1993, 125-28) which implied that the Austro-Hungarian border was not only crossed by Hungarian and Austrian citizens, but also frequently by (illegal) migrants from the Middle East and Asia. Consequently, a deportation agreement with Hungary was signed in 1995, allowing Austria to directly return illegal border crossers to Hungary (Fassmann 1999).

In 1995, Austria became a member of the European Union and the Schengen Agreement, requiring the harmonization of border policies. This event marks the beginning of the third phase of border regime change in Austria. The accession meant that Austria had to police an external border of the EU and had to cope with the Schengen border control standards. Austria improved its border infrastructure, personnel and control technologies as a result of financial and organizational efforts that were made in order to cope with the needs of adequately controlling the EU’s external border with Hungary. These stricter controls resulted in an increase in the number of persons caught trying to enter the country illegally (Fassmann 1999, 82). A governmental network, the ForumSalzburg, was established in 2000 between Austria’s neighbouring states. Since then, cooperative controls at the Austro-Hungarian border have been developed. Common police patrols, called mixed patrols, in which an Austrian and a Hungarian border police officer patrol the border area together, are pursued since 2006 (Österreichisches Bundesheer 2008). Furthermore, common liaison offices have been set up.

After the EU accession of Hungary in 2004 and the abolition of border controls at the crossing points in 2007, the Austro-Hungarian border is no longer an external EU border. Through the organizational framework of first the PHARE programme and later the European External Border Agency FRONTEX, Austria helped to build border control capacities in Hungary. Since Hungary became a member of the Schengen agreement as well, both countries now exchange information on illegal immigration and visa issues bilaterally, but also plan to take part in the Schengen information system (VIS). Finally, Austria has abolished its border controls at border crossing points altogether, since all borders developed into Schengen internal borders between 1997 and 20094.

For decades, the two countries have been cooperating closely. This cooperation is now officially integrated within the European border regime. Consequently, Austria eagerly established, since the fall of the Iron Curtain, more border crossing points and made travelling between both countries more fluent; as one indicator, up to 34 lanes at a single crossing point have been built to speed up the crossing for trucks and private vehicles. Despite the attempt to fully dismantle the border between Austria and Hungary, some contradictory developments remain, as the recently prolonged military mission along the land border indicates (Der Standard 2009).

The shape, function, and impact on border crossings of the Finnish-Russian and the Austro-Hungarian border were described above according to major political-historical incidents: the East-West divide signified by the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent opening of borders. Later on, EU and Schengen membership played a significant role in the border regime change. Taking this ‘objective’ or established reading of the border as a starting point, we will proceed by showing what perspective policy actors have on the border and its changes. The comparison between the Austrian and Finnish perspectives bears insights not only on the particular borders of the respective countries, but also on the transformation of borders in general.
4. Perceptions of Border Regime Change in Austria and Finland

After the description of change at Finland’s and Austria’s Eastern borders, we will now focus on how our interviewees perceived that change. The established reading of borders often seems quite clear and uncontested in retrospect, but does not necessarily reflect individual actor’s perceptions of border regime change. Therefore, the narration of border policy actors on the Finnish-Russian and the Austro-Hungarian borders sometimes deviate from this established reading. For example, the memory of how open or closed the Eastern border actually was is not necessarily congruent with the image the Iron Curtain conveys. Single statements of interviewees cannot easily be generalized and, thus, have to be considered within the established discourse on political developments. These two levels of analysis, individual statements and established discourse, combined will allow for a better understanding of the changing border and of its supposed functions.

Taking a closer look at our diverse interview material, we found that many statements differ from one another depending on the part of the border interviewees discussed. In general, if people talk about the official border crossing points, they convey an image of interaction, orderly traffic and mobility. Whereas, if they were focussing on the land border section, interviewees referred to the closure of borders, the resurrection of state sovereignty, and the problem of illegal border crossings. In the process of analysing our interview material, we found this to be a reoccurring pattern. Being aware of this pattern helped us to better understand and arrange our data. We therefore argue that studies on border narratives should take the part of a border a certain statement is referring to into account in order to understand how a border is meant to function.

Border narratives referring to the first and third period studied fit particularly well into this conceptual distinction. For example, the perception of the Austro-Hungarian border during the Cold War varies considerably depending on the section of the border which is focussed on:

“Before the fall of the Iron Curtain it was like – both sides have been controlled, while from Austria to Hungary, clearly there was the prominent ‘cheese, butter, eggs and salami traffic’ [petty trade] taking place. One had to buy those products for which Hungary is famous (...) but the traffic density was only a fraction of the traffic today. And in the border sections between the authorised crossing points, at the so called green borders, there was the Iron Curtain of course. There was then the full --- the full program that you also had at the German-German border.” (Interview AT # 8, 2008, own translation)

In this statement, the interviewee compares the situation at the crossing point and at the land border. He describes differing realities: at the crossing points, every day movements took place; to the contrary, at the land border sections strict control was enforced. The overall perception then depends on where the observer looks. Taking an example from today, the same pattern reoccurs. An Austrian NGO field worker told us about his observation when he crossed the ‘non controlled’ Austro-Hungarian border with his car: “the difference is that next to the border then in the Hinterland, there are still soldiers stationed but if you take the road the impression is very similar to driving to Italy” (Interview AT #5, 2008, own translation). He reflects that his possibility to freely move across the border is limited to the crossing points. If he had walked cross-country he most likely would have been stopped and checked.

Previous and present border narratives vary depending on which part of the border is considered and might therefore generate contradictory statements if it is not specified which border section is meant. This conceptual insight helped us to understand the border narratives on the Finnish and Austrian borders we present in the following sections, which sometimes seem to be inconsistent.
Concerning the memory of the border during the Cold War, perceptions in Austria vary decisively, while the Finnish perception is basically coherent with the readings in the literature. This leads us to first tackle the question of to what extent the Iron Curtain was permeable (see 4.1). In the next section (4.2), we consider the opening of the Iron Curtain in the 1990s. For this period, the interviewees predominantly referred to the way in which the border control infrastructure was adjusted to the ‘new’ conditions (see 4.2). For the second phase, perceptions in both countries are consistent with the historical developments we just described. Fins particularly focus on evaluating the bilateral cooperation in terms of border control with Russia; whereas Austrians remember this time as a challenging period on their way to EU and Schengen membership. In the phase after accession (see 4.3), the positioning within the EU border regime is a prominent theme for actors in both countries. One other theme in both contexts is the common history with the neighbour, which is taken as a reason for close cooperation. For this phase in general, the topic is the permeability of borders to neighbouring countries. However, perceptions on the developments vary and contradictory logics in the narratives are revealed in both cases. Finally, our concluding section (4.4) discusses the new border narrative, which chiefly considers it to be a facilitator of mobility, found in the border discourse of both countries. This narrative substituted the old narrative of the Iron Curtain and focuses particularly on border crossing points and their supposed function to encourage flows across borders.

4.1 A Permeable Iron Curtain?

Concerning the first period during the Cold War, our interviewees agree that the Eastern borders were tightly controlled, but they have very different understandings of why control at the Eastern borders was so strict. Obviously, interviewees in both countries saw the communist regimes as a main reason. Differences though become apparent in the way Austrians and Fins reacted to the control at the border exerted by their Eastern neighbours. A Finnish official recalls the character of control as follows: “The Eastern border has been after WWII [...] very rigid, closed and formal. There were only some places where you could pass the border and border formalities have been very strict.” (Interview FI # 13, 2008)

At the same time, tight controls at the Finnish side of the border are perceived by most interviewees as a reaction to the restrictive border control practices of the SU. Finland was supposed to play at the “same level and had to present the same kind of face”, meaning that the border patrol acted more like the military and less like a civilian state organization (Interview FI # 13 2008). This interviewee displayed the belief that Finland must respond in kind to the SU border control methods in order to stress Finland’s sovereign capabilities. Therefore, the Russian-Finnish border is remembered as hard or even ‘impossible’ to cross, a perception which is congruent with restrictive border control procedures described in the literature. Finnish policy actors had a congruent picture of the Iron Curtain, since both land border sections and crossing points were rigidly controlled. The border was designed to impede most cross border movements in both directions.

Austria, however, did not see any necessity to react reciprocally to the restrictive Hungarian control practices. It appears that the Austrian government saw no need to control mobility, since Hungary had taken care of this border function. Likewise, Austria did not consider it necessary to exhibit control in order to demonstrate territorial sovereignty. Apparently, Austria did not feel threatened by Hungary, while Finland was very aware of the Soviet great power.

Our Austrian interviewees gave seemingly paradoxical statements on actual cross-border movements during that time. On the one hand, interviewees focus very much on the strict Hungarian controls and describe the border as a “deadly border” (Interview AT # 13, 2008). Concerning the entry into Austria, officials recount border incidents such as injured or even
killed border crossers. The Eastern border is remembered as a closed and strictly controlled border due to the Warsaw Pact (Interview AT # 11, 2009). On the other hand, some interviewees report that cross-border traffic was a usual and normal activity in both directions. For example:

“At the time of the Iron Curtain the border to Hungary was very strict. Austria had the advantage that Austrians could travel without visa to Hungary in the 1980s. By the means of bilateral treaties Austrians could travel, but in return Hungarians as well were always able to travel to Austria. That was well observable in the Maria-Hilfer Strasse [a street in Vienna] where they travelled first […] because the Hungarians bought electrical devices, oranges and bananas in bulk which were hard to get in socialism. They could enter and then they went back because due to the so-called ‘Goulash communism’ the tendency to flee was not necessarily given. On the other hand Austrians travelled to Hungary in order to get cheap groceries or go to the spas which were very good and cost hardly anything at that time. […] Sucessively that became easier” (Interview AT # 11, 2009, own translation).

These two inconsistent perceptions of the Eastern border in Austria during the Cold War can be explained by the conceptual tool of distinguishing between foci, between the land borders and the crossing points. The different take the interviewees have on borders becomes visible: the dominant narrative of the Iron Curtain which highlights restrictive controls on cross-border movements is reproduced if interviewees talk about the high control standards at the land border sections, like barbed wire and armed border patrols. A secondary narrative, which emphasizes a more societal and less political perception of the border, emerges when interviewees recalled the options of legal mobility via crossing points often referring to the existence of frequent petty trade in both directions.

4.2 Adjustment to New Conditions

In the second phase, between 1989 and 1995, both countries saw paradigmatic changes at their Eastern borders. In comparison to many advanced Western states, the former militarized borders to their Eastern neighbours were demilitarized to facilitate economical liberalization and commercial exchange (Andreas 2000). For the first time in decades, borders were crossed by an enormous number of tourists, cross-border traders, commuters, migrants and refugees. The interviewees perceived these movements as normal activities following the dismantling of the Iron Curtain. These perceptions focus on crossing points as well as land border sections since the entire border was transforming at that time.

Interviewees in Finland and Austria focused on the reaction of their borders to the increase of mobility flows. A Finnish public servant puts it as follows: “There are quite natural and growing flows from Russia. But the border is very carefully checked by both – the Finnish and the Russian border and there is good cooperation” (Interview FI # 4, 2008). Cross-border mobility between the two countries is perceived by the interviewee as a positive development and Finland’s border regime is viewed as able to manage these flows successfully. Compared with Finland, Austria could not rely on its border infrastructure in the early 1990s, as it had yet to adequately develop such infrastructure. Reportedly, Austria had not really established sufficient border control policies. The new reason for building the border control infrastructure on the Austrian side of the border is generally explained by referring to illegal border crossings and infrastructural investments in anticipation of EU membership. For Austria, the accession to the EU meant to step up control and for Finland to modernize their border control infrastructure to prepare for policing the external EU border. The possible dilemma of making borders more
secure while simultaneously making sure that they remain friendly to border crossers and businesses (Andreas 2000, 4) was less referred to by Fins than by Austrians since the latter had to build a new border infrastructure to Hungary.

Border policy actors in Finland and Austria refer to the beginning of the 1990s as a crucial time in which they successfully adjusted to the new conditions after the fall of the Iron Curtain. New political circumstances, namely the liberalization of Central and Eastern Europe, brought with them the increase of cross-border mobility, which was seen as the most fundamental challenge to the Eastern borders.

4.3 Contemporary Borders as Open Borders?

In the third phase, both countries went through EU accession and gained Schengen membership and, thus, now represented EU external borders with the same border control requirements. Austria, after having established an EU external border to its neighbour in the 1990s, had to dismantle the same border after Hungary joined the Schengen agreement in 2004. Despite the EU requirement to abolish border control at both land border sections and crossing points, the Austrian military remains currently stationed at land border sections. In order to make sense of this complex and contradictory border regime change, policy actors assume that the enduring military mission is politically motivated. One official sees security issues as the central motive for this mission, which supposedly aims at maintaining the “population’s sense of being protected” (Interview AT # 6, 2008, own translation). The content of this narrative is a perception of fear of unwanted migrations and mobility from the East. Obviously, the border is still supposed to have effects on the resident Austrian population. Interestingly, although it is an internal border, the image of the land border as the line of protection against foreign intruders is still present.

On a more subtle level, the same interviewee assumes that the use of this security narrative is to construct a justification for the deployment of the military. Allegedly, the border patrol justifies the maintenance of its functions and secures its resources, although it would otherwise now be dispensable (Interview AT # 6, 2008). Following this rationale, security sensitivities are being exploited to guarantee the survival of an institution.

When talking about the current phase and the abolishment of border controls, interviewees, rather surprisingly, often mention social commonalities between Austria and Hungary rooted in the past. The emphasis is placed on a common history, referred to as a “love-hate relationship” in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (Interview AT # 8, 2008, own translation). This history narrative gives Hungary a privileged position in various bilateral relationships with Austria; differing, for example, from the Czech Republic, which is often mentioned if a contentious relationship to one of the eight neighbouring countries of Austria is meant to be exemplified (Interview AT # 11, 2009). The security narrative justifying the enduring deployment of the military at the border seems to be contradictory to this history narrative, which reaffirms societal interaction. Again, the push towards rather closed and secure borders focuses on land borders where soldiers are stationed. The history narrative, in contrast, is used as an explanation for the will to open them again.

In contemporary Finland, the history narrative is used as well in order to confirm the necessity to keep the border as open as possible (Interview FI # 1, 2008). While the Austro-Hungarian Empire is the frame of reference for Austrian interviewees, Finnish officials do not explicitly relate to tsarist Russia and the times of Finnish pre-independence to find commonalities. Rather, they refer to a regional identity between the metropolitan areas of Helsinki and St. Petersburg, in which the trade in labour and goods was essential between the two regions in the 19th century. As one official puts it:
“I think that we could have more business between Finland and easier ways to make business between for example the St. Petersburg area and the Finnish-Karelian area because if you know something about the history… So the border is very strict now, but 150 years ago when St. Petersburg was growing up, the economic area concerning St. Petersburg was this huge [pointing to a map drawing a circle reaching to the Helsinki metropolitan area]” (Interview FI # 1, 2008).

This history referring to the tradition of cross-border mobility within the regional context is pushed in order to call for an infrastructure connecting the cities better or to criticize the visa regime between the EU and Russia. Most interviewees argue in favour of facilitating the cross-border mobility of tourists, given the increased wealth of potential Russian travellers (Interview FI # 15, 2008). The discourse in Finland about the visa regime between the EU and Russia reveals that most officials we spoke with are unhappy to be bound to supranational legislation and unable to waive the visa for Russians. The EU is identified as being in the way of the Finnish intention to loosen the visa regime:

“We are discussing here in Finland concerning the visa policy towards Russians that should in some way provide Russians free immigration without visa towards Finland and that would be very useful for Finland, but the pressure from other European Union countries is a little bit strong and that is why we can’t… That’s my understanding that Finland cannot work alone concerning the Russians or provide visa-free immigration to Finland or visiting to Finland without visa. But if we will make visa-free movement from - how would I say - moving without visa from Russia to Finland, it would be very useful to Finland” (Interview FI # 1, 2008).

Most interviewed officials confirmed this view (Interviews FI # 7, # 8, # 10, 2008). However, the interviewees’ perceptions were bound to their organizational backgrounds. As could be expected, those officials in the Ministry of the Interior gave the security narrative discussing the visa regime:

“Finland wants to be the most secured nation still in 2015 and if we think that Russians can come without a visa, without any control hardly, so that will … we feel that that could jeopardize. Because the rate of crime in Russia is high and they could very easily come to Finland and maybe do some crimes, I think. But that’s at least from the Minister of the Interior. But then, I don’t really know what [the foreign minister] and his people think on the foreign policy level, […] I would say that from the Interior Minister’s point of view, we think that whoever is in power, and there is always this threat because the Russian society is as it is” (Interview FI # 2, 2008).

The security narrative and the free movement narrative are competing in the Finnish discourse on the visa regime, which has yet to be finalized. This conflict between liberty and security is essential to the dynamics of Europeanization. Member States are reacting to and interacting with the internationalized border regime, since the EU has become a decisive actor in defining borders and their functions. Taking the two studied countries as an example, we see that interviewees either criticize the EU or suggest very own strategies. In Finland, the claim for the removal of visa obligations for Russians is a reaction to the strict EU border regime; while in Austria, the ongoing deployment of military at the border is a reaction to the openness and free movement imperative of internal EU borders.

These two approaches appear less critical if they are analytically distinguished. The removal
of visa obligations is supposed to channel more legal mobility into Finland, while their land border is safeguarded to prevent illegal crossings. Visa free travel for Russians does not imply the abolishment of border control in general. Traffic at a crossing point is meant to be encouraged, because the border is supposed to function as an open or, at least, permeable border. In Austria, tightly controlling the land border sections is discussed, supposedly to ensure security. In contrast to these land border sections, security is not an issue at border crossing points that are not meant to be controlled any longer. However, crime and illegal crossings might happen there as well.

Finally, we are going to discuss the narrative of the “border for the people”, which perceives the border as a facilitator of mobility. This narrative was found in the border discourse within both countries and does not only substitute the former narrative of the Iron Curtain, but also blurs the competing functions contemporary borders are supposed to fulfil: control necessities and claims for freedom and mobility.

4.4 The “Border for the People”: A Conceptual Understanding of Borders

The narrative of the border as a facilitator of mobility can be gathered from remarkable commonalities between our interviewee’s descriptions of the cases. The understanding of what the border to the Eastern neighbour should accomplish today is reoccurring within the perceptions of actors in Austria and Finland: Austrians depict their contemporary border as “demand tailored” and functioning with a “bottom-up approach” (Interview AT # 8, 2008, own translation) in which the chief aim of the border control is to speed up crossings and facilitate mobility. As one interviewee stated, “What is now getting stronger and stronger – Austria as a tourist destination and Austria as a place for international organisations – this intensifies more and more. That is to say that there is the attempt to make it less difficult via visa regulations for tourists or – to make it as easy as possible to get a visa” (Interview AT # 11, 2009, own translation).

Fins also emphasize this approach of an open border which facilitates mobility instead of hampering it. Although they see themselves bound in their scope of action due to their obligation to police an EU external border, both Vienna and Helsinki are perceived as gateways to the East and West, promoted as mobility hubs and international tourist and goods trafficking intersections. Speeding up flows instead of obstructing them seems to be the proclaimed function of contemporary borders. “Helsinki is a hub for many Asian people; Vienna is a hub for the Balkan area and part of the Middle East like Teheran and so on. There are a lot of flights. I see that borders are more open than they were before” (Interview FI # 8, 2008).

This narrative of mobility is connected to an increase in international aviation with the destination or transit location of Helsinki or Vienna. If one considers these statements, it becomes apparent that interviewees only speak about specific channelled mobility flows, which go through international airports in these capital cities to approach Europe and the Western World. The facilitation of mobility is only meant to happen via certain gateways and channels. As long as policy actors talk about these legal and regulated border crossings, they are narrated as unproblematic, welcome and worthy of support. “The authorities see themselves as being, it sounds really unrealistic – being there for the people, so they are there to assist and facilitate” (Interview FI # 11, 2008).

The focus in all these statements lies on crossing points where legal and wanted mobility is supposed to take place. The border as a facilitator regulates mobility at defined spots, which means that facilitation takes place at mobility hubs which can be supported by modern infrastructure. The border itself becomes a service unit in this narrative and its function is subtly
transformed into giving assistance to mobile people. As soon as the focus of border policy actors shifts to the land border sections a very different function of the border comes to the fore. Here, the primary function of a border comes into play again; a border is supposed to execute control and this is only possible if movements are stopped.

5. Border Narratives and the Functions of Borders

We researched changing narratives on borders that were part of the Iron Curtain. To illustrate this change, we presented the most salient narratives ascribed to those borders over three studied phases. In addition, we gave an account to the established historical readings of border regime change at the two Eastern borders. By bringing the established reading together with the discourse of border actors narrating developments and changes today, it became possible to make sense of certain events which at first seemed contradictory. We discovered that different sections of the border are meant to have different functions. This perspective allowed us to develop the analytical tools necessary to distinguish between statements referring to border crossing points, often linked to the facilitation of mobility, and those referring to land border sections, which typically focus on control and exclusion. This distinction proved to be helpful in arranging and understanding the data.

Historical ties play important roles in both countries in the call for open and permeable borders. Moreover, both free movement and security narratives are prevalent in the actor’s perception in both countries. These two narratives are crucial to the European project of dismantling borders between Member States and securing external borders to the countries of the European periphery (Vobruba 2005). However, Austria and Finland are in certain respects uneasy with the way in which new functions are superimposed on their borders. By mentioning the freedom of movement narrative in Finland and the security narrative in Austria, we understand that borders need to accommodate this paradox: mobility and control.

In contrast to the border narrative of the Iron Curtain, contemporary border narratives no longer emphasise the demarcation of political and economic systems. This means that in both countries studied, contemporary borders are looked at as depoliticised and demilitarised institutions which are typically designed according to the demands of border-crossers. Therefore, changes at the border are more and more understood as reactions to international mobility. The amount of mobility at a border is used as a justification for the design of the border practices. This holds true on the one hand for illegal immigration, which is used to justify restrictive measures, and on the other hand for tourist and business flows, which are used to justify the liberalization of border regulations. Still, in the perception of our interviewees, both types of mobility take place at different border sections: illegal movements are supposed to be stopped at land border sections, while tourists and business people are assumed to enter countries at crossing points, which need to be further assisted by better infrastructure. In order to give the border a positive meaning, policy actors focus on the interests of those sought after border-crossers. The state’s enduring interest in control only plays a minor role in this narrative of “the border for the people”. By writing this article we tried to deepen our understanding of where this control is expected to occur.

Endnotes

1 We collected the empirical data for this article in the context of Professor Steffen Mau’s research project From the Container to the Open State. Border Regime Change and Cross-Border Mobility at the Collaborative Research Centre 597 Transformations of the State at University Bremen. The project is funded by the German Research Council.
Political geography first of all deconstructs territorial narratives exposing the interests behind international geopolitical thinking or representations of threat. The relationship between geography, power, and politics is analyzed in order to comprehend how spatial concepts are constructed to legitimize territorial claims in policies (Albert, Reuber, and Wolkersdorfer 2003, 516; Ö Tuathail and Dalby 1998).

We spoke to the interviewees in the years 2008 and 2009 and asked them what kind of change they have observed in relation to the respective Eastern border of their countries. Perceptions on the borders in former times are therefore always narrated in retrospect. We therefore do not claim to compare current border narratives on today’s borders with border narratives which were, e.g., generated in the 1970s. The border narratives found are structured according to the time interviewees were referring to, but all statements have been made in the last few years. The analysis of the interviews was computer assisted by the qualitative content analysis software MAXQDA.

The only exceptions are the crossing points at international airport and the border with the Principality of Liechtenstein, which is 35 km long (Öffentliche Sicherheit 2009).

Italy is part of the Schengen agreement where no border control is enforced.

References


