

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Bordering Practices in the EU's Eastern Borderland/s

Conceptualizing Space (and Community) within and without Europe

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Abstract

Borders—and, more specifically, bordering practices—are among the most powerful signifiers shaping global, regional, national, and local dynamics. Their effects extend across political, geographical, and cognitive dimensions. To understand these dynamics, we adopt the concept of 'borderlands' to denote spaces of flux, where multiple bordering practices coexist, and borders are simultaneously produced and effaced. The European Union (EU)'s Eastern Neighbourhood serves as an exemplary case of such borderlands, with particular attention to developments in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, and the Russian Federation. This introductory article provides the conceptual framework for a set of multidisciplinary contributions that investigate the complex interplay between bordering practices and the transformation of borderlands in the EU's East.

Keywords: Borders; European Union; Western Balkans; Eastern Partnership; Russia.

Introduction

The border is an evolving construction with merits and problems that must be constantly reweighed (Agnew, 2008, p. 176)

Bordering practices suggest that borders are not fixed; they are often subject to conflicting symbolic interpretations, historical recollections, and complex regulatory regimes. This process involves states and international organizations, but also the geography and self-representation of the actors involved at different levels (people, municipalities, state, and supranational actors). This dynamic results in controversies over the interpretation and meaning of spatiality, which involves conflicting political and social orders with geopolitical and cultural implications.

Few areas in the world have been as affected by a dense set of processes of bordering, de-bordering, and othering in both geopolitical and cognitive senses as the European Union (EU)'s Eastern neighbourhood. The enlargement of international institutions such as the EU and NATO, violent conflicts (such as the wars of Yugoslav and Soviet successions), and the establishment of partnerships and areas of regional cooperation (including the EU's Eastern

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Partnership, NATO's Partnership for Peace, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) have led to the redefinition of physical and cognitive borders and frequently to forced migration. The region has also been characterized by a sometimes fluid and spontaneous, occasionally channeled, sometimes chaotic transit of people who crossed, contested, and redefined existing borders, such as those coming from southern regions towards Europe (e.g., the Balkan route) or from Russia and the Caucasus.

Due to this dense and diverse set of bordering and de-bordering dynamics, the EU's East is an intriguing area to explore the clashes between tendencies towards hard-bordering (frequently associated with territorial conflicts and de facto border changes), de-bordering (seen in the softening of borders entailed in the creation of areas of regional integration), and othering (manifested in practices of marginalization and exclusion of outsiders—be they ethnic minorities or immigrants—in their respective national or regional contexts). This Special Issue undertakes an analysis of these dynamics across different areas of the EU's Eastern 'borderlands' (the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, and the Russian Federation), conceived as spaces where borders—whether cognitive, physical, or political—are simultaneously produced and effaced, paying attention to both historical processes and recent developments. From this latter perspective, Russia's new assertiveness has certainly attracted significant scholarly attention (see, for example, Mungiu-Pippidi 2024).

Focusing on the 'borderlands' makes a distinctive contribution to the existing literature: first, it shines a light on an area that has been scarcely examined through this conceptual lens; second, it highlights the pluralism of practices and the multiplicity of actors involved in their activation, extending beyond traditional ones. Third, it broadens the focus from the EU's role in the area to the roles of other actors, without losing sight of the combined efforts of often opposing bordering and de-bordering practices. The multidisciplinary nature of this Special Issue, drawing from history, international relations, critical border studies, and migration studies, as well as the inherent flexibility of its methodological choices, further underscores the appropriateness of this conceptual perspective. In this regard, this contribution has three main tasks: to define the relevant concepts and propose a distinction between bordering practices and types of borders; to recall some of the main dynamics of de-bordering, re-bordering, and othering in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood; and to identify crucial questions—partially still unanswered—to which the articles in this Special Issue aim to respond.

This introductory article begins with a consideration of the heightened relevance of borders and, more specifically, of bordering practices, emphasizing their multifaceted effects in political, geographical, and cognitive terms. It then introduces the concept of 'borderlands', differentiating it from other usages of the term to describe an area of changeable spaces where multiple bordering practices are simultaneously produced and effaced. Here, the EU's East is identified as the primary site of investigation, focusing on the dense grid of actors, political experiments, and symbolic meanings that constantly reframe and dispute a consolidated understanding of borders, whether national, regional, or supranational. Finally, it outlines the research questions that the articles in this Special Issue will address.

Borders: so hard, so loose

The concept of 'border' is evocative and seemingly self-evident in its meaning. However, it is polysemic and tends to be perceived and enacted differently by various actors at different historical moments. After years of fascination with a globalized world, transnational relations, and ever less Westphalian interpretation of state demarcations, borders have now regained ground. The fact that we live in a "very bordered world" is not new (Diener & Hagen, 2012, p. 1). However, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the erection of fences

around the world, borders are back in the spotlight of politics and academia (Makarychev et al., 2024; Makarychev & Dufy, 2024; Zhurzhenko, 2024). While attention has reasonably shifted towards a 'hard' understanding borders, the study of borders cannot be limited to this specific aspect. As Makarychev and Dufy (2024, p. 217) highlight, the focus should not only be on the impact of military action on international borders in Europe, but also on the wide range of practices implemented by states and international organizations that shape people's sense of space and community *through* borders:

"Spaces and borders might be (re)constituted and (re)shuffled, apart from military atrocities, by institutional policies of EU eastward enlargement, normative and civilizational choices of candidate countries, economic and financial flows, as well as a range of biopolitical practices - from managing human migration to mitigating food insecurities in the global South."

Over the last decades, the literature has emphasized the need to problematize essentialist readings of borders as "lines in the sand", revealing the complexity of the relation between borders and territory, and highlighting the latter's nature as a "shifting medium" (Parker, Vaughan-Williams et al., 2009). Thinking about borders as "practices", we may look at how divisions between entities emerge, or are produced and maintained, from a more political, sociological and actor-oriented perspective: that is, we may endorse "a shift from *the concept of the border* to the *notion of bordering practice*" (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012, p. 729; see also Ceccorulli, Fassi, Lucarelli, 2023). Such practices are assumed to be implemented not only by the state – "with its numerous institutions uninterruptedly being mobilized in both social spatialization and spatial socialization" (Paasi, 2021, p. 22) –, but also "performed *in interaction* with other types of non-state actors, processes and organisations" (Parker & Adler-Nissen, 2012, p. 776). Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge that bordering practices encompass not only overt actions that are unequivocally intended to 'border', but also covert activities whose unintended consequences may include the establishment and/or re-establishment of borders (ibidem).

Accordingly, several practices and several types of borders can be identified (Ilcan et al., 2022). For the sake of simplicity, we will limit ourselves to the distinction between practices of bordering, de-bordering, and othering; as for types of borders, we will distinguish between hard, soft and cognitive borders.

Bordering is the material and/or narrative practice to define a dividing line between groups/polities/states. The process of de-bordering involves the reduction of border effects with the objective of facilitating circulation across the dividing line. In contrast, the process of re-bordering entails the reactivation of specific border functions on both symbolic and material levels (Andreas and Biersteker, 2003). Finally, othering refers to practices of inclusion/exclusion coming along with the process of (de-/re-)bordering, that is "an ongoing co-shaping and co-demarcating of a socially ordered identity (a we) and a constituted outside (a them)" (Van Houtum, 2021, p. 36).

These practices of border construction/deconstruction have been mostly studied adopting a distinction between hard and soft borders, describing borders as 'closed', or 'barriers' (*hard*), or as 'open', 'porous', or 'bridges' (*soft*) (Neuwahl, 2020). The traditional concept of 'hard' borders is associated with physical territorial boundaries, while the more recent idea of 'soft' borders aims to acknowledge the complex connections in border areas and a more flexible, negotiable approach to borders. Both terms are used metaphorically to describe different ways of perceiving and implementing physical borders (Grappi & Lucarelli, 2021). However, it is important to recognize that, in reality, borders can be both hard and soft at

the same time. What really matters are the social relationships that are created and sustained by borders (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 279).

A more telling distinction is between material and cognitive/ideational borders. Again, the distinction between the two is less sharp than it seems, as they impact on each other; however, they can be considered analytically distinct, being the former made of barriers, fences, administrative boundaries of rights, and the latter the perceived borders of a self-identified community (Brown, 2001). Cognition of self and otherness constitutes an imaginary border which has important social and political implications, which can also lead to material aggressive behaviour, as events in Ukraine and the Middle East are currently showing (Opióła et al., 2022; Al-Hindi, 2023).

In the EU, the intersection between bordering practices and types of borders is particularly interesting, as this political entity is itself the product of multiple processes involving border dynamics, starting with the integration process. The EU has also framed its relations with its proximities, conferring a peculiar role to de-bordering and bordering dynamics. At the same time, the EU's East is itself characterized by an interplay of dynamics which reshuffle borders and their political and social bearing. This is why this Special Issue is specifically focused on this crucial 'borderland'.

From Bordering to Borderland/s: the EU and its (Eastern) Neighbourhood

Founded on the idea that fostering stronger transnational relationships among states can have a profoundly positive impact on international cooperation, the EU integration process has been driven by a vision of constructing peace and security through the transformation of traditional notions of state borders. The gradual introduction of exclusive or shared areas of EU authority, collaborative efforts in infrastructure-building, and the facilitation of transborder mobility through the single market and the Schengen Agreement have been fundamental components of the integration process. In other words, the EU has boldly reinterpreted and redefined the significance of its member states' borders, representing one of the most crucial, yet often overlooked, aspects of its post-Westphalian (Caporaso, 1996) or pre-Westphalian (Zielonka, 2013) character.

At the same time, the redefinition of borders, both internal and external, has changed the nature of the EU, its self-representation, and its practices. Enlargement has played an important role in the 'remaking' of Europe (Browning, 2005). It has been a, *de facto*, living process of complex reorganization of the physical and cognitive borders of and within Europe. The Eastern European narrative of a 'return to Europe' has been accompanied by uneasy processes of institutional and cognitive adaptation and, for parts of European societies, by revised forms of self-identification. Far from being a case of 'mere' institutional adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, enlargement has entailed a significant cognitive and ideational component, leading to a slow yet consequential redefinition of the borders of the perceived community of belonging for both old and, particularly, new members.

Enlargement has also redefined the physical, cognitive, and ideational boundaries of neighbouring communities, within a dynamic of self-other representation that has softened borders with some non-EU countries (e.g. Ukraine and Georgia)—also by means of enhanced partnerships—and has contributed to the transformation of internal debordering practices, with the gradual participation of new member states (and some non-member states) in the Schengen area. Nonetheless, "the positive 'strategic landscape' which existed immediately following eastward enlargement in May 2004" has been gradually effaced since the late 2000s by the growing "threats to European values bearing down on the EU from all sides" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 194). In this regard, the rising role of China in the global economy and the aggressive militarism of Russia may serve as illustrative examples. The very fact that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which was promoted in 2004 to avoid drawing

dividing lines in Europe after the enlargement, paradoxically re-established such dividing lines between the EU and “regions of the world located at the limits of European territory” (Kramsch, 2011, p. 197) shows how a state of contention has gradually emerged in the “wider Europe”, where competing ideas of space and community have come to clash.

In her study devoted to the EU’s relations with its southern neighbours, Del Sarto (2021, p. 2) adopts the definition of “Europe’s borderlands” to describe the EU’s neighbourhood as an in-between region, or “an area which is not Europe but which remains closer and more connected than the areas beyond it” (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 3). Within the space of this ‘broader Europe’, we thus witness the emergence of “a system of concentric regions”, where “a number of countries in Eastern Europe and around the southern Mediterranean are linked to the European Union through different types of institutional and trade relations, and these states vary in their status vis-à-vis Europe” (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 22). Del Sarto analyses these dynamics by identifying the EU as “an empire of sorts” (ivi, p. 22), and more specifically as a “normative empire”, experiencing an “enduring territorial instability” (ivi, p. 27) due to repeated rounds of enlargement and constantly striving to stabilise its borderlands.

In border studies, borderlands are also described as areas of “active tensions between antagonistic logics” (Bossé et al., 2019, p. 10) or as “shifting sites of transition and movement, where space is contested and negotiated” (Fellner, 2024, p. 5). Along these lines, we use the concept of borderland to denote an area in which borders—whether cognitive, physical, or political—are concurrently established and dissolved.

On the one hand, as a result of re-bordering and de-bordering processes within and promoted by the EU in its neighbourhood, the area along the EU’s eastern border has been subject to a remapping of political and social space in terms of identity-making, which has frequently been “grounded in two pillars — the (re)territorialization of politics and the binary conceptualization of Self-Other distinctions” (Makarychev, 2018, p. 747). Moreover, the shifting and permeable nature of the EU’s eastern borderlands, which are still shaped by EU policies aiming “to integrate these areas in a highly selective, gradual, and differentiated manner into the European order” (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 27), also makes them important sites of transition and mobility.

On the other hand, the concept of ‘borderlands’ appears to accurately capture both the condition of contention and the concomitant permeability of the Eastern European neighbourhood, while allowing us to move beyond an exclusively EU-centred perspective. Accordingly, the emergence of the EU’s eastern borderland may also be described as the result of a “crisis of political ‘vision’ capable of representing how the external borders of Europe should be cared of as a properly worldly space” (Kramsch, 2011, p. 196). In this context, actors other than the EU advance their own “cartographic and epistemological representation in the world” (ivi, p. 194), creating parallel—and often contested—practices of debordering, rebordering, and othering not only within or vis-à-vis Europe, but also beyond Europe. Here, the pluralism of practices and the multiplicity of actors involved in activating them beyond traditional ones constitute a crucial, yet often overlooked, area of investigation.

Remapping Eastern Borderland/s: the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and the Russian Federation

Since the 2010s, an unprecedented series of political ‘crises’ in the EU’s Eastern borderlands has further highlighted the need for a better understanding of the nature of competing political and social orders in the broader European (and Eurasian) space, where human mobility, identity-making, and the hardening of physical borders strongly intersect. The Western Balkans (WB) can be considered the quintessence of these dynamics and emblematically embody the ever-changing character of the EU’s Eastern borderlands. They

constitute a target area for further EU enlargement and are deeply involved in the accession process across its multiple dimensions (Sekulić, 2020), albeit with an unpredictable accession path. Migration flows along the Balkan Route have conferred upon the region a new and crucial geopolitical role from Brussels' perspective, turning it into a potential partner in the control and management of migrants arriving from third countries—that is, a partner in the process of the securitisation of borders and migration. For this reason, the EU and Western Balkan countries have recently engaged in enhanced cooperation initiatives, including the externalisation of borders, understood as the transfer of human and financial resources to carry out border management activities outside the EU (Bobić & Šantić, 2020). As the EU has increasingly shifted the burden of migration governance onto its Eastern neighbours, this process has gradually favoured the rise of exclusionary politics and authoritarian practices in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2020), in some cases reactivating the 'old' territorial disputes stemming from the Yugoslav succession wars of the 1990s. Moreover, the 'Balkan route' has long been a major corridor for migrants and refugees; yet its prominence has been overshadowed by the uncomfortable fact that "several European countries which emerged from the genocidal dissolution of Yugoslavia" had "yet to be (re) admitted into the self-anointed circle of genuine and proper European-ness" (De Genova, 2017, p. 20). As Zoppi and Puleri (2022, p. 585) emphasise, this process "created room for alternative discourses to enter the debate, which were mainly revolving around a 'new' functional idea of European spatiality", thereby making the Western Balkans a crucial borderland for determining what Europe is—and what it is not.

In a similar vein, the Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, was formed to 'upgrade' the EU's relations with most of its eastern neighbours, with the main goal to accelerate political association and deepen economic integration between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. This regional framework included six post-Soviet countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), while, unsurprisingly, excluding the Russian Federation, also in light of its special status within the political geography of a continent spanning both Europe and Asia (Hofmann, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the term "Eurasia"—deeply rooted in Russian intellectual traditions and recently revived in the post-Soviet political imaginary of this segment of the EU's Eastern borderlands—has been variously described as a "contact zone" or as a "geopolitical" and "civilizational project" threatening the stability of the EU (Laruelle, 2015). As Akchurina and Della Sala (2018, p. 1546) argue, the 2004 enlargement of the European Union resulted in the inclusion of members who perceived their accession to the organisation as a guarantee of protection from renewed incorporation into the Russian sphere of influence. Conversely, the Eastern Partnership, which initially lacked a clear integration perspective for its affiliated countries, gradually evolved into a platform for cooperation. Its primary objective appears to have been the division of post-Soviet Europe into Russia and "non-Russia" (Baunov, 2015). The re-bordering process enacted through the Eastern Partnership, thus, created a new borderland between the EU and Russia; paradoxically, this process also reshaped the political and social reinvention of the former Soviet space over recent decades.

For the Russian Federation, the region emerging from the ashes of the USSR has represented a sphere of vital interest for structuring its post-imperial and post-Soviet political identity, while simultaneously posing a major challenge to the reconstruction of its role as a regional power. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the disintegration of a contact zone characterised by high levels of human mobility and largely invisible internal borders into fifteen new independent states. The transition that followed produced increasing diversification in internal developments across the region, giving rise to new—often contested—borders and divergent economic and social dynamics (Minakov, 2019). At the same time, mirroring the perceived success of the European Union, regionalism

gradually became the foundation of a broader Russian identity-building project, with the state sponsoring cultural and economic initiatives aimed at fostering a new supranational identity (Kazharski, 2019, p. 28). Nonetheless, Russia and the European Union approached their shared borderlands in markedly different ways: on the one hand, “their respective handling of their common neighbourhood came to be tightly bound to their respective identities” (ivi, p. 7); on the other hand, Russian state identity became increasingly anchored to territory—a territory that, notably, “stretches beyond the borders of the Russian Federation” (ivi, p. 9). Linked to culturally ascriptive qualities (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2019) and to a historical self-representation as a Great Power (Moulioukova & Kanet, 2021), post-Soviet Russian identity has thus been deeply embedded in its role within the neighbourhood.

The 2008 ‘August War’ in Georgia not only had ‘frozen’ Tbilisi’s ambitions for deeper integration into Western institutions, but also had made clear to other post-Soviet countries that Russia’s engagement in the post-Soviet space would henceforth be driven by national and ideational interests. At the same time, Russia’s unilateral recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in late August 2008 rendered “Russia’s allegations to be “a stabilizing, ordering or organizing force in the post-Soviet space,” (Prozorov, 2010, p. 264) no longer credible, thereby opening further space for violent territorial contestation and contributing to a growing condition of instability and contention in the ‘borderland’ between Russia and the EU.

Russia’s evolving self-identity has also been deeply shaped by its perception of others, especially ‘Europe’ and the EU. Historically, Europe has occupied a dual position in Russian identity formation, functioning both as a constitutive element of the Self and as a significant ‘Other’. At the end of the Cold War, this ambiguity leaned more towards a liberal interpretation, emphasising normative affinity with the West while still affirming Russia’s civilisational uniqueness and special interests in the post-Soviet space. From the early 2000s onwards, however, Russian elites increasingly embraced a more nationalist—and partially Eurasianist—understanding of core identity traits, including ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, and stateness (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2025). This shift profoundly altered Russia’s perception of the EU, as well as its relations with the EU and with the shared neighbourhood. Elites increasingly stressed Russia’s historical mission and cultural uniqueness, promoting the idea of a distinct political trajectory through ‘sovereign democracy’.

This growing insistence on Russia’s uniqueness fostered heightened securitisation of culture and values, rendering meaningful dialogue with the West progressively more strained, if not altogether unworkable. Over the following decade, developments in the shared neighbourhood further hardened Russian perceptions of the EU and the EU’s perceptions of Russia, while nurturing alternative and often conflictual projects for regional ordering.

Only by adopting this broader perspective can we fully grasp the long-term impact of the opposing bordering practices underpinning the so-called Ukraine crisis (2014–), which severely undermined security prospects for Europe (and Eurasia) through the contested annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine (Raik, 2019). Already by 2020, this conflict—gradually built upon the Kremlin’s ideological re-bordering of an “historical Russia” through the reunification of its “divided people” (Puleri & Mamaiev, 2024)—had generated a pressing, yet largely “invisible”, human mobility crisis (Sasse, 2020): the forced displacement of approximately 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine preceded the outflow of more than six million refugees following the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022. This massive resettlement across the European Union was subsequently accompanied by the departure of approximately 800,000 Russian citizens, who left their country for destinations across the EU’s Eastern borderlands in order to

escape military conscription, deteriorating economic conditions, and political repression (Krawatzek & Sasse, 2024). Furthermore, while the *de facto* modification of Ukrainian borders in late September 2022—following Russia's unilateral annexation of four partially occupied regions—was sanctioned through Kremlin-sponsored referendums, the Azerbaijani offensive in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 resulted in the restoration of the *de jure* international borders of the former Soviet republic and brought an end to the existence of the breakaway entity. This event was celebrated by President Ilham Aliyev as the fulfilment of a decades-long 'Azerbaijani dream' of reclaiming the region from ethnic Armenian separatists. According to UNHCR data, approximately 115,000 refugees have since fled Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, where they now account for around 3 per cent of the total population.

Last but not least, over the past decade, the EU's own process of de-bordering appears to have slowed down, if not partially reversed. Hard borders within and among member states, as well as *vis-à-vis* third countries, have been reinforced. The EU's external borders have been hardened, and internal freedom of movement has been restricted—at times suspended altogether—in response to perceived threats related to terrorism, irregular migration, or the spread of viruses (Baker-Beall, 2019; Leonard & Kaunert, 2020; Ceccorulli, 2025). The rhetoric of a 'geopolitical' EU has thus increasingly been coupled with the narrative and practice of a 'protective' Europe, centred on border control. While the prospect of a new enlargement round (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) has been framed as a geopolitical imperative necessary to safeguard Europe's core values, this outward-looking rationale has unfolded alongside a renewed inward turn, marked by the resurgence of nationalism. Although this nationalism takes different forms in Eastern and Western Europe, it displays significant similarities in its shared understanding of physical borders as sovereign prerogatives of the state and as the ultimate *limes* of rights.

The effects of complex (re-/de-)bordering and othering in the EU's Eastern Borderland/s

Practices of re-bordering, de-bordering, and othering are inherently complex phenomena which, in the context of the EU's Eastern borderlands, manifest in particularly intricate and multifaceted ways. They therefore raise a range of critical questions and call for a multidisciplinary analytical approach. By adopting a borderlands perspective, it is possible to highlight the dynamics through which this internally diverse area has moved from being a "grey zone", caught between opposing bordering and de-bordering practices, to a "frontline zone" (Makarychev et al., 2024, p. 2), where new dividing lines are progressively crystallizing.

This special issue addresses three core questions:

- What dynamics of re-bordering, de-bordering, and othering have emerged in the EU's Eastern borderlands? What types of bordering practices and narratives can be observed?
- What evidence exists regarding the interaction between different bordering practices (cognitive/ideational and material)? To what extent are these dynamics correlated with relations with the EU?
- How does the emergence of conflicting political and social orders in the broader European space affect human mobility, identity-making, and the hardening of physical borders—and vice versa?

To address these questions, the special issue brings together contributions that explore, from different perspectives and theoretical traditions, the relationships between borders and space, borders and identity, and borders and mobility, adopting predominantly a perspective from the region.

In their contribution, Michela Ceccorulli and Carmelo Danisi explore a largely uncharted territory within the EU: the “internalisation of borders” (Ceccorulli & Danisi, 2025) envisaged in the Protocol between Italy and Albania, a novel model of migration and asylum externalisation with far-reaching bordering implications. Their analysis examines the political and legal consequences of these shifting borders and their relation to concepts such as sovereignty, jurisdiction, territoriality and rights, highlighting the broader implications that the remapping of migration and asylum policies entails for Italy, the European Union, and the individuals affected.

Resting on the Balkans, Francesca Fortarezza’s (2025) article investigates the implications of border regimes and bordering processes in migration governance for liberal political values. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2020 and 2023 along the so-called Balkan route, the study employs participant observation, qualitative interviews, and document analysis to reveal the convergence of neoliberal and securitarian modes of governing migratory flows.

Marco Puleri and Nicolò Fasola (2025) then turn attention to the alternative bordering practices adopted by the Russian Federation over recent decades. Their contribution aims to reconstruct the roots of Russian political discourse on borders and national security by highlighting its polyphonic and deeply embedded nature. Adopting a long-term perspective, Puleri and Fasola analyse the political trajectories of elites emerging in Russia in the 1990s, examining how their discourses and interests shaped rebordering practices in the post-Soviet space—both at the cognitive level and through concrete policy choices—and how these, in turn, influenced state-level policymaking.

The final section of the special issue comprises two contributions reflecting on the implications of bordering practices for human mobility in the Eastern borderlands. Eugenia Pesci and Margarita Zavadskaya (2025) examine the unprecedented migration of Russian citizens triggered by the invasion of Ukraine, which has reshaped mobility patterns across Eurasia and beyond. While existing scholarship often portrays Russian emigrants as politically active, economically secure, and highly skilled global migrants—particularly in the IT sector—this article shifts attention to less privileged groups, such as those settling in Central Asia. Drawing on seventeen qualitative interviews conducted with Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan between 2022 and 2023, the authors introduce the concept of discordant privilege to capture migrants’ simultaneous experiences of relative advantage and economic and social precarity.

Finally, Nenad Miličić and Dragan Umek (2025) present a comprehensive study of Russian and other post-Soviet immigration to Belgrade, situating these flows within the specific social interactions triggered by Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. By examining socio-spatial transformations, evolving social relations, and potential long-term outcomes, the article offers valuable insights into the changing dynamics of migration and their implications for urban life and policy responses.

Overall, the SI invites further research on an ever more crucial and fluid borderland, suggesting to look at those compounded dynamics that shape borders, their nature, meaning and implications.

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