

The Grey Zone and Liminality as Complementary Conceptual Approaches for Border and Migration Studies

Carolyn Leutloff-Grandits

Abstract *The article explores the analytical value of the concepts of the grey zone and liminality for border and migration studies. It argues that the concepts can be used in a complementary way in order to highlight the interrelationship between structural and individual dimensions of migration: The concept of the grey zone makes the institutional production of ambiguous and often discriminating legal and political spaces visible. Liminality highlights the spatial, social, temporal and legal in-betweenness of migrants and captures demonstrations of agency even under restrictive regimes.*

INTRODUCTION

In research on borders and on migration, the concepts of liminality and the grey zone have gained importance as terms for capturing migrants' experiences and living conditions. While both terms are sometimes used interchangeably in academic literature, as both emphasize ambiguity and in-betweenness, they also point to different approaches to the study of ambiguity, which will be highlighted here. The concept of the grey zone focuses on the multiple dimensions of border regimes, showing how states and other actors create and manage ambiguous legal and social spaces to govern migrants. Liminality focuses on the ambiguities that stem from the temporary suspension of social structure that occur in the transitory situation of migration. These differences make it useful to discuss the concepts in tandem. By carving out their distinct analytical lenses, this article offers explorative insights into the analytical value of the two concepts for border and migration research, and how they can complement one another.

GREY ZONE

The concept of the grey zone highlights the ambiguities and the in-between spaces created by a

variety of bordering processes, be it in relation to geopolitical borders, or social boundaries.¹ This goes back to the understanding of borders as based on a complex constellation of institutions, actors, infrastructures, norms and discourses, which is also expressed through the concept of the border regime. Rather than being a stable entity, the concept of the grey zone introduces a perspective on the border as being in constant transformation as well as being charged with multiple meanings.²

Green goes one step further by pointing at the coexistence of multiple and partly contradictory border regimes.³ She defines the concept of the grey zone as an ambiguous space created by the overlapping of distinct border regimes. One example of this are geographical areas in which national and EU border regimes apply simultaneously. These different border regimes can have different objectives and epistemologies, but they interact with each other, reinforcing or weakening each other, thus creating legal ambiguities or forming grey zones. One concrete example she refers to is the Aegean region, where Greece and Turkey both claim territorial sovereignty over uninhabited islands, resulting in political conflicts between the two countries, while the EU border regime and its regulations simultaneously promote cooperation between Turkey and Greece.⁴

Grey zones also emerge as zones in which national law overlaps with a different legal order within the same territory, which is sometimes the case for specific groups of the population. In this way a dual, distinct, but intertwined, legal order emerges, which has not only spatial but also social

and temporal effects and which for the population group in question creates a situation of liminality.

This reading of the concept of the grey zone has recently been applied to situations of enduring territorial conflicts, in which competing or also overlapping legal orders exist simultaneously. This is the case in northern Kosovo, a region which the Kosovo state having proclaimed independence in 2008 – seeks to institutionally integrate into Kosovo. However, the Serbian state, and especially the extremist parties, have a strong influence on the Serbian part of its population. This leads to institutional competition and thus to ambiguities that foster a grey economy and give rise to criminal networks, some of which extend into the Albanian population in Kosovo. The grey zone which emerged here has become self-perpetuating, constructing its own form of economic, social and legal regulation.⁵ The subsequent subsections outline specific manifestations of the grey zone in contemporary migration regimes.

Grey zones at the external EU border

The concept of the grey zone gives visibility to the multi-layered nature of migration management at the EU external border as well as in neighbouring non-EU countries. Through the concept one can grasp how the EU outsources border control to neighbouring countries, the border regimes of which are increasingly integrated into the EU border and migration regime to shield the territory from irregular migration. This turns the Balkan countries into a buffer zone for the EU, also termed “European semiperiphery”.⁶ Here the EU border and migration regime functions as a mechanism for determining who belongs to Europe and who does not. By becoming increasingly integrated into the EU migration regime and adopting EU categories that create different groups of people whose migration is considered more or less legitimate, the Balkan countries are becoming seemingly more European yet nevertheless remain outside the EU. The concept of the grey zone can capture this process of defining and demarcating but also blurring of what is perceived as the border of Europe. Indeed, the

concept of the grey zone highlights the ambiguity and changeability of the border, of being included and excluded at the same time.

The concept of the grey zone can also highlight the gap between the legal “face” of the EU and the widespread practices of the EU border and migration regime. One example is the analysis of the impact of the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2020.⁷ In this region, the Croatian police – in accordance with EU migration policy – have increased their presence to detect and prevent irregular border crossings of migrants at the EU’s external border, utilizing also unauthorized push-backs.⁸ Here, the concept of the grey zone can make analytically sense of the fact that push-backs are widespread and tolerated at various EU external borders, which is in breach of the Refugee Convention as well as EU and national law according to which irregular migrants have a right to apply for asylum.⁹

Grey zones within state territory

Also, within states, legal grey zones are established to govern migrants. Rachi,¹⁰ for example, shows that in the United States, the zone for “expedited removal” of irregular migrants, which was originally limited to a narrow strip along the U.S. border, was extended to the interior of the U.S. under the first Trump administration and now applies to virtually the entire U.S. territory. The zone for “expedited removal” is based on an administrative order within the state, which suspends state law, and particularly the U.S. human rights order. Through this measure, migrants in the U.S. are subject to a different set of rules than U.S. citizens despite being on U.S. territory. Looking at the different dimensions of the grey zone, the concept captures the temporal effects, by paying attention to the fact that detained migrants have only a short period of time to prove their legal residence in the United States. It furthermore captures legal and social effects of border ambiguities by observing how legally residing migrants are deprived of their freedom and

individual rights as soon as caught, leaving them in a situation of vulnerability and lawlessness.

LIMINALITY

The concept of liminality was coined by Arnold van Gennep¹¹ and later elaborated by Victor Turner,¹² both social anthropologists, to describe rites de passage from adolescence to adulthood. The aim was to emphasize the transformative position and agency of young people within the social order, particularly in non-Western and so-called pre-modern societies. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is based on three stages: separation, liminality and (re-)integration. The rite de passage begins with a separation from the former order, often through a ritual of detachment, in order to enter the phase of liminality, which is characterized by ambiguity and the suspension of normative social structures. In an intermediate state between two social orders, individuals exist between their old and new roles, experiencing both insecurity and uncertainty, as well as openness and diverse possibilities. Eventually, they enter the phase of affiliation, where they reintegrate into a (renewed) social order. The temporary phase of liminality, thus, creates a specific time-space in which the individual occupies a unique social position outside the usual social order amidst the prospect of an uncertain future. In this position he/she can relate to others in the same situation and form a community with its own rules and structures of solidarity. In fact, the phase of liminality is also a time-space in which an antistructure can be established.

For the study of borders and of migration, liminality constitutes a powerful analytical lens through which to examine migrants' experiences, including temporal limbo, spatial dislocation, and socio-legal ambiguity in relation to the border and migration regimes and the social orders they create. The concept is particularly useful for showing how migrants experience conditions in which they must live with little institutional support and restricted or no rights. In fact, the state of liminality is often associated with the lack of citizenship and residency

rights, as well as with the lack of mobility rights which implies irregular crossing of borders.¹³ Liminality refers to the condition of modernity itself, in which a person's legal status, or even the right to have rights, is tied to citizenship.¹⁴ Moreover, liminality allows researchers to trace how migrants creatively respond to these conditions by exercising agency and creating new social orders in situations of insecurity. The following subsections will outline specific forms of liminality as they appear in contemporary migration contexts.

Liminal experiences of migrants along "transit routes" and in refugee camps

Studies on migration have applied the concept of liminality to both highlight the interplay between the systemic forces that identify and categorize migrants as illegitimate or even illegal and how such conditions are experienced, navigated and contested by individuals. It has been applied to migration of individuals from the Middle East, Africa and Asia on their way to EU destination countries on Balkan route.¹⁵

Janković¹⁶ describes migrants who move through the Balkans as 'liminoids': On the one hand, the liminal phase is deeply rooted in the social, spatial and bodily experiences of suffering and exhaustion due to discrimination and hunger, lack of health care and shelter as well as the experience of border violence in a space full of power asymmetries. At the same time, this liminal phase is also underpinned by imaginaries of hope, sense of openness and opportunity, as well as a strong will to continue to reach the destination country. This state can transform into tactical actions that migrants take to survive and to cope with their situation.

The concept of liminality has been used to highlight the fact that migrants *en route* are partly forced into a state of waiting, not knowing if they will be able to continue their travel to reach their final destination or not.¹⁷ This condition has also been described as "stuckedness"¹⁸ or as "limbo".¹⁹ Along the Balkan route, this enforced state of waiting has been related to the border fortifications and

security measures that were expanded in 2016. This is part of the EU's strategy of externalizing its borders and outsourcing migration management to third countries, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, and the strengthening of external borders in Croatia. This made irregular border crossings by migrants more difficult and riskier.²⁰ Contrary to the idea of a linear movement from sending to destination countries, the concept of liminality captures the temporal and spatial unpredictability resulting from migrants' exposure to unpredictable repression: as migrants are often violently pushed back at the borders, have to try to cross the borders multiple times or are even detained, the 'transit' is often not only halted, but can also entail a reverse or circular movement. The concept of liminality can make analytical sense of the fact that what was conceived as a transit phase (the Balkan route) can become a chronic condition. Migrants can end up in a 'timeless limbo in no man's land',²¹ with the liminal perspective showing how migrants live through and make sense of these uncertainties on a day-to-day basis. Without a successful (re-)integration phase – which could be conceptualised as a return or a transition to a new residency or citizenship status – the liminal phase in which migrants find themselves becomes prolonged or even chronic. In this sense, liminality serves to describe the experiences of migrants caught in a legal, social and temporal limbo in which they are neither fully included in nor completely excluded from European societies.

The concept of liminality can also be meaningfully applied to refugee camps to examine the camp as a zone of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, which may be also conceptualized as a grey zone. It can highlight that migrants who have filed an asylum claim are being under scrutinization by state authorities, while being simultaneously secluded from citizens and having often limited rights to spatial mobility, limited rights to receive visitors and often lack other fundamental rights such as the right to family reunification or the right to work. This forces migrants into a state of waiting, in which the future is insecure and often on hold.²²

Formation of migrant communities as anti-structure

The concept of liminality also emphasizes the formation of temporary communities that can bring about a so-called anti-structure, a new social order outside the conventional social order.²³ In terms of migrant groups and the temporary social order they establish, this has been insightfully applied by Altin²⁴ as well as Janković.²⁵

Janković, who studied migrants living in irregular conditions in Belgrade in 2015, also highlights the sense of solidarity among irregular migrants *en route* through the Balkans, who build informal networks to receive information and humanitarian support and are partially supported by activists and volunteers. She emphasizes that migrants reconstitute this new social order through their embodied, spatial and temporal actions. In this new social order, however, social, cultural as well as financial capital matters and socially structures the emerging communities.

The concept of liminality is also used to emphasize the tension between migrants' structural (non-)embeddedness in dominant social orders, as well as individuals' ability to challenge orders and transgress their boundaries to reclaim a position. Applying Turner's three-phase model of rites of passage – separation, liminality and reintegration – Altin²⁶ describes how young male migrants along the Balkan route from Syria, Afghanistan and other countries in the global South refer to their attempts to irregularly cross securitized and militarized borders on their way to the EU as 'the game', which gives it the impression of a very peculiar rite of passage. The term 'game' hints at the underlying rules imposed by those who control the borders and highlights the open-ended, risky and uncertain venture. Yet it also implies individual agency and anticipates tactical manoeuvres of migrants to move past and resist border controls. If the crossing is successful, they find themselves in the place they made their destination, the northern EU societies. A successful game further leads to redemption – a release from the limbo of transit or waiting for an imagined future. This release is often still illusory, as

the limbo continues after arrival in destination countries, as also here, they must fight for their rights.

CONCLUSIONS

The concepts of the grey zone and liminality offer valuable and distinct yet interconnected and sometimes complementary analytical tools for exploring the dynamic configurations of borders, mobility and migration governance. Both focus on the contested nature of social and legal orders and the ambiguity and in-between states which result from this.

The concept of the grey zone highlights the systemic, institutional production of ambiguity shaped by intersecting and often fully or partly contradictory border regimes. By explicitly focusing on borders and the legal, social and temporal spaces that unfold between them, it offers a nuanced way of understanding borders that goes beyond the simple inclusion/exclusion binary.²⁷ Rather than considering borders as fixed, the concept of the grey zone accounts for their constant being negotiated, contested and reinterpreted. This leads to uncertainty and ambiguity, some of which is deliberately created by political authorities.

In contrast, the concept of liminality focuses primarily on the experiences of migrants linked to the suspension of social structure which are brought about by border and migration regimes, and the opportunities and obstacles that arise from this. More specifically, it can be used to draw a differentiated picture of the exclusion from, but also partial inclusion of migrants in an existing social order and the spatial, social and temporal aspects associated with it. It captures the lived, embodied dimensions of migration, and offers an in-depth insight into the existential and socio-political uncertainties that characterize many migration trajectories. At the same time, it can be used to highlight the agency of migrants and shows how social networks, tactical resistance and the creation of temporary social orders emerge in what can be called liminal spaces.

The concepts of the grey zone and liminality can also be used in a complementary and interconnected way to deepen our understanding of borders as sites not only of enforcement but also of negotiation, manipulation, and reordering. The concept of the grey zone illustrates how these conditions are shaped by overlapping and often contradictory border regimes. Liminality highlights how migrants experience and endure, but also resist and redefine, the conditions imposed on them. The intertwined application of both concepts thus bridges the micro and macro levels of analysis and links personal experiences with the political and legal logic of bordering and ordering.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my colleague Amelie Kutter, with whom I designed and conducted the inspiring seminar "European Peripheries, European Grey Zones" in the summer semester of 2024, which served as the basis for this article. I would also like to thank our student group, with whom we discussed various articles that have been incorporated into the analysis of the two concepts here, as well as Tobias Häußler and the two editors of the journal, Brigitte Suter and Måns Lundstedt, for their thought-provoking comments on the final draft of this paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] Harboe Knudsen, I. & Frederiksen, M. D. (Eds.). 2015. *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities*. London: Anthem Press.
- [2] Leutloff-Grandits, C. & Wille, C. 2024. Dynamics of Dis/Order in Border Complexities. In C. Wille, C. Leutloff-Grandits, F. Bretschneider, S. Grimm-Hamen, & H. Wagner (Eds.), *Border Complexities and Logics of Dis/Order*, pp. 7–30. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- [3] Green, S. 2015. Making Grey Zones at the European Peripheries. In I. Harboe Knudsen & M. D. Frederiksen (Eds.) *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities*. London: Anthem Press.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Cattaruzza A. 2012. "Zones grises", interstices durables de la carte politique? Relecture critique d'un concept géopolitique. *Bulletin de l'Association de géographes français*, 89(1), 104–120.
- [6] Jansen, S. 2023. How Bosnia and Herzegovina Was Bordered: The Supervised Making of a Border/Mobility Assemblage in the European Semiperiphery. *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 71(2), 190–209.

- [7] Leutloff-Grandits, C. 2023a. "We are not Just the Border of Croatia; This is the Border of the European Union". The Croatian Borderland as "Double Periphery". *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 38(2), 265–282.
- [8] Laghai, S. 2021. Europas Schattenarmee: Pushbacks an der kroatisch-bosnischen Grenze. *Monitor*. 07.10.2021; Border Violence Monitoring Network. 2024. *Illegal Push-backs and Border Violence Reports Balkan Region – March 2024*. Border Violence Monitoring Network. Available at <https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/BVMN-Monthly-Report-March-2024.pdf> (last accessed 22.05.2025).
- [9] Augustova, K. & Sapoch, J. 2020. Border Violence as Border Deterrence: Condensed Analysis of Violent Push-Backs from the Ground. *Movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Studies*, 5(1), 219–231.
- [10] Rachi, I. 2024. A Land of Wolves: The Rise of Legal Anomie in Administering Expedited Removals of Illegal Aliens in the United States. In C. Wille, C. Leutloff-Grandits, F. Bretschneider, S. Grimm-Hamen & H. Wagner (Eds.), *Border Complexities and Logics of Dis/Order*, pp. 261–284. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- [11] van Gennep, A. 1909. *Les rites de passage*. Paris: Librairie Critique.
- [12] Turner, V. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- [13] see also Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- [14] Boland, T. 2013. Towards an Anthropology of Critique: The Modern Experience of Liminality and Crisis. *Anthropological Theory*, 13(3), 222–239.
- [15] Janković, S. 2017. Stuck In-between: Exploring the Liminality inside the Migratory Transfer to Europe. In M. Bobić, & S. Janković (Eds.), *Towards Understanding of Contemporary Migration: Causes, Consequences, Policies, Reflections*, pp. 241–267. Belgrade: Institute for Sociological Research Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade; Altin, R. 2021. The Floating Karst Flow of Migrants as a Rite of Passage through the Eastern European Border. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 26(5), 589–607; Leutloff-Grandits, C. 2023b. The Balkans as "Double Transit Space": Boundary Demarcations and Boundary Transgressions Between Local Inhabitants and "Transit Migrants" in the Shadow of the EU Border Regime. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 38(2), 191–209.
- [16] Janković, 2017, p. 246.
- [17] Khosravi, S. 2010. *'Illegal' Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders. Global Ethics (GLOETH)*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Khosravi, S. 2014. Waiting. In B. Anderson & M. Keith (Eds.) *MIGRATION: A COMPAS Anthology*. Oxford: COMPAS.
- [18] Hage, G. 2009. Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality. In G. Hage (Ed.), *Waiting*, pp. 97–106. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.
- [19] Altin, 2021.
- [20] Leutloff-Grandits, 2023b.
- [21] Altin, 2021, p. 595.
- [22] e.g. Leutloff-Grandits, C. 2019. Temporalities of Refugee Experience in Germany: Diversification of Asylum Rights and Proliferation of Internal Boundaries. *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo XXII*, 21(2).
- [23] Turner, 1969.
- [24] Altin, 2021.
- [25] Janković, 2017.

[26] Altin, 2021, pp. 595–599.

[27] see also Leutloff-Grandits & Wille, 2024.

Author bio: Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, PD Dr. phil., is a social anthropologist and senior researcher at the Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION at the European University Viadrina. Based on extensive fieldwork in the countries of former Yugoslavia and Germany, she has researched borders and migration from an entangled perspective, focusing on temporality and complexity, social security, family, and entrepreneurship. She was the coordinator of the academic cooperation project "The Balkans as a double transit space" funded by the German Exchange Service (2020) and is currently researching migrants from Kosovo setting up businesses in their home country (funded by the Leibniz Association). Her most recent publications include the monograph "Translocal Care Across Kosovo's Borders. Reconfiguring Kinship Along Gender and Generational Lines", Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2023. Contact: Leutloff@europa-uni.de

© 2025 Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.