

Introduction to the Special Section: Borders and bordering processes

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INTRODUCTION

Borders are not just lines on a map. They are social, political, and symbolic practices that shape how we live, move, and belong. Whether materialized as fences and checkpoints or enacted through technologies, discourses, and everyday encounters, borders are constantly made and remade. This special section explores how borders emerge through processes of inclusion and exclusion, control, and identity-making, and how they are also resisted, negotiated, and subverted. Drawing on rich empirical material and critical theoretical tools, the contributions of the special section of this issue of CIMR collectively push the field of border and migration studies toward a deeper understanding of bordering as a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon.

PRESENTATION OF CONTRIBUTIONS

We begin in the Central Mediterranean, where Daniela DeBono's article *Drifting in Dark Waters: Mediterranean Boat Journeys between (In)Visibility and Presence* examines the invisible yet deeply present journeys of migrants crossing by boat. Based on two decades of ethnographic work in Malta, Lampedusa, and Sicily, the article reveals the paradoxes of invisibility and presence, highlighting how these crossings are marked not just by danger but by silence, resistance, and relationality. Through voices of survivors and an analysis of the "game of (in)visibility", DeBono

exposes how European policies render some lives visible and worthy of rescue, and others disposable.

Eline Wærp turns to the conceptual terrain of absurdity in her article *Studying the Absurdity of EU Border Controls*. Drawing on the literary world of Alice in Wonderland, she argues that the logics underpinning EU border control, especially as exemplified in Frontex's risk analyses—invert common sense. Refugees are rendered threats rather than being seen as at risk, and non-rescue is rebranded as humanitarian. Through this lens, Wærp invites us to see these inversions not as anomalies, but as systematic features of European bordering, and calls for greater scholarly engagement with the absurd as a critical tool.

Borders are also drawn in everyday spaces. In *Informal Policing of the Internal Border*, Måns Lundstedt traces the geography of xenophobic violence in Stockholm. Using a unique dataset of hate crimes motivated by xenophobia, the article maps how violence by non-state actors effectively enforces internal borders across the urban landscape. Lundstedt shows how such acts of informal policing limit the freedom and safety of racialized 'others', producing exclusionary boundaries even in the heart of the city. This granular view of bordering reveals how racial hierarchies are spatialized and normalized in local contexts.

From the streets of Stockholm to a more broad perspective, Christian Wille invites us to reconceptualize borders more broadly in *Border(ing)s: A Border-Studies Perspective*. He argues for an understanding of borders as agentive and polymorphic processes that are mobile, selective, and deeply embedded in technological, social, and

symbolic systems. Drawing on developments in Critical Border Studies, Wille introduces the “bordering turn” and shows how borders are simultaneously materialized and diffused, fortified and invisible, symbolic and affective. His contribution offers a vital theoretical anchor for the special section as a whole.

The complexities of externalization and migration diplomacy are at the center of Marija Pavicevic's article *Border and Bordering Practices in an EU “Buffer Zone”*. Focusing on Serbia, she explores how the country has come to play a central role in the EU's external migration regime—not only as a space of transit and control, but as an actor strategically leveraging its “buffer zone” status. Through interviews, policy analysis, and conceptual framing from Critical Border Studies, Pavicevic shows how bordering is both a technique of EU governance and a tool of regional political negotiation.

Finally, Carolin Leutloff-Grandits's article *The Grey Zone and Liminality* offers conceptual clarity on the ambiguous and suspended conditions migrants often face. By combining the concepts of “grey zones” and “liminality,” she highlights how institutional arrangements produce zones of legal and social uncertainty, while migrants themselves navigate these spaces with agency and resilience. Her contribution advances an analytical vocabulary for understanding the entangled, multi-scalar, and experiential dimensions of border regimes.

Borders are not only geographic demarcations but also sociopolitical constructs—tools of migration governance and symbolic boundaries between the familiar and the foreign; between what is normal, on the inside, and what is presented as dangerous and unknown on the outside. We hope these contributions spark reflection, conversation, and new ways of thinking about borders.

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The Editors.

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