

Reflections: Extreme Geographies

Bordering the “other”: the case of the Finnish-Russian border

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This short reflection on the keynote speech given by Henk van Houtum at the Annual Meeting of Finnish Geographers enhances discussion on bordering and border construction, both within the European Union (EU) and via the external border of the EU in the northeast, specifically the Finnish-Russian border. And it focuses attention upon the problem of Eurocentric geographies, and a dominant Western perspective of the rest of the world.

Keywords: border, bordering, second home, Russians, Finland, trans-border mobility

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We live in an era of extreme borderism, and are witness to the largest fortification of borders in living memory (van Houtum 2016). Indeed, some borders have been physically demarcated in recent times, and even redrawn, while others have experienced intensified border controls. Researching trans-border leisure mobility, in the form of Russian second-home ownership in Finland, I deal directly with mobility across a physically demarcated and strictly controlled border. The Finnish-Russian border is an external border of the EU and is in many ways both mentally and physically a hard, separating border (Kolossoff & Scott 2013). This external border of the EU, as well as the EU's internal borders, have different degrees of border openness (Boehmer & Peña 2012). EU internal borders are considered open and integrated, while the Finnish-Russian border is a controlled and restricted. Studying mobility across the Finnish-Russian border, that for both Europeans and Russians requires a visa to cross it, provides a different perspective on borders and bordering in European space. Gaining a perspective from the edge of Europe, this commentary attempts to demonstrate that so-called extreme geopolitics have always been present in European geographies. Gaining a perspective from the edge of Europe, this commentary attempts to demonstrate that so-called extreme geopolitics have always been present in European geographies, as something *old*. Modes of extremes and their articulation have changed in recent times to a renewed hardening of borders and “othering”, as something *new*.

Extreme geographies refer here to the edge, a border or a gate thinking, within the boundaries of normality (van Houtum 2016). In recent times, the number of borders has increased as states begin to circumscribe their territory, even within a supposedly “borderless” European space. The erection of physical demarcations to harden borders, a reintroduction of border controls by several European states, as well as random identity checks while moving from one EU member-state to another, are all examples of a contemporary presence of borders in a “borderless” Europe. This demonstrates that the project of constructing a common European space, a European identity, has been undermined. Often in relation to the perspective and solution employed by certain European member-states, towards the refugee crisis. An increase in European borders reveals a move in the opposite direction to the state of border and trans-border mobility research. Border studies have departed from

thinking of borders as lines and given structures to the performance of borders and bordering practices, while the empirical evidence from Europe shows a return to barriers (van Houtum 2010; Timothy *et al.* 2016).

European space, however, has never been completely “borderless”. For this reason, I intentionally leave the quotation marks. A “borderless” European space has turned out to be an imagined construct, which managers of the European project have tried to promote. The EU has several borders, including amongst others, the Schengen Area, the Euro Zone, and old regional imaginaries which continue to divide, such as East and West Europe, and the Balkans. These borders do not necessarily coincide with the border of a nation state, blurring the boundaries of belonging (Häyrynen 2009). The European project itself, while proposing the freedom of mobility by removing borders between the member-states, has turned into a construction of borders by delimitating those who can enter and belong to the European space. Such delimitation of belonging has been referred to as “global apartheid geopolitics” (van Houtum 2010, 957).

Indeed, the EU makes its space fragmented rather than cohesive in relation to foreign property ownership (Åkerlund *et al.* 2015). Recent physical expressions of borders demonstrate how a perception of the “other”, the non-European, is constructed. Yet fears of the “other” have always been present in the European community, though they may not have always been spoken of as they are now. Thus, in relation to borders and mobility there are two separately existing truths: the geography of borderlessness, and the mobility and geography of border discipline (Massey 2005; Newman 2006; van Houtum 2010; Gielis & van Houtum 2012). Indeed, the absence of a physical border does not exclude the presence of invisible or mental barriers that in many ways define the nature of inclusiveness and exclusiveness (Newman 2006; Gielis & van Houtum 2012). These two edges in border thinking form a complex interplay when looking at mobility across European borders.

The majority of studies on trans-border and trans-national mobility in Europe are made in light of the “de-bordering” and “intensifying mobility” concepts that have naturally appeared during the formation of the “borderless” European space. Other groups of people coming from outside the European circle, potentially as mobile as the population of a European country, have been largely overlooked. Those, who come to Europe from other regions of the world, are often portrayed as unwanted, illegal or dangerous (van Houtum 2016). In relation to leisure mobility, tourism geographies have been traditionally dominated by a Western theoretical and empirical perspective. As such, the established patterns of tourist mobility have been criticised as being the product of Western modern tourism or “Eurocentrism” (Massey 2005; Cohen & Cohen 2015; Lin & Yeoh 2016). Cohen and Cohen (2015, 12) state that, “tourism [that] originated in the West is characterized by North-to-South, or West-to-East flows, and prioritises Westerners as international tourists, while representing the people of the emerging regions as hosts or ‘tourees’.”¹ Thus tourism practices from emerging, non-Western regions or the “margins of this world” (Massey 2005, 87), have been safeguarded through borders and mobility regimes, and “have not been matched by adequate theorizing in tourism studies” (Cohen & Cohen 2015, 11).

This is particularly the case when considering the Finnish-Russian border, that has historically functioned as a dividing line between the East and West. The tourism mobility flow across the Finnish-Russian border acts in contradistinction to other European examples, with the majority of visitors and second-home owners coming from the East (Russia) to the West (Finland). Mobility, as such, across it has changed during the last few decades. To assess this change and the modification of bordering practices, it is important to provide a short outline of the development of trans-border mobility across this border.

The Finnish-Russian border in its present physical shape was formed after World War II, during which Finland and Russia (the Soviet Union at that time) were enemies. After the war the Soviet Union annexed 12.5% of the Finnish territory. This created national trauma in Finland, and a feeling that the country had lost a part of itself. For this reason, the Finnish national identity has ever since been constructed through a portraying of the Soviet Union as the dark “other” (Paasi 1999). Consequently, in addition to a physical demarcation, the border has a strong symbolic role. Thus, the opening of the border for mutual visits, after the Soviet Union’s collapse, has been met with mixed feelings amongst Finns. Many were worried that “thousands of unwanted and impoverished Russian refugees would

flow across the border" (The Economist 1992). These fears have not materialised. However, during the 1990s "Eastern tourists" were strongly perceived as a source of problems (Gurova & Ratilainen 2016). Yet, with a rapid increase in the number of mutual visits between the two states, the perception of Russian visitors has changed. Between 1991 and 2015, the number of Russian visitors increased tenfold from 350 thousand to 3.5 million visits (Federal State Statistics Service 2016). Since 2000, Russians have increasingly purchased second homes, becoming the biggest group of foreign property owners in Finland (Lipkina 2013; Hannonen 2016).

The high amount of cross-border activity initiated discussions on the creation of a visa-free regime between Finland and Russia in 1999 (Burganova 2011). This visa-free policy has been actively negotiated since 2010. That year the President of Finland met with the Russian president and the Russian prime minister three times. According to the most optimistic estimations made by the Russian Ambassador, it would have been possible to introduce the visa-free regime with the EU by the end of 2013 (Hantula 2013). There have been a number of obstacles in the introduction of this. Yet, the desire to move forward and negotiate the matter has become a huge step on the way from one edge of the continuum of border functionality to another. Although in 2014 the visa-free discussions were suspended and borders and border control returned in light of the Ukrainian conflict and the introduction of sanctions. This contemporary political situation has meant that it is unlikely the bordering practices across the Finnish-Russian border will change. As such, the border will remain to function as a delimitating line of Europe.

Russian second-home ownership is an example of such delimitation and the "othering" of a particular national group in Finnish and European space. Soon after Russian owners entered the Finnish property market, they became the subject of lively coverage in the national press, with increasingly nationalistic rhetoric (Pitkänen 2011). Russian purchases have been perceived as a threat to the national lake landscape and portrayed as a "Russian invasion", with a fear of potential Russian resettlement in Finland. Russian owners have also been accused of displacing locals through pricing Finns out of the market and purchasing permanent residences in rural areas (Pitkänen 2011). The Ukrainian conflict inflamed a new wave of concerns. Currently, Russian second homes are viewed as a security issue with the most recent public discourse concerning Russian property purchases next to strategic objects in Finland and their potential use for possible military interventions. Debates about Russian property purchases and their restriction have also been held in the Finnish Parliament. Numerous legislative initiatives by Members of Parliament have sought to restrict land ownership by foreign citizens outside the European Economic Area². These parliamentary debates are another example of "othering" and contemporary edge thinking as the discussions float between the edges: the freedom of mobility in relation to foreign second-home ownership on the one side, and suspicions of Russian properties on the other.

According to one study in a border region of Finland, Finnish local residents and second-home owners largely agree with the concerns raised in the national press (Honkanen *et al.* 2015). The majority of Finnish residents and second-home owners in this border region wish to have limited contact with Russian owners and would like to restrict Russian purchases of properties in Finland (Lipkina & Hall 2013; Hannonen 2016). This indicates a desire to uphold a certain mental and physical distance from Russian owners, to move a mental barrier further to the edge of the territory of the Finnish state, and reunite it with the physical border. The "othering" of Russian owners is reinforced by a clear differentiation between Russian nationals and other foreigners. While EU citizens are welcomed to the Finnish property market, Russian property ownership should be restricted (Hannonen *in press*). For this reason, Russian second-home ownership reinforces the symbolism and mental distance of the Finnish-Russian border, which is strongly rooted in the Finnish identity. Indeed, civic discourse on the phenomenon of Russian second-home ownership demonstrates the influence of a historical past that has produced a strong dividing line between the East and West, and the contemporary perception of Russia by Finns.

When looking at the European community as an open and integrated space, traces of borderism can still be found at any point of the EU's development. Bordering as "othering" and defining the borders of inclusiveness and exclusiveness has always been present in European politics, especially across the external borders of the EU and the Finnish-Russian border. In this short reflection, the

empirical case of second-home ownership across the Finnish-Russian border has demonstrated that “othering” Russia has not vanished. It has, rather, taken a new shape since the opening of the border in 1991, and the increase in Russian second-home ownership in Finland since 2000. As such, contemporary bordering processes across EU’s internal and external borders pose questions. Has Europe ever departed from an edge, extreme, or border thinking? Does it merely move to the extreme; or does it simply reinterpret normality to define its identity? I would like to end this short reflection by noting here that “Eurocentric” perspectives are no longer capable of addressing the growing mobility of people from non-Western regions. The solutions that the EU proposes now, however, continue to impact mobility and dwelling across its borders.

Notes

- ¹ “The “touree” is a native-turned-actor, in other words, a native who modifies their behavior to meet tourists’ demands” (Yang & Wall 2014, 8).
- ² Over the last 15 years 30 written interrogatories by Members of Parliament concerning foreign property ownership, and three legislative initiatives (in 2009, 2011 and 2013) and one citizens’ initiative (in 2015) to restrict land ownership by foreign citizens and organisations outside the European Economic Area were submitted in the Finnish Parliament.

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