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Dynamics of exclusion and everyday bordering through Schengen visas

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ABSTRACT

Turkey is the only European Union candidate country whose citizens are obliged to obtain a Schengen visa. The difficult visa procedures, often seen as unjust and discriminatory, are a longstanding source of frustration and humiliation among Turkish citizens, as they reproduce both symbolic and physical borders between the EU and Turkey and seem to reiterate the 'Fortress Europe' thesis. These perceptions of the visa process and the consequent feeling of 'otherness/non-Europeanness' hinder the process of Turkish integration into the EU. Bordering no longer occurs merely in the border areas separating two states, but rather through a wide range of practices in multiple locations within and beyond the state's territory. This complexity has recently been augmented by the introduction of intermediary companies. The offices of these intermediaries have become an example of bordering sites located away from the border area. Moreover, in these offices border work is carried out by non-traditional actors: in other words, not by border guards or immigration officers of the EU but by Turkish employees. Treating those offices as significant nodes where border work is done, this paper draws on material collected at visa offices in Ankara to understand the multifaceted construction of borders between the EU and Turkey. Using a situated intersectional framework, this paper elucidates not only perceptions from both sides of the border —Turkish nationals applying for visas and Turkish nationals doing border work — but also how the differentiated social positionings and purposes of travel shape these interactions.

In a 2009 press conference following a meeting with the chief negotiator for EU affairs, then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said: '… it is unacceptable that certain Balkan countries that are in the starting phases of association and which have not begun negotiations have received Schengen privileges, and that Turkey, taking into consideration the level it has reached in EU negotiations, has not' (EU-Black Sea Observatory, 2009). In 2016, Prime Minister Davutoğlu emphasised the centrality of the visa regime for EU-Turkish relations: 'We see visa liberalisation as the indispensable, fundamental element in the EU-Turkey agreement. As a matter of fact, there is a direct linkage between the Readmission Agreement and visa liberalisation. It would be effective only if visa liberalisation is put into practice' ('Başbakan Davutoğlu,' 2016).

Turkey has been an official candidate for membership in the European Union since 1999, and the European Union put an 'Accession Partnership' (AP) strategy for Turkey into practise in 2000. Following the acceptance of the National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA) by the Turkish government, Turkey and the EU started accession negotiations. Since Turkey is the only EU candidate country whose nationals must obtain a visa to enter the Schengen zone (Stiglmayer, 2012: 100), the visa requirement has always been at the forefront of the relationship between the EU and Turkey and 'has become highly 'politicized' and even 'securitized'' (Özler, 2012: 121). The issue occupies a central place in the latest agreement between the two parties pertaining to the refugee crisis, and it has been used as a source of punishment and reward by the EU as well as the Turkish government. It has also been instrumentalised as a mechanism for domestic politics through which both sides control and manipulate public opinion. Another aspect of the visa problem for Turkish nationals is the procedural dimension, which entails cumbersome bureaucratic processes at the doors of member states' embassies. Starting in 2005, certain

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member states delegated parts of the visa service to private companies instead of consulates.[1] Currently, there are two major companies operating in Ankara, VFS Global and IDATA, which were authorized by the consulates to process short-term Schengen visa applications.[2] Visa applicants have begun to contact these companies rather than consulates to obtain their visa, submitting all documents, including fingerprints, to them and paying extra fees for the service they provide. In this way, the Schengen visa service has been privatized and is now largely conducted by non-traditional actors.

Although the repercussions of the visa issue have been approached from various angles, including legal, economic and administrative perspectives (Groenendijk & Guild, 2011; Kirişçi, 2005; Knaus, 2014: 1–7; Vukašinović, 2011; Özler, 2012), few studies unpack 'the human dimension' of this politicized and securitized issue. Following the research agenda of critical border studies, this paper attempts to unravel the societal dimensions of the Schengen visa regime from multiple Turkish perspectives. The theoretical backbone of the study will be the critical juncture between the processual approach to borders and a situated intersectional framework. Drawing upon research conducted in private Schengen offices in Ankara, Turkey's capital city, we treat the process of obtaining a visa to enter 'Europe' as a dynamic bordering practice that is experienced, negotiated and (re)constructed by actors dependent upon their social positioning. Our purpose is to take 'the visa front' of the negotiations between the EU and Turkey beyond the analysis of high politics occurring between the EU and Turkish state. We begin by laying the theoretical groundwork for this study and discuss the concept of bordering and situated intersectionality in relation to our subject of inquiry. After a brief review of the history of the visa problem for Turkish nationals, we then turn to our fieldwork to demonstrate how the EU's border regime has moved away from embassies and embedded itself within Turkish society through intermediary companies, which have been made almost compulsory for visa applications. In so doing, we trace the implications of visa-issuing procedures for Turkish nationals.

Borders, bordering and situated intersectionality

Until the 1980s, border studies were dominated by classic geographical accounts. In this traditional perspective, borders are perceived as static, mainly in their physical capacity to separate territories of different states. The end of the Cold War, increasing globalization and the permeability of EU borders brought about a shift in the conceptualization of borders. Although the first outcome of those developments was the expectation that the relevance of borders would decrease in a seemingly 'less bordered world', borders both within and between states have re-emerged and in some cases even been strengthened. Instead of erasing borders, 'globalization has provoked a transition from one general and 3strictly fixed border line to multiple lines created for different actors' (Kolossov & Scott, 2013). The increasing complexity of relations between borders and territory has led to calls from border scholars to develop alternative epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies to capture the new realities of borders. To catch up with the increasing sophistication of bordering practices in a globalized world, scholars have offered alternative epistemological registers that transcend what Yosef Lapid calls the 'territorialist epistemology' of the traditional approaches to border studies (Parker and Vaughan-William, 2009: 583). The conceptual relocation of the border paved the way for the emergence of new research agenda(s) for border studies. 'Rather than treating the concept of the border as a territorially fixed, static, line […], we begin thinking of it in terms of a series of practices' (Parker and Vaughan-William, 2009: 586; Bürkner, 2014). The analytical terrain of the concept of border has been expanded, and political, sociological and actor-oriented analysis has gained prominence in the literature. The ways borders are constructed and maintained (Doevenspeck, 2011; Paasi, 1998; Parker and; Vaughan-William, 2009) has also become a significant subject of inquiry.

In tandem with the cultural turn in social sciences, this new scholarship is increasingly interdisciplinary and has shifted its focus from the static and physical characteristics of borders to socio-cultural and discursive processes and practices (Brambilla, 2015). Based on the recognition that 'borders are everywhere' (Balibar, 1998), it uses a sociological and anthropological understanding of divisions and difference, often based on binary oppositions such as Self-Other, Us-Them, Include-Exclude, and Inside-Outside (Newman, 2006). New border studies are also rescaling from the state level to local and micro levels of border-making, and have moved from a static focus on borders as dividing lines to dynamic, processual approaches. The key contribution to the conceptual shift in border studies was the introduction of the notion of 'bordering', which emphasises the constructed character of borders (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002; Newman, 2011: 33–47; Scott, 2011; Linde Laursen, 2016). Bordering can be defined 'as the everyday construction of borders, for example, through discourses and institutions, media representations, school textbooks, stereotypes and everyday forms of transnationalism' (Kolossov & Scott, 2013). The bordering perspective is thus based on a notion of conceptual change that involves shifts from largely functional to cognitive and symbolic perspectives on borders. The process of bordering and 'the changing nature of the border [have] implications for identity, since the system of classification the border establishes provides identities with a means of distinguishing insiders from outsiders' (Delanty, 2006: 183). According to Browning and Christou (2010: 110) 'identity narratives are implicitly about border drawing and making the Other foreign', as the 'construction of identity is always drawn through a dialogue of demarcating the Self from the outside.'

Furthermore, bordering no longer occurs merely in the border areas that separate two states, but also through a wide range of practices in multiple locations within and beyond the state's territory (Jones & Johnson, 2014: 5). As Paasi (2009; see also Johnson et al., 2011) states, 'borders are not only to be found in border areas but are "located" in broader social practice and discourse all around societies and increasingly in relation to the global space'. The processual turn in border studies has thus been accompanied by a spatial turn, and hitherto neglected sites have become fields of inquiry for border scholars. In addition, bordering is conceived not as a state-exclusive activity but as a process that includes non-traditional actors.

This reinvigoration of border studies has been further supported by contributions from the 'situated intersectionality framework', which emphasises that borders are not experienced in the same way by all people but are dependent upon the social positioning of the social agent (Yuval-Davis, 2013). The situated intersectional approach is significant for border studies because although the notion of border inherently evokes two sides, intersectionality reminds us that these sides are not homogenous. This reminder first prevents us from reifying or black-boxing the categories these boundaries create, such as EU/non-EU or European/non-European. Second, it provides us the tools to analytically differentiate various

[1] Most of the Member States have given sole authority to these agencies to process short-term Schengen visa applications.

[2] Apart from these two agencies, there is another one assigned to process Hungarian visa applications and one for Latvian and Slovakian visas.

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