

*Defining the European Union's final borders*

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## **DEFINING THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FINAL BORDERS**

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### **Abstract**

The complicated issue of the EU's final frontiers is an issue that gained remarkable importance after the 2004 enlargement round. The European continent has been reunited but the EU cannot enlarge forever. Is it time to draw Europe's final frontiers and if yes, where should we draw the dividing line? Which countries should be left outside and by which criteria? The EU is above all a Union of values but geography still plays an important role. Defining Europe's final frontiers will certainly affect current as well as future candidate countries. A major challenge for the EU will be to decide Turkey's European future, as the country is considered being next in line for EU accession. A decision on the Union's final borders will also be a decision about Turkey's Europeanness. The paper analyses four areas related to borders, namely the importance of borders, the nature of European borders and the relation of the EU's final frontiers with Turkey and the Union's integration capacity.

**Key words:** borders, EU, final frontiers, Turkey, integration capacity

### **Introduction**

With the accession of Croatia in 2013, the EU will have grown from the initial six members to include 28 states, each with its own culture, politics and strategic interests. It will run from the Black Sea to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Arctic Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Many argue that Europe has finally reached its natural boundaries. However, such a statement could cause serious effects to candidate countries like Turkey, which might think that the gates of Europe have already closed despite the opening of accession negotiations.<sup>i</sup> European politicians as well as ordinary people often consider the question of Europe's borders. This is a valid point for Europeans. The question resounds not only due to nationalist or even xenophobic sentiments but mostly in relation to fundamental aspects regarding the future of the EU and European integration. The word "Europe" is first of all a geographical term, but it has also strong and clear cultural, civilizational, and historical dimensions. Europe cannot be however clearly defined only as a continent or political entity. So where does Europe begin and where does it end? How far do the European borders reach? Where does "Europeanness" begin and where does it end? There are no easy answers to these questions. The most complicated task is to find where Europe ends.<sup>ii</sup>

### **The importance of borders**

The concept of "border" has been an important one throughout world history. Borders provide a key element in the structure of the global system: mapping the number and arrangement of the territorial units upon which all humans live. One of the most remarkable features of today's globalizing world is the cross border penetration of just about everything; goods, ideas, technology, culture, food and much more. For proponents of globalization, this growing interdependence is promising. In the post-Cold War era, few ideas have been more influential than the notion that the spread of liberal democracy and free markets could contribute to peace and stability. In such a world, countries would be interdependent, cooperation would increase, and state borders would matter less. Despite the great appeal these ideas hold, this is still a world defined by states and their borders.<sup>iii</sup> Borders define territories within which identities and order are described and defined. The issue of borders is central to understanding the nature of sovereignty and the relations between countries. The changing definition and placement of the border is one of the most striking features of the recent transformations of the Union.

Every border and every border region is unique. Their meanings and significance can change dramatically over space and time, as regimes change in one or more of the neighboring states, as borders are 'closed' or 'opened'. Territorial borders both shape and are shaped by what they contain, and what crosses or is prevented from crossing them. The 'container' and 'contents' are mutually formative. Eventually, the importance of borders derives from the importance of territoriality as an organizing principle of political and social life. The functions and meanings of borders have always been intrinsically vague and contradictory.<sup>iv</sup> Under the broad label of "EU borders", we refer to at least two sets of contested issues: The first one is the shape of EU borders. Here we deal with borders as political frontiers, and ask which countries should become members of the EU. Indeed, the Union is to be open to any European state. This requires being "European" and then to demonstrate the ability to meet the Copenhagen criteria. And here comes the big question... Who is European? Is Turkey European? What about Ukraine? How far, should our European neighbourhood extend? The second issue is the nature of EU borders. Here we speak of borders as boundaries between different kinds of territories. These borders may be soft or hard. These boundaries are between Europeans and non-Europeans living outside or inside the EU itself. Borders can be both bridges and barriers.<sup>v</sup>

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Borders represent different meanings and they can be presented as limits, horizons, bridges, opportunities, and assets. Borders matter. Even in today's post-Cold War world, borders still serve a wide variety of functions across the areas of security, economics, politics, and social interactions. Despite contemporary challenges to sovereignty, borders outline not only areas of legal competence but also the concept of the "state." Borders are essential as they set out the location and arrangement of states, and their distances from one another. Borders both facilitate and constrain human interaction in conflict and in war.<sup>vi</sup> It is important to underline the general significance of borders at a time when there is reference to the emergence of a 'borderless world' or a 'Europe without frontiers'. Borders are an integral part of human behaviour, they are a product of the need for order, control and protection in human life and they reflect people's desires for sameness and difference, for a marker between 'us' and 'them'. At the same time, all boundaries must be fluid in order to accommodate survival and change and permit cross-border exchange. The Berlin Wall and other borders of state socialist countries in Eastern Europe are good examples of borders that were too strict to accommodate changes arising from European integration. While borders are important for our sense of security and identity, they also provide avenues of escape from oppressive regimes and poor societies. Therefore, boundary creation, preservation and transcendence are integral features of human behaviour for as long as human beings demand a measure of autonomy and self-direction.<sup>vii</sup>

During the recent decades, where globalization and growth of trans-national governance have preoccupied social science, state borders have become increasingly irrelevant. All kinds of borders, economic, political and social are coming down. Following this notion, the EU is an indication of this new 'borderless' world. Yet, there are powerful *a priori* reasons for making borders central to social science analysis. Borders are integral to behaviour and they are the product of the need for order, security and belonging in human life. They express our deepest desires for sameness and difference, for differentiating between the 'known' and the 'unknown' and between 'us' and 'them'. Borders, therefore, express two universalistic features of human society, social inclusiveness and exclusiveness. As long as human beings demand a measure of autonomy and self-direction, they will seek to create borders. Modern state boundaries are no exception to this axiom.<sup>viii</sup>

### **The changing nature of European borders**

According to the late Pope John Paul II, Europe in a broad way includes all Orthodox countries. In strict geographic terms this creates some problems. For example, Siberia is not a part of a traditionally interpreted geographical Europe, but people living there are Orthodox and therefore Europeans. Others, like Samuel P. Huntington, have stated that the eastern and south-eastern borders of Europe are determined by the borders of the ancient Roman Empire, which define the boundaries of Western culture and civilization. According to Huntington, the eastern borders of Europe lay therefore somewhere in western Belarus and Ukraine. This theory could also be problematic. How could we exclude all of Scandinavia and the Baltic States from Europe and refuse their inhabitants a European identity? The geographic description of Europe and its borders could be vague. It shows us how difficult and complex the issue of Europe's borders is. There are similar troubles with using history and culture. Historically, Europe grew for centuries from Christian roots and after many upheavals, Christianity and the Church, together with Christian rulers, created modern Europe. This does not mean that today we should not discuss the possibility of integrating Muslim countries such as Albania and Turkey. Europe should also focus on countries and nations with different cultural roots that also have a long history closely related to Europe's, though this may be a difficult process.<sup>ix</sup>

For centuries Europe had been characterized by a process of consolidation of small European states into larger ones, a process which reached its zenith at the end of the nineteenth century. By contrast, the twentieth century saw the successive break-up of the multinational empires including the Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, French, British, and most recently of all the Soviet empire. In Europe, the twentieth century has been characterized not just by the changing of state borders but also by their geographical instability. Typically, change in the territorial location of borders has not been a democratic process but rather a product of wars and invasions. The new border arrangements after 1945 were no exception. Germany was partitioned with its Eastern part becoming a member of the Soviet bloc and Poland was moved 500 kilometres westward. A series of agreements under the aegis of the western powers also fixed the Italian borders with France, Austria and Yugoslavia. The forty-year period after 1945 continues to shape our understanding of recent border change. In Western Europe, the new borders facilitated the re-building of democratic regimes. Despite their ideological differences, the communist states in the East, as well as the welfare states in the West, both underlined the increased practical significance of state borders. Compared to the decades before the First World War, post-1945 Europe was characterized by many more state borders, and much more regulation of people within those borders. Since the end of World War II, the international political system has been structured around three central tenets: the notion of equal sovereignty of states, internal competence for domestic jurisdiction, and territorial preservation of existing boundaries.<sup>x</sup> The founders of the movement for European integration accepted the post-war *status quo* but set out to replace interstate war with inter-dependence. This new alternative proposed the ending of territorial wars, the acceptance of the state boundaries produced by the post-war period and the development of economic and political interdependence across frontiers in order to advance European integration and a European Community.<sup>xi</sup>

The architects of European integration considered the idea of a united Europe as an antidote to the problem of state borders in Europe, in particular to the type of territorial expansionism that generated the two World Wars. Europe has had a long history of unsettled political borders, in terms of changes to the borders of existing states and

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the formation of new states. Especially in the twentieth century state borders have been predominantly unstable. Consequently, state borders have multiplied, culminating in the post-1989 collapse of the Soviet regime. In practice the process of European integration has led to a 'Europe of borders' rather than a 'Borderless Europe'.<sup>xii</sup> The enlargement of the EU towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has stretched the continent's borders and has created new challenges for the concept of borders in the EU. Expansion into Eastern Europe presented the EU with unprecedented uncertainties. The disappearance of all the geopolitical landmarks which had structured post-war Europe has forced the EU, for the first time, to consider spreading across the entire continent. The resulting changes to the Union's borders meant that it acquired new neighbours and moved closer to old ones. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was developed to try to prevent new dividing lines emerging between the expanded EU and its neighbours. It is aimed at building a closer relationship with countries on the Union's borders and, in the words of the European Commission, creating "a zone of stability, security and well-being for all".<sup>xiii</sup>

In 1992, the European Commission considered the question of the EU's final frontiers in a report to the European Council but it failed to come up with a comprehensible reply. It concluded that the term 'European' had not been officially defined. It combined geographical, historical and cultural elements, which all contribute to the European identity. It was neither possible nor suitable to establish the frontiers of the EU. When it reviewed the question again in 2006, the Commission came to the same conclusion. Meanwhile none of the other European institutions such as the Council of Ministers or the European Parliament have addressed the question in a definitive manner. An attempt by the EU institutions to decide its future limits, a decision requiring unanimity, would be unlikely to give a clear answer, as member-states have conflicting views on future membership. Those which share borders with non-members often wish to include them in the EU for reasons of stability and security. Poland, for example, wants Ukraine to be a member of the EU, but other states such as France have a more restraining position on the inclusion of Turkey. In fact, a discussion of the 'limits of Europe' can easily become a debate on 'should Turkey join'?'<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Final frontiers and Turkey**

The question of Turkey's membership remains a controversial topic both in national public opinion and in political parties. With Turkey being next in line for accession, Europeans for the first time question the limits of their continent. What should be the borders of Europe? The answer to that question will be not only a reply to Turkey's European aspirations but also an answer to the nature of the European project. If we consider Europe in terms of geography and religion, then Turkey has no place in it. It does not belong to the European continent, apart from a small part, and it is a predominantly Muslim country. But if we consider Europe to be a political project owning a political identity, then everyone wishing to share its values has the vocation to enter the EU.<sup>xv</sup> Although Turkey's formal application for EU membership was made in 1987 and the EU opened accession negotiations in 2005, Turkey's future membership is still questioned by a number of member-states, such as Germany, France and Austria. Turkey is the biggest country ever to apply for EU membership. Yet there is an Islamic Europe as well, which Turkey as a state most represents. It is reshaping the identity of Europe with the arrival of migration from North Africa and the Greater Near East.<sup>xvi</sup> Turkey is the only Islamic nation with European aspirations but Europe has always considered the Bosphorus the end of the continent. Furthermore, there is the question of whether Turkey is a European country or not.<sup>xvii</sup>

The answer to this question depends on a variety of factors: geography, history, the choices made by Turkish people and the acceptance of other European countries. The effort to define who is European and who is not reveals an interesting aspect regarding the Union's behaviour towards its neighbours, mainly towards Eastern Europe before the 2004 enlargement and Turkey. The EU argues that it shares with Eastern Europe common roots, common values and a common cultural heritage. The collapse of communism provided the perfect opportunity to reunite the continent that has been split into two parts. The case is not the same with Turkey, where a completely different picture emerges. Even though the EU acknowledges the importance of having a close relationship with Turkey, this relationship is between two different parts and not between two halves of the same piece. Moreover, nothing is mentioned about a common cultural heritage. Indeed, during the centuries there has been exchange of ideas but these are not the same with Europe's ideas. Turkey is described as a bridge between Europe and Asia and not as part of Europe.<sup>xviii</sup> It can be concluded that the EU had a different approach towards Eastern and Central Europe's candidates and Turkey based on culture and geography. The post-communist countries have been linked to the Union in a rapid and smooth way, even though their economies were backward and there were problems with their progress in establishing democratic regimes. They are regarded parts of the European continent, part of a wider European family, while Turkey is not.<sup>xix</sup>

After the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey's territory was reduced to the point where only 3% fell within continental Europe. However, 11% of Turkey's population and the economic and cultural capital Istanbul are to be found within that space. Turkey lies on the dividing line between Europe and Asia but whereas Europe's borders to the North, West and South are clear and undisputed, those to the East remain fluid. Turkey belongs both to Europe and Asia but since Europe seems to have no Eastern border, it is impossible to make a decision based on geographical terms. Therefore, geography alone cannot provide an answer to the question of Turkey's Europeanness.<sup>xx</sup> The Turks may reply that their country can be considered European since the early 1920s, when the founder of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, turned the country towards Europe and the West with his radical social and cultural reforms. Ever since, Turkey has been a secular state and successive governments had as main goal the country's Europeanization. Turkey was also a founding member of the Council of Europe in 1949 and joined NATO in 1952. As

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for the EU, it gave its answer in 1963, when the Association Agreement between the EEC and Turkey was signed.<sup>xxi</sup> In terms of history, the Ottoman Empire was an important factor of European politics, often acting as a conqueror and sometimes in close alliance with major European countries. The Empire became a safe place in 1492 when thousands of Jews from Spain were given shelter and this demonstrated the Ottoman's tolerance towards other religions. The Empire was considered so much part of European history that in 1856 after the end of the Crimean war, the Sublime Porte was invited to join the other major European powers in order to decide Europe's destiny. When the declining of the Sultan and the Empire was a fact, it was France and England that inspired the 'Young Ottomans' to propose a constitutional government and raise questions of liberty. Their ideals survived and were taken up by the 'Young Turks' who chose the path of revolution. Their dream was the building of a Turkish national identity combined with Western elements, a process they considered crucial for Turkey's survival.<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Final frontiers and integration capacity**

The debate on Europe's final frontiers is linked to the major debate regarding the Union's integration capacity. The European Parliament, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the former French President Nicolas Sarkozy emphasized the importance of borders by stating that an entity without borders cannot act coherently and that no political project can live without borders. On the other hand, the Commission is vividly against the idea of defining the Union's geographical borders.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Why defining borders is such a complicated task? First of all, because the traditional sovereign state, as it used to be, tends to extinct in Europe and borders seem to lose their clarity. The general purpose of frontiers in a sovereign state was to establish absolute control over the territory and the inhabitants it covered. Inside its borders the state was powerful to exercise exclusive legal, administrative and social control. But sovereignty is a term being eroded in Europe. A second reason is that border transformations can be disturbing, as they alter the balance of power and authority, they undermine habits and cultural patterns, they threat identities and they create a sense of unease and insecurity. People usually are not fond of border changing. Boundary-making has been a part of the history of human beings. Religion, history and ethnicity are parts of the discourse on frontiers and throughout history they have motivated people to fight and die for.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In the case of Europe, the definition of its final borders appears to be necessary, not only because Turkey is negotiating its accession to the EU but also because the Union itself should consider where it should stop. For sure, defining borders will result in the EU narrowing down its capacity to influence its neighbourhood. This result opposes the logic of the European Neighbourhood Policy which was initiated in order to avoid the creation of new dividing lines between members and neighbours.<sup>xxv</sup> At the same time, the Union and its member-states will have to decide whether to rethink the direction of integration or open up to new frontiers.<sup>xxvi</sup> The whole discourse regarding this issue also incorporates the issue of identity. Finding criteria for deciding where Europe stops, or should stop, is a fundamental challenge and raises questions such as who the Europeans are and what kind of values characterize Europe.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The problem with settling a European identity is the impossibility of finding an element which is both common to all of Europe and at the same time exclusively European. For example, democracy and the rule of law, two elements that lie in the heart of Europe are not exclusively European, because they can be found in other parts of the world as well. If we consider religion to be the dominant element, then the consideration is wrong again. Christianity may be the principal religion across Europe, but Muslim presence is many centuries old. Moreover, if Europe is by definition a Christian entity then neither Albanians, nor Kosovars nor Bosnians of Muslim origin should be considered European. Thus, language and religion cannot be used for defining Europe and the paradoxical conclusion is that Europe is united in diversity.<sup>xxviii</sup> The location of the external border has implications both for the internal development and for the external relations of the Union. Its location will influence the degree of political integration, the operation of the EU's institutions as well as its economic interests.<sup>xxix</sup>

As part of the debate on the future of Europe and the nature of the Union, European politicians have made demands, that the EU should now finally define its ultimate borders. There are also calls to define the EU's integration capacity and apply it in future accessions. After the last round of enlargement, Europeans seem concerned about the pace and scope of enlargement. The EU's borders must be defined, but there are certain problems regarding this difficult task. Is it fair to draw a new Curtain on the map of Europe so soon after the disappearance of the Iron Curtain? Which countries should be left outside and by which criteria? Drawing new lines would fit poorly with the spirit of the Maastricht Treaty. While values, above all, make the borders of Europe, geographical determinants do matter.

Legally, the borders of the EU correspond to the borders of the EU member-states' territory. Most of Europe's borders are self-evident but the main problem remains unsolved and that is the continent's Eastern border. Where should we draw Europe's eastern border? And does it have one? Many geographers consider the European continent as a peninsula of the Eurasia continent and consequently they see no reason in dividing that continent in two.<sup>xxx</sup> Moreover, geographers have never agreed on the precise physical or natural borders of Europe, particularly its Eastern border. In geographical terms Europe stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. To the north and south its borders are often said to be the Arctic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. To the West, the Atlantic Ocean has been defined as the natural border of Europe, which makes sense. At the same time, such a border would leave outside Europe the Azores, Madeira and the Canaries. To the South, the natural border is the Mediterranean but again

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this means exclusion of Cyprus and Malta, already members of the EU. To the North, some locate the border of Europe between the North Sea and the Arctic Sea, which makes sense. But defining Europe's Eastern border remains an extremely difficult task, because it seems that geographically Europe has no Eastern border. At this point, only values can help defining the East and Southeast European border.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Enlarging the EU's borders is a matter of extending the zone of European values. In October 2005, the Union decided unanimously to open accession negotiations with Turkey, which means the extension of EU borders to the national borders of this country, if and when it becomes member-state. The EU has also promised membership to the Western Balkans, meaning the change of European borders for once more, if this promise is translated into EU membership.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The term integration capacity is usually accompanied by a discussion on 'enlargement fatigue'. This term has become apparent since the 2004 'big bang' when ten new members joined the Union.<sup>xxxiiii</sup> It is a vague political reaction and it might also be a passing mood. Given some period to rest, the European citizens might be refreshed and no longer fatigued. The huge enlargement of the EU to 25 and 27 in 2007, reasonably leads to a desire to pause and to gain experience of how the enlarged Union is functioning.<sup>xxxv</sup> It will not be easy for the Union to adapt to the presence of 12 new member-states, particularly taking into consideration that all of them came out of Communist rule just two decades ago and still have fragile economies and immature democracies. But their membership will probably help them experiencing a smoother transition and consolidation. Meanwhile, EU institutions and mechanisms also need to be transformed in order to match the new realities of the larger Union.

### **Conclusion**

The European project brought down borders within Europe, but the issue of Europe's borders remains central. The projection of European influence beyond its borders and Europe's relationship with the wider world, are vital concerns. The movement of persons within Europe and from outside of Europe highlights the importance of the questions of immigration, integration and multiculturalism. With the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the reunification of the European continent with the 2004 enlargement round, one issue gained particular renewed urgency: defining the EU's final borders. The resurgence of this issue occurred mainly because Europe and its borders are left undefined in the Treaties. How far can the EU's expansion continue? Where should its final frontiers be established? During the last 50 years, it has grown from 6 to 27 members and continues to attract neighbouring countries. But with the last enlargement round it seems that Europe has reached its limits. The EU cannot enlarge forever. Since the EU Treaty gives any European country the right to apply for Union membership, any attempt to draw a final boundary around its territory would not be consistent with the Treaty. However, member-states will have to decide where the final frontiers of the EU should lie. Establishing the EU's final borders may seem an unrealistic quest but eventually...somewhere we have to stop.

### **Bio-note**

I am currently a doctoral student at Lancaster University UK, having previously completed my BA in German Language and Literature at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Greece, a MSc in European and International Studies at Loughborough University UK and a MA in Southeast European Studies at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. My research interests include the EU's enlargement, the Union's integration capacity, Europe's final borders and Turkey. As a postgraduate student, I got involved in several research activities. I was closely monitoring the German Presidency of the EU (January-June 2007) and I was also an editorial assistant for the informative bulletin "*European Affairs*", published by the University of Athens. From December 2011 to June 2012, I was also a writer for Lancaster University's Newspaper "*The Whistleblower*". My doctoral research is focused on the EU's integration capacity but also on the capacity of future members, namely Turkey, to integrate European values/ideals.

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