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What has happened to our cross-border regions? Corona, Unfamiliarity and transnational borderlander activism in the Danish-German border region

Martin Klatt

The COVID-19 crisis has closed most of Europe's borders, external as well as internal. But are these border closures only a temporary measure to cope with a pandemic, or do we experience a new climax of re-bordering trends in effect since 9 September 2001? For Europe specifically this raises questions on the multi-level governance processes of the European Union and its complex system of hierarchies. It has become evident that the present crisis is the time of the nation state executive. National governments have introduced

measures to limit the virus' spread. For almost all governments this included the closure of borders from mid-March. Reopening of borders has been announced, but again not on EU level, but by national governments driven of different interests, with different priorities and different selection criteria on who is allowed in.

Based on Martin van der Velde's and Bas Spiering's theoretical framework of Unfamiliarity explaining cross-border interaction (Spierings and van der Velde, 2008), this text will use observa-



Figure 1: Skomagerhus border crossing closed during COVID-19. Photo: Martin Klatt 2020

tions from the Danish-German border region to illustrate processes of multilevel governance, aspects of familiarity/unfamiliarity as well as transnational borderlander and stakeholder activism in a moment of disruption and re-bordering of cross-border regions. When Denmark announced the closure of its borders for all non-Danish travelers who did not have a significant reason to be in the country (commuters actually working, permanent residents), the mayor of Germany's border city Flensburg criticized the decision both on a factual (the virus is already in Denmark, it is more effective to isolate infected people to control it) and an emotional basis (cooperation is put on ice; the border's 100th anniversary celebrations do not have a meaning anymore). She was supported by

the German state Schleswig-Holstein's government expressing surprise and disappointment. The same government, though, closed its southern borders to the German states of Niedersachsen, Hamburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern a few days later for all touristic trips; even pedestrians and cyclists from Hamburg were denied entry the first weekend. Several stakeholders criticized the border closure, especially the two national minorities used a narrative of a lifeline being cut. This happened exactly in the 100 years anniversary of its existence – an anniversary intended to be celebrated along a narrative of reconciliation and overcoming of the border in daily life. So, do we experience a good-bye to the open border and the borderless region idyll celebrated not only in Sønderjylland-Schleswig?

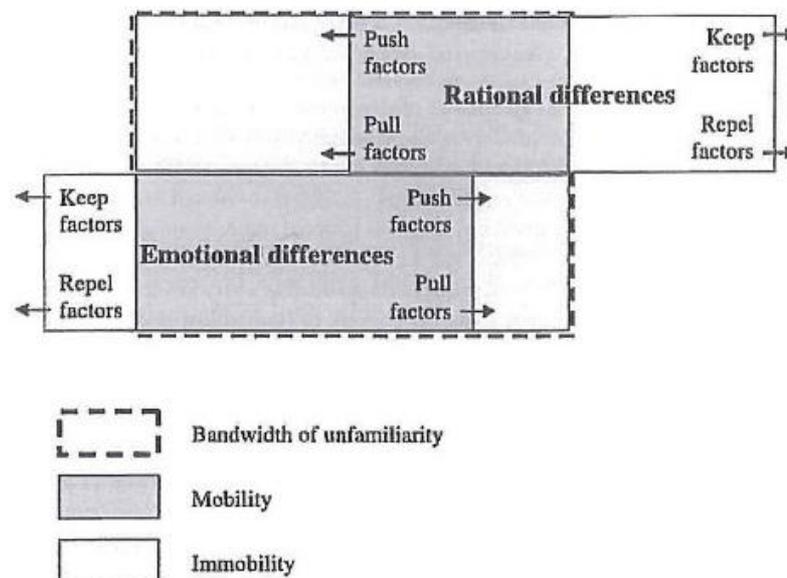


Figure 2: Bandwidth of Unfamiliarity. Source: Spierings/van der Velde, 2008, p. 502

Unfamiliarity or familiarity? A continuing process

The dichotomy of Unfamiliarity/Familiarity describes the degree of the known in relation to the unknown in social contacts and interaction. It can be applied to explain interaction and flows in border- or rather cross-border regions. There are both rational and emotional differences that hinder or encourage social interaction across borders. Martin van der Velde and Bas Spierings have examined this for the field of consumer mobility in border regions (Spierings and van der Velde 2008, 2013). Other researchers have expanded the concept to other fields of cross-border interaction

(Andersen 2012, 2014; de Fátima Amante, 2012; Izotov and Laine, 2012; Klatt, 2014, 2017; Knotter 2014; Szytniewski and Spierings, 2014; Yndigegn, 2012). Core conclusion is that there exists a bandwidth of familiarity within which social interaction is happening. The research question as such is, how far has the bandwidth of unfamiliarity been affected of the crisis caused by COVID-19 and the different measures governments have introduced to cut back mobility, restrict movement and reinforce borders?

The Danish-German border region Sønderjylland-Schleswig: a narrative of reconciliation

The 100th anniversary of the drawing of the Danish-German land border, dividing the former duchy of Schleswig, is celebrated in 2020 – or rather was supposed to be. Except for a start-up conference in January 2020, all important events have been cancelled or moved into 2021. Two narratives are connected to the celebrations: “Reunifi-

cation” and “Reconciliation”. Reunification accounts for Denmark having recovered parts of the territories lost in 1864. Reconciliation plays on the narrative of successful border drawing in a nationally divided territory implementing the right of national self-determination, and a subsequent accommodation of national dissenters into culturally autonomous national minorities. The reconciliation narrative, sponsored especially by the German state government of Schleswig-Holstein, suggests that the region has produced a European model of creating a society embracing unity in diversity and overcoming the divisive aspects of the state border.



Figure 3: The minorities present themselves at the *Schleswig-Holstein Tag 2004* in Flensburg. Source: Institut for Grænseregionsforskning (Syddansk Universitet)

Quick facts: what has happened?

Denmark closed the border at 12 noon on 14 March, Germany followed on 16 March. At first, only commuters, goods and the persons transporting them, and children of separated parents were allowed to cross the border. From mid-April, Denmark eased access to include parents visiting children and vice versa, as well as couples in a long-standing relationship, meaning having resided together at a time. From 18 May, Germany allowed extended family visits (children, grandparents, siblings, in-laws; all only in case of important family events). Quarantine rules were dropped for people entering from EU and EEA countries as well as from the UK. From 15 June, there will be no more entry restrictions to Germany for residents of EU, EEA and the UK. Denmark will allow tourists from Germany, Iceland and Norway to enter if they can document a hotel/campground/summer cottage booking of at

least six nights; a special solution for border region residents has been announced but has not materialized yet

Immediate issues

The border closure increased awareness on existing cross-border flows and social interaction. The euroregional office Infocenter has been confronted with many issues evolving around the closure. On social media, people have exchanged advice on facebook groups as *Flensbook – for danskere i Flensburg* (predominantly Danish citizens having moved to Flensburg), *Arbeiten in Dänemark* (predominantly Germans commuting to Denmark), *Einreiseverbot Dänemark* (predominantly Germans affected by the border closure) and *Åbn Grænsen NU* (predominantly members of the two national minorities). Cases go into details: people in the process of moving to the other country and consequences, construction of a house on the other side of the border, child cus-



Figure 4: The A7-E45 motorway crossing on 28 March 2020. Photo: Martin Klatt 2020



Figure 6: Clear message "Closed for passage" at the Padborg border crossing. Photo: Martin Klatt 2020



Figure 5: This farm's driveway has been closed – it is on the border. Photo: Martin Klatt 2020



Figure 7: The parking lot at Fleggaard, the largest border supermarket, on Maundy Thursday. A holiday in Denmark, but not in Germany, it usually is the day with the highest turnover of the year! Photo: Martin Klatt 2020

tody issues, living together with a partner who has not registered his/her address, acute family crisis/separation, but also simple issues as access to farmland, a riding horse, a sailboat or machines stored on the other side of the border.

Conclusions: COVID-19 – renaissance of the executive

The state has returned as single actor, replacing practices of cross-border multi-level governance. Measures were taken from a state centered perspective, regarding the state as a bordered container. This implies the original exceptions allowed for border crossings: they were seen in a

critical infrastructure framework. Later easing included social aspects, too. But even the opening for tourism was effectuated because of domestic political pressure from the tourism industry. Furthermore, a national rhetoric has dominated government statements especially in Denmark. Warlike by naming COVID-19 Denmark's worst crisis since the traumatic German occupation in WW II. By focus on national solidarity (talking about *Danes* and naming the threat as foreign). Especially Sweden's different course in fighting the pandemic was antagonized rhetorically. When the Danish prime minister presented her government's original four phase plan to reopen Danish society, opening the borders was not even on the agenda of phase four.

Outlook: challenges of reopening

Cross-border cooperation within Euroregion Sønderjylland-Schleswig has been set on stand-by mode. Deeper issues on built up trust and familiarity are at stake. Business in the border region is hit severely: this applies to regional tourism, but especially to the cross-border shopping business in South Schleswig. Especially the Danish minority's relation to its kin-state have been damaged. The minority did not feel being taken into account by neither Denmark's border closure, nor the reopening plan.

The Danish-German cross-border region might have to start from anew. Following the Unfamiliarity concept, it must be assumed that the emotional differences have changed by symbolic and actual re-bordering. Incentives to engage in cross-border cooperation will move away from a constructivist cross-border region approach to exploiting rational differences. On the other hand, COVID-19 has demonstrated the existing high interaction on business and personal level, as well as the density of multiple flows and social interaction across the border.

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