

RE-SIGNIFYING THE BORDER: THE EUROCIITY CHAVES-VERÍN

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The European Union transborder regionalization politics have become an icon of its political geography regime. Border peripheries are getting into centers of construction of *Europeanness*, in terms of the importance that cross-border regionalization is acquiring in the EU policies. This article introduces a study case, the Eurocity Chaves-Verín, in order to expose and discuss bordering practices of the EU at its internal borders, and to advocate for a necessary comprehension of borders as processes of constant production of new spatial practices and social meanings as well.

The theoretical framework of this work is twofold. In one side, I am using the Woodward and Jones (2005: 239) definition of bordering practices to discuss borders: «Bordering describes a vast array of affective and transformative material processes in which social and spatial orders and disorders are constantly reworked». Thinking border through practices of bordering is to look at the practicing of borders, as the events involved in the construction of the border, that are «never completed or finished, but always in process of materializing» (Prokkola, 2008: 15). In the other side, I will try to underline the forms of territorialization of the society through historically specific social practices and discourses. To do so, the concept of social spatialization will be used. Spatial socialization is «institution-based process through which individual actors and collectivities are socialized as members of specific territorially bounded spatial entities and through which they more or less actively internalize collective territorial identities and shared traditions and spatial imaginaries» (Paasi, 2007:15; 1996:54). By examining some of these processes, the making of cross-border imagination will be approached.

Already a number of studies documenting the workings of various cross-border practices show how they take different forms and that some of them have meaning for the sociospatial organization of Europe (Scott, 2000; Kaplan and Häkli, 2002; Perkmann, 2003; Strüver, 2005; Prokkola, 2008; Lois, 2009; 2010). But, even if set by similar practices of bordering, bordering practices take place on different contexts, geographies and social relations. So, by approaching a study case, the way in which peripheries at the

border become pivotal places in the construction of European Union political geographies of Europe will be underlined.

The simultaneous entry of Portugal and Spain in the European Community in 1986 represent a starting point for region-based institutional development perspectives at the Iberian border. Border areas in both countries are very sparsely populated and relatively impoverished, specifically in the north-east side of the border. In this context, the Eurocity Chaves-Verín, in the Tâmega River Valley, rises as a cross-border cooperation project, developed in the frame of the Program of Cross-Border Cooperation Spain-Portugal (POCTEP, 2007-2013). The Eurocity is about the merging of two areas: Chaves, a municipality at the Portuguese side, with 43.667 inhabitants (INEPT, 2010); and Verín, a municipality at the Spanish side, with a population of 14.391 inhabitants (INE, 2010). The city centers, with 15 km between them, are the territorial scenario for the Eurocity activities. Since the 90's, both cities are increasing their population, in losing and ageing population regions; both cities work as an employment and trade core for the surrounding rural areas as well.

The Eurocity works a structure that encourages *governance* and *partnership* following the European policies orientations for cross-border management, without a specific juridical status. The project is fostered by the municipalities of both sides of the border; so called the Eurocity of the Water, its Strategical Agenda (<http://es.eurocidadechavesverin.eu/a-eurocidade/agenda-estrategica>) displays three axis of action. In terms of *Development of Eurocitizenship*, they set a Common Cultural agenda, based on Portuguese courses, school exchanges, conviviality activities, and a Eurocitizenship card, that allows the use of both municipalities' infrastructures and services. In terms of *Sustainable Development*, both cities are developing a common public transportation and Road Safety Card following the European Commission standards. The protection of rural environment and the construction of a high speed motorway communicating both countries are some priorities. And finally, in terms of *Economic Dinamization*, the Eurocity sponsors integral tourism packages around thermal services; fosters a common commercial area (Open Border Trade), and an Economy and Business Forum. In the practice, the development of these activities has a certain impact on urban areas, mainly, not affecting the surrounding rural areas (except for two football competitions).

Some of the Eurocity plans are already at work; some of them are everyday jurisdiction and bureaucracy conflicts with states legislation and administrative frames. But the Eurocity has a political and social presence, not only by becoming a *marker* of the municipality and the regional government of the Galician region, but also for prizes to the 'Best Touristic Destination of Future', by the Spanish journal *Trips and Tourism* (2009); and for EU institutions and Universities tourism as well.

In terms of the Eurocity geographies, a symbolic re-structuration of sociopolitical spaces and scenarios of the border is at work. In that sense, the former customs building has been transferred from the Spanish state to the Verín Council, in order to be rehabilitated and become the head office of the Eurocity, under the INTERREG sponsorship. This way, the border, as visual exhibition, gets other meaning in form of encounter in a re-signified space. At the same time, the spatial socialization in the Eurocity policies set a border area linked by water, re-signifying space for tourism around a geographical icon. Border tourism around

the Eurocity set border as an experience, to be lived in terms of destination. Transborder tourism changes the meaning of limits, setting it as a place to experiment. The re-making of the border based on EU policies promotion becomes an everyday fact.

At the same time, these policies are working in parallel with the making of the Eurocity as a management space, enforcing a social spatialization outline that transcends to other geographical scales. In this sense, transborder cooperation, in the frame of cross border regionalization has become a political asset, usually referred as an institutional *new* arena for institutional actors at local, regional and European scales. It is presented as an example of *European* political practices. These considerations enforce the idea of the Eurocity as a laboratory to test the integration process promoted by the EU. The implementation of policies and the financial support shows the importance of making socio-territorial identifications with transborder imagination.

These facts, examined and discussed more deeply in the article, lead to a final discussion in terms of the political geography of the EU, specifically about bordering and de-bordering practices and geographical imagination. The Eurocity de-bordering process may be deepening the differences between rural and urban population in the area, re-bordering structural cleavages. De-bordering is not a common experience in all border areas, and may go in depth of other social differences. The narratives of people living in this border region show the continuing significance of the border in people's lives, both as a barrier and as a place of contact. How the border gets practiced through the European policies, and how these practices are lived and experienced in local geographies show the multiple structures and agencies (including non-institutional actors) involved in re-creating (or not) those bordering practices.

Tourism and cross border regionalization, as policy and politics of the EU for border areas, becomes a spatial socialization intervention, in terms of creation of collective spaces and times. In other words, these implementations are parts of social transformation processes, in a general framework of a cross-border spatial regime. Borders become crucial spaces of integration, places of constructing geographies of *Europeanness* by re-ordering socioterritorial markers. In this sense, the Eurocity takes form of a laboratory showing the paradoxical elaboration of border as a heritage object. Border theory, then, requires working with borders not as permanent, unequivocal and static structures, but as historically contingent processes (Paasi, 1996). This way, the largely assumed univocal nature of borders may be replaced for their comprehension as paradoxical and non-fixed place, as sites of constant negotiation. As social representations, borders are constantly being reproduced and created, in material, discursive and practical ways, and paradoxes are just one of their characteristics.

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