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Agents of change? (Hi)stories, perspectives, and everyday practices of Polish border guards

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Summary

Agents of Change? (Hi)stories, Perspectives, and Everyday Practices of Polish Border Guards.

This doctoral dissertation, *Agents of Change? (Hi)stories, Perspectives, and Everyday Practices of Polish Border Guards*, examines how borders are enacted, negotiated, and sustained through the everyday practices of street-level border officials operating at the Polish–German border within the Schengen Area. While the Schengen regime is commonly understood as a legal and political project aimed at abolishing internal border controls and enabling free movement, this dissertation demonstrates that borders have not disappeared. Rather, they have been transformed and relocated into discretionary practices, organizational routines, emotional labour, and historically embedded narratives that shape how mobility is governed in practice.

The dissertation departs from the observation that much of the legal and policy-oriented scholarship on Schengen conceptualizes borders primarily as formal legal sites—either present or absent, open or closed. Within this framework, the abolition of internal border controls is often treated as a decisive rupture that fundamentally alters the nature of borders within the European Union. However, such approaches tend to overlook the everyday practices through which borders are continuously produced and experienced. By focusing on the lived realities of border enforcement officials, this dissertation challenges the binary logic of border presence versus absence and instead conceptualizes borders as dynamic, relational, and processual.

The research is embedded within the five-year research project *Getting to the Core of Crimmigration*, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) through the VIDI scheme. It contributes to socio-legal studies, criminology, and critical border research by examining the phenomenon of *crimmigration*: the growing convergence of criminal law and migration governance. While crimmigration scholarship has generated important insights into the expansion of punitive logics in migration control, it has predominantly focused on legal frameworks, policy developments, and external borders. This dissertation extends that literature by analysing how crimmigration operates at an internal Schengen border and by foregrounding the role of enforcement agents as key actors in translating law into practice.

The central research questions guiding this study are: **What role do Polish Border Guard officers play in the enforcement and management of border control and mobility within the context of crimmigration? And how do their discretionary decisions and everyday practices relate to the broader legal, organizational, historical, and societal contexts in which they operate?** These questions are addressed through a qualitative, ethnographic, and multi-scalar research design that situates street-level practices within wider political, institutional, and historical processes.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The dissertation draws on and contributes to several interrelated bodies of literature. First, it engages with socio-legal scholarship on discretion and street-level bureaucracy, which

emphasizes that frontline officials exercise considerable interpretive power in the application of law. Rather than simply implementing rules, street-level bureaucrats actively shape policy outcomes through discretionary decision-making. This perspective is crucial for understanding how border control operates in practice, particularly in contexts characterized by legal ambiguity and competing normative demands.

Second, the dissertation engages with crimmigration scholarship, which highlights the increasing entanglement of criminal law and migration control. While much of this literature conceptualizes crimmigration as a legal convergence, this dissertation argues that crimmigration should also be understood as an *emotional and cultural regime*. Legal categories and enforcement powers do not operate in a vacuum; they are embedded in affective atmospheres, moral judgments, and symbolic understandings of threat and belonging. By foregrounding emotion and meaning-making, the dissertation expands the analytical scope of crimmigration beyond formal law.

Third, the study draws on critical border studies, particularly work that conceptualizes borders as practices rather than fixed territorial lines. From this perspective, borders are enacted through everyday routines, technologies, narratives, and interactions. The dissertation builds on this insight by demonstrating how borders are reproduced within Schengen through discretionary checks, transfers, surveillance practices, and informal assessments of risk and deservingness.

Finally, the dissertation incorporates insights from anthropology and sociology on emotion, affect, and identity. Emotions are treated not as individual psychological states but as socially and institutionally shaped phenomena that play a central role in governance. By analysing emotional labour as a core component of border work, the dissertation shows how feelings such as fear, suspicion, pride, and moral anxiety structure enforcement practices and professional identities.

Theoretical contributions

A central theoretical contribution of this dissertation lies in its rethinking of borders not as fixed legal or territorial entities, but as institutionalized practices that are continuously produced through interpretation, judgment, and affective engagement. While legal scholarship often treats borders as formal sites of jurisdictional demarcation, this study demonstrates that borders also operate as *epistemic* and *moral* devices through which state authority is enacted. Border officials do not simply enforce the law at the border; they actively interpret what the border is, whom it is meant to protect, and which forms of mobility are deemed legitimate or threatening.

In this sense, the dissertation conceptualizes bordering as a process of meaning-making that unfolds at the intersection of law, organizational norms, historical narratives, and emotion. Discretion is not understood merely as the space left open by legal rules, but as a structured practice shaped by institutional expectations, professional socialization, and broader political imaginaries. This approach moves beyond conventional accounts of discretion as either a technical necessity or a problem of accountability and instead situates discretion at the heart of contemporary border governance.

Building on crimmigration scholarship, the dissertation argues that the convergence of criminal law and migration control cannot be fully understood through doctrinal analysis alone. Crimmigration also operates as a cultural and affective regime, one that relies on emotions such as fear, suspicion, and moral unease to render certain forms of mobility governable. These emotions are not incidental or irrational; they are cultivated, shared, and normalized within border institutions. As such, they function as a form of informal knowledge that guides decision-making in situations characterized by uncertainty and legal ambiguity.

This perspective allows the dissertation to bridge socio-legal analysis with anthropological and sociological insights into governance. It shows that border control is not only exercised through rules and technologies, but also through embodied practices and affective dispositions. Border officials are trained not only to know the law, but also to *feel* when something is “out of place,” “suspicious,” or “unsafe.” These feelings, in turn, shape how legal categories are applied in practice.

Importantly, the dissertation situates these affective practices within a broader historical and political context. The meanings attributed to borders, security, and belonging are not produced anew in each encounter, but draw on longer histories of state formation, territorial loss, and national vulnerability. In the Polish context, memories of occupation and shifting borders continue to inform how authority and threat are perceived. By integrating historical analysis into the study of everyday enforcement, the dissertation demonstrates how contemporary border practices are anchored in collective memory and national narratives.

Historical and political context

The Polish–German border constitutes a particularly revealing site for examining intra-Schengen border practices. Poland’s twentieth-century history is marked by shifting borders, occupation, and contested sovereignty, experiences that continue to shape contemporary political discourses and institutional cultures. The border region itself has been repeatedly reconfigured, producing layers of historical memory and symbolic meaning that inform present-day understandings of territory, authority, and belonging.

Moreover, Poland occupies a dual position within the European border regime. It is simultaneously an internal Schengen state and an external EU border state. This duality generates tensions within border institutions, as officers are expected to reconcile the logic of free movement with security-oriented expectations associated with external border control. The dissertation demonstrates that these tensions are not merely abstract but are actively negotiated in everyday practices.

Political discourses on national identity and security play a crucial role in shaping the normative environment in which border officials operate. Parliamentary debates, policy documents, and public narratives frequently frame migration as a threat to national cohesion and security, while emphasizing Poland’s historical vulnerability. These narratives provide interpretive frameworks through which border officials make sense of their work and justify discretionary interventions, even in a formally borderless space.

In addition to its historical significance, the Polish–German border occupies a politically sensitive position within contemporary European integration. While formally an internal Schengen border, it remains symbolically charged due to enduring asymmetries between Western and Central-Eastern Europe. These asymmetries are reflected in political discourses that portray Poland simultaneously as a guardian of European security and as a state whose sovereignty must be vigilantly defended against external influence. Such narratives shape not only national politics but also the institutional self-understanding of border authorities.

The dissertation demonstrates that border officials operate within a political climate marked by fluctuating trust in European governance and heightened sensitivity to questions of control and autonomy. This context influences how Schengen obligations are interpreted and prioritized in practice. Rather than experiencing free movement as an unquestioned norm, officers frequently frame it as a conditional arrangement that must be actively managed and, when necessary, curtailed. In this sense, Schengen is not perceived as a settled legal order but as a fragile political project subject to constant reassessment.

These dynamics are reinforced by public and political debates that link migration to broader concerns about national identity, moral order, and social cohesion. The border thus functions as a site where abstract political struggles over Europeaness, sovereignty, and security are translated into everyday decisions. By situating contemporary enforcement practices within this broader historical and political landscape, the dissertation shows that border control is shaped as much by long-standing narratives and geopolitical imaginaries as by immediate operational concerns.

Methodological approach

The dissertation is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a six-month period at the Polish–German border. Gaining access to a securitized institution such as the Polish Border Guard required prolonged negotiation, trust-building, and ethical reflexivity. In total, more than 900 hours of participant observation were conducted, including patrol ride-alongs, observation at border posts, and time spent within regional command structures.

In addition to participant observation, the research involved informal and semi-structured interviews with officers across hierarchical levels, focus groups, and more than 400 qualitative surveys designed to capture patterns of discretionary decision-making. These data were triangulated with analyses of parliamentary debates, legal instruments, policy documents, and internal organizational materials.

Methodologically, the dissertation advances an understanding of ethnography not merely as a data collection technique, but as a mode of inquiry that is particularly well suited to studying law in action. Ethnographic research makes it possible to observe how legal norms are interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in practice, especially in settings where formal rules leave room for judgment. In the context of border enforcement, where much decision-making occurs informally and away from public scrutiny, ethnography provides access to dimensions of governance that would otherwise remain invisible.

Conducting fieldwork within a securitized institution such as the Polish Border Guard required continuous ethical reflection and methodological adaptability. Access was not a one-time achievement but an ongoing process shaped by trust, negotiation, and institutional gatekeeping. The dissertation treats these dynamics not as external constraints but as integral to understanding how secrecy and control operate within border institutions. Moments of refusal, silence, or discomfort are analysed as meaningful indicators of organizational culture and power relations.

A key methodological contribution of the dissertation lies in its treatment of emotion as data. Emotions experienced by both participants and the researcher are analysed as part of the empirical material, offering insight into the moral and affective dimensions of border work. Feelings of tension, fear, empathy, or frustration are not dismissed as subjective noise but are examined as indicators of how border officials navigate conflicting demands and uncertainties. This approach aligns with feminist and reflexive traditions in qualitative research and demonstrates their relevance for socio-legal inquiry.

Everyday practices of border control

The empirical chapters demonstrate that border control at the Polish–German border is characterized by a high degree of discretion. Officers routinely assess who to stop, question, transfer, or ignore based on situational judgments that draw on legal knowledge, organizational norms, experiential knowledge, and emotional cues. These decisions are rarely reducible to formal legal criteria alone.

One key site where discretion becomes particularly visible is the practice of forced returns of Polish citizens from Germany to Poland. Although EU citizenship is often assumed to provide protection against punitive border practices, the dissertation shows that Polish citizens are subject to discretionary and sometimes punitive treatment during transfer procedures. These practices illustrate how crimmigration logics extend beyond third-country nationals and complicate assumptions about the inclusivity of EU free movement.

The dissertation also highlights how exceptional measures become routinized. Temporary controls, informal checks, and intensified surveillance are often framed as necessary responses to perceived threats, but over time they become normalized aspects of everyday border work. In this way, the distinction between exception and norm becomes blurred, and discretionary practices acquire an air of inevitability.

The analysis of everyday border practices reveals that discretion is exercised not as an exception but as a routine and necessary component of border governance. Officers are constantly required to make rapid judgments in situations characterized by incomplete information, ambiguous legal categories, and competing institutional priorities. These judgments are informed by formal legal knowledge, but also by experiential learning, peer norms, and situational cues that are rarely codified in official procedures.

The dissertation shows that discretionary practices are often justified through appeals to professionalism and common sense. Officers emphasize their ability to “read situations” and to distinguish between routine mobility and potential threat. Such assessments frequently rely

on informal indicators—demeanour, perceived intent, or contextual irregularities—rather than strictly legal criteria. In this way, discretion becomes a means of managing uncertainty while maintaining a sense of control over the border environment.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that discretion is embedded within organizational routines that normalize exceptional measures. Temporary controls, intensified checks, and informal surveillance practices are frequently framed as pragmatic responses to shifting risks, yet over time they become routinized aspects of everyday work. This normalization blurs the boundary between ordinary governance and exceptional intervention, contributing to a gradual expansion of border authority within a formally borderless space.

By documenting how discretion operates in practice, the dissertation highlights the gap between legal imaginaries of predictable rule application and the realities of enforcement. It shows that border control is shaped less by clear-cut legal commands than by ongoing interpretive labour performed by officers navigating a complex and often contradictory governance environment.

Secrecy, emotion, and meaning-making

A central analytical contribution of this dissertation lies in its examination of secrecy and emotion as constitutive elements of border governance rather than as peripheral or incidental features. Secrecy emerges not merely as a practical necessity linked to security concerns, but as a **structuring principle** that organizes knowledge, authority, and belonging within border institutions. It operates across multiple levels: as state secrecy justified by national security imperatives, as organizational confidentiality embedded in institutional routines, and as informal silence maintained among officers in everyday practice. Through these layered forms, secrecy shapes what can be known, said, and questioned about border control.

Importantly, the dissertation demonstrates that secrecy is not simply restrictive but also **productive**. It enables discretion by shielding decision-making from external scrutiny and by reinforcing professional hierarchies and boundaries between insiders and outsiders. For border officials, secrecy functions as a marker of professional legitimacy and trustworthiness, distinguishing those who “understand how things really work” from those deemed naïve or uninitiated. In this sense, secrecy contributes to the internal cohesion of the organization while simultaneously limiting possibilities for accountability.

Closely intertwined with secrecy is the role of emotion in everyday border practices. The dissertation shows that emotions such as fear, suspicion, pride, frustration, and moral doubt are not private experiences but socially organized and institutionally cultivated. Border officials are expected to develop affective dispositions that align with organizational goals: to be vigilant without appearing arbitrary, firm without losing control, and empathetic without compromising security. Emotional labour thus becomes a key mechanism through which officers manage uncertainty and reconcile competing normative expectations.

Through secrecy and emotion, border officials actively engage in **meaning-making**. They interpret ambiguous situations, classify persons and behaviours, and assign moral value to different forms of mobility. In doing so, they construct the border not only as a site of

enforcement but as a moral and symbolic boundary that distinguishes between belonging and exclusion. The dissertation therefore conceptualizes border officials as agents who do not merely apply law, but who continuously produce the social meaning of borders through affective and interpretive practices.

Synthesis and practical contributions

Taken together, the dissertation advances three central arguments. First, it demonstrates that intra-Schengen borders persist through discretionary, emotional, and symbolic practices, despite the formal abolition of systematic border checks. Second, it argues that crimmigration should be conceptualized not only as a legal framework but also as an emotional and cultural regime of governance. Third, it shows that border officials function as key intermediaries who translate law into lived experience, thereby shaping the practical meaning of borders.

The dissertation makes empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions. Empirically, it provides rare ethnographic insight into internal EU border enforcement. Theoretically, it expands crimmigration scholarship by integrating emotion, history, and meaning-making. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of reflexive ethnography in securitized settings and advances emotion as an analytical category in socio-legal research.

Beyond its empirical focus on the Polish–German border, the dissertation offers insights that are relevant for understanding border governance more broadly. By demonstrating how borders persist within a formally borderless space, the study challenges linear narratives of integration and highlights the resilience of bordering practices in contemporary governance. It shows that the removal of physical barriers does not eliminate borders, but rather redistributes them across institutional practices, discretionary decisions, and affective judgments.

For legal scholars and policymakers, the findings underscore the limits of reform efforts that focus exclusively on legal frameworks or procedural safeguards. While legal change is important, it cannot fully address the ways in which borders are enacted in practice without attention to organizational cultures, professional identities, and emotional dynamics. Border governance is shaped as much by how officials understand and experience their role as by the formal rules they are tasked with enforcing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation challenges dominant narratives of borderlessness within the Schengen Area by demonstrating how borders persist as lived, practiced, and deeply meaningful sites of governance. Rather than understanding borders as static legal demarcations that can simply be removed through formal policy change, the study conceptualizes borders as **dynamic processes** that are continuously enacted through discretion, emotion, secrecy, and historically embedded narratives. The abolition of internal border controls has not eliminated borders, but has transformed how and where they operate.

By foregrounding the everyday practices of border officials, the dissertation highlights the central role of enforcement agents in shaping the practical meaning of law. Border officials emerge as key intermediaries who translate abstract legal norms into concrete social realities,

often under conditions of uncertainty and moral tension. Their decisions have profound implications for mobility, belonging, and exclusion, frequently long before formal legal determinations are made. This insight underscores the importance of examining law not only as a system of rules, but as a set of practices that are lived and interpreted by human actors.

The findings of this dissertation carry important implications for legal scholarship and policy debates on migration and border governance. They suggest that reforms focused solely on legal frameworks or procedural safeguards are unlikely to fully address the realities of border control unless they also engage with organizational cultures, professional identities, and emotional dynamics. Governance operates not only through law on the books, but through law in action—shaped by discretion, affect, and meaning-making.

More broadly, the dissertation calls for a rethinking of how borders are conceptualized in both scholarship and public discourse. By revealing the persistence of borders within a formally borderless space, it challenges linear narratives of integration and progress and invites a more nuanced understanding of contemporary governance. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that borders are not merely lines on a map, but social institutions continually produced through everyday practices, with far-reaching consequences for how societies define security, identity, and belonging.

