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Researching borders -  
capturing social imaginary through 'maps  
and map-making'

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## Introduction

“I should have maps, because everything always goes back to the map. Geography is the basis of our work. There are these borders that seem rather unchangeable, but their meanings could be transformed“ (Deutschlandfunk:2009). A Finnish Frontex employee, whose office is only decorated with an art calendar, states in an interview that maps are omnipresent in the headquarters of the European Border Control Agency in Warsaw, her office being an exception. Maps are said to be central to the operationalization of border control. However, it is important to ask: What is the function of maps? Orientation - as in knowing which political and legal framework is valid where you are? Or Anticipation - as in aspiring to control a certain territory, as in negotiating authority in an area of foreign sovereignty?<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the How? the Where? has turned into a crucial question when securing the external borders of the European Union. Additionally, Where? alludes to the transformations borders have undergone in the past 20 years: from territorial lines defining the territorial nation-state to a networked system of control and surveillance, which reproduces the border inside and outside the respective state. “Les différentes frontières loin de disparaître, se reproduisent et se deversifient – en devenant soit potentiellement omniprésentes, soit potentiellement infinies en nombre et en type”<sup>2</sup> (Cutitta 2007:2). Considering the ‘vacillating’ nature of borders (Balibar 2002a:91), the usage and function of maps appears ever more interesting. How would borders be represented cartographically? Where would security agents - be it Frontex personnel or a national border police - locate the operationalization of border control? And more abstractly: How far have the meaning and function of territorial and sea bor-

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<sup>1</sup> In his ‘History of Spaces’, John Pickles (2004) shows that the function of cartographic representation has primarily been anticipation, allowing to identify and distinguish between the self and the other. He gives example for the arbitrary, however, momentous drawing of lines and the consequent definition of socio-political entities, such as nation-states or cities. He suggests that in addition to the need for an imagined community as described by Anderson (1991), there is also the need for an image of the territory which is inhabited (particularly:107-123). Pickles writes: “Maps and mappings precede the territory they ‘represent’”; “[T]erritories are produced by the overlaying of inscriptions we call mappings” (Pickles 2004:5).; “By the late nineteenth century, this paradigmatic discourse of mapping had so informed strategic thinking about the state and territory that the geopolitical practice of empire took on what, in hindsight, seems like an increasingly arrogant cartographic imagination” (ibid.:108).; “In this sense the map is a hidden (or not so hidden) tool - a plan - for a delimiting the environment and the practices that take place in it. But it is also an explicit tool for the transformation of social, economic and political spaces of the state” (ibid.:111).

<sup>2</sup> “The different kinds of frontiers, far from disappearing, reproduce and diversify themselves. Therefore, they become potentially omnipresent, and their number and types are potentially infinite.” (Non-English quotations have been translated by the author.)

ders been transformed? How is this reflected a) topographically and b) in social imaginary? To assess these questions, this article proposes to design an empirical research project on borders with a distinct focus on maps and map-making. A combination of qualitative methods is expounded, which aim at making use of the ‘revealing nature’ of cartographic representation for the collection, the generation and the processing of empirical material. The methods proposed in this article concentrate on the particular example of the EU external border in the Mediterranean Sea and how security forces of the EU member states operationalize border control there. In order to theoretically inform the research techniques, contemporary observations on the transformations of borders are discussed in a first step.

## The reconfiguration of the EU migration and border control regime

Interestingly, it is taken for granted that immigration and border control are handled as two sides of the same coin.<sup>3</sup> Different articles deduce the emerging characteristics of contemporary borders from an analysis of migration control and asylum policies (Cuttitta 2006/2007; Kaufmann 2006). In 2002 Etienne Balibar hypothesises that the term border

“is profoundly changing in meaning. The borders of new politico-economic entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer at all situated at the outer limit of territories: they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled” (Balibar 2002b:71).

According to Balibar securing borders is equal to securing sovereignty, and therefore “border areas - zones, countries and cities - are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the centre” (ibid.:72). The (cross-border) movement of goods, information, money and people challenges the public ambition to establish and maintain order. As a preventive reaction, borders become ubiquitous (Balibar 2002b/2004; Cuttitta 2007). In his article *Grenzregimes im Zeitalter globaler Netzwerke* Stefan Kaufmann describes the

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<sup>3</sup> Katrin Meyer and Patricia Purtschert apply Foucault's ideas on governmentality to the EU migration regime and conclude that its management and regulation approach is committed to a selective and biopolitically defined notion of security (Meyer, Purtschert 2008). Their arguments help in understanding the conflation of migration policies and border control. Additionally, Petra Bendel (2006) addresses the intermingling of development policies, external relations and security considerations which accompanies the EU's migration policies since the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999. Effectively, linking the field of (im)migration as well as of asylum policies to the development-security complex bestows yet another quality to the relationship between Africa and the EU member-states. This trend indicates a change in the nature of asylum policy toward a suspicion-driven rather than a protective institution (Kaufmann 2006, Horn 2002).

transformation of borders in detail. He identifies four distinctive aspects: 1.) Firstly, and as a prerequisite to the other three aspects, the conception of security has been transformed fundamentally, with the source of threats being multiplied and transnationalized. Projecting this on the meaning and function of borders, three topographical changes have been induced: 2.) Forward Relocation (*Vorverlagerung*). The border is shunted outwards and is expanded into a zone of demarcation with military forces redefining or exceeding their area of authority, police posts and detention camps functioning 'ex-territorially' as hubs of surveillance, control and deterrence.<sup>4</sup> 3.) Tightening (*Verdichtung*). The line of demarcation itself is consistently surveilled and thus covered without gap. „Grenzsicherung wandelt sich von der Kontrolle der Übergänge zur permanenten Überwachung der gesamten Linie“<sup>5</sup> (Kaufmann 2006:37). 4.) Infoldings (*Einstülpung*). Control and surveillance, formerly executed by the border police, is appearing within the public sphere, albeit strategically dislocated. Facilitated by technological and information networks, which could be operated privately or by police forces, border control penetrates the inside of a nation-state. Elaborating on these three topographical transformations of the border, Kaufmann shows that the societal conceptualization of a network-society has found its manifestation in the reconfiguration of the EU migration and border control regime. Paolo Cuttitta (2007) argues that the peculiar implications of securing territorial borders have been projected on selective legal practices and conditionalized relations with third or transit countries. With the multiplication of authorities - of bureaucratic, legal, political or other nature - the number of borders increases. One might suggest that it seems rather suitable to talk about hurdles instead. However, Cuttitta's argument is precisely that the strength of territoriality from which the border profited as a means to define and secure a socio-political entity, is now penetrating social, political and legal practices globally. Drawing on Georg Simmel, he argues that the operationalization of the territorial border has been sunk into supra-territorial social formations. Hence, what are the attributes of territoriality? Simmel distinguishes between supra-spatial formations (*überraumliche Gebilde*) and spatial formations (*räumliche Gebilde*).<sup>6</sup> Whereas the latter are characterized by a congruency between territory and

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<sup>4</sup> Even though ex-territorial camps have been discussed controversially, their existence precedes a definition of their legal and political status (Nsoh 2008).

<sup>5</sup> "Border control has been transformed from the control of border crossings to a permanent surveillance of the entire line".

<sup>6</sup> In 2006 Cuttitta utilizes the terms 'supra-spatial' and 'spatial', whereas in 2007 he uses the words territorial borders and supra-territorial borders when referring to Simmel. Yet the German term 'Raum' carries territorial connotations of belonging, settling, and expanding, whereas the equivalent term in Roman languages 'espace', 'espacio', spazio or the english term 'space' can have multiple meanings, including social, political, physical, territorial, etc.. "Raum und espace verweisen [...] auf zwei sehr unterschiedliche Positionen: auf die Annahme einer abso-

social ties and thus by an 'exclusivity' (Ausschliesslichkeit des Raumes), supra-spatial formations go beyond territorial definitions or belonging, and might be what contemporarily is described as transnationalized formations.<sup>7</sup> The state is the perfect example of a territorial formation. The term 'territorial nation state' indicates this. "The type of relation between the individuals that the state creates, or of which the state is the result, is so strictly linked to territory that it is impossible to think of the co-existence of another state on the same territory" (Cuttitta 2006:31 quoting Simmel). Subsequently, territorial (state) borders materialize spatial exclusivity, which highlights the meaning and function of territorial borders as being distinction, or even exclusion and defense. Going back to Cuttitta's argument that supra-territorial borders follow the nature of territorial borders, practices of exclusion and defense no longer merely turn up at the border. Instead, they are reappearing in legal practices and power-relations. However, the argument of territorial characteristics being transferred to non-territorial borders indicates that the meaning and function of territory itself is at question. What are the attributes of territoriality? Is it access and non-access and thus the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion? Is it the application of rights bound to ground - as Schmitt (1950) might have suggested? Is it the scope of a certain political power? Of sovereignty? In how far are social practices and figurations determined by territorial and geographic conditions?

Reading Balibar, who writes that territories "combine in a single unity the institutions of (absolute) sovereignty, the border, and the government of populations" (Balibar 2004:4) one might equate the term territory with the nation-state. Yet, Markus Schroer shows that, in societal imaginary, the attributes National and Territorial are inextricably linked with the formation of the state. He insists that it is important to acknowledge the diversification and specialisation of spatial matters ("räumliche Bezüge") and thereby overcome methodological nationalism (Schroer 2006:222-226). Schroer writes: "Sie [die Soziologie] hat sich bisher wenig damit beschäftigt, dass die Räume selbst es sind, die sich ändern, und nicht mehr nur das, was sich »in« ihnen abspielt"<sup>8</sup> (ibid.:223). With the societal and political significance of territory loosing ground to manifold –however, as yet not defined or epistemologically

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luten, territorialen Bindung einerseits und auf den Ausgangspunkt einer relationalen Verortung andererseits [...]" (Dünne/Günzel 2006:10). ("*Raum* and *espace* each point to very different perspectives: the first points to an absolute, territorial linkage, the latter points to the starting point within the context of a relational localization".) Nonetheless, linguistic connotations should not determine one's understanding of theoretical work. Rather it is crucial to critically follow definitions, and to get an impression of the imaginaries behind the terms of daily and academic usage.

<sup>7</sup> The term formation refers to 'Gebilde' which could alternatively be translated with entity or body.

<sup>8</sup> "Sociology has hardly dealt with the fact, that the spaces themselves are transforming and not just the things happening »inside« them".

assessed- spatialities, it is to be underlined that Where? matters. However, are those spatialities geo-coded? And concretely: Which setting or foil can be identified with regard to the operationalization of border control? Below, spatialities are assessed which are emerging from the operationalization of border control in the Mediterranean Sea and which seem characteristic of the regime or even essential to its functioning.

**Detention camps.** Although the nature of detention camps is still debated - academically, as well as politically - the increase in the number of the camps on Mediterranean Islands is an empirical fact: four have been counted on the Canaries, two on Lampedusa, six on Sicily and another four on Malta (Migreurop 2009). In abstract terms Giorgio Agamben describes the camp as a manifestation of the state of exception becoming the rule (Agamben 2002:177) Agamben states:

„Das Problem des Ausnahmezustands zu begreifen setzt [...] eine konkrete Bestimmung seiner Lokalisierung (oder Nichtlokalisierung) voraus. Wie wir sehen werden zeigt sich der Konflikt um den Ausnahmezustand wesentlich als Streit um den locus der ihm zukommt“<sup>9</sup> (Agamben 2004:33).

Assuming that Agamben not merely refers to the process of finding a geographic place, which could be used to establish a camp, the quote underlines that an analysis of the spatiality camps hold - geographically, politically, legally, socially and even economically - is highly relevant. Following Agamben, detention camps can be described as a (re-) territorialization of the state of exception, as an including exclusion<sup>10</sup>, and as a zone of undecidability<sup>11</sup>. However, these descriptions would be formulated with the unquestioned assumption of an existing (supreme) sovereignty. Hence, looking at the spatiality camps hold from an Agambian point of view seems oblivious to the overlapping of authorities and thus, might not allow for overcoming the nation-state framework. Cuttitta, in contrast, describes camps as ‘punctiform manifestations’ of a flexibilized border. Using this term, Cuttitta points both to their shape (it is a spot, a closed place), as well as to their function: they incorporate demarcation. Kaufmann, instead, assesses their nature by focusing on its connection to law. To him, a camp mirrors the shift in asylum policy, as it draws “eine mehr oder weniger enge,

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<sup>9</sup> “Understanding the problem incorporated by the state of exception requires [...] a concrete decision on its localisation (or non-localisation). As we shall see, the conflict about the state of exception arises essentially as a dispute about the locus it is allotted”.

<sup>10</sup> Inclusive exclusion is described as the functional need of a socio-political entity to exclude but control a particularly defined (deviant) cluster.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben describes the zone of undecidability as the treshold between executive power and law, it is the moment in which power and law cannot be distinguished (see Agamben 2002:42).

eine mehr oder weniger durchlässige Grenze um diejenigen, deren Aufenthalt der Staat nicht mit dem Stempel der Legalität versehen hat”<sup>12</sup> (Kaufmann 2006:47). The camp is a place where legality and rights are renegotiated. Consequently, the spatiality camps hold should be assessed with regard to their spatial arrangement, i.e. their architecture and geographic location, their political function and legal set-up.

**The boat.** Giving name to the people who try to go in a boat to Europe, these wooden boats surely can be considered a spatiality. It is a spatiality in movement, with the clear function of transporting people, it can be considered the symbol of unwanted migration towards Europe, and immediately recognized as ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’ when detected (or just crossed) by other boats - be it border agents, Frontex, fishermen, or Cap Anamur). In a conversation with a Frontex employee, it turned out that identifying a boat with illegal migrants followed a clear legalistic logic: the fact that the boats were travelling without a national flag - and not their well known overcrowded appearance - would reveal the destination of the boat and thus render them illegal.<sup>13</sup> The spatiality of the boat is constituted by the route the boat takes, by the number of passengers it carries, by the physical condition of the vessel and by the destination it reaches.

**Other spatialities** exist constituting of and revealing about the EU border regime in the Mediterranean Sea, such as the high sea, sea borders, the European Union as ‘an area of freedom, security and justice’, harbours of departure in Mauritania or Senegal, Frontex operations such as Hera I –III, etc.. These spatialities give way to certain practices for which the locus in which they occur is a constituting element.

Subsequently, a frequently described tension dissolves: the tension between the need for a territorial manifestation (*Verortung*) of any conceptualization of order on the one side, and the weakening of the nation-state framework as the ordering system on the other. The logic of territoriality and the logic of the nation-state do not compete, nor are they inextricably linked. In other words: leaving the nation-state framework is not a decision against territoriality. It is rather the acknowledgement of manifold spatialities, which could still be geo-coded, but also politically, legally, religiously, economically coded. Projecting this on the nature of borders, it can be stated that their “multiples appartenances se chevauchaient et s’entrecroisaient sur différents territoires, mais différentes souverainetés, différents degrés d’obédience et de

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<sup>12</sup> “It draws a more or less narrow, a more or less penetrable line around those, to whom the state has not given the status of legality”.

<sup>13</sup> This perspective was expressed by a Frontex employee during an informal conversation.



fidélité pouvaient aussi converger sur le même territoire<sup>14</sup> (Cuttitta 2007:3). Likewise Schroer writes that “Grenzen und damit auch der Umfang von Räumen sind nicht mehr festgelegt, sondern Gegenstand permanenter Auseinandersetzung und Prozesse<sup>15</sup>” (Schroer 2006:223). Considering the above, how could research on the EU migration and border control regime in the Mediterranean Sea be conducted?

## Mapping

“The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. [...] What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs [...]. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting – reworked by an individual, group or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987:13-14).

Due to the vacillating nature of borders, representing the EU border control regime in the Mediterranean Sea cartographically would exceed drawing a line on a geographic map. Nonetheless, it is proposed to design the outlined empirical research project with a distinct focus on maps and map-making. Maps contribute to the formation of identities, the (anticipatory) definition of political and juridical ambits and the imprinting of knowledge. As such, they reach deep into social imaginaries, which in turn is revealed through them. Considering this, a combination of qualitative methods will be proposed, which attempt to make use of the ‘revealing character’ of cartographic representation for the collection, the generation and the processing of empirical material.

**Collection of empirical material.** The aim is to collect the manifold social imaginaries of the EU border control regime in the Mediterranean Sea. Focusing primarily on cartographic representations, it has to be noted which (and even how many) maps are used by border personnel. The following questions would be used to structure the collection process: What kind

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<sup>14</sup> “Their [of borders] multiple appearances overlap and intersect on different territories. Likewise, different sovereignties, different degrees of obedience and of loyalty may converge on the same territory”.

<sup>15</sup> “Borders as well as the reach (breadth) of spaces are no longer defined, they are rather subject to constant discussion and processes”.

of maps geographical or political, digital or print are used? What is displayed on the maps? How is it displayed? Which information is integrated? What is not displayed? How (and how frequently) is a map utilized? Where is a map located? Additionally, it should be captured what other kinds of visual representations of the Mediterranean Sea (and of migration) exist in their work place: e.g. photographs, drawings, tourist items, etc.. Moreover, information on the spatial arrangement of particular places should be gathered, such as architectural plans of camps, offices, and agencies. Considering the paradox of visibility and invisibility (Holert, Terkessidis 2006) as well as Agamben's remarks on the locus, it is important to record where - geographically, politically - these places are located, and why this locus was chosen. Lastly, in order to accommodate different codings of demarcation it might also be informative to search for representations of the border which differ from the barbed wired fences. Different representations might be accessible through movies, pictures, exhibitions, as well as migrants' biographies.<sup>16</sup>

**Generation of empirical material.** Whereas semantic descriptions - which could be gathered through different forms of interviews - might not go beyond the epistemology already in place, working on and with maps, as well as the individual production of maps might point to the reconfiguring social embodiment of borders.

1.) For the purpose of capturing imaginaries on the EU external border in the Mediterranean Sea, individual maps should be produced by those operationalizing the border, i. e. Frontex employees, Guardia Civil, Maltese Coast Guards, or the Italian Guardia Costiera. The production of individual maps will be embedded in a focused interview (Merton/Fiske/Kendall 1990), so that visual and linguistic ideas of the border area might unfold. Within this context, two approaches are possible, which should be undertaken in parallel for the purpose of having a control group: (A) a semi-structured approach, which would ask to overwrite or illustrate a geographic map with individual accounts concerning the operationalization of border-control, and (B) an open approach, which would refrain from predetermining localizations on a map, asking the interviewee to illustrate (map) his/her work. The stimuli given to the interviewees would be decisive, since encouraging someone to draw is more challenging than urging

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<sup>16</sup> The collected material could be reflected upon in discussion groups, ideally composed of four to five border security personnel. By contrasting different ways of representation, their imaginaries might be challenged, and the implicitness of border and border control might be questioned. Despite probable distorting effects, group discussions based on visual material (maps, pictures, videos, etc.) should be video-recorded, since it is important to analyze and to be able to retrace to what and where the participants point.

someone to talk. Organising the semi-structured approach as group interviews could be considered, particularly if this rendered access to the border personnel easier.

A) The interviewee would be asked to illustrate his/her work referring to a geographic map. A prompting question could be *Where is your work most intense?* The advantage of this question would be the clear focus on work (and not on borders) as well as the request to localize either action or incidences, practices or structures. Throughout the process of illustration, critical topics might emerge, which the interviewer could pick up for further reflective enquiry. With regard to the above mentioned academic discussion, the researcher should ensure that the following five questions - as a minimal standard - are reflected upon: How far are the geographic conditions to be discussed? How far are political borders to be mentioned or sketched in? How far are legal ambits to be mentioned? How far is the nature of the border to be reflected upon? Is it a network? points and lines?

B) The aim of the open approach is to have the interviewee produce an individual map of his/her daily routines. The utensils to do so would be a pen and a (white) sheet of paper. The guiding question in the context of the open approach is intricate: how could a question be formulated without suggesting the kind of representation and thus data which is desired by the researcher. Such a question would clearly have to avoid the words *map* and *border*. *Could you give me a picture of your daily routines at work?* This question asks the interviewee to use pen and paper, but not precisely to draw a map; the focus is again the operationalization of work. To add the location-dimension to this interview, the interviewer should after some time ask the question of the semi-structured approach *Where is your work most intense?*. This approach is surely more prone to failure as well as to influencing behaviour by the interviewer. However, it is also promising as the individual maps open up chances of accessing non-standardised stocks of knowledge.

Both the open approach and the semi-structured approach of the focused interviews should have a second phase in which the result of the 'mapping'-process is reflected upon. It is important to know whether the interviewee considers his/her product representative of his/her work, and accurate, as well as whether he/she likes the 'map' or not. In case it was not possible to touch the above mentioned five questions during the mapping-interview-process, these aspects should be addressed during the reflections. Both the first and the second phases of the focused interview should be tape-recorded, with the permission of the interviewee. Lastly, the researcher should keep an observation sheet for the purpose of recording his/her account of the interview and the interviewee.

Processing - collaging images, comparing maps. Assessing, analysing and interpreting the collected and generated material is a challenging task. Ever more so, since the researcher is biased by his/her academic - as well as individual - imaginaries. Consequently, the data would have to be processed in a way which allows for multiple assessments. Possible ways of processing the material are a) the compilation of the individual maps in a book, b) the preparation of a collage of images, or c) an exhibition.<sup>17</sup> The researcher should make use of the feedback he/she hopefully receives and which would broaden his/her assessment of the material. Thereby types of imaginaries as well as societal implicitness about demarcations might be put out clearly. These insights will structure new perspectives on the EU migration and border control regime as executed in the Mediterranean Sea and allow identification and characterization of spatialities. The overall aim is to identify the manifold - be it overlapping or clearly distinguished - spatialities and to assess in how far these spatialities are geo-coded and to what extent they refer to political and legal ambits.

## Researching borders

“Can we suggest a new cartography showing us in a clearer way the signs of the sovereign power, helping us to distinguish the visible signs from the invisible ones, the material borders from the immaterial ones, the borders marked on the territories from those impressed on persons, on lives, on the choices and destinies of all human beings? Perhaps such a map would help us to understand how the very features of the different kinds of border are now becoming more and more difficult to distinguish, and how materiality and immateriality, flexibility and rigidity, territoriality and a-territoriality tend to trespass their limits and turn into one another, and how each one uses each other to its own advantage” (Cuttitta 2006:29).

Aiming for such a new cartography as envisioned by Cuttitta, geographic or political maps would surely not be sufficient to capture social imaginaries nor the societal embodiment of borders. Nonetheless, where matters fundamentally, since certain practices seem only acceptable or even possible against a specific political, legal and geographic background. In this context, it has to be seen that borders continue to be imagined as the line that circles the nation-state or, in the case of the EU, a supra-national formation. Hence, aiming to overcome methodological nationalism, research on bor-

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<sup>17</sup> The cartographic project MigMap (Spillmann 2007), pursued by the research group Transit Migration inspires innovative readings of the migration regime in Europe since 1989 and stimulated the ideas on methods proposed in this paper.

ders should not only try to reveal practices and structures of demarcation. It should reveal the relationship between demarcation and the locus - the political, legal, social, geographic condition of particular practices. Under the premises of the significant meaning and function of the locus, different forms of cartographic representations should be re-read critically throughout the research process. Working with individual maps might allow for unfolding and localizing the background which accommodates demarcation. A research design which focuses on different representations - cartographic or other - of borders opens up the opportunity to distinguish between structures as well as practices of demarcation on the one side and their manifestation against the background of a particular condition (geographic, political, legal) on the other. This way manifold - overlapping or distinguished - spatialities might be recognizable.

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