

Scott, W. James., & Wilson, M. Thomas (ed.) (2026). *Routledge Handbook of European Borderlands*. Routledge.

Teodor Gyelník

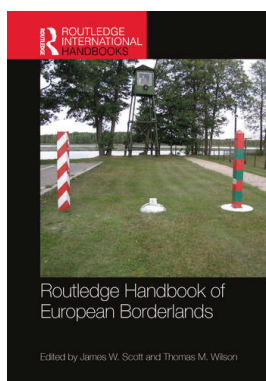
Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives

teodor.gyelnik@cesci-net.eu

Keywords: European Borderlands, Securitisation, Geopolitics, Cross-Border Relations, European Union, External Frontiers

In 2025, Routledge published an edited volume that provides an interesting research into the evolving phenomenon of European borderlands. Moving beyond traditional geopolitical analysis, the volume integrates a diverse array of interdisciplinary frameworks and innovative methodological perspectives with the aim to examine what is happening in the selected European borderlands. The contributors bridge multiple research fields such as sociology, human geography, geopolitics and political science, thus they afford a nuanced examination of how borders function not merely as lines on a map, but rather as dynamic spaces.

The *Routledge Handbook* brings together heterogeneous perspectives to highlight the social, political and cultural dynamics which are capable of shaping the borderland spaces. James W. Scott and Thomas M. Wilson provide the point of departure for this volume, framing the conceptual and research approach through which the European borderlands are examined. To be more specific, “...borders and border studies, and borderlands and borderland studies, cannot



be easily contained, spatially and conceptually. They do not fit neatly into the boxes and two-dimensional matrices applied to them by map makers and cosmopolitan elites alike. Thinking and acting beyond the box is demanded of border scholars, and necessary in the continuing scholarship of European borderlands.”

The scope of the book is pan-continental, addressing the social and political contours of borderland regions from the post-Brexit United Kingdom to the Russian frontier, and from the strategic reaches of the Arctic to the complex maritime boundaries of the Mediterranean. Borderlands are marked by specific features that result from either extensive interaction or notable separation. They can be understood as spaces that are profoundly shaped by both the boundary and cross-border mobility. These borderlands are polysemic and polymorphic, and each of them have its own specific characteristics shaped by historical legacies and contemporary circumstances. As Jussi P. Laine underlines in his chapter, “*Borderlands are spaces of political opportunity, but they are also particularly vulnerable to international disputes,*

crises and instability. Reflecting the vicissitudes of prevailing geopolitical contexts, borderlands are in a constant state of change and becoming."

Why are borders and borderlands important in the contemporary world? European borders remain unsettled, even in the era of European integration and Europeanisation. Integration does not eliminate the historical, social and political dynamics that constantly challenge and transform territorial limits. Consequently, the *Routledge Handbook* argues that we experience the 'revenge of borders' which is mainly manifested through the rise of populist political forces, revanchist impulses, nationalist fervour and neo-imperial aggression. This revenge highlights that borders and borderlands are explicitly reasserted as visible instruments of identity, control and geopolitical competition.

The *Routledge Handbook* is divided into four major parts. The first part focuses on the 'Borderlands of (in)security and control', exploring topics such as post-Brexit borderlands, borderland geopolitics, borders and bloodlands, the EU-Belarus border, and the impact of the COVID-19. The second part examines 'Creativity, cooperation, and resilience' researching regions such as the Finnish-Swedish borderland, the Greater Region, the Galicia-Northern Portugal Euroregion, and the Italy-France frontier, while also covering border twin cities and spatial planning. The third part concentrates on 'Mashing and clashing sovereignties and identities' including the Irish borderlands, Brexitism in Northern Ireland, the European governance of refugeehood, populism, and the Danish-German borderland. The final part investigates 'European borderlands in the era of (post)

globalisation', involving topics such as Hungary as a borderland nation, the case of Transcarpathia, Turkey as a European borderland, the reconstruction of the nation-state, Poland's eastern frontiers, transboundary nature protection, and the Finnish-Russian borderland.

In the following part of this review, I present several chapters from the *Routledge Handbook* and summarise their main messages.

Thom Tyerman and Nick Vaughan-Williams write a chapter on securitisation and epistemic borderwork in the British/European borderlands. The chapter traces the historical evolution of securitisation policies within the English Channel, framing it as a privileged borderland space. The study illustrates how the Channel functions as a primary driver of political, social and cultural transformation. They argue that borderlands are imprinted with post-colonial racism, post-imperial/post-colonial 'melancholy' and that they resonate with nostalgia for colonial racial hierarchies infused with British nationalism "...that reassert a racialized geopolitics and orders subjects according to a hierarchy of humanity." The central thesis of the authors is that research of contemporary racialised border politics remain fundamentally incomplete and flawed without confronting the enduring ghosts of colonial racism. These spectres are not merely historical relics, but rather, they are forces that are still powerfully present in modern sovereignty through 'epistemologies of ignorance'. This means that modern border regimes are sustained by a structured production of non-knowledge, which creates an intentional blindness regarding the link between imperial/colonial history and current border

practices. Consequently, this systemic ignorance allows the discriminatory logic of the past to be rebranded and normalised within the high-tech, securitised landscapes of the 21st century of Europe, thus ensuring that colonial hierarchies remain embedded in the very fabric of contemporary border management.

Jaume Castan Pinos and Steen Bo Frandsen present a chapter on borderlands and geopolitics, emphasising the deep interrelation between geopolitical dynamics and the historical aspects of borderlands. They argue that borders and borderlands are not just some peripheral spaces, but they are explicitly at the centre of geopolitics, noting that “*the weight of history has significant reverberations for contemporary borderland geopolitics. Territorial unsettledness in borderlands can indeed be reactivated through narrative, discourse and, more dramatically, through political – and military – action.*”

Their central premise is that borders are inherently unsettled, shaped by ongoing geopolitical turbulence, as well as by revisionist narratives promoted by nation-states. As a result, the chapter advocates rethinking of geopolitics through a borderland lens, emphasising the intersection of instability, memory and power. The Russian – Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 and escalated dramatically in 2022, serves as a clear example of this argument, illustrating the fragility of the geopolitical status quo and the enduring capacity of borderlands to become focal points of conflict.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko addresses the Ukrainian – Russian border as ‘borderlands and bloodlands’. The chapter describes the historical development of borderlands and

border measures within the post-Soviet framework. Until 1991, the administrative boundary separating the two Soviet republics was neither formally demarcated nor monitored and it played a negligible role. In the first two decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian – Russian border ranked among the busiest, with millions of people crossing annually. The most common motivations were tourism, family visits, small-scale trade across the border and labour migration. Nevertheless, the borders that emerged in 1991 separated not only two independent and sovereign states, but also the troubled post-Soviet present from the idealised Soviet past.

The new border not only separates the two post-Soviet state entities, but it has also become a space where state-building converges with European integration and globalisation, often with clashing identities and processes. The author insightfully remarks that “*the Ukrainian-Russian war seems to be a moment of historical rupture, a farewell to the ‘post-Soviet’.* Glued together by societal inertia and Soviet nostalgia, joint socialization, mass media and pop culture, the common geocultural space which had emerged from the disintegration of the USSR three decades ago is now crushed by the war as a powerful identity-building factor.”

Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola’s chapter investigates the historical and multi-layered dynamics of cross-border relations, cooperation and identity formation in the Finnish – Swedish border region. The Finnish – Swedish borderland is presented as a valuable space of everyday cross-border interactions, institutional cooperation and shared regional identity. It serves as a case study of how cross-border regionalisation, Nordic cooperation and Europeanisation

initiatives have materialised in specific local contexts. The chapter looks at the process of reinvention of border and problematising the idea of a borderless borderland. Despite periodic securitisation measures and state interventions, cross-border interactions have not been cancelled, but rather adapted to the changed realities. The central argument emphasises that cross-border cooperation in the region has evolved through a historically path-dependent process that continues to sustain and reproduce the idea of a long-standing 'border of peace'.

Christophe Sohn examines the Greater Region, located on the western flank of Rhineland Europe and involving parts of Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg. The Greater Region represents a cross-border cooperation initiative encompassing more than 65 thousand km² and approximately 11.7 million inhabitants, which places it among the largest and most densely populated euroregions in Europe; subsequently, it can be rightly considered as a true laboratory of European integration and cross-border cooperation.

The Greater Region has emerged through the exploitation of cross-border differences, with Luxembourg acting as the main polarising force. In order to maintain its competitive edge, Luxembourg diversified its economic activities and oriented itself toward niche policies. This shift involved a strong specialisation in the financial sector and investment funds, which helped the country to consolidate its pivotal role within the region. Subsequently, Luxembourg has become a key driver of cross-border economic dynamics, shaping the overall growth trajectory of

the Greater Region and attracting a large number of cross-border workers, which exceeded 200,000 daily commuters in 2020. Nevertheless, the region faces numerous challenges. The first major challenge is the saturation of transport routes, such as road networks, bus services and train lines, which substantially increases commuting times. *"If obtaining a job in Luxembourg generally translates into a significant rise in the material level of existence, the living conditions of the cross-border workers are often marked by an exhausting rhythm of daily commuting."* The second challenge is that cross-border interactions generate little endogenous development, and the main dependence on Luxembourg remains largely unchallenged; therefore, *"the increased socio-economic interactions between Luxembourg and its neighboring regions do not contribute to territorial convergence. On the contrary, we are witnessing the reproduction of cross-border disparities, which undermines the economic, social, and territorial cohesion of the Greater Region as a whole."*

Ekaterina Mikhailova explores border twin cities in Europe and she aims to outline the development and significance of twin cities throughout Europe. The chapter looks at the genesis, geographies and institutional background of the European twin cities.

In earlier times of the European continent, twin cities frequently served both as sites of military and diplomatic confrontation between neighbouring sovereign entities and as venues for negotiation and international agreements. In today's world, twin cities can rightly be understood as spaces of transition par excellence, serving as laboratories of integration, as important centres of para-diplomacy, as key engines fuelling the

internalisation of regional economies and/or as experimental zones for innovative cooperation. As the author aptly writes that “...*twin cities hold the key to constructing an ever more united Europe.*”

Moreover, the importance of twin cities is highly relevant today, because they continue to multiply due to post-Cold War border changes on the one hand, and shrinking of effective distance on the other. These developments have increased cross-border interactions and created new opportunities for cross-border cooperation.

Christian Lamour discusses populism and borderlands as the use of spatial objects in the name of the people. The basic aim of the chapter is to examine plurality through an overarching framework that conceptualises populism as a discursive strategy. In this view, populism depends on the construction of antagonistic relations between the people, the elite and various outsiders, often articulated in spatial terms. This antagonism frequently involves explicit or implicit references to open, closed, or controlled borders and borderlands, which become key symbolic sites in populist narratives. Such discourses strongly resonate with a segment of the population that perceives political, economic and cultural transformations as negative (often experiencing as an existential threat), and interpret these changes within their own lived environments. By linking identity and territory with a perceived loss of existence, populist rhetoric amplifies a sense of grievance and frames border issues as central to a struggle between ordinary citizens and those who are perceived as responsible for their marginalisation

Within the populist framework, the neoliberal interpretation of the world plays a central role. Neoliberalism has been a dominant ideology that deeply shapes our everyday lives. It accompanies our late-modern era, resonating across multiple domains such as the economy, state structures, taxation systems, market strategies, education and/or broader social relations. The acceleration of neoliberal reforms has generated a profound sense of alienation for a large segment of society, as individuals increasingly experience economic insecurity, social fragmentation and the erosion of collective institutions. Consequently, this influence not only restructures markets and public policies, but it also redefines how people understand themselves and their place within society, hence contributing to widespread feeling of disconnection.

Péter Balogh contributes a chapter on Hungary as a borderland nation. The author claims that Hungary is a clear case of a borderland nation, more specifically, “...*the omnipresence of borders on different levels of Hungarian society makes it a borderland nation par excellence.*” Hungary is at the intersection of historical legacies, geopolitical positioning and contemporary political practices, “*Throughout its history, Hungary has repeatedly grappled with the question whether it is part of the West or of something else. As in most places even beyond Hungary, the opposite of the West would typically be some version of the East, which in the Hungarian case has been particularly complex to define.*”

The chapter offers a multi-level analysis of Hungary. The first is the civilisational-ideational level, where Hungary’s Western identity is underlined with the Christian religion and with its Christian self-image.

However, various forms of Easternism have periodically been emerged in Hungary in order to orient the country eastward. This attempt reflects a small state's strategy to escape its long-standing geopolitical and economic marginality. The second level is the regional alliance building. At this level, Hungary has focused on strengthening Central European cooperation with the aim of creating a political and ideological counterweight to the West. This level has emerged primarily within the framework of the Visegrad Group and/or the Three Seas Initiative. The next level is the kin-state politics that emphasises the idea of virtual reunification of the Carpathian Basin. Finally, the border securitisation level includes elements such as the construction of a long fence and measures to protect against illegal migration, which have been explicitly present since 2015.

James W. Scott focuses on borderlands geo(ethno) politics at the EU's external frontiers, namely in Transcarpathia. Transcarpathia is a western region of Ukraine situated along the borders with Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, and "... *the region of Transcarpathia is a product of long-term historical processes and particularly of the geopolitical and territorial shifts that have taken place since the early 20th century*". In current constellation, Transcarpathia is an example of an archetypal borderland contestation in which its relationship with Ukrainian history, culture and territoriality becomes a geopolitical tool for various external actors. The author claims that the resulting conflict unfolds across several layers. One important layer is rooted within the Russian geopolitical thinking, which generates a narrative in which Ukraine and the structures of the European Union are

framed as key participants in a broader civilisational competition. This perspective is closely intertwined with ethno-political narratives of Russia that underline cultural, linguistic and historical ties extending beyond the current borders of Russia. Within these discourses, Ukraine is portrayed as a liminal and contested space situated along a symbolic and geopolitical fracture line between East and West. This means that the country is depicted as a strategic ground, where both Russia and the European Union are seen to pursue significant political, economic, security and cultural interests, reinforcing perceptions of rivalry, influence and competing spheres of belonging.

Ramazan Aras and Ibrahim Emre Yanik discuss territorial security walls, sovereignty and the reconstruction of the nation-state. The analysis addresses the dual role of the Turkish security wall in preventing trans-border Kurdish political and armed movements and in obstructing migrant routes toward the European Union. The principal and symbolic instrument of this Turkish policy is the concrete wall barrier that extends over 828 kilometres, thus making it the third largest border wall after the Great Wall of China and the wall along the United States and Mexico. The authors describe the border wall in the following way, the "...*newly erected security walls not as indicators of overcompensation, but as adaptation of old techniques to new crises*"; subsequently, Turkey has enhanced its governing and surveillance capacities across its national territory, population and national identity. What is new in Turkey's border policy is that the security wall is not primarily designed to defend against a conventional Westphalian sovereign actor. Instead, its main targets

are non-state entities, such as individuals and transnational networks. Moreover, the purpose of the wall is not only to reduce permeability, but also to contribute to the criminalisation of transnational political mobility, particularly affecting Kurdish and other minorities. Consequently, the authors argue that the Turkish border project has been able to effectively and efficiently reproduce territorial sovereignty and national imaginary.

Jussi P. Laine addresses the shifting significance of the Finnish and Russian borderland. The chapter provides valuable historical approach about the genesis of the Finnish – Russian borderland, including pre and post-soviet context and the 2014 ‘watershed’. The Finnish and Russian borderland serves as a laboratory for examining broader socio-political changes impacted by geopolitical shifts. This specific borderland once was imagined as part of a new neighbourhood policy approach, EU inspired ideas of cross-border cooperation and post-national regionalism that may foster partnerships and open new spaces for interaction. During this period, cross-border relations expanded rapidly, involving the establishment and development of communication channels in various sectors, with diverse actors and individuals. However, the borderland is currently a strongly securitised zone of tension and the initial optimism has disappeared. Historical memories of conflict have returned and the relations are profoundly dominated by geopolitical imaginations and everyday geopolitics. As a result, engagement with ‘otherness’ is back again. The ‘We’ is mentally distanced from the perceived threats of the ‘Other’, accordingly, the borderland has become a

clashing space for distinguishing the ‘East’ from the ‘West’ in historical, political, mental and cultural terms. Simply, Finland resonates as an ‘exposed outpost of the Western community’.

To conclude, the edited volume of James W. Scott and Wilson M. Thomas ‘*Routledge Handbook of European Borderlands*’ provides an insightful overview of the evolution of European borderlands. The book raises important issues and articulates critical questions concerning borders, borderlands, border measures, sovereignty, securitisation and cross-border cooperation. It underlines that borders are continuously reshaped by (geo)political, social and economic forces, while it also demonstrates the complex interplay between state authority and regional integration. Overall, the *Routledge Handbook* offers valuable theoretical and empirical contributions for scholars interested in understanding the changing nature of borders and borderlands in contemporary Europe.

This book is especially recommended for the academic community, particularly students and scholars in political science, international relations and law, political geography, geopolitics and border studies. It offers a valuable theoretical and methodological resources for those who are interested in deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of European borderlands. Additionally, the book is relevant for individuals who engage with borders professionally or personally, such as policymakers, legal practitioners, border officials, NGO workers and researchers, as well as for citizens who experience border crossings and related restrictions in their daily lives.

